BETWEEN HETEROPATRIARCHY AND HOMONATIONALISM: CODES OF GENDER,

SEXUALITY, AND RACE/ETHNICITY IN PUTIN'S RUSSIA

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines two simultaneous and convergent processes. One is the mechanism of heteropatriarchal nationalism in Russia, in which white ethnic Russian heteronormativity is idealized and employed for maintaining symbolic and physical boundaries of the state. Another is the process through which Russia's heteropatriarchal nationalism interacts, diverges from, or overlaps with homonationalism and homotransnationalism on a global scale. In order to unravel these complex processes four political case studies are presented: Chapter 1 explores how Russian gender and sexuality studies were affected by the Western gaze and the Russian government's repression on queer and feminist scholars and discusses the resistant practices in academic contexts. Building on this foundation, Chapter 2 employs visual analysis to examine the links between notions of patriotism and representations of gender and sexuality in Russian popular culture. Chapter 3 applies semiotic analysis to examine the use of sexual signs and metaphors in political cartoons in the context of Russia–Ukraine war. Finally, Chapter 4 applies critical discourse analysis to investigate the discursive and representational practices embedded in oppositional media reporting on the persecution of Chechen gay men. These political case studies demonstrate how codes of gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity are employed to sustain the physical and symbolic national borders in the Russian centre and in two peripheral militarized zones—the Republic of Chechnya and the recently annexed Crimea. This thesis argues that both nationalist sexual politics and resistance to it are saturated by the concomitant processes of racialization/ethnic othering and the ascendancy of white Russianness. Located at the crossroads of Russian studies and transnational sexuality studies, this dissertation expands our understandings of the intersections of nationalism and sexuality, global homonationalisms, and the links between sex, gender, and race/ethnicity in the post-Soviet region.

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Introduction

In the Spring of 2018, just days before the Russian presidential elections, the U.S.-based news magazine *The Economist* published a commissioned article titled "From Russia with Youth: Meet the Puteens" (Sneider & Monteleone, 2018, March 15). In this extensive project, which included interviews and portraits of twelve Russian 18-year-olds, the journalists sought to create "a collective portrait of a generation, where the parts would add up to a whole like a mosaic" (Sneider, 2018, March 15). The creators went to Moscow, Novosibirsk, Dagestan ("to capture a bit of Russia's oft-overlooked ethnic diversity"), and Murmansk ("for a flavour of the Far North") (Sneider, 2018, March 15). As the journalists explained in an accompanying article, "The Making of The Puteens" (Sneider, 2018, March 15), the project was based on an extensive questionnaire; however, the final text omitted the interview questions and presented the teenagers' responses in the form of heavily edited monologues. As a result, the reader was left with a somewhat disjointed set of opinions on diverse topics: from whether it's good to live in Russia to whether they were going to vote and their perspectives on women's and gay rights. The article was accompanied by a playlist of the interviewees' favourite music. The journalists had a special interest in 18-year-olds due to the fact that they have spent their whole lives with Vladimir Putin in power: How did Putin's Russia (the years 2000–2018) shape them? How much are they affected by the Kremlin's propaganda and censorship? Are they going to rock the boat in order to change their realities?

The final mosaic created by the journalists was rather muddy. The Puteens seem to be quite a diverse bunch; the only common feature in their interviews was a vague sense of ambivalence and incongruence illustrated by eerie portraits. Most of the portraits were taken against the dark and gritty landscapes of urban winter: worn-down grey apartment buildings, imposing monuments in the style of social realism, dirty snow on unplowed roads. The Puteens posed for the camera standing tall or sitting on benches with calm serious looks on their faces, which were always directed at the camera. Strangely, almost none of the teenagers photographed outside wore coats. One of the interviewees, a telecommunications student, was pictured holding a rifle in the middle of an empty residential street in

Novosibirsk. Why a rifle? The reader was offered no clues, since the interview did not suggest an occupation or anything else that would explain bearing arms on a residential street.

The interview texts complemented the eeriness of the portraits. For example, Mikhail, photographed shirtless in a gym, passionately supported women's rights and gay visibility but said he liked Putin because "he is a real man." Anastasia, who was critical of Putin's repressions and planned to vote for oppositional candidates, wholeheartedly admired Stalin, saying that he was "a great leader" and "the smartest, strongest man." The interviews (and accompanying playlists) demonstrated that Russian teenagers knew North American cultural references quite well and expressed opinions that North American youth are not that different from them. But despite the focus on sameness, these interviews and photographs left the reader with feelings of strangeness, distance, and grimy melancholy. These uneasy affects were strengthened by the emphasis of the interviews on gender equality and sexual diversity.

The inclusion of the teenagers' opinions on women's and gay rights—but not, say, anti-racist values or (dis)ability rights—seemed to be an important focus for *The Economist*. Nested among opinions on who to vote for, what music to listen to, and whether Russia is the greatest country, these questions evaluated what Jasbir Puar (2013) would call the "personal affective investment" in neoliberal discourses of self-determination, tolerance, and equality (p. 337). The special interest in these issues comes from the global understanding of Putin's Russia as a patriarchal and homophobic country. There is a long history of imagining Russia as lagging behind in terms of civilizational achievements and sexual liberation (for critiques, see Baer, 2002; Engelstein, 1992a; Wolff, 1994). However, in the last decade, the emphasis on heterosexism has been especially entrenched by the circulation of news, signifying an increase in violence against feminists and LGBT people. The issues publicized on the global scale include the imprisonment of the members of the feminist punk band Pussy Riot in 2012, the "gay propaganda" law adopted in 2013, the wave of violence against gay people in the North Caucasus in 2017, and the ongoing pressure on feminist and queer academics of the European University in St Petersburg.

In this context, the questions posed by *The Economist* about women's and gay rights were meant to gauge individual values of a young Russian population (the "Puteens") vis-à-vis Russian repressive

politics. Had the interviewees expressed sexism and homophobia, the reader would think that Putin's

politics really got the people stuck in the past; had the responses demonstrated some degree of tolerance,

it could be taken as a sign of protest despite the repressive politics. Not surprisingly, the teenagers did not

provide a united position; their answers ranged from "I believe a wife exists for her husband" and "men

kissing on the streets is a violation of physics or nature" to enthusiastic support for gay members of their

families. However, the very interest of *The Economist* in these questions underscores a key measure of

modernity; opinions about gender and sexuality locate Russia on a geotemporal map wherein Europe and

North America occupy the space of (sexual) modernity while the rest of the world must catch up with

Western standards of sexual tolerance, liberation, and rights. In its approach, this article by *The

Economist* highlights the complicated ways in which gender and sexuality emerge as sites through which

Russia is constructed as a subject of knowledge, an identity, and a place that is located in relation to other

places, most prominently the West. It is this foundational belief that allows opinions about women's

equality and gay rights to become one way to know Russian teenagers and, by extension, a way to

understand Putin's Russia. This way of knowing rests on the assumption that one can gauge the extent of

the impact of Putin's repressive politics on the Russian people by the levels of misogyny, homophobia,

and tolerance expressed in simple for-or-against statements.

Concerned with this limiting narrative, I seek to complicate the positioning of Russia as backwards

but perpetually on its way towards sexual modernity. Situating my research in discursive and

representational practices located in Russia, I hold four main objectives for this dissertation: First, to

examine the uses of hegemonic codes of gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity for nationalist ideology and

for cases of resistance to nationalism. Second, to examine how issues of gender, sexuality, and

race/ethnicity animate the positioning of Russia vis-à-vis the rest of the world by diverse actors within

this country, including government, media, activists, scholars, and artists. Third, to question how the

manifestations of political tensions in the sphere of gender and sexuality intersect with nationalism,

racial/ethnic identities, and control of the internal and external national borders. And fourth, to investigate

the links between Russian heteropatriarchal nationalism and global processes of neoliberal

homotransnationalism, which seek to include homonormative LGBTQ subjects into ideologies, structures, and practices of nation-states.

Research Questions and Dissertation Structure

Given that the discourses created in Western media—including in *The Economist*'s article above—utilize questions of women's liberation and gay tolerance as epistemological tools for understanding Russia, I explore the ways in which discourses on and representations of gender and sexuality are instrumental in Russia's positioning of itself in the geopolitical scene. The research questions that guide this project are as follows: How are issues of gender and sexuality employed for the project of nationalism in Russia? How do gender and sexuality connect with questions of whiteness and race/ethnicity in Russia? What are the links between discourses on gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity in Russia and those which are dominant on the global level? How do those resisting the official ideologies employ gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity in their actions? Where does resistance come from within this context and in what forms does it appear?

Since it would be a mistake to treat Russia as a monolith, I recognize that the imagination of national identity varies among different actors; the way politicians, media makers, and activist groups understand Russianness are necessarily diverse. Given this reality, I have chosen to focus on four social spheres of political tension in Putin's Russia: (1) the crackdown on gender and sexuality studies, their positioning as a non-Russian discipline, and the links between scholarship and contesting Russian nationalism; (2) popcultural representations of white Russian heteropatriarchal nationalism and the challenges presented by counter-cultural movements, such as Pussy Riot; (3) the employment of codes of gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity in political cartoons addressing the Russia–Ukraine conflict and the annexation of Crimea; and (4) oppositional media discourses on anti-gay violence in Chechnya and construction of the figure of the racialized gay man in Russia. I believe that these four areas of cultural and knowledge production illuminate the most significant points of contention at the crossroads of gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, and nationalism during Putin's third (2012–2018) and fourth (2018–

present) presidential terms. The main thesis of this dissertation is that within Putin's Russia, the hegemonic political discourse on gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity is one of nationalist heteropatriarchy, which is then used to assert Russian exceptionalism against the West and justify colonial expansion. In this context, I identify three types of resistance: (1) scholarship and activism that seeks to decentralize white Russianness and build coalitions among post-Soviet diaspora; (2) Russian countercultural movements that satirize Russian heteropatriarchal nationalism; and (3) oppositional media that appeals to Western forms of homonationalism via marking Russia's racialized/ethnic Other as backwards, sexist, and homophobic.

Chapter 1 discusses the development of gender and sexuality studies in Russia and the recent crackdown on educational and research institutions that work from feminist and LGBTQ perspectives. Overviewing works produced by Russian scholars, I explore the main perspectives of and achievements by gender and sexuality studies, the processes of censorship and political pressure on queer and feminist academics, and queer and feminist modes of resistance. This chapter demonstrates that after the fall of the Soviet Union, the support and resources from European and North American scholars and foundations were crucial in developing education and research centres that studied gender and sexuality. This enabled—though simultaneously limited—scholarship in the field. In Putin's Russia, hubs of gender and sexuality scholarship were positioned as being driven by foreign interests. In this chapter, I describe the complexities of these processes as well as look for locations of resistance to pressure both from the Russian government and the Western gaze.

After establishing what has been happening in the field of gender and sexuality studies in Russia in Chapter 1, I turn to discursive and representational practices that reflect similar cultural trajectories. At the centre of my analysis in Chapter 2 is the interaction between hegemonic representations of national heteropatriarchy and counter-cultural performances. My objects of inquiry include the pervasive images of President Putin's naked torso—as a national hypermasculine ideal and as an object of female desire— and representations of female sexual aggression. I discuss how these gendered and sexualized representations of white Russian bodies function to sustain national ideals and how they are challenged by

Russian art-activism. Inspired by the series of protests in 2012 that led to the incarceration of the punk feminist art collective Pussy Riot, I explore practices of resistance, censorship, and negotiation of the gendered, sexual, and nationalist representational codes in the Russian public sphere. Zooming in on several cultural flashpoints, including the circulation of images of President Putin's body, scandals around portrayals of homoeroticism, and protest performances by Russian art-activists, this chapter illuminates the connections between representations of the normatively gendered, sexualized, and white Russian body and narratives of patriotism.

Chapter 3 analyzes political cartoons produced in the context of the Russia–Ukraine conflict (2014–present). These cartoons employ oppressive gendered and sexual representations for explaining the conflict and, at the same time, articulate a specific view of the world and of Russia's place in it. In this chapter, I ask, what power do these political cartoons have within the shaping of sociopolitical discourses? How might they reflect contemporary codes of gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, and class? And, more generally but no less importantly, what kind of world do they describe? Reading political cartoons through codes of gender and sexuality, I argue that they serve to articulate class, race/ethnicity, and whiteness in relation to Russianness, Ukrainianness, and the abstract notion of "the West." I further claim that together with other representational practices, such as advertising of the resorts in annexed Crimea that targets white Russian heteronormative families, these cartoons work to maintain symbolic and geographical borders.

Finally, Chapter 4 turns to news coverage of the persecution of gay people in Chechnya in 2017 and the involvement of Russian oppositional media in resisting this violence. Analyzing discursive and visual representations of anti-gay violence in the media, I discuss the diverse ways homophobia and heteropatriarchy are formulated and imagined as quintessentially Chechen and/or Russian cultural traits. I argue that Russian oppositional investigative media, which was largely responsible for generating a world-wide response to this case of persecution, at once exploited homotransnationalist discourses and further racialized gay people in Chechnya. Exploring the ways in which this issue was covered by the

media, I argue that creating the discursive figure of "the gay Chechen" enabled the ascendancy of whiteness in the Russian context.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this dissertation builds on scholarship in transnational sexuality studies and on theories of representation within cultural studies. Although the field of transnational sexuality studies is quite rich, there is a lack of scholarship on sexuality in post-Soviet spaces that considers processes of neoliberalism, racialization, and inclusion of queer subjects into nation-building projects. The key works in transnational sexuality studies provide context for formulating the research questions, theoretical framework, and methodology of this dissertation. Specifically, this dissertation builds on the following ideas: (1) the regulation of gender and sexuality is a building block of nationalism; (2) heteropatriarchy and homophobia are implicated in social and political systems and intersect with oppressions related to race and class; (3) in global neoliberal discourse, the questions of women's rights and LGBTQ liberation are framed as markers of sexual modernity; and (4) discourses and practices of sexual modernity are saturated by processes of racialization and the ascendancy of whiteness.

First, this dissertation starts with an understanding that the regulation of gender and sexuality is a building block of nationalism. Nationalism has been theorized as both an ideology and a set of institutional practices that rests on the imagining of a close community with shared past and values (Anderson, 1991) and on invented traditions that maintain feelings of historical coherence and affinity (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). Poignantly, Michael Billig (1995) conceptualizes "banal nationalism" as "the collection of ideological habits (including habits of practice and belief) which reproduce established nations as nations" (p. 6). This conceptualization is particularly useful for this dissertation, which aims to demonstrate mundane and habitual use of gender and sexuality for reproduction of the idea of the Russian nation.

Gender is central to the construction of national communities since, as Anne McClintock argues (1993), national identity is highly dependent on gender difference—i.e., the asymmetrical binary opposition between "masculine" and "feminine." Nations are generally organized as communities of men, which maintain and control homosocial forms of male bonding through shared care and protection of the motherland, specifically, the nation's women and children (Nagel, 2010). By contrast, women are included in nations primarily through their reproductive capacity: as biological reproducers of the nation and the workforce, as transmitters of culture, and as symbolic signifiers of national difference (Yuval-Davis, 1996). Controlling gendered differences and sexual behaviours helps to maintain the boundaries between normal and abnormal, healthy and pathological, and associates these boundaries with the categories of national and foreign. For example, the classic historical study by George Mosse (1985) shows how the notion of "respectability" was central from the very beginnings of Western European nation-states in the eighteenth century, as it connected ideas of sexual decency to national ideals of male and female beauty and virtue through processes of normalization.

Such heteronormative systems of regulation maintain material and symbolic structures of the nation-state, which exclude those subjects whose sexual identities and practices do not fit into perceptions of what is "natural" and, by extension, become historically and culturally incoherent within the nation. However, heterosexual nationalism is complicated by the inclusion of *some* queer subjects into processes of nation-building and boundary control. A large body of scholarship on homonormativity and homonationalism demonstrates that queer subjects become instrumental to nationalist ideologies when discourses on and affective investments in LGBT inclusion and homophobic patriarchal "others" justify and enable military interventions, incarceration, and torture (Agathangelou, Bassichis, & Spira, 2008; Alexander, 2006; Feitz & Nagel, 2008; Haritaworn, Kuntsman, & Posocco, 2013; Puar, 2007, 2013; Razack, 2005). This scholarship questions the classic understanding of nationalism as an ideology that rests exclusively on heteronormativity; it shows that it is necessary to pay close attention to how non-heteronormativity can be recruited for the project of

nationalism. As I discuss in this dissertation, within contemporary nation-states based on heteropatriarchy, such as Russia, homonationalism emerges in calls of oppositional agents for inclusion of homonormative subjects in the structures, processes, and ideologies of the state and through appeals for the Russian state to replicate Western forms of neoliberalism and inclusion and, in this way, become more "civilized."

Second, this dissertation holds as a central idea that heterosexism and homophobia are implicated in social and political systems, and they intersect with oppressions related to race and class. Instead of taking a psychological approach to homophobia that centres issues of stigma, interpersonal violence, and private attitudes, I believe it is more productive to focus on institutionalized and politicized homophobia as a set of discourses and practices that use prejudice to sanction violence, pathologization, and criminalization, and to maintain hegemonic gender and sexuality norms in intersection with the norms and hierarchies of race and class. Gregory Herek (2004) defines heterosexism as "an ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship or community" (p. 16). Homophobia, as a discriminatory practice of aversion to homosexuality, supports the entrenchment of heterosexism in social institutions. Some theorists link homophobia to gender as the performance of hegemonic masculinity in interpersonal relationships (Pascoe, 2005) and at the level of state politics, particularly when state politics are bolstered by metaphors and qualities of hard masculinity (Boellstorff, 2004; Novitskaya, 2017).

The conceptualization of homophobia is closely related to discourses on LGBT rights, meaning that a focus on homophobic violence and the fight against it is central to human rights discourses (Bryant & Vidal-Ortiz, 2008, p. 391). In this way, homophobia becomes a discursive tool against oppression that produces affects and practices, such as claims for visibility, while it forecloses others and simultaneously reestablishes hegemonic norms of gender, class, and race. This can be illustrated through cases of queer reclamation of urban spaces inhabited by Muslim populations in London (Bachetta, El-Tayeb & Haritaworn, 2015) and in Toronto (Wahab, 2015): in these cases LGBT/queer

citizens protest homophobia by marching in spaces marked as racialized/ethnic and poor and in turn reproduce Islamophobic claims, racializing practices, and erasure of queers of colour. As Martin Manalansan (2009) argues, "homophobia and its dismantling has become part of the queer empowerment agenda of queer activist groups and nonprofit organizations" (p. 34). Such practice and the term "homophobia" itself, as he further writes, "obfuscates racial, class, and other social hierarchies which maintain and prop up particular privileged and hegemonic groups" (p. 35). The popular imaginary often sees homophobia in racialized communities as an inherent pathology and fails to recognize the role of Western countries in spreading homophobia through policy and practice (Hoad, 2007; Kaoma, 2013; Rivkin-Fish & Hartblay, 2014; Wahab, 2016). The essentialist understanding of homophobia in post-colonial societies is also complicated by analyses of homophobia as an expression of anti-colonial or post-colonial views and identities (Boellstorff, 2004; Hoad, 2007; Murray, 2012).

In the context of transnational gay activism, which rests on human rights discourses and politics of visibility, identity, and representation, some scholars interpret homophobia in non-Western regions as a response to LGBT visibility and rights claims (Boellstorff, 2004; Renkin, 2009), and sometimes as pre-emptive measures even before LGBT movements and identities have arisen (Wahab, 2016; Weiss, 2013). This kind of anticipatory homophobia, which develops in absence of gay visibility, is discussed by David Murray (2012) in his development of the concept of "spectral sexuality." In this case, the social threats, real or imagined, are projected on the invisible "homosexual," creating a cultural figure and providing it with attributes of horror and abjection. Throughout this dissertation, I build on the diverse literature on homophobia to interpret how homophobic codes are employed in discourses and representations of national belonging, race/ethnicity, and narratives of sexual modernity.

Third, the concept of sexual modernity, as developed through the field of transnational sexuality studies, is also key to my analysis in this dissertation. Within global neoliberal discourse, the questions of women's rights and LGBT/queer liberation are framed as markers of sexual modernity and

progress. The term "sexual modernity" points towards a Western-centric understanding of geographical and cultural places evolving at different paces towards an ideal notion of "full" gender equality and LGBT/queer inclusion in social life. Under this framework, patriarchy and homophobia are markers of the past, while countries in the West are understood as having achieved an exceptional level of gender equality and tolerance of sexual diversity. A sense of belonging within sexual modernity is a quintessential element of national consciousness for most countries in Western Europe and North America. As Puar (2007; 2013) has formulated, this self-identification of sexual exceptionalism works to support homonationalism, a set of biopolitical practices that includes homonormative queer subjects in state institutions such as marriage, military, and representational governance while entrenching hierarchies of race and class and processes of imperialism, displacement, and capitalist accumulation.

Critiques of sexual modernity discourses are further strengthened by discussions about the effects of sexual exceptionalism and homonationalism on vulnerable populations. In a variety of geopolitical contexts, subjects of multiple intersecting marginalizations—trans*, racialized, sex working, undocumented, colonized people—are included in the circulation of expendable bodies available for spectacularization, injury, death, and neglect in the name of imperialism, policing, and security discourses. This is the process which Achille Mbembe (2003) calls "necropolitics." As many transnational sexuality scholars have argued, the discourses and affects of white gay national subjects work to bolster the availability of these marginalized subjects for necropolitical control (Bhanji, 2018; Haritaworn, Kuntsman & Posocco, 2014; Puar, 2017). Even when queers of colour are represented in neoliberal discourses, these subjects are not necessarily able to escape necropolitical practices. As Haritaworn, Tauqir, and Erdem (2008) argue in their examination of queer Muslim visibility in Britain and Germany, representations of queers of colour as both victims of homophobia and exceptional liberated queers further proliferate the racism and Islamophobia of white imperialism and nationalism.

One of the central concerns of this dissertation is how contemporary Russia participates in these global processes. Russia occupies a paradoxical space on the map of sexual modernity. On one hand, it

has been framed as inherently more sexually diverse than the West (Baer, 2002; Essig, 1999), but on the other hand, global homonationalist discourses construct it as significantly more homophobic and patriarchal, which places it within a rhetoric of development (for critique of political discourse and media representations, see Rivkin-Fish & Hartblay, 2014; Wiedlack, 2017). Theorists of sexualities in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) point out that the developmental understanding of sexuality, modeled on North American and Western European sexual politics, suggests a linear progression—from widespread homophobia and the criminalization of homosexuality to gay visibility and overall tolerance to the inclusion of some queers into state institutions and national imaginary—and projects this expected trajectory to spaces outside of the West. However, as Mizielinska and Kulpa (2011) propose, sexual time in the CEE is not linear but "knotted"; LGBT representational and visibility politics exists alongside queer anti-identitarian politics. Although an overall understanding of the West as following a model of linear progression has also been critiqued (Navickaite, 2014), studying the CEE means doing away with the expectations that are modeled on the histories of sexual politics in Western European and North American countries. Thus, in this dissertation, I pay attention to the ways in which (hetero)sexual nationalism coexists with neoliberal gay rights discourses as well as with radical queer anti-Western-centric critiques.

The final key theoretical idea that grounds my research is the way discourses and practices of sexual modernity are saturated by processes of racialization and the ascendancy of whiteness. Historically, colonization and imperialism employed regulations of gender and sexuality in order to create and sustain whiteness. In the course of colonization, as Ann Stoler (1997) explains, European colonizers sought to educate the "native" in supposedly proper gendered and sexual behaviors in order to secure white racial and civilizational superiority and prevent miscegenation. This sexual history of colonization has its legacy in contemporary forms of post-colonial sexual modernity, where civilizational superiority means bringing gay people—primarily white and male—into a model of consuming global citizens and positioning them as under threat of local homophobias. As Jacqui Alexander (2006) has written, these processes of normalization under post-colonial capitalism leave

out lesbians, working-class gay men, and queers of colour, while equating the discourse of gay liberation with homonormative male gayness, consumerism, and whiteness.

My approach to understanding and articulating whiteness is heavily informed by bell hooks, Sara Ahmed, and Beth Loffreda and Claudia Rankine. bell hooks (1992) demonstrates that whiteness expects a lack of interrogation, observation, and description as an object of knowledge. Moreover, whiteness is assumed to universally represent "all that is benign and non-threatening," even though in the Black imagination, whiteness is often represented as a terrorizing imposition (p. 340-341). In her phenomenological analysis, Sara Ahmed (2007) conceptualizes whiteness as a background to experience: "whiteness could be described as an ongoing and unfinished history, which orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they 'take up' space" (p. 150). A similar approach is taken in Claudia Rankine's fiction and analytical works. For instance, in an essay with Beth Loffreda, Rankine (2015) proposes that race be understood as a structure of feelings. In their discussion of race in the practice of fiction writing, the authors point to a culturally set repertoire of narrative opportunities, kinds of feelings, situations, subjects, tropes, and plots "available" to characters of different races and their authors. Rankine calls this repertoire "the racial imaginary" and describes its limitations, namely the way in which the racial imaginary hides the dynamics of power. What emerges from these approaches is an understanding of whiteness as a power dynamic that structures imagination, feelings, and embodiment, and forms them into habits. Therefore, in my analysis, I pay attention to the way in which discourses and representations maintain the creation of narratives, feelings, and expectations of bodily expression from a white Russian perspective.

Theorizing how bodies become racialized, Sara Ahmed (2002) points out that racialization is a process of investing skin colour with meaning. Race is popularly understood as an intrinsic property of the body and skin, while ethnicity points to cultural belonging and acts as a descriptor of a social rather than corporeal origin. This popular understanding explains how Russia and other post-Soviet countries are seen to be non-racial, because they are perceived as spaces of whiteness—i.e., spaces that are inhabited exclusively by white bodies. Discourses on race are also largely absent from the

academic analysis on Russia.[1] Due to the denial of racial distinction, whiteness in Eastern Europe remains invisible, and so do the processes of investing bodily properties with meanings of difference and hierarchy. The result is that whiteness, as a moral category and as a concept underlying racism, colonization, and cultural imperialism (hooks, 1991), is often seen as "irrelevant" in Russia and post-Soviet spaces. Due to presumption of racial homogeneity of Eastern Europe, the term "ethnicity," as a descriptor of cultural belonging, takes the place of race, a concept that is popularly understood to describe intrinsic properties of the body. Ethnicity, by its relationship to culture and history, holds the potential to destabilize essentialist constructions of difference (Hall, 1997). However, Ahmed (2002) cautions against replacing the term "race" with "ethnicity," because such a replacement erases the processes of racialization—i.e., the process of investing bodily properties with meaning and the violent consequences of this investment.

Analyzing the processes of racialization is a complicated task in post-Soviet spaces; people of the same non-Russian geocultural background often have diverging opinions on their own racial and ethnic identities—while some of them see themselves as white, others self-identify as racially non-white or "off-white" (for a vast array of terms to describe non-whiteness and non-ethnic Russianness, see Zakharov, 2015). Recently, I witnessed the complexity of discussing race among post-Soviet scholars and activists during a conference at the University of Vienna (see Chapter 1). During the conference, some of the participants from non-Russian post-Soviet spaces passionately protested being described as racialized (especially when Western scholars were the ones doing this describing), and others argued that it would be more appropriate to talk about ethnicity rather than race. Due to such diverging opinions and the complex histories of this terminology, I have resolved to use the combined

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[1] A notable exception is a sociological study by Nikolay Zakharov (2015), which demonstrates how the idea of race provides a new ideology of social cohesion in post-Soviet Russia. The main arguments of this book are that ideas of race in Russia are used to articulate class and labour relations, which the author demonstrates by examining discourses on migrant labour, and that today Russia strives to become as white as possible. Zakharov shows how white Russianness symbolizes belonging to a "civilized country," provides distance from the Soviet era, and differentiates a Russian middle class from those who work menial jobs and those who make cultural choices associated with the Soviet past.

terms of "race/ethnicity" and "racialization/cultural othering" in this dissertation to refer to the processes of ascribing hierarchical meanings and meanings of difference to bodily *and* cultural traits. This combined terminology also seems appropriate for pointing out the fluidity between markers of cultural belonging and markers of bodily difference. I demonstrate this slippage between ethnicity and race particularly in Chapter 4, which discusses how, during the Russia–Ukraine conflict, Ukrainian cultural traditions, such as the consumption of fatty foods, crossed over into bodily difference by stereotypical representations of Ukrainians as possessing fat bodies and basking in over-indulgence. In this case, ethnicity crosses over into race when Ukrainians are further racialized as off-white through visual references to their proximity to Muslim and Black bodies and juxtapositions with Russian white bodies. These representations simultaneously contribute to the ascendancy of whiteness in Russia.

My understanding of the ascendancy of whiteness is influenced by Puar's (2007) formulations, which connect this process to narratives and practices of sexual modernity. The ascendancy of whiteness refers to the process by which white privileges and rights become entrenched in sexual civilizational narratives through demands for equality with heterosexual norms such as gay marriage. Queers of colour are also employed for homonationalist projects and the ascendancy of whiteness as model minorities who participate in homonormative capitalism. They are further leveraged as proof of homophobia in their own communities of colour. Puar (2007) states:

> The queer or homonormative ethnic is a crucial fractal in the disaggregation of proper homosexual subjects, joining the ranks of an ascendant population of whiteness, from perversely sexualized populations. As with the class fraction that projects a model minority, we have here a class, race, and sexual fraction projected to the market as homonormative gay or queer consumer. (p. 28)

In the chapter on the anti-gay violence in Chechnya, I discuss the similar employment of the queer ethnic—the figure of the gay Chechen—in the Russian context.

Within post-socialist states, whiteness occupies a peculiar place. Eastern Europe is popularly imagined as void of race; nevertheless, whiteness expresses cultural and economic belonging. As Aniko Imre (2014) writes, "East European nations' unspoken insistence on their whiteness is one of the most effective and least recognized means of asserting their Europeanness" (p. 82). In Eastern Europe, some state actors seek to protect their whiteness against the multiculturalism of the West as well as against racialized migrants. Whiteness is articulated as sexual purity while multiculturalism is understood through metaphors of racial and ethnic sexual mixing. Although heavily under-researched, ideas of whiteness influence constructions of gender and sexuality in Russia and post-Soviet spaces. For example, in the context of the Russian colonization of Eurasia, colonial understandings of gender constructed Russian women as aggressive and sexually promiscuous, in contrast with notions of Islamic pious femininity (Tlostanova, 2010). However, the Eastern European region itself has been also imagined as preserving traditional European whiteness against a multicultural West. As the boundaries of Eastern European nationalism are unstable, sexuality helps to secure them through symbols of white sexual purity of Eastern European cultures.

Methodology

Since I take a multi-sited approach to answering the key questions of the dissertation and each chapter uses somewhat different methods, I include a brief note on methodology in each chapter. Chapter 1 builds on an overview of literature and conference materials in order to examine gender and sexuality studies in the Russian context. Chapter 2 is based on observation and interpretation of several cultural flashpoints that highlight the link between gender, sexuality, and nationalism in visual representations in Russian popular culture. Chapter 3 uses the Cultural Studies Approach to image analysis and relies on the terminology of semiotics in order to read the codes of gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity in political cartoons and place them in the geopolitical context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Finally, my inquiry in Chapter 4 employs techniques of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and the Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse (SKAD) for exploring the media discourses

surrounding cases of anti-gay violence in Chechnya. CDA is an approach to discourse that is attuned to power dynamics and intersections of oppressions in the use of language. The goal of CDA is to produce insights into how discourse establishes and reinforces structural inequalities. SKAD is based on a sequential analysis that involves coding and mapping of text in order to show how different actors understand and interpret a specific social problem. The combination of these two approaches to discourse forms my methodology for analysis of media representations in Chapter 4.

In the current global order, the construction of imagined national communities is affected by fluid and unpredictable flows of people, ideologies, technologies, media, and capital (Appadurai, 1990); therefore, representations are particularly potent for maintaining feelings of national affinity and enmity, as well as challenging the established norms. My approach to analyzing representations stems from Stuart Hall's (2012 [1997]) suggestion that representation is not an indexical reflection of reality but a process of making meaning through language and codes that are established and maintained by culture. This conceptualization is significant because it requires us to examine representations not in terms of their accuracy but in terms of the way in which they are embedded in and also support the power structures. The interrelated processes of normalization and resistance happen through establishing or rejecting hegemonic representations, stereotypes, and controlling images (Collins, 2008).

In conducting visual analysis of popular images, I want to consider not only what images mean and what they represent, but also what they do. This question comes from the field of visual anthropology and the call for considering how images possess agency (Bakewell, 1998) and desire (Mitchell, 2005). Lisa Bakewell (1998) suggests that images are not so much descriptive as they are categorizable as actions, similarly to speech acts. Meanwhile, J. W. Mitchell (2005) advocates for considering what images *want*. I am particularly interested in this question, because in the Russian public sphere, certain images —especially those of the gendered and sexual body—seem to hold a particular power; they are said to be able to inspire—like images of President Putin—or to offend— like images depicting particular sexual bodies and acts or the ones questioning white superiority.

Positionality

My interpretation of the material in this dissertation is affected by my specific position. I am writing this dissertation as a queer migrant from Lithuania currently living in Toronto, Canada. I was born in the Soviet Union and grew up in a Russian family, surrounded by Russian language and culture. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, I have spent some time in Russia and Ukraine and maintain relationships with my extended family in these countries. My relationships with queer members of my family living in Russia enriched my understanding of Russian realities significantly. Having spent my adulthood freely moving through various spaces in Europe and North America, I do not see myself as an insider to Russian culture, even though this is the language, culture, and people that I understand the best. Instead, I see myself as a member of a Russian queer diaspora that maintains connections with friends and family in Russia. In 2015, I spent a month doing fieldwork in St Petersburg, acquiring literature unavailable in Canada and collecting background information on the topics of my chapters. I have also attended academic and activist conferences on sexualities in post-Soviet regions, which has bolstered my understanding of gender and sexuality studies in Russia. In 2017, I worked as a translator for the gay and lesbian refugees from Chechnya in Toronto, which informs Chapter 4 of this dissertation, even though I decided against interviewing the refugees out of safety concerns. Although I am committed to challenging Western-centric perspectives, I am bound by my positionalities and must acknowledge my outsider status and the way it may limit my interpretations of events and representations. Throughout this research, I have done my best to mediate the specific conditioning I have received through my training in Western-based queer and transnational sexualities studies. This is, however, an unescapably subjective reading of the topics at hand.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I explore some of the pivotal cases in which the Russian heterosexist militaristic patriarchy meets the image of a liberatory Western model of sexual citizenship—notably, I am writing in a moment when Russianness and Russian queerness and feminism is being redefined,

reconstructed, and replayed anew. The cases of this dissertation seemingly build on models of a "global" gendered and sexual subject—a riot grrrl, an LGBT/queer activist, a queer refugee. Resting on the imperial models of sexual modernity, these subjects fall under the systemic oppression of the Russian state before finding supposed relief in Western democratic salvation—through the world witnessing and embracing these subjects, through politics of protest and outrage, and/or through seeking asylum. The stories I examine fall under the Western model of liberal ethics and freedom, creating the ethical Western subject while condemning Russian values and constructing them as outdated. In this dissertation, I hope to complicate the view presented by *The Economist* mentioned in the beginning of this introduction, in which the opinions of young Russians on gender equality and sexual diversity become an epistemological tool. My goal is not to describe Russian people in some more "accurate" way, but rather to call for a more complex consideration of describing and knowing Russia. It is my hope that the cases I analyze in this dissertation will illustrate that the employment of gender and sexuality in discourses and representations does not follow a predictable pattern of authoritarian repression towards the (imagined) Western model of sexual liberation. Rather, the Russian sexual modernity includes multiple and contradictory modes of sexual politics concomitantly.

Chapter 1

Scholarship as Resistance: Gender and Sexuality Studies between Russian Censorship and the Western Gaze

Introduction

      In 2015, I traveled to St Petersburg for one month to conduct research. My plan was to strengthen my contacts in Russian academic and activist worlds and to collect materials in preparation for writing this dissertation. Among the professors, students, and activists I met was Evgeny Shtorn, a young sociologist from the Centre for Independent Social Research. At the time, Shtorn was also a translator of multiple languages, a co-editor of the special issue on sexuality in the *Sociology of Power* journal, and a research fellow at the Laboratory for Sexuality Research, conducting a legal study on hate crimes against LGBTQ people in Russia (Shtorn, 2018). Over the last four years, the life of this bright scholar has changed drastically. In 2017, Shtorn was threatened and intimidated by the Federal Security Service officials, who were attempting to recruit him as an informant on the activities of LGBTQ academics and activists. Shtorn's passport was annulled and he was forced to urgently flee Russia in the beginning of 2018. At the time of this writing, he is an asylum seeker in Ireland and is facing numerous challenges.

      Shtorn has been writing about his difficulties with immigration, financial hardship, housing, and mental health on social media and his blog (Shtorn, n.d.), not only documenting his personal journey but also creating an ethnographic account of refugee lives in Ireland. As Shtorn explained in an interview for the *Irish Times* (Pollack, 2018, November 28), he had been particularly vulnerable to intimidation due to his queerness and his migrant background in Russia (he was an immigrant from Kazakhstan). Queer immigrants from Central Asia are particularly vulnerable to intimidation because of the ease with which the Russian state can annul their passports and immigration documents. They also face the threat of violence in cases of deportation to their home countries after their LGBTQ status had become known to

the public.[2] Sadly, this story of an established queer studies scholar being targeted is not unique; many other LGBTQ scholars, activists, and writers, especially those with precarious immigration status, face pressure and intimidation from state agencies. Such stories illustrate that gender and sexuality studies in Russia is not just a matter of theory, research, and education—it is also a political site in which marginalization and exclusion influence individual lives as much as they do the development of the discipline.

The field of gender and sexuality studies in Russia is thus politicized and connected to questions of Russian nationalism. It is also utilized in drawing boundaries around what is considered to be national or foreign, pro-government or anti-government, Russian or non-Russian. The development of the field has historically been determined by several key areas: relationships with Russian authorities, access to international academic communities, physical and symbolic border controls, and the marginal status of the discipline both within academia and in larger socio-political contexts. The Soviet regime imposed decades of censorship and restrictions on the social sciences, which ensured scholars were not always able to access archival and empirical data, collaborate internationally, develop and apply innovative theories, or conduct research projects on topics considered unconventional in social sciences, such as gender and sexuality (see Kon, 2008; Zaslavskaya, 2007). At the same time, the Soviet space has also been influenced by the Western gaze of Western European and North American scholars and activists, which has positioned it as a place of repression and otherness, and more recently as a space of transition towards modern liberal democracy. Thus Russia has been produced as an object of study for the West (Baer, 2002). Although the conditions of censorship and isolation of Russian sexuality and gender studies have changed since the Soviet era, I contemplate in this chapter how Russian researchers of gender and sexuality have to navigate two challenges simultaneously: the authorities' perception of these fields as

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[2] A similar story was that of a queer journalist Ali Feruz, an immigrant from Uzbekistan, who worked for the independent newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* covering issues of anti-gay violence, among others. Feruz was targeted by the Russian state agencies in 2017 and faced deportation. While in detention Feruz attempted suicide and later claimed that if deported, he would be tortured due to his sexual orientation and his refusal to become an informant for Uzbek and Russian secret services (Amnesty International, 2018, February 15).

suspicious, unnecessary, and quintessentially anti-Russian, and the Western gaze that consistently and persistently projects ideas of otherness onto Russian sexuality.

For reasons outlined above, it is impossible to consider gender and sexuality research without seeing it as a site of social and political tension itself. Therefore, the goals of this chapter are (1) to explore the achievements of gender and sexualities studies in Russia, and (2) to outline links between scholarly research and Russian social and political contexts. This overview will provide background for the subsequent chapters, in which I examine representational and discursive practices that employ discourses on sexuality, gender, and race/ethnicity for nation-making. Reviewing anthropological, sociological, and cultural studies literature on sexuality, gender, and sexual politics in Russia, I first provide a short history of gender and sexuality studies as a field as well as the social and political contexts in which it developed. Next, I discuss the political and structural pressures faced by institutions and academics working in this discipline and the resulting problems and limitations. Finally, I highlight sites of resistance employed by Russian academics and activists working in the field of sexuality studies. These tactics not only resist political pressures from the Russian government but also challenge the Western academic gaze. As I argue in this chapter, contemporary gender and sexuality studies scholars are in a difficult position both in terms of politics and theory. Scholars working from feminist, LGBTQ, anti-oppressive and intersectional critical perspectives are positioned as harming the "Russian national interest" and are subjected to intimidation, censorship, and pressure to either collaborate with the government or to leave the country. To continue academic work, Russian and other post-Soviet scholars are often required to adopt the Western-centric theoretical language of gender and sexuality studies and to produce scholarship that conforms to the Western exoticizing and orientalizing gaze.

From communist utopias of genderlessness to gender studies centres

In contemporary Russian scholarship, "gender studies" and the related "sexuality studies" amalgamate methodological and analytical tools from Western feminism with historically rooted Russian theorizations and analyses of gender relations. Concern over the social realities of Russian women were

widely articulated during the first period of activity of Russian women's movements in the mid-nineteenth through early-twentieth centuries. For example, the political analysis of sexual relations was central in works by Alexandra Kollontai, a prominent communist ideologue in the early 1920s who promoted sexual liberation and the full inclusion of women in work, social, and political life (Yukina, 2007). Still, despite the rich history of Russian/Soviet feminist thought, the country's modern vocabulary of gender and sexuality studies rests predominantly on Western conceptions that were legitimized and institutionalized in Russia alongside processes of liberalization, economic privatization, and democratization that were imported to Russia from the U.S. in the late eighties (Tlostanova, 2015). As a result, terms and concepts are applied unevenly and evoke various contexts.

The terms "gender," "patriarchy," and "feminism" in Russian are awkward, rootless, ahistorical transplants from English; however, they stand at the centre of contemporary Russian gender and sexuality studies. Moreover, the term "gender" has also entered Russian religious discourse, where it is explicitly associated with the threat of sexualization and feminism infiltrating from the West (Temkina, 2012). Political and legislative discourses also use a strange concoction of terms related to sexuality. Within these fields, it is not rare to find the archaic term "muzhelozhestvo" (literally, "man lying with man"), coming from religious texts, next to terms that have been adopted from English, such as "lesbianstvo" ("lesbianism"), "biseksualizm" ("bisexualism"), and "transgendernost" ("transgenderism") (for analysis of terminology relating to sexuality in legal discourse, see Kondakov, 2010). Russian vocabulary describing gender categories—such as "pol" (biological/physiological sex) and "rod" ("kin" and grammatical "gender," which, in Russian, includes masculine, feminine, and neutral)—are used less often by Russian scholars and activists than the terms "gay," "lesbian," "transgender," and "queer," which all come from Anglophone scholarship and LGBTQ movements. As a result, there are no analytical concepts within contemporary Russian scholarship that derive specifically from Russian gender vocabulary.

Intersectional approaches to studying gender and sexuality are also quite limited in Russian scholarship. While the analysis of intersections of gender, sexuality, and class categories are present in some research (e.g. Kay, 2006; Stella, 2015), scholarship analyzing intersections of gender, sexuality, and

race or ethnicity is very rare. The are several reasons for this shortage. First, the analytical categories of "race," "racialization," and "ethnicity" have been absent from Russian scholarship for decades due to Soviet ideology, which actively sought to erase ethnic and cultural differences and replace them with a notion of a universal Soviet citizen. This, as Zakharov (2015) points out, made race a "legally unacceptable means for identity construction" (p. 5). What emerged in scholarship instead was the biological concept of "etnos" that allowed scholars to study social groups as biological organisms, to exclude ethnicities from their social and national histories, and to omit questions of racialization, marginalization, and oppression (Oushakine, 2009).[3] The result of this erasure is the still widespread understanding of Russia as a racially and ethnically homogenous country, which is only ethnically diverse on the periphery[4]. Second, the study of race/ethnicity is seen as a field that is separate from and even competing with the field of gender and sexuality studies. The rare study of gender and/or sexuality in non-ethnic Russian populations is either situated in the disciplines of ethnology and physical anthropology (Oushakine, 2009, pp. 79-129), or is conducted or commissioned by international agencies under the umbrella of "gender mainstreaming" (Shakirova, 2006), which I discuss further in this chapter. Devoid of critical analysis of colonialism and privileging essentializing understandings of racial/ethnic groups, such scholarship produces a predictable set of narratives in what Loffreda and Rankine (2015) would call "the scholarly racial imaginary." This contributes to processes of racial/ethnic othering and the orientalization

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[3] As Oushakine (2009) explains, etnos is based on the essentialist understanding of social groups as "etnos units" rooted in the natural world (as opposed to the constructivist view of ethnicity) and is used to describe "bio-psycho-social" collectivities or "cultural genotypes"—not unlike scientific racism of European and American physical anthropology with a twist of Darwinian evolutionism. The discipline of *etnologia* ("ethnology") was, and still is, concerned with studying natural conditions under which "etnos units" would develop and change. Oushakine's study points to the revival of etnos theory in post-Soviet scholarship concerned with Russia's "demographic problems" of low birth rates, high death rates, and the growing proportion of non-Russians in the country. For more criticism of Russian scientific ethnic taxonomies and their employment for purposes of colonization of Caucasus and Central Asia, see Tlostanova, 2008.

[4] According to the latest census data (Federal State Statistics Agency, 2012), there are approximately 200 different ethnicities and/or nationalities in Russia. Russia's total population consists of 78% Russians, 3.7% Tatar, 1.4% Ukrainians, and 1% or less of every other ethnicity and/or nationality. The non-Russian and non-Slavic populations are predominantly residing in peripheral Southern and Northern provinces of Russia, and therefore people of white Slavic ethnicities constitute 90-98% in central territories of Russia. Although it is not a reason to underestimate the need for research decentralizing white Russianness, these numbers provide some explanation of why Russia is perceived as an ethnically homogenous country and why the ethnic Russian is prioritized as an object of scholarship.

of non-Russian population. Third, the limited access to financial, human and intellectual resources and the small number of gender and studies researchers (see Temkina & Zdravomyslova, 2014) means that white Russianness is prioritized as the object of academic study and largely remains unmarked as a racial/ethnic category. Although very small, there are a number of scholars who started developing critical analytical language on race, racialization, ethnicity, and (post/neo)coloniality in the last decade (Reznikova, 2014; Tlostanova, 2010; Zakharov, 2015). I discuss these works further in this chapter.

Some scholars of post-Soviet society describe this lack of Russian analytical vocabulary in gender and sexuality studies and studies of race and ethnicity as a symptom of colonial consciousness. A Russian anthropologist Serguei Oushakine (2002) characterizes colonial consciousness as "a deeply engrained crisis of identity, distrust for the creative possibilities of its own language, suspicion towards its own history and its own frames of reference" (p. 18). While Russia is itself a colonial power in terms of political and cultural influence in the Eurasian geographical region, what is meant by the term "colonial consciousness" here is the dependency of frames of explanation, theory, and research on post-Soviet politics and cultures on Euro-Atlantic theoretical and methodological constructions of knowledge (Tlostanova, 2015). Some scholars, however, argue that using the vocabulary, theory, and methods developed by gender and sexuality scholars in the West enriches Russian scholarship, which had, for decades, stagnated due to Soviet censorship (Vorontsov, 2014). Recently, adaptations of the theoretical vocabulary developed by feminists of colour in the Caribbean and North America have found their way into studies of gender and sexuality in Russian (post)colonial spaces through the work of a young generation of scholars who are in the process of their graduate studies (Kreolex.Center, n.d.; Reznikova, 2015; discussed further in this chapter).

The theoretical constraints of gender and sexuality studies stem from systemic problems in Russian academia and the historically marginalized position of not only gender studies, but social sciences in general. In his autobiographical book *Eighty Years of Solitude* (2008), Igor Kon, the first— and for the longest time only—Soviet/Russian scholar working on topics of sex and sexuality from a position of sociology rather than medicine, described the deep feeling of intellectual loneliness

surrounding his work in the Soviet Union. As he explains, even though sexuality was a rich area of academic and medical inquiry before the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, all of this knowledge was condemned, censored, and destroyed during the first several years of communist rule. Under Soviet ideology, sexuality was virtually non-existent, and sex was treated as the exclusive domain of medical doctors. Writing about sexuality from non-medical perspectives was nearly impossible under these conditions. Kon (2008) describes how some foreign books, even those kept in libraries, could only be accessed via special permits and were heavily censored for "anti-communist" content. Foreign books sent to him by mail were sometimes confiscated, and travelling to conferences across the border required special permission. Decisions regarding permission for travel and access were arbitrary and unpredictable. Therefore, Kon's texts were first translated and published abroad in the late seventies. They were only published in Russian much later, in the nineties. Similarly, Tatyana Zaslavskaya (2007), a sociologist of Soviet economy, describes how the theory of political economy taught in Soviet universities was based on communist dogmas and ideology rather than on real economic situations. Publishing academic texts also required adherence to communist ideology and citations of party documents. Due to these limitations, scholars learned to read and write in double-speak, conveying their true meaning between the lines. The result of this complex relationship to official discourse, as Alexei Yurchak (2005) notes, was "the creation of an unanticipated cultural 'surplus' of meanings and realities that did not necessarily oppose the state's communist goals but did not necessarily follow them either" (p. 287).

As Kon explained in several of his texts (1993, 2008, 2010), the Communist Party during the Soviet period (1922-1991) hoped to desexualize women and transform the codes of gender relations that prevailed in tsarist Russia—those which Communist ideologues saw as outdated. Soviet conceptualizations of citizenship determined the value of individuals by their contribution to and place within the state's collective production, as well as to their belonging within a specific community, such as a communist youth organization, a factory, or a collective agricultural unit (Bratochkin, 2014). Therefore, the Soviet doctrine on gender and sexuality was built on the rationalization of production, the standardization of modes of belonging, and a utilitarian view of the body that saw it as a tool of

production, separated from any aesthetic or sexual pleasure. As Helena Goscilo (2006) eloquently writes, "the politics of unanimity had rendered the Soviet body a predictable semiotic center subject to minimal variation" (p. 270). Everything, including the workplace, housing, public spaces and the way people looked, was organized around ideas of efficiency and functionality. This resulted into silencing of discussion on sex and sexual pleasure.[5]

To improve the efficiency of production, early Soviet ideology aimed to eliminate historically established gender differences that oriented men towards the workplace and women towards the domestic sphere. Instead, communist ideologues proposed the establishment of a different gender regime, one where women and men were equally devoted to serving the needs of the people and the communist state at both work and home (Ashwin, 2000; Stella, 2015; Yukina, 2007). These new ideas were central to the creation of a new "Soviet citizen" and were established and maintained by the same mechanisms used to sustain the ideology of the party-state. These mechanisms included presence of party representatives in all workplaces, communal houses, institutions and organizations; mass propaganda campaigns; and large events, celebrations, and mobilizing initiatives that organized and structured the everyday involvement of individuals in communal citizenship. These communism-building mechanisms normalized new gendered discourses and dampened any visibility of sex and sexuality across all Soviet republics.

In the "absence" of sexuality in public discourse were romantic communist ideas of pure love and intimacy that were expressed through one's service to their family and workplace. These ideals, in turn, ultimately represented a Soviet citizen's devotion to the state (Chuykina, 2002). These expressions were rooted in the work of Friedrich Engels, who criticized bourgeois family models that were based on economic relations and the ownership of private property (Yukina, 2007). Engels argued that men and women, respectively, represented the bourgeois exploiters and exploited proletariat. Thus, the liberation of women from the domestic sphere and their equal participation in a workforce was seen to be an issue

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[5] A great interpretation of this can be found in a conversation between Nikolay Oleynikov and Keti Chukhrov (Oleynikov, 2014) about Soviet underwear; they exclaimed the underwear was so standardized, functional, and painfully ugly that if someone caught a rare glimpse of it in a movie, one would think about economics rather than sex.

of class emancipation. Soviet rhetoric also constructed homosexuality as a form of bourgeois decadence, which the state sought to eradicate by means of criminalization and complete negation of its existence.

As Svetlana Chuykina (2002) shows, the Soviet ideological position on issues of love can be summarized in the popular slogan, "Domestic life is inseparable from politics!" (p. 102). The domestic sphere was described by the ideologues of the Communist Party as a synecdoche of communist society and was, therefore, a place where the personal was inevitably always political. Individual behaviour in sexual and familial relationships was viewed as a manifestation of one's political stance: loyalty to or betrayal of the Communist Party. This created rigid norms of "good" gendered and sexual behaviour and prompted an omnipresent scrutiny of intimate relationships. This disciplinary policing was continuously enforced by one's own family members, neighbours, employers, coworkers, fellow members of clubs, communities and associations. Such continuous surveillance also rested on the idea that a "good" person has nothing to hide and thus does not need a personal life. The notion of "the personal" in Soviet culture was associated with egoism, individualism, guilt, and a sense of personal duty, such as personal responsibility to sacrifice for the fatherland (Boym, 1995). The fact that there is no single word for "privacy" or "personal life" in Russian further points towards the absence of "the personal." The closest alternative available (*chastnaya zhizn*), has rather negative connotations—something close to "secret life". As a result of Soviet ideological postulates that made individual intimacy a political—as well as a public—matter, mainstream discourses romanticized heterosexual spiritual love and completely suppressed any public discussion or visibility of sex.

In the context of authoritarian communism, scientific research on gender and sexuality also had to serve official state ideology. Sexuality was studied exclusively through a medical lens under the discipline of sexopathology, a section of Russian/Soviet clinical medicine that studied sexual disorders, including behavioural, personal, and social deviations (Shcheglov, 1993). From the end of the nineteenth century until the early sixties, sexopathology primarily collected encyclopedic knowledge of sex, such as information on sexual dysfunctions and statistics on the age of sexual maturation and entry into marriage. Yet, starting in the early sixties, due to a growing concern about low birth rates and rising instances of

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divorce, the medical community led a resurgent interest in sex. This interest encouraged public debates on sex education and sexual hygiene, inspired medical research and publications on sexual diseases and behavioural disorders (including sexual "perversions," prostitution, and transsexualism), and resulted in the establishment of "family guidance" clinics that provided medical and psychotherapeutic services to the public (Shcheglov, 1993).

The monopoly sexopathology had on sexual discourse and representation, however, did not mean there were no alternatives; although heteronormativity, abstinence, and functionality defined the officially proclaimed sexual utopia of Soviet Russia, there existed informal expressions of everyday sexualities, including cruising spots, hidden same-sex relationships, sex for money, and other dissident sexualities (Kondakov, 2016a). Moreover, even though the official discourse reached for linguistic purity, Russian and everyday expressions have always been full of references to sexualized body parts and sexual acts in the form of folklore, jokes, and crude language (Kon, 1997). As Laura Engelstein (1992a) argues, dissident discourses on sexuality, from erotic literature of Russian authors to black-market porn, employed sexual taboos to protest the prohibition of pleasure and censoring regimes imposed on the Russian population. These underground sexual expressions were, unfortunately, replete with misogyny, homophobia, and sexual violence (Borenstein, 2007). Zdravomyslova and Temkina (2007) define this twofold reality of sexual culture—an official one that negated, moralized, and romanticized sex, and a colloquial, everyday one that highly vulgarized and rationalized sex—as a "hypocritical sexual regime." The social circumstances of everyday living, such as housing shortages and constant surveillance, limited privacy and intimacy for citizens, making it difficult for them to develop discourses that would, on the one hand, escape the romanticized and unrealistic ideals of sexual purity, and, on the other hand, avoid succumbing to violent and exploitative representations of sex. I maintain that this hypocritical employment of both discourses, that of respectability and that of sexual violence, is a characteristic of political discourse in contemporary Putin's Russia. One can spot it in Putin's pro-natalist family-praising rhetoric and metaphors of sexual aggression and crude language in his passionate anti-terrorist speeches

(see Chapter 2). It is also present in popular representations of political conflicts, such as in sexist and transphobic political cartoons in the context of Russia-Ukraine conflict (see Chapter 3).

In post-Soviet Russia, gender and sexuality became sites of engaging with both nostalgia (Boym, 2001; Nadkarni & Shevchenko, 2004) and consumption (Humphrey, 2002; Shevchenko, 2002). Led by Mikhail Gorbachev at the end of the nineteen-eighties, the political reforms of *glasnost* ("openness") and *perestroika* ("economic restructuring") ended Soviet-style censorship in the media and initiated a reorientation away from the country's communist centralized economy towards economic competition, privatization, and the establishment of a free neoliberal market. These changes greatly affected the knowledge and politics of sex, gender, and sexuality in Russia. Officially liberated from omnipresent surveillance and communist propaganda in 1991, post-Soviet Russians were enthusiastic about getting rid of the old gender regime. This meant discarding ideas of gender equality, retiring gendered ideals of serving the state, regaining a separation between private and public spheres of life, and reinstating essentialist gender roles. Russian sociologists called this return to essentialism a "patriarchal renaissance" (Posadskaya, 1993; Temkina & Zdravomyslova, 2014). Contemporary moral panics over the loss of idealized "pure love" and the simplicity of life without sex can also be seen as expressions of a nostalgic longing for Soviet times, imagining oneself in a time and place that has been lost. In contrast, consumption, became a way of constructing identity and expressing individual agency in a fast-changing and unstable post-communist world (Shevchenko, 2002).

Democratic reforms and cultural changes prompted the rapid proliferation of discourses on sex and sexual pleasure, as well as a large-scale commodification of sexuality—processes the old Soviet regime had, for decades, associated with the moral decline of the West. Seeking inclusion in the European community, Russia decriminalized homosexuality in 1993 and incorporated a series of anti-discrimination directives into its legal system (though, whether these legal advancements were actually followed is another issue). Russia's revived interest in sex produced a variety of expert knowledge, including television programs discussing all matters related to sex, sex advice columns in *Cosmopolitan* magazine, which was first published in Russia in 1994, and the legitimization of research on gender and sexuality

through newly established gender studies institutes. A talk show "Pro Eto" ("About That") ran on the National TV channel from 1997 to 2000. It was dedicated exclusively to sex, addressing issues such as homosexuality, bisexuality, sexual health, and sexual harassment (Borenstein, 2007). These multiple sites of debate on sexual matters demonstrate how previously silenced and negated realities—such as, sex for pleasure, sexual orientation, sex work, STIs and HIV/AIDS—were suddenly normalized aspects of everyday life. The explosion of sexual discourses came with some backlash; as sex became omnipresent in public spaces and visual cultures, the public concern regarding promiscuity, pornography, and sexism in the media rapidly increased (Kon, 1993; Attwood, 1993). Sexuality emerged as a vessel for post-Soviet citizens to channel their hopes, dreams, anxieties, and the emotional challenges of adjusting to a new model of the self. The national conceptualization of the individual moved from the old *homo sovieticus*, a model-citizen that desired labour, dreamed of high production outputs, and was faithful to the state, to a new citizen that was driven by individual desires and the consumer market.

Gender politics, research, and education developed in Russia and other post-Soviet countries as part of a wider social, political, and economic modernization project. The project was prompted, monitored, and sustained by international organizations and private Western funds (Shakirova, 2006; Zimmerman, 2005), and the renewed openness of Russia's physical and symbolic borders provided new collaborative opportunities between Western and Russian researchers. Russian scholars could now go abroad, attend conferences, and work together with researchers in the West, while Soviet archives were reopened and became accessible to both Russian and Western historians. Russian social science projects started to receive substantial funding from international foundations, including the MacArthur, Ford, Open Society, and Heinrich Boll Foundations (Kondakov, 2016b; Shakirova, 2012; Temkina & Zdravomyslova, 2014). The move from Russian government-sponsored funding for research to international and private project funding meant that Russian scholars had to adapt the language, topics, and methodology of research to the requirements of international foundations—quite a difficult task for many researchers who were not fluent in English (Kon, 2008). At the same time, these funding opportunities attracted many anti-feminist and pseudo-scientific projects, which used the analytical

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language of gender studies without actually applying feminist theory and methods. This created a paradoxical situation in which some scholars who self-identified as feminists executed research that advocated for a return to distinct gender roles and otherwise supported pronatalist nationalist ideologies of the state (Temkina & Zdravomyslova, 2014).

The other problem that international funding brought was constraints to theoretical, methodological, and political approaches. A gender studies scholar and activist from Kazakhstan, Svetlana Shakirova (2006), writes that with funding post-Soviet spaces had to adopt international research and a political agenda of gender mainstreaming. This stifled and orientalized both scholarship and activism and was only somewhat efficient in driving political and legal changes. As Shakirova (2006) poignantly explains the main problem:

> In international networks of women's movements, we frequently take the role of the exotic
>
> Other to water-down the 'norm.' The fact that we have to focus on the worst forms of gender
>
> discrimination and inequality [in our communities] in order to justify legitimacy of our
>
> activities also points toward our orientalist service to the West. Proliferation of the themes of
>
> bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan, sex trafficking in Central Asia, women's self-immolation in
>
> Uzbekistan, arranged marriages in Tajikistan, prostitution in Kazakhstan, etc.—what is that
>
> if not following orientalist clichés? (para. 5)

Similarly, Tlostanova (2008) further extrapolates that Russian peripheries and non-European post-Soviet states are subjected to what she calls "secondary orientalism," defined as "the copying of western orientalism with a slight deviation and necessarily, with a carefully hidden, often unconscious feeling that Russia itself is a form of a mystic and mythic Orient for the West" (p. 1).

In spite of these challenges, the political conditions for developing and institutionalizing gender studies were overall favourable after the collapse of the Soviet Union, since Russia sought political integration into the international sphere and was rapidly making legal advances in the spheres of human rights and feminism. Yet the fact that sexuality and gender studies developed primarily through the

collaboration with and funding from foreign investors deeply affected the theoretical and thematic foci of the scholarship and the position of gender studies as a discipline in Russia. While Russian scholars saw gender studies as an innovative and modern field, the government and society saw it as foreign-born and anti-Russian.

Framing gender and sexuality studies as non-Russian disciplines

In Russian academia, gender studies formed under the marginal discipline of "public sociology," which had been a locus for criticism of the political regime and advocacy for democratic reforms in the nineties. The concept of gender as a social category that describes the experience of women under patriarchy began to develop in Russia in 1989. In the early nineties, it was at least partially legitimized as an object of study within the newly established gender research centres in Moscow, St Petersburg, Tver', and Samara. The European University in St Petersburg was established in 1996 and became a leading institution in sociological research on gender and sexual identities, behaviours, and politics from feminist and LGBTQ-inclusive perspectives. These gender research centres generated many research projects that gathered statistical and ethnographic data across Russia. Having previously been cut off from the international academic community due to Soviet censorship, Russian researchers were now eager to incorporate Western sociological and gender theory into their studies. However, they also introduced some new theoretical concepts to describe the gendered realities of Russian society, such as "state patriarchy," "etacractic gender order,"[6] and the previously mentioned "patriarchal renaissance" (Temkina & Zdravomyslova, 2014). Thematically, gender scholars of the nineties focused on women in the labour market, discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace, the feminization of poverty, the underrepresentation of women in politics, the prevalence of abortion, the lack of sex education, and problems facing sexual minorities (Temkina & Zdravomyslova, 2014; Tartakovskaya, 2010). This academic research and analysis provided a gendered criticism of post-Soviet realities, warning against the

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[6] Zdravomyslova and Temkina (2007) describe the etacratic gender order as a monopoly of the party-state on the production of stable and homogenous gender roles and norms that are implemented through strict institutional surveillance.

pitfalls of returning to essentialist understandings of gender. The opening of the Soviet borders and archives also made it possible for Western researchers to conduct historical and ethnographic studies of sexuality in Russia. This resulted in Laura Engelstein's (1992b) history of sexuality in late imperial Russia, Dan Healey's (2001) study of homosexuality in Stalin's Gulag camps, Eric Naiman's (1997) work on sex in early-Soviet ideology, and Laurie Essig's (1999) rich, ten-year long ethnographic study of queer communities in Moscow.

At the end of the nineties, feminism and gender studies in Russia stopped being a priority for international funding organizations and private funds. This situation caused serious financial challenges for gender studies centres and research projects (Temkina & Zdravomyslova, 2014). In addition, research that was primarily focused on gender—and even the term "gender" itself—was increasingly perceived as a threat to "authentic" Russian discourse and to building a new nationalist society under Vladimir Putin. During Putin's presidency, gender and sexuality have become sites of conflict over nationalist values, and sexuality has increasingly been framed as a social problem (Stella, 2015). Putin's public image campaigns exploited gender and sexuality by promoting essentialist and pronatalist discourses and bolstering the image of a strong patriarchal leader (see Chapter 2). Further, a series of laws have been implemented that support patriarchal gender roles and nationalism. This includes the federal law "For the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values," which is widely known as the "gay propaganda" law, approved in 2013. Additionally, in 2017 the reformulation of the laws criminalizing domestic violence significantly reduced women's protection from battery. Putin's administration has also promoted panics regarding low birth rates in the country, increased conservative mobilization, executed an authoritarian crackdown on mass protests, and strengthened the Russian Orthodox Church, which has always seen feminism and discourse on sex as a threat to morality. These legal and social changes have significantly affected the discipline of gender studies in Russia.

The attempt to undermine feminist and LGBTQ-inclusive research is epitomized by the state's current attempts to shut down the European University in St Petersburg (EUSP). According to the efficiency rankings conducted by the Ministry of Education and Science in 2016, the EUSP is the top

university in the country in terms of scientific and research accomplishments among 830 universities (EUSP, 2016a). Despite this recognition of its high-quality work, the EUSP was ordered to relinquish its scientific and educational work and to vacate the building in December 2016 (EUSP, 2016b). This decision was made following a series of audits initiated by the Ministry of Education's inspectorate and members of Russian parliament, who had previously criticized the institution for carrying out anti-Russian research, receiving sponsorship from abroad, serving foreign interests, and hosting foreign professors and students. The audits cited several minor administrative and technical issues as reasons for the institution's closure, such as a lack of sport facilities. However, none of the audits revealed substantial violations in relation to conducting research, publishing, or educating. Additionally, no financial violations were found. The university issued a statement (EUSP, 2016b) detailing a long process of appeals and corrections to the violations. This statement concluded that the primary reasons for the initiation of the audits and final decision to close the institution were political, since the university is a leading institution in LGBTQ and feminist research in Russia. After the University moved to a different building and after long series of additional audits, the license allowing the university to continue educational activities was reinstalled in August 2018. The suspension of the license and requirements to change the location of the University significantly interfered with its work and demoralized its students, faculty, and administrative staff (EUSP, 2018).

The EUSP is not the only institution that has been targeted by the government. In 2012, Russia passed a federal law that requires independent groups receiving any foreign funding—including as little as $8 for a newsletter subscription from abroad (Amnesty International, 2016)—and engaging in political activity to register with the Justice Ministry as "foreign agents," a term historically associated with treason and espionage in Russia. Many organizations have protested and boycotted the law, but they were added to the "registry of nonprofit organizations performing the functions of a foreign agent" against their consent. Since passing the law, the registry has listed 158 groups, among them the Centre for Social Policy and Gender Studies in Saratov, the Arkhangelsk regional LGBT organization, the Samara Centre for Gender Studies, the Women's League in Kaliningrad, Women of the Don in Rostov region, and

Women of Eurasia in Chelyabinsk. According to the Human Rights Watch report (HRW, 2017), About 30 organizations have shut down, while others must deal with the consequences of a negative reputation, increased scrutiny, and potential criminal charges for treason.

The persecution of gender and sexuality studies has been occurring within the context of national discourse on the low birthrates embedded in the nationalist ideology of pronatalism (Rivkin-Fish, 2006). Pronatalism includes concerns for the health and morality of women, the fear of changes to stereotypical gender roles, the belief that sex education and family planning programs are morally outrageous, the distrust of foreign influences, and a preoccupation with the ethnic purity of the Russian population. Serguei Oushakine (2009) connects the concern with a decline in the Russian population due to low birth rates and to the prevalent feeling of mourning over what he calls "ethnic trauma." This "ethic trauma" stems from the loss of Russianness as spiritual ("Russian in vastness of the soul") and national ("Russian in enormity of territory and population"). The language of feminism and LGBTQ rights used by gender and sexuality studies becomes a target for pronatalist nationalism not only because it challenges heteropatriarchal norms but also because it is perceived as harming white Russianness. As Rivkin-Fish (2006) suggests, there is little activism against pronatalist discourse and policies because the rhetoric of pronatalism is contextualized within concerns for the nation's future. Therefore, opposition risks being seen as betraying the nation altogether and working in concert with foreign interests against the Russian people.

In the early 1990s, Russian scholars were already demonstrating that the resurgence of gender essentialism and patriarchal structures of society were some of the most significant changes in post-Soviet Russian culture and politics (Posadskaya, 1993). The popularization of feminist discourse and its association with notions of progress, modernity, and democracy, which occurred immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, were brief. During the democratization process, a commitment to gender equality was established through the Constitution of the Russian Federation as well as in newly adopted anti-discrimination laws. Furthermore, multiple committees on women's issues were put into place within governmental and administrative institutions. However, feminist scholars have demonstrated that these

changes were purely nominal; the anti-discrimination laws were not followed in practice and were

therefore ineffective. Participation of women in representational politics was extremely low, and by the

early 2000s, almost every women's group within Russia's political and administrative institutions were

either disbanded or had effectively ceased to function (Aivazova, 2007). The organizations that

represented Russian feminism in the nineties de-radicalized and disassociated themselves from feminism.

For example, in the nineties, women's crisis centres fought against domestic violence against women,

criticized male gender roles that legitimize such violence, and advocated for women-only spaces. By the

end of Putin's second presidential term in 2012, the few remaining crisis centres were framing the issue of

domestic violence in gender-neutral terms, as violence against anyone by anyone in the family, and had

abandoned the idea of women-only spaces (Johnson & Saarinen, 2013). Moreover, post-Soviet discourse

condemned the Soviet era's principles of gender equality and its idealization of the androgynous worker-

woman. Instead, post-Soviet culture embraced the previously non-existent separation of public and

private spheres and conceptualized these spaces as "naturally" gendered (Kay, 2006). This patriarchal

renaissance only further intensified with the consolidation of Putin's rule.

Many scholars of Russia have documented that since the beginning of Putin's presidency in 2000,

public discourse, popular values, and gendered representation have relied heavily on patriarchal gender

stereotypes. The research of sociologists Tatyana Riabova and Oleg Riabov (2010) shows a strong

countrywide idealization of Putin as a "real man," with his wit, determination, physical toughness, and

strength of opinion cited as the most desirable traits of Russian virility. Similarly, Valerie Sperling (2015)

argues that the sexualization of Putin's hypermasculinity was one of the most successful tactics of his

political campaign and served to legitimize his governing. Neotraditional models of masculinity, which

are characterized by aggression and excess, have also been popularized in public discourse through

advertising (Kay, 2006) and popular culture (Borenstein, 2007). Not surprisingly, neotraditional models

of femininity place women as a vulnerable segment of the population in need of paternalist social

policies. This ideology also stresses that women have a gender-determined civil function: the

demographic reproduction of the nation. Sociologists Elena Zdravomyslova and Anna Temkina (2007)

claim that this hegemonic ideology of pronatalist nationalism leaves women with only three available behaviour models: working mothers, housewives, or hypersexual women (Zdravomyslova & Temkina, 2007). According to Elena Gapova (2016), the revival of gender essentialism, with its masculine competitiveness and objectification of women, fits neatly into the post-Soviet goals of establishing systems of class stratification and a culture of consumerism, both of which have been legitimized and prioritized as central features of a progressive, market-driven post-Soviet Russia. Overall, these analyses of Russian patriarchal gender regimes demonstrate that the conservative change in conceptualizing, governing, and representing gender is closely related to economic and political changes in contemporary Russia.

The paternalist, nationalist ideology of modern-day Russia is further fueled by public debate on a variety of social crises that are seen to be threats to modern Russian identity. As mentioned above, these crises include the country's demographic decline, its crisis of masculinity, and the loss of national identity under Western liberal influence. However, as historians of gender politics show, these social realities are nothing new for Russia; they were a popular focus of political discourse during the late Soviet period through the nineties (Meshcherkina, 2000; Prokhorova, 2006; Rivkin-Fish in Goscilo & Lanoux, 2006). Soviet leaders often framed low birth rates and high mortality as direct threats to the strength of the Russian nation, claiming they were a result of Western influence and, in particular, its sexual liberalism (Rotkirch, Temkina & Zdravomyslova, 2007). Nowadays, the moral decline of the West and its acceptance of homosexuality are again favourite tropes of contemporary religious and nationalist Russian discourses (Riabov & Riabova, 2014). The nationalist rhetoric of Putin's administration capitalizes on these public anxieties by framing the demographic decline as one of the nation's most-threatening problems (Rotkirch et al., 2007).

In addition to concern over the country's demographic decline, a crisis of masculinity is also frequently mentioned as a national problem. Political and media sources paint a picture of Russian men being unable to provide for themselves and their families, feeling unfulfilled, and failing to lead meaningful lives. Scholars also name low life expectancy, alcoholism, and high suicide rates as symptoms

of this crisis. These concerns about masculinity, although often exaggerated and dramatized, are quite real. For example, Rebecca Kay's (2006) extensive ethnographic study of masculinity in both urban and rural Russia demonstrates the contradictory situation that Russian men find themselves in: on the one hand, they are seen to be strong, protective, dangerous, unrestrained and prone to excessive risk-taking, alcohol consumption, and violence, yet on the other hand, men are failing financially, are unable to adapt to socio-economic changes, and are burdensome on hard-working and resourceful women. The large-scale demoralization of low-income men in particular sits in stark contrast to the Russian nouveau riche, a relatively small group of men who rapidly accumulated an incredible amount of wealth as a result of the economic reforms in the nineties and whose consumerist and violent masculinities fit the modern national ideal (Ashwin & Lytkina, 2004; Goscilo & Azhgikhina, 2002). As the Soviet-style model of productivity-based masculinity no longer guarantees economic and symbolic status, working-class men commonly aspire to neoliberal types of masculinity that are based on individuality, self-expression, and consumption (Vanke & Tartakovskaya, 2016). In the context of widespread poverty, these ideals are incredibly hard to achieve, and Russian masculinity is, thus, perpetually haunted by narratives of failure. In mainstream discourses, narratives of this masculinity crisis have transformed into moral panics, ultimately fueling the demonization of feminism and homosexuality.

Quite paradoxically, the essentialist interpretation of gender roles and contemporary narratives of crisis happened at the same time as the rapid liberalization and increasing visibility of sexuality. Discourses on sex have multiplied and sex is now starting to be recognized as important to many areas of life—from advertising and political campaigns to self-fulfillment. This explosion of discourses was a momentous change, since the Soviet communist regime previously monopolized the production of discourses on sex, sexuality, and the body. The liberalization of discourses on sexuality in the nineties and the development of a culture in which intimacy is more valued, as well as more attainable, produced a "rational sexual discourse" (Zdravomyslova & Temkina, 2007, p. 226) that acknowledges, even if quite often contemptuously, the existence of non-marital sex and sexual pleasure, as well as non-heteronormativity, sex work, and sexually transmitted infections—i.e., the "degeneracies" that were

previously excluded from public discourse and existed only in the rare, specialized literature of sexopathology.

During the early post-Soviet transitional period of liberalization, Russian society was beset with contradictions. As Adele Marie Barker (1999), a scholar of Russian popular culture, adeptly puts it, "like Russia itself, [the] new popular culture [found] itself torn between its own heritage and that of the West, between its revulsion with the past and its nostalgic desire to re-create the markers of it, between the lure of the lowbrow and the pressures to return to the elitist prerevolutionary past" (p. 5). Eliot Borenstein (2007) uses the term "overkill" to describe the dominance of images of crisis, bleakness, and grimness, such as joyless sex, violent crime, poverty, and domestic conflict, in the popular culture of the nineties. He further explains how the sexualization and brutalization of public spaces and visual cultures—e.g., advertisements, mass media, popular films, television series, and pornography—provided "the symbolic vocabulary for the expression of fundamental anxieties about national pride, cultural collapse, and the frightening new moral landscape of Yeltsin's Russia" (Borenstein, 2007, p. 23). Thus, sex became a way to express the political, economic, and psychological states in which Russia found itself after democratization—a state characterized by a crisis of masculinity, the instability of national identity, and widespread geopolitical confusion (Borenstein, 2007).

The visual culture of sexualized despair and violence remains, but over the last two decades, it has been complicated by sexual and gendered discourses that focus on family, intimacy, and consumerism, as well as by more optimistic and satirical engagements with sexuality. The sexualization of everyday life has been increasingly used as a tool for the political legitimization of power. There's no clearer example of this than the political campaigns of President Vladimir Putin, which often include sexualized images of young women. As I discuss in Chapter 2, Putin himself has demonstrated his macho strength and fit body on numerous occasions (e.g., shirtless horse-riding, swimming with dolphins, tranquilizing a Siberian tiger). Sperling's (2015) exploration of political discourses during Putin's presidency shows that an adherence to gender norms in contemporary Russia is a highly meaningful aspect of cultural identity. Sperling (2015) further contends that "the availability of a sexist and

misogynist cultural idiom and the absence of a sizeable Russian feminist movement make the use of

gender norms and the sexualization of politics possible in a way that it would not be in a community

where overt sexism was no longer seen as acceptable in the political realm" (p. 4). Yet, on the other hand,

in her analysis of youth politics in Putin's Russia, Julie Hemment (2015) calls for caution when using a

feminist lens to critique the sexualization of the public sphere in Russia. She urges us to keep in mind that

Russian responses to sex in public culture rest on an understanding of sex, gender, satire, and politics that

is quite different from that of Western feminist approaches. Further, she cautions, Russian uses of public

sex and feminist critiques are enmeshed in global systems of power and political economy that redefine

our relationship and understanding of authoritarianism, liberalism, and capitalism (Hemment, 2005).

Writing on "arousing" patriotism in today's Russia, Hemment instead suggests looking at the

sexualization of Putin and patriotic pronatalism as "geopolitical performances" (2005, p. 180). The author

argues that by participating in these processes, Putin's supporters use sex as a display of Russian power as

well as a critique of liberalism and globalization, which they argue devalues Russian national identity.

However, Putin and his allies are not the only ones utilizing sex; the political opposition also widely

harnesses narratives of sex and gender. Some examples include queer activists popularizing images of

"drag Putin" to confront homophobic legislation (Paulauskas, 2015), Ukrainian nationalist youth

challenging Putin's masculinity in chants during protest marches (Golovetskiy, 2014), and countercultural

artists such as Voina ("war"), Pussy Riot, and Piotr Pavelsnky using sexualized expressions of political

protest in their art, which I discuss in Chapter 2.

Alongside Russia's patriarchal renaissance and the resurgence of hypersexualization, homophobia

has also been a defining feature of Russian culture in global media. This is particularly true of the "gay

propaganda" law enacted in 2013 and its attendant legitimation of anti-gay violence. Homophobia in

Russia and restrictions on homosexuality have been at the forefront of contemporary research on Russian

sexualities by both Russian and non-Russian scholars. Kon writes that homophobia in Russia, on the one

hand, constitutes a part of the country's general sexophobia, and, on the other hand, is closely related to a

form of xenophobia that constructs complex racial-sexual figurations of otherness through a combination

of anti-Semitism, Russian supremacy, machismo, and homophobia (Kon, 2008). Adi Kuntsman (2008) argues that contemporary forms of Russian homophobia are closely related to the culture of Soviet prisons. Analyzing modern homophobic discourse, Kuntsman finds that perpetrators of anti-gay violence use language that is similar to the language of the hierarchical systems and practices of sexual punishment and domination that governed the Soviet Gulag. This history complicates modern understandings of homophobia in Russia, as it demonstrates that it is not only based on individual prejudice but is also the legacy of a culture of punishment, repression, and criminality. Thus, contemporary homophobia associates homosexuality with criminality and monstrosity.

Laurie Essig (2014) notes that the increase of homophobia in contemporary Russia is a result of two phenomena: the first is the concerted efforts of Putin's political campaigns, which have used homophobia as a political platform, and the second is the growing influence of the Russian Orthodox Church and its postulates of gender normativity and sexual abstinence. Dan Healey (2014) further claims that homophobic rhetoric is nothing new in Russian politics, but rather, it has been recently refined in two ways: First, the rhetoric has been strengthened by the addition of religious arguments to official legal and medical discourses that pathologize homosexuality. As a result, homophobic discourse has been popularized among Orthodox believers. Second, the discourse has been simplified through the categorization of sexualities into "traditional" and "non-traditional," which strengthens the idea of queerness having non-Russian origins. In this way, homophobic discourse connects heteronormativity to national belonging. According to research by Soboleva and Bakhmetjev (2015), Russian LGBTQ citizens themselves recognize how homophobic campaigns instrumentalize LGBTQ issues for other purposes, such as developing a dichotomy in which a "traditional" Russia is placed in opposition to a liberal and sexually permissive West.

However, the regulation of non-heteronormative desire occurs beyond the sanctioning of violence. Alexander Kondakov (2013) argues that even though homosexuality is not criminalized as such, the unintelligibility of non-heteronormative relationships creates an aura of illegality and censorship. He points out that the legal discourse limiting gay visibility uses the terms "propaganda" and

"homosexualism," and therefore, it characterizes homosexuality as an ideology rather than a sexual orientation. In doing so, it likens favourable discourse on homosexuality to claims of social, racial, national, and religious supremacy, which are prohibited under the Constitution of the Russian Federation. This law, as Kondakov (2013) notes, breaks the regulatory silence in the legal sphere and attempts to directly restrict LGBTQ activism while defining the contours of Russian sexual citizenship.

However, not every scholar of Russian sexuality views the situation as being as dire as the ones cited above. For example, Francesca Stella (2015) cautions against using Western theorizations of sexual citizenship, such as the one developed by Jeffrey Weeks (1998), in which sexual subjectivity has a certain constitutive function in the development and maintenance of sexual identities and sexual activism that demands inclusion in legal, social, and political institutions. As Stella argues, Russian forms of sexual citizenship do not afford the same kind of significance to sexual subjectivity; according to the Russian queer citizens Stella interviewed for her ethnographic project, their sexuality is not part of meaningful political action and they do not support activism that is based on LGBTQ visibility, association, and political representation. Admittedly, this is partly because of the stigmatization of sexuality during the decades of Soviet censorship, but it is also due to the visibility of sexuality being positioned as dangerous. The inclusion of queer people in the liberal marketplace and commercial consumption is only starting to emerge in Russia. As a result, attempts to redefine LGBTQ people as consumer-citizens, and thus as subjects written into normativity, are ineffective.

The contemporary Russian public sphere can be characterized by both the coexistence and confrontation of nationalist ideologies that promote heteropatriarchy—which are supported by the Russian Orthodox Church—and a liberal secular ideology that pushes for gender equality (Vorontsov, 2014). The ideology of gender equality and the hypersexualization of public space directly undermine the traditional gender regime, and thus the state and the church continuously frame it as anti-reproductive and anti-Russian. This has set the stage for numerous "national crises" in relation to what the church and state see as failing morals regarding sexuality and gender norms. These crises reflect changes in gendered, sexual, and national identities in post-Soviet society, and as such, they are both real and imaginary. In

reality, the crises describe economic stresses, mental and physical health problems, and the instability of individual and collective identities. Yet they are simultaneously imaginary in that they are highly exaggerated in political discourse, framed within moral panic rhetoric, and used to justify restrictive nationalist ideologies. Ultimately, the new political and religious sexual doctrine pathologizes any utterance on the topic of sex, justifies homophobic violence, and demonizes feminism and women's reproductive, sexual, and civil rights. In this political climate, the gendered and sexual "other" becomes a scapegoat, an easy target—and the restriction, exclusion, and eradication of it becomes a solution. It is within this context that such conservative policies of banning "homosexual propaganda," sanctioning domestic violence, and thwarting the work of research centres and non-governmental organizations in Russia have developed. However, due to increasing international attention regarding homophobia in Russia—including the international support campaigns during the public trial and incarceration of feminist punk band Pussy Riot (discussed in Chapter 2) and transnational actions to help Chechen gay people to flee from persecution (discussed in Chapter 4)—voices of LGBTQ activists in Russia have found a public platform. Although these voices are not unified, and although the contours of Russian queer politics are murkier than ever before, Russian sexual dissidents' opinions on sex and politics became more visible than before. Furthermore, in this context, queerness signifies resistance not only to gender normativity but also to a whole array of political problems.

Gender and sexuality studies as forms of resistance

In the contemporary Russian climate, many academics are simultaneously activists, organizers, and artists; it is often hard to distinguish these roles. For example, Temkina and Zdravomyslova (2014), in describing their career paths and the peculiarities of being feminist academics in Russia, write that being gender studies scholars today means not only researching and teaching, but also providing expertise and support to human rights groups as well as participating in often-hostile talk shows. The development of gender and sexuality studies, the discipline's positioning as anti-Russian, and the recent applications of queer and anti-colonial critical approaches demonstrate that Russian scholarship in these areas should be

understood as political resistance to both Russian heteropatriarchal nationalism and the Western gaze. In this section, I trace the connections between scholarship and activism, including recent engagements of scholars with the decentralization of Russian whiteness.

In Russia, writing about homosexuality was almost impossible until the nineties. Yet, even with the explosion of sex-expertise at that time there were very few Russian scholars studying this topic seriously. According to Igor Kon (2010), public discussion regarding homosexuality from scientific and humanitarian points of view began in 1987-1990, and the emergence of activism on behalf of sexual minorities themselves started in 1991-1993. The newly founded activist organizations, such as Association of Sexual Minorities in Moscow, have drawn on discourses of human rights and financial and political support of American LGBTQ organizations (Kon, 2010, p. 293). As a result of educational publications and direct action on the streets LGBTQ issues in Russia were transformed from medical concerns into political battles. Additionally, the opening of borders and increased access to archives in the nineties sparked interest in new ethnographic possibilities for studying Russia. Over the past two decades, LGBTQ desires, identities, and behaviours in Russia have been major topics of interest for Western-based researchers. A lot of this research, however, has continued to look at Russia through a lens of difference, thus continuing the tradition of "inventing Eastern Europe" (Wolff, 1994), moreover the studies privileged Russian metropolitan centers over peripheries and thus the intersections of sex and gender with marginalizations based on race/ethnicity and remote geographical location remained unstudied.

The first significant ethnographic research on Russian queers was conducted by American anthropologist Laurie Essig (1999) over the course of a ten-year stay in St Petersburg that began in the late eighties. Although Essig's was not the first immersive study of queer cultures in Russia,[7] it opened new terrains for exploring questions about Russian same-sex desire from modern Western understandings of queer identity and subjectivity. The main argument proposed by Essig is that Russian homosexuality

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[7] British novelist Duncan Fallowell (1994) and American journalist David Tuller (1996) provided accounts of Russian homosexual life during their travels there in the early nineties. See James Baer (2002) for a critique of Fallowell's and Tuller's conceptualization of Russian sexuality as erotically liberating. For a historical analysis of travel writing on Russia and exotification of Russian sexuality, see Larrie Wolff (1994).

does not crystallize into gay and lesbian identities in the same way as it does in the West because of the fluid nature of Russian sexuality. She found this fluidity in people's reluctance to adopt sexuality as an important part of their identity and in their unwillingness to mobilize around sexual rights. Essig has also described the fluidity of gender identity in Russian queer circles, an observation that was based on Essig's participation in cruising and cross-dressing in St Petersburg. This fluidity results in what Essig (1999) calls "politics without identity,"—i.e., politics based on subjectivity rather than identity (p. 81). This kind of politics brings people without consistent sexual identities together for temporary and occasional common projects—cruising practices, festivals and celebrations, small political protests, and more. For example, an individual could be in a heterosexual marriage and still be a part of a monthly lesbian poetry gathering. These kinds of imagined communities of "our people" exist outside the strict limitations of binary and inflexible identities of heterosexuality and homosexuality (Essig, 2014).

Brian J. Baer (2002), an American historian of Russian literature, describes two prominent cultural figures that are significant for understanding queer identities in the context of Russian modernity. The first, the "spiritual homosexual," embodies Russian national identity through the centrality of ideas of "soul" and "suffering." The second, contrasting, figure is the "lesbian," who is very intimately attuned to the body, sexuality, and everything carnal (Baer, 2002, 2009). By analyzing the presence of these figures in Russian literature and film, Baer demonstrates that the question of homosexuality for Russians is "often inseparable from the burning question of Russia's place in the new world order and of Russia's relationship to modernity itself" (Baer, 2009, p. 36). According to Baer, in Russian post-Soviet literature, homosexuality belongs to a series of images that illustrate the disturbing loss of difference and resulting identity crises that characterize post-Soviet life. Additionally, he claims that "the Russian homosexual, constructed as a 'suffering soul,' in contrast to his hedonistic cousin, the 'global gay,' earns himself a central place within the national community not through a discourse of civil rights but rather through the deeply spiritual discourse of soul" (Baer, 2009, p. 15). Baer demonstrates that homosexuality in Russian literature is often evoked as an aesthetic expression of longing, soul-searching and suffering and this, paradoxically, makes homosexuality visible in Russian culture.

This is in contrast to what sociologists describe as the censorship and silencing practices surrounding homosexuality in contemporary Russia; queer characters, including gay, lesbian, and gender-nonconforming people, are highly visible in Russian cultural milieus, including in the popular music scene and among filmmakers and other types of public personas.[8] Despite this presence, their sexuality is never directly discussed, associated with LGBTQ movements, or criticized. Baer's proposal that homosexuality is an aesthetic representation seems particularly fitting for these characters, who are viewed as possessing not a different *sexuality* but rather a different *sensitivity*, which then, in the public sphere, translated into music, poetry, talent, and/or fashion. I find that such view on homosexuality as sensitivity is also perpetuated in Russian portrayals of racialized/ethnic homosexuality—I return to this point in the Chapter 4 where I discuss the construction of the Chechen gay man in oppositional media discourses.

Although there are very few studies of race, racism, and racialization in the field of Russian studies, there has been an increase in recent years. One of the most important multidisciplinary contributions is a theoretical, sociological, and ethnographic work by Nikolay Zakharov (2015), in which the author develops race and racialization as analytical concepts for the Russian context. Zakharov investigates forms of racial thinking and racial exclusion in tsarist, Soviet, and contemporary Russia through a multi-sited analysis. His study includes a historical examination of the construction of race through Russian ethnology and physical anthropology and the critique of a contemporary racist ideological framework through the issue of migrant manual labour in Russia. This ideological framework constructs labour migrants from North Caucasus and Central Asia as a security problem, identifies manual labour as "black," and enables identification of non-manual work and Russianness as "white." However, Zakharov's otherwise ground-breaking study misses an opportunity to analyze the gender

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[8] Examples include female rock singers Zemfira Ramazanova, Diana Arbenina, Svetlana Surganova; male pop singers Boris Moiseev, Sergei Zverev; and film director and actress Renata Litvinova. These people, although famously known for their nonheteronormativity, never publicly speak about their sexuality and do not identify themselves as lesbian, gay or queer. They constitute that kind of paradoxical double-life, where they are inside the system and at the same time outside it (Yurchak, 2005).

dimension of race, racism, and racialization in Russia, because it focuses on racialized male migrant labourers and the racist discourse and physical violence directed specifically at racialized migrant masculinity. The important questions left out of Zakharov's study include: are there any links between Soviet scientific racism and the medicalization and pathologization of sexuality, which were also developed in early Soviet period; how does the discourse of patriarchy and gendered violence, including controversial topics of "cultural" violence such as body covering, forced marriage, or "honour killings," play into articulations of racial and/or ethnic difference and constructions of non-violent Russian whiteness; and how does racialization play out among *female* migrant workers, including those involved in reproductive labour and sex work? This missed opportunity to enrich the analysis of race through further considerations of its intersections with gender and sexuality is a common omission in Russian racial and ethnic studies.[9]

British researcher Francesca Stella (2015) also challenges Eurocentric approaches to Russian same-sex sexualities by complicating the homogeneity of Russian sexual identities, even though she as well focuses on the sexuality of ethnic Russians. Stella notes that Russian sexual subjectivities were more fluid and diverse than in the West not because Russians were somehow inherently queer, as Essig's book suggests, but because homonormativity did not coalesce in Soviet Russia. Her ethnographic project treats Russia not as a unified homogenous space, but rather as a multiplicity of geographic and temporal sites where the experiences of Russian lesbians differ across space and generation. Stella looks at the lives of several generations of women in Moscow and in the provincial city of Ulyanovsk. Her findings show that processes of coming out, self-identification, and political mobilization are pragmatic decisions made by Russian lesbians who choose between being "in the closet" and disclosing their sexuality strategically, taking into account their varying circumstances. Therefore, the processes that are often seen in the West as signs of forming self-consciousness and sexual identity are not necessarily central to the experiences of

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[9] Besides Zakharov (2015), another important study of racialization in the Russian context is the research on Soviet racialization of the Roma people by Ian Law (2012), however it also exemplifies a disconnect between analytical categories of race/ethnicity and those of gender and sexuality.

lesbians in Russia. Similarly, ethnographers of Russian queer diasporas Adi Kuntsman (2009) and Diana Fisher (2003) have demonstrated the strategic pragmatism of navigating disclosure when in the presence of Russian friends and family and when participating in local queer cultures. This, however, does not mean that Russians are incapable of holding intersectional identities simultaneously. Rather, as a significant amount of research has shown, many queer Russians simply do not prioritize the disclosure of their sexual identity at the expense of maintaining good family relationships or in order to participate in identity-based LGBTQ politics.

Several Russian scholars have criticized Western researchers for objectifying and exotifying Russian sexuality, pointing out that the social circumstances and economic conditions of Soviet and post-Soviet life have created an environment in which stable sexual identities are unnecessary and undesired. Nadya Nartova (2004), for example, argues that the reality for Russian lesbians is defined not by a floating subjectivity, but by a specific form of social space organization—a management of behaviour and identity-presentation that varies across place. This includes clear divisions among three spaces: one where women can present themselves as lesbians, another where they lead visibly heterosexual lives, and a final, borderline, space where their lesbianism is visible but not discussed nor necessarily identified. Finally, Galina Zelenina (2006) claims that lesbian identification in Russia is not related by belonging to a community or by adopting queer citizenship based on human rights claims, nor is it really a cultural identification. Instead, Zelenina's quantitative research of online spaces for queer women shows that 60 percent of respondents avoid using the word "lesbian" due to this term's historical associations with criminality and psychosis in Soviet Union.[10] Zelenina concludes that because of the stigma and secrecy surrounding lesbianism, identifying as a lesbian is a matter of private behaviour rather than social belonging. As one of her respondents said, "sexual orientation … does not, and should not, impact the way people look, who they socialize with, their political views, or their cultural tastes" (Zelenina, 2006,

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[10] According to Essig (1999), Soviet psychiatry classified lesbianism as mild schizophrenia. Currently, women having sex with women often identify themselves using the English term "dyke" and the vague term *tema,* which literally means "theme" or "topic." The term *tema* is also used by gay men.

n.p.). These arguments made by Russian sexuality studies scholars provide a nuanced analysis of LGBTQ communities in Russia that emphasizes that Russian sexualities cannot be gauged by linear ideas of gaining political consciousness, but must rather take into account the social and economic circumstances of living, representing, and politicizing sexualities. Such views are also supported by a small but visible community of Russian transfeminist activists and scholars. Overviewing the emergence of trans* communities and organizations and the politicization of trans* issues, Yana Kirey-Sitnikova (2016) demonstrates that although the visible trans* community in Russia is very small, it is incredibly diverse. This diversity includes vast differences in gender expressions, definitions of trans* identity, and approaches to trans* politics and visibility. According to the author, some trans* people seek to challenge cisnormativity and gender essentialism through confrontational activism, while others attempt to compromise with the state by lobbying against transphobic laws using a "born this way" paradigm. In a difficult and perhaps counterintuitive move, there is also a highly vocal group of trans* people who condemn non-binary gender expressions, oppose activism altogether, and support cissexist state practices that pathologize, medicalize, and impose compulsory surgeries on trans* people. This diversity in the conceptualization of trans* experiences and identities, as well as in political approaches to trans* activism and political visibility, is heavily influenced by class and educational privileges as well as by theoretical and political ideas that are imported from the West (including trans-exclusive feminist approaches). In light of this socio-political complexity, Sitnikova (2014) calls for caution when collaborating with Western feminists and LGBTQ academics and activists. In particular, she cites the West's frequent lack of understanding of Russian political contexts, their often patronizing "progress-oriented" approaches, and the vast power imbalances between Russian and Western academics and activists as added considerations.

In his article on teaching queer theory in Russia, sociologist Alexander Kondakov (2016b) reflects on the isolating situation of being a queer scholar in that country. In the context of the governmental sanctioning of, animosity towards, and violence against LGBTQ people, as well as the clampdown on freedoms of association and speech through legislative and bureaucratic means, the queer

scholar's position, according to Kondakov, is one of loneliness and isolation. University courses in queer theory are almost non-existent across the country, Russian scholars working within the queer paradigm are very few, and institutions and organizations engaging in critical research on queer theory are under constant scrutiny and attack. However, at the same time, the political oppression of homosexuality has created momentum for increased interest, visibility, and politicization of queer scholarship, and, according to Kondakov (2016b), a feeling of hope.

Today, engagement with queer theory and politics in Russia is full of inconsistencies, ambiguities, and contradictions. On the one hand, the term "queer," and its phonetic Russian translation to "kvir," is currently ubiquitous in Russian academic and activist circles. The terms are often employed to signify a sexual-cultural identity, a social and political paradigm of thought, and a disciplinary orientation. Russian realities expand the notion of queerness to such an extent that some scholars even claim that under patriarchy all women are queer (Kharitonova, 2010b). In this sense, queer politics is an extension of feminism, as its main task is undoing patriarchy and gendered oppression. Russian queer theory, scholarship, and politics have emerged within this context, where the space of marginalization is a common political consideration for leftists, feminists, and LGBTQ people. According to philosopher Alla Mitrofanova (2014), each of these marginalized people "become[s] a new historical subject, who has to take on the political decision regarding rationalization of a new historical community. This historical subject is exactly queer-subjectivity in the political sphere" (p. 346). On the other hand, the use of the term "queer" often doesn't mean anything more complex than sexual fluidity and is frequently used as an umbrella term for LGBTQ people. For example, the annual weeklong QueerFest held in St Petersburg since 2009 uses the term "queer" as a catch-all term for LGBTQ sexual identities. Organizers themselves said that the festival was a human rights event modeled after Western Pride Parades and its purpose is to "create places for dialogue between various parts of society to promote tolerance of invisible and stigmatized groups" (QueerFest, n.d.). This festival does not use queerness as a point of reference for the deconstruction or critique of gendered and sexual categorization systems; instead, it emphasizes the

homonormative formulations of human rights, tolerance, and celebration of sexual diversity directly borrowed from the West.

Some Russian scholars (Vorontsov, 2014; Nartova, 2007; Kharitonova, 2014) also claim that Russian gender and queer studies all too often fail to use the theoretical and methodological advances of gender and queer theories. Instead, Russian scholarship produces behavioural descriptions of LGBTQ lives without adopting the reflective, deconstructing, paradigm-changing function of researching the norms of social behaviour and social structures. Some research presenting itself as queer studies chaotically compiles psychological theories of sexual orientation and makes political claims for the recognition of certain rights while accidentally slipping into a heterosexual binary by framing their studies in "active" and "passive" classifications of sexual behaviour (e.g., Baranov & Zolotareva, 2012). This situation, however, reflects the state of Russian academia in general, which, as a result of Soviet censorship and ideological pressure, promoted the intellectual isolation of sexuality studies scholars (Oushakine, 2002; Vorontsov, 2014), or what Madina Tlostanova (2015) calls "the coloniality of knowledge."

Tlostanova (2015) criticizes the global configuration of knowledge where research on post-Soviet politics and cultures depends on Euro-Atlantic theoretical and methodological constructions of knowledge. She also raises issue with the fact that post-Soviet researchers are seen as being incapable of producing theory and methodology beyond replicating Western models. As Tlostanova discusses, this coloniality of knowledge is present in most social science research produced both in the West and in post-Soviet spaces. There are both external and internal reasons for the Eurocentric epistemology. Externally, Eurocentrism in knowledge production is perpetuated by the constant reproduction of post-Soviet and post-socialist difference and epistemic racism that treats non-European people as native informants rather than theory producers. Internal reasons include the stagnation of Russian academia, constant censorship and intervention from the government, as well as what Tlostanova calls the "tendency to idealize the West" (p. 48) and projection of objectifying and exotifying perspectives onto Russian peripheries. In this context, decolonizing knowledge would mean destabilizing the established subject-object relationship by

moving away from post-Soviet subjects and instead producing studies that focus on the dynamic changeability, mobility, flexibility, and complexity of interaction between post-Soviet spaces and the West, as well as Russian center and its (post)colonial peripheries.

One example of such complexity is the research of Olga Reznikova, a Russian scholar at München University in Germany. In her M.A. research project, Reznikova (2014) discusses the applicability of race as an analytical concept and its usability alongside terminology of gender and feminism in the Russian context. Reznikova analyzes anti-Chechen racism in Russian political discourses and ethnographic materials collected during her fieldwork in Grozny, Chechnya. Specifically, she examines the ways in which Russian nationalist discourse is used by a liberal protest leader and Putin's presidential opponent Alexei Navalny. Navalny employs images of violence against Chechen women perpetrated by Chechen men to call for the exclusion of Chechens from Russian citizenship and the imaginary community of the Russian nation. Reznikova claims that this racist discourse attempts to create an image of "humanist nationalism" (p. 26), or, nationalism that appeals to feelings of care for Russian women and strengthens the symbolic barriers between the "nourishing and protective" self and the patriarchal Other. Using language of Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Gayatri Spivak, Reznikova connects such processes of discursive racialization to the biopolitics of Chechnya as a militarized zone and the ways in which Chechen lives become ungrievable. Interpreting this politics from the perspective of the Chechen women that she interviewed, Reznikova argues that male violence in Grozny should be conceptualized not solely as a feminist issue and gendered violence but primarily through the lens of colonial and racist violence against Chechen people. Reznikova's research and theorization is a rare example of an explicit use of intersectional feminist theory in Russian studies. However, Reznikova avoids a direct transposition of the language of critical race theory and (post)colonial theory onto Russian realities but underscores the specificities of the Russian geographical, cultural, and historical context that requires alteration of these theories and their key terminology.

The criticism of Eurocentric approaches to feminism and LGBTQ politics is also an important conversation in activist circles. Vanya Solovey's (2017) research shows the ways in which Russian

feminist activists and organizers perceive Western theory and the "lag discourse" (i.e., the position that maintains that Russian feminist movement is following in Western footsteps towards progress). For example, as Solovey discusses not without irony, in Russian activist circles such "lag discourse" takes form of discussion whether Russian society is ready for the third wave of feminism or whether feminists should work to establish the principles of the second wave a bit better first. Solovey's ethnographic research of multiple locations in Russia demonstrates that while some despise such lag discourse it also provides a feeling of hope for many activists, because it creates the expectation that Russia is not stuck in patriarchy but will move towards the more open future. On the other hand, his data also suggests that most activists are more focused on small local community organizing and see the concern with Eurocentrism as a less relevant issue.

Nevertheless, there have been several conversations among queer studies scholars that help make sense of the situation. The first formal event was a one-day seminar in September 2010 in St Petersburg entitled "Is Queer in Russian Possible?" This event, and the resulting publication (Sozaev, 2010), considered the possibilities of applying queer theory and its methodology to diverse disciplines, such as the social sciences, psychology, legal studies, and literary studies. In the years following, two interdisciplinary international conferences brought together queer scholars from post-Soviet countries and those studying Russia from Western academia. The conference "Queer Sexuality: Politics and Practices" was held in Minsk in October 2012 and was organized by the feminist project "Gender Route" and the advocacy project "GayBelarus" (Solomatina & Shurko, 2014). The conference "On the Crossroads: Methodology, Theory and Practice of LGBT and Queer Studies" was held in St Petersburg in October 2013 and was organized by the Centre of Independent Sociological Studies (Kondakov, 2014a). In interdisciplinary and multi-methodological fashion, the published conference papers from these two conferences include theoretical discussions, empirical research, photographs, drawings, a screenplay, protest posters, and autobiographical essays. Finally, another transnational event, titled "Gender, Sexuality, and Power: Queering Normativity," was scheduled to take place in Kharkiv, Ukraine, in March 2014, but it was cancelled due to the commencement of military actions in the country. Although the

event was cancelled, its organizers published short papers from the presenters they had invited (GSP, 2014). Collectively, these four events have produced a rich diversity of texts and created a continuous conversation, since many of the scholars involved in each of these events were present at some or all others as well.

Among the recent gender and sexuality conferences focusing on the post-Soviet region, I would like to discuss one example, which I see as a particularly successful case of interdisciplinary collaborations between academics and non-academics. This conference provides an example of an initiative which decentralized the Western gaze, worked from decolonial perspectives, and sought to deprioritize white Russianness in studies of gender and sexuality of the post-Soviet region. This is the conference titled "Fucking Solidarity: Queering Concepts On/From a Post-Soviet Perspective," which was organized by post-Soviet queer diaspora in Western and Central Europe and was held at the University of Vienna on September 20-23, 2017. The event was one example of organizing from a feminist and queer diasporic perspective that challenged the Western academic and activist gaze as much as it criticized Russian imperialist repressions. The conference was also an example of overcoming different kinds of borders, physical and symbolic ones; it was a collaborative project between queer and feminist academics, activists, and artists from multiple locations, including central cities in Russia (Moscow and St Petersburg), Russian and post-Soviet peripheries (smaller cities in Russia, Chechnya, countries of post-Soviet Central Asia, and conflict zones in Ukraine), Russian-speaking diaspora in Europe and North America, and non-Russian-speaking scholars of Russian and post-Soviet sexualities. These various collaborations are important. In the Western world, gender studies scholars, due to their access to university networks, knowledge of funding, and recognition of their expertise, are able to provide financial, institutional, and networking resources. However, the knowledge of academics is privileged over those doing the important work of assessing, explaining, disseminating, and addressing social problems without educational credentials, such as artists and activists. The latter are not often recognized as experts and, as a result, generally have less access to resources. Within Russian and some other post-Soviet academia, gender studies scholars are severely marginalized and are suspected by the

government of being "foreign agents," which means facing censorship, deprivation of funds, and sometimes persecution that pressures people to either collaborate with the government or to leave the country (such as Evgeny Shtorn's example mentioned above). Academia is also an important way for people fleeing persecution or dangerous situations in Russia, as acceptance to university programs is a way to access exit and entry visas and, sometimes, necessary funds. These opportunities, however, are also severely limited by language barriers and access to information on application processes, which means the process is heavily dependent on a Russian-speaking diaspora in the West. This situation underscores the importance for academics (mostly graduate students and junior scholars) to collaborate with the scholars and non-scholars working from within Russia and other post-Soviet countries to challenge restrictive systems.

The conference organizers of "Fucking Solidarity: Queering Concepts On/From a Post-Soviet Perspective," sought to address these power imbalances and, in the conference set-up, actively prioritized activists and artists over academics, Russian-speakers over English speakers, and people from the post-Soviet periphery versus people from the West and Russian urban centers. The official call for papers and pre-conference information bulletins emphasized the need for presenters to use language that would be accessible to people outside of academia. This formal requirement created an atmosphere in which it was appropriate to request clarifications on complex theoretical concepts or challenge the presenters for not following the rules of the conference on the spot. The moderators of the discussions also prioritized people outside of academia asking questions and offering comments during Q&A sessions. The presentations of the conference were either in Russian or in English with translations provided, including whisper translations on smaller panels. The rules and ethical principles of the conference created an important reversal in power and an atmosphere in which those who are normally seen as experts on Russia and/or post-Soviet region and have the most recognition and power were under scrutiny and sat face to face with those who are usually the subjects of their academic work.

This conference also truly demonstrated that worlds of academia, activism, and art are closely intertwined. Previously unfamiliar with one another, people found out that they were all dealing with the

same simultaneous processes of marginalization and oppression caused by the Russian government, and homonationalist exclusions in countries of Western Europe and North America. For example, a common topic in scholarship and activism discussed at the conference was the persecution of queer people in Chechnya, as many of the conference attendees worked to help refugees relocate, apply for asylum, network, find housing, and translate in the countries of their residence. They were drawn to the conference because of its commitment to decentralizing white Russians from the conversation on homophobia and to shift the language of tolerance, liberalism, and human rights towards more intersectional and anti-oppressive perspectives. Moreover, the conference centralized academics, activists, and artists from Russia's (post)colonial spaces. I will provide two examples of this through the work by the Creolex Centre and Ukrainian queer feminist activists.

Creolex Centre is an artistic and academic collaboration led by queer and trans* feminists Maria Vilkovisky and Ruthia Jenrbekova from Kazakhstan. This project is an example of the work from the racial/ethnic margins of post-Soviet space, as the artists' perspectives are rooted in identity, politics, and aesthetics of post-Soviet Central Asia. The artistic and scholarly projects of the Creolex centre employ theories of creolization and feminist border-crossing, such as works by Gloria Anzaldua (1999 [1987]), in order to create bridges between post-colonial spaces of the Caribbean, the post-Soviet spaces of Central Asia—where Soviet rule had artificially imposed divisions along ethnic lines in forms of "nationalities" (Tlostanova, 2008),—and post-Soviet non-Russian diasporas. In their theoretical texts, performance works, and poetry, Vilkovisky and Jenrbekova use trans* modalities of gender, queer sexualities, and deconstruction of Central Asian ethnic and national categories to imagine futures with no borders or boundaries (Kreolex.Center, n.d.).

Another example of challenging the Western gaze, homonationalist perspectives, and critiques of local repressive politics, was the presentation by feminist activists from Ukraine—Ira Tantsiura, nadiya chushak, and Yulia Serdyukova. Titled "Gaycation Ukraine: Honest Trailer," this presentation offered a creative critique of the episode on Ukraine of the American documentary series *Gaycation.* The series follows Canadian actress Ellen Page and her friend Ian Daniel as they explore local LGBTQ cultures

around the globe and highlight human rights abuses. The series presents a contemporary form of colonial travelogues. However, unlike the travel accounts of post-Soviet Russia provided by Fallowell (1994) and Tuller (1996)—and criticized by Baer (2002)—*Gaycation* focuses not as much on the discourse of Ukrainian queers' difference from Western queers but rather on their sameness, and seeks to establish empathy for the Ukrainian LGBTQ people by exposing and criticizing Ukrainian homophobia. To critique the Western perspective presented by the show, the Ukrainian activists provided a detailed analysis of the episode, as well as a video project in a form of an "honest trailer." The honest trailer provided a frame-by-frame commentary of the episode that featured voices of those Ukrainian queers who were excluded, underrepresented, or misrepresented by the show. This commentary criticized the documentary as an example of an objectifying and exotifying gaze and thrilling "risk tourism," which privileged Western homonormative forms of queerness in its narrative, imposed homonationalist expectations of LGBTQ citizenship on Ukraine, and exploited locals and their labour in the creation of the episode. These critiques were portrayed through witty commentary of the misrepresented Ukrainian queer community. The commentary also allowed the conference audience to recognize and take pleasure in moments where locals were "trolling" the creators of the show by playing on the Western gaze. For example, Ukrainian drag performer Misha, offended by the way show creators attempted to represent him, invited Ellen and Ian to a dilapidated village and asked them to drink raw eggs and eat pig's ears right from the roasted pig's head lying on the table in an attempt to satirize Western expectations of Ukraine as "the Other." The result of producing the honest trailer was forming community through a shared experience of misrepresentation and taking pleasure in gazing back at the creators of the show. Watching this trailer also provided an important moment of bonding for the attendees of the conference and an important call for the white North/Western academics, activists, and artists to check themselves and their assumptions.

Such initiatives as the "Fucking Solidarity" conference underline the importance of Russian and post-Soviet diaspora in scholarship and activism as well as non-institutionalized forms of scholarship and activism. The critical language that is currently developing through such diasporic collaborative projects

as this conference offers an alternative to what has been earlier discussed as the Western gaze, including the politics of "gender mainstreaming," the limiting and orientalizing agendas imposed on Russian and other post-Soviet spaces by international institutions, homonationalist adoptions of LGBTQ rights discourses and, to use Tlostanova's (2010) term, "colonial epistemologies." However, this diasporic and collaborative critical gaze also offers an opportunity to develop strategies to address problems within Russia—the crackdown on institutionalized centres of critical gender and sexualities scholarship, the silencing of LGBTQ voices, and the state's employment of gender and sexuality in maintaining the physical and symbolic boundaries of the nation and Russian whiteness, as I discuss in the following chapters.

Conclusion

In this chapter I provided an overview of the development of gender and sexuality studies in Russia and the main challenges of the field. The current state of gender and sexuality studies has been affected by Soviet censorship and control over social sciences, dominance of medicalized views on gender and sexuality, and biological and evolutionary views on racial/ethnic difference. In the nineties, the field was majorly influenced by Western funding, agenda, and perspectives – this resulted in the institutionalization of gender study centers, emergence of large-scale sociological, ethnographic, and policy analysis projects, and adoption of the Western language of feminism, gender, and sexuality studies. This scholarship was subsequently stalled with the withdrawal of international organizations from Russia in 2000's, positioning of the discipline as driven by non-Russian interests, and the crackdown on critical scholarship and activism under Putin's presidency. However, as I argued in my analysis of more recent scholarly and activist initiatives, the most significant work currently happens outside of the institution of academia or research centers. This is the scholarship that emerges from collaborative projects between emerging scholars and activists from the post-Soviet regions and diaspora.

Chapter 2

Patriotic Sexualities: Cultural Representations of Sex and Gender in The Normalization and Contestation of Russian Nationalism

Introduction

This chapter considers the role of sex and gender in popular culture for processes of nation-making in Putin-era Russia (2000–present). Russian popular culture is known for its heavy use of heteropatriarchal codes of representation in nationalist rhetoric, such as "macho" hypermasculinity and subservient and hypersexualized femininity. The fascination of Western media with President Vladimir Putin's macho public image is the most obvious example of how these codes are reproduced transnationally. Since the beginning of Putin's presidency in 2000, most independent mass media became controlled by the state, and codes of gender and sexuality were actively recruited for boosting public support for Putin's policies (Gessen, 2012; Sperling, 2015). So, for example, Russian representations that celebrate Putin's masculinity, such as photoshoots of his many adventures in the Russian wilderness, are seen through Western framings as representing quirks of character, expressions of his masculine egomania. In this fashion, the *Guardian* review of the *BBC* documentary "Putin: The New Tsar" discusses Russian President's public image and describes him as "a lonely, lying narcissist" (Wollaston, 2018). Such psychological explanations provide a backdrop for further assessments of the overall character of the Russian people and their readiness to shed the inherent sexism and homophobia, such as in the *Economist*'s article "From Russia with Youth: Meet the Puteens" (Sneider & Monteleone, 2018, March 15) included in the Introduction of this dissertation.

At the same time as heteropatriarchal codes remain dominant in Russia, sexualized and gendered discourses have gained more optimistic, playful, and satirical forms. In Western readings of these forms, however, some cultural and political elements were lost in translation, as satire and play have been interpreted simplistically as tactics of countercultural movements that are set in opposition to hegemonic heteropatriarchal representations. One example of this celebrated opposition is Euro-American white

feminist attention on the Russian punk band Pussy Riot. Pussy Riot became famous after their carnivalesque anti-Putin performance in Moscow in 2012 and subsequent incarceration of two members of the band. After their release in 2014, Pussy Riot members were invited to participate in Western culture—such as leading the Toronto Pride parade in 2015 and filming music videos criticizing Donald Trump's sexism. The excitement and self-identification with Pussy Riot among Western feminists and queers—for example, through the #WeAreAllPussyRiot Twitter hashtag—capitalized on linear constructions of sexual modernity, wherein Russia is discursively fixed as a place of inherent sexism and homophobia that is being slowly transformed by politics of visibility, identity, and the fight for human rights. In the case of Pussy Riot and other feminist actions, this narrative is expanded through the conceptualization of Russian feminism as being in the process of "catching up" with the progressive and already-feminist West (Groeneveld, 2015).

While I do not maintain that analyses of Putin's character are wrong, nor that Pussy Riot's actions fail to be countercultural or subversive, I suggest that the emphasis on the psychological portrait of a leader, and by extension the people of his nation, overlooks the ways in which Russian pop cultural representations that make use of sexual and gendered codes are moments of establishing or contesting power. Specifically, I argue that when the codes of gender and sexuality are embedded in representations of "Russianness," they should not be seen as expressing Russian nationalism, but rather as constituting, accruing, or contesting it. Thus, in this chapter, I look at several examples of popular cultural representations of sex and gender in nationalist contexts and examine the mechanisms of nation-making that are expressed in those moments of representation. Moreover, the cases analyzed in this chapter further illustrate what I have identified in Chapter 1 as the constructed "foreignness" of non-normative representations of gender and sexuality.

My arguments here follow Stuart Hall's (2012 [1997]) theory of representation, which maintains that a representation is not a copy of reality, a stand-in for something that exists, but rather is a process of meaning-making through visual language. Subverting the popular understanding that images simply stand in for something that exists in reality, Hall argues that meaning is given to things at the moment of their

depiction instead of existing prior to representation. This production of visual language and meaning does not happen in isolation, but rather draws on already existing communication codes and "conceptual maps of meaning" within the wider socio-cultural and political structure (Hall, 2012, p. 18). In Putin's Russia, profound sexualization of visual culture has served to normalize certain representations of the gendered body, sex, and desire into "near-universal codes" (Hall, 2012, p. 95)—i.e., codes with universally understood and seemingly natural meaning. The production of these codes, as this chapter suggests, happens through dialogue between hegemonic visual culture and resistant images.

Following Hall's definition of representation, codes of sex and gender are not merely using sexualized and gendered language in service of nation-making through representation, but rather create nationalism *as* sexuality or, to use Parker, Russo, Sommer, and Yaeger's (1991) term, an "eroticized nationalism" (p. 1). This argument also builds on Michael Billig's (1995) conceptualization of "banal nationalism" as indicating "the collection of ideological habits (including habits of practice and belief) which reproduce established nations as nations" (p. 6). I suggest that when national symbols of pride or patriotism are expressed through codes of gender and sexuality in popular culture, they (re)create the ideological habits of nationalism, while countercultural or resistant representations attempt to disrupt this (re)creation of habits.

To support this claim, I offer a discussion of several cultural flashpoints of Russian popular culture in this chapter: the hyperheteronormative public image of President Putin; the non-heteronormative, and therefore controversial, ballet *Nureyev*, film *Matilda*, and viral video from students of the Ulyanovsk pilot academy; and several art-activist actions from Voina, Pussy Riot, and Piotr Pavlensky. Each of these are cases in which representations of gender and sexuality were taken up as matters of national concern. Sensationalized and amplified by the media, they focused the public eye on the body, inviting scrutiny and discussion. These representations linger in Russian visual space, reappearing periodically in news media, on talk shows, and on social media, which emphasizes their enduring cultural capital.

The discourses surrounding these representations fixate on questions of national belonging and patriotism, and therefore reveal the complex intersections of gender, sexuality, body, and nationalism.

Through an interpretation of these cases, I explain the mechanisms that constitute eroticized nationalism, normalize heteropatriarchal codes of nationalism, and also contest them. First, I examine hegemonic heteropatriarchal representations of sex and gender as they intersect with notions of the nation and patriotism—i.e., the practice of demonstrating respect and commitment to national ideals and symbols. To examine this, I utilize anthropologist Julie Hemment's (2105) term "erotic patriotism" to analyze the demonstrations of love and desire for national symbols and securing images of white Russian virility through the example of President Putin as an iconic representation of the nation-state. Second, I examine the hegemonic maintenance of erotic patriotism through practices of censoring and expressing public contempt for feminist and non-heteronormative representations. Analyzing these public responses, I highlight how these practices are related to the popular understanding of what is patriotic and what is not, using three examples: the scandal around homoerotic representations in the ballet *Nureyev*, the protests against the portrayal of Tsar Nikolay II in the film *Matilda*, and the public discussions about the viral satirical homoerotic video by the students of Ulyanovsk pilot academy. Finally, I discuss three examples of how the link between heteropatriarchal representations and nationalism has been challenged by countercultural art-activists and discuss the successes and limitations of their strategies. In this last section, my cases consist of performances by the countercultural movements Voina and Pussy Riot and by the art-activist Piotr Pavlensky. The selection of cases for this study should not be seen as being representative of or describing contemporary Russian visual culture in full; however, my choices were motivated by the great attention each received in Russian media (as well as beyond). All of these events became moments of sexual and national scandal, and therefore, I see them as being particularly useful for my examination of eroticized nationalism.

The theoretical framework of this chapter starts with the function of heteropatriarchy in Russian popular culture. Building on Adrienne Rich's theory of compulsory heterosexuality, Francisco Valdes (1996) proposes the term "compulsory heteropatriarchy," which rests on four elements:

the bifurcation of personhood into 'male' and 'female' components under the

active/passive paradigm; the polarization of these male/female sex/gender ideals into

mutually exclusive, or even opposing, identity composites; the penalization of gender

atypicality or transitivity; and the devaluation of persons who are feminized. (p. 170)

As I show in this chapter, all four of these components are present in Russian hegemonic representations, which are organized through heteropatriarchy: male patriotism is asserted through active hypermasculinity, while female patriotism is expressed through a desire for hypermasculine national symbols and a rejection of effeminized masculinity. Furthermore, representations of gender atypicality and femininity are devalued through official, state-sponsored campaigns, such as Putin's campaign to limit the visibility of LGBT people started in 2010 (Healey, 2018).

In this chapter, I discuss strategies of censorship and the expression of public contempt as processes of devaluing gender and sexual transgressions that are seen to be non-patriotic. My analysis of heteropatriarchy in cultural representations in contemporary Russia starts with analysis of erotic patriotism as a hegemonic form of expressing love for the motherland. The concept of "erotic patriotism" is used by Julie Hemment (2015) in her anthropological study of youth cultures in Putin's Russia to describe the practice of sexualizing national symbols and expressions of national belonging through sexualized rituals. Specifically, Hemment analyzes the sexualization of women in Putin's election campaigns and an ethnography of camps for young Putin supporters, in which the participants were encouraged to marry a person who they just met at the camp in an act of demonstrating and enacting their love for the motherland. In my case studies for this chapter, I analyze cultural representations that use the similar tactic of erotic patriotism, and I consider a series of countercultural representations that attempt to interrupt the hegemony of erotic patriotism.

The theoretical framework of this chapter also builds on works that analyze humour, satire, and the grotesque in Russian culture. Protest cultures in Russia have historically relied on carnivalesque humour and a representational device termed *stiob*, a kind of satire that became popular in the late-Soviet era and

reemerged again after the 2000s. *Stiob* is similar to the Bakhtinian notion of the carnival, a humorous

transgression of bodily, social, and political taboos that relies on displays of excess, grotesque, and

ambivalence. For Bakthin (1984), the carnival created an alternative space in which social and political

norms were challenged. *Stiob* differs from the carnival because, in addition to satirizing regimes of power,

its critical position is in itself ambivalent; *stiob* exposes the authority and constructedness of social norms

but invites the participant or audience to take part in the regimes of authority, to identify with them

despite this exposure, perhaps even with pleasure. This is how the scholar of Soviet culture Alexei

Yurchak (2005) describes this representational and discursive tactic:

> *Stiob* was a peculiar form of irony that differed from sarcasm, cynicism, derision, or any
>
> of the more familiar genres of absurd humor. It required such a degree of
>
> overidentification with the object, person, or idea at which this *stiob* was directed that it
>
> was often impossible to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a
>
> peculiar mixture of the two. The practitioners of *stiob* themselves refused to draw a line
>
> between these sentiments, producing an incredible combination of seriousness and irony,
>
> with no suggestive signs of whether it should be interpreted as the former or the latter,
>
> refusing the very dichotomy between the two. (p. 250)

Specifically, Yurchak provides a study of the aesthetic movement of necrorealism in late-Soviet period

(late 1970s–early 1980s). Necrorealists overidentified with the form of the authoritative discourse—by

performing party speeches and slogans, recreating the excessive communist bureaucracy, celebrating

party leaders, or performing other rituals of ordinary Soviet life—but emptied this discourse of its

content.

The process Yurchak calls "overidentification" differs slightly from José Esteban Muñoz' (1999)

term "disidentification," which refers to a rhetorical practice in which minority groups repurpose

hegemonic representations. As Muñoz (1999) explains, "disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the

encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing

and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications" (p. 31). This term has been widely applied to the ways in which queer people of colour engage with hegemonic culture as raw material to carve out new cultural spaces for themselves. The practice of overidentification is similar to this process in that it also displaces dominant symbols and uses them to create spaces in between seriousness and irony and in between submitting to the dominant symbolic order and criticizing it. However, those who have used the process of overidentification to engage in *stiob* humour do not necessarily belong to minority cultures. On the contrary, as Yurchak (2005) notes, towards the end of the Soviet era, when the distrust towards the Communist Party and deep irritation with the excessive state apparatus became widespread, the culture of *stiob* and the ironic use of authoritative forms of discourse and representation became omnipresent in mass culture. As Yurchak (2005) explains, *stiob* became literally an everyday aesthetic of living. In my analysis, I demonstrate how *stiob*, as a form of irony, is used not only by resistant Russian cultural producers who are well-known outside of Russia, such as Pussy Riot, but also how it plays a significant role in upholding heteropatriarchal forms of nationalism.

My approach to visual analysis is influenced by the field of visual anthropology, which not only looks at process of representation—i.e. the process of constructing meaning through language (Hall, 2007)—but also holds that images "rather than re-present reality and therefore be largely descriptive, are more accurately categorized as actions" (Bakewell, 1998, p. 22). In other words, images do not only reflect the reality or the intentions of their creator, and their function does not stop at their representation. In this way, they are similar to speech-acts, the term that points to the ability of words and utterances to function as promises, accusations, threats, orders, offences, or acts of violence (Austin, 1962).

In her analysis of hate speech, Judith Butler (1996) shows that injurious speech wounds not only by the words of hate but even more so by the mode of address itself, which interpellates and constitutes a subject. As Butler argues, injury by words does not originate in the intention of the speaker, and it is not created anew with every utterance; instead, it comes to being through its social and linguistic contexts and by iteration of previous utterances. Through the process of hurtful speech being brought into legal

contexts, the hate speech and its injury is enacted again. In examining the images of the Russian visual space, images that "offend," create panicked responses, and urge to be covered up or censored, I find a striking resemblance to the power of speech as analyzed by Butler. The images I take up are claimed to offend the feelings of "the people," to hurt through their representation of gender and sexuality, and this offence is recreated repeatedly through lingering of images in the news media, in court, and in public spaces such as talk shows. Therefore, in this chapter, I contend that it is particularly useful to see images as image-acts that create action not only due to their content but also due to the mode of their representation.

President Putin's body: Erotic patriotism and icon of Russian popular culture

Though the laws against "gay propaganda" and recent bans on profanity in news and social media would suggest strict prohibition, sex, desire, and pleasure are highly visible in contemporary Russian politics and culture. Russian visual culture engages in the necessarily intertwined processes of exclusion and the production of sexual power. Narratives of sexual pleasure present in Russian politics are expressed through politicized stories that imagine sexual desire, what it means, how it relates to the present moment and the future, and how it relates to the nation. This portrayal of sexual pleasure is a tool that shows Russian citizens how and who to desire, how desire is connected to politics, and whose desire matters the most. President Putin's image is the most visible example of this instructional rhetoric, as it creates a specific nationalist iconography.

Putin's public demonstrations of his physical prowess and "fit body" are numerous: fishing, hunting, hiking, horse-riding shirtless in the Siberian wilderness, teaching martial arts on DVD, practicing the difficult butterfly stroke, swimming with dolphins, diving to recover ancient urns in the Black Sea, tranquilizing a tiger, and taking an outdoor ice plunge in winter are but some examples (Figures 1-6). This ongoing series of presidential images has been the object of jokes and inquiry internationally, both in the popular media as well as in academic writing. One of the most recent instances of these broadcasted accomplishments is official footage from Putin's vacation in summer 2017, which was released by the

Kremlin to the press (Kremlin.ru, 2017, August 7; NTV.ru, 2017, August 5). In the video, the President is shown driving a motor boat and fishing pike underwater in the remote Siberian wilderness, his healthy lifestyle underscored by his casual refusal of alcohol offered to him during the fishing trip.

Figure 1. Putin takes an ice plunge. Photo credit: Alexei Druzhinin/RIA News (RIA News, 2018, January 19)

Figure 2. Putin on vacation on the Cayo-Blanco island. Photo credit: RIA News (Kremlin.ru, 2000, December 17)

Figure 3. Putin hunting. Photo credit: Kremlin. (Kremlin.ru, 2017, August 13).

Figure 4. Putin swimming. Photo credit: Alexei Druzhinin/RIA News (Kommersant.ru, 2017, March 3)

Figure 5. Putin fishing. Photo credit: Alexei Nikolsky/TASS. (Kremlin.ru, 2017, August 7)

Figure 6. Putin riding a horse. Photo credit: Kremlin. (Kremlin.ru, 2017, August 13).

While many world leaders, including Barack Obama (The Huffington Post, 2017, June 12), Tony Blair (Culliford, 2016, August 13), and Justin Trudeau (CTV News, n.d.), have been photographed and filmed while engaging in physical activities, sometimes also shirtless, the appearances of the Russian President's capable body overshadows all others by the frequency of broadcasting and intensity of physical activities he engages in. While other leaders' engagement in sports seems more accidental, or at least incidental, the Russian media regularly reports on Putin's exercise routines, vacations full of recreational activities such as fishing, hunting, hiking, and horseback riding, and exotic experiences, such as swimming with dolphins and archaeological endeavours. Moreover, such activities like underwater fishing, competing in martial arts tournaments, and ice plunging require an exceptionally fit body. The omnipresence of the image of Putin's hairless tight torso, as well as the scale of audience's engagement in consuming and reproducing this image, which I discuss further in this chapter, suggests that it is firmly placed within contemporary Russian iconography and becomes a symbol of national pride.

Valerie Sperling (2014) argues that the accessibility and resonance of gender norms and sexist stereotypes with Russian cultural identity have enabled them to be used as means for political legitimation and sustaining political power. Elizabeth Wood (2011) sees Putin's public persona as a carefully crafted image that has served to transform the insipid technocrat into an ultramasculine hero. Wood claims that Putin's image of a "tough guy" serves two purposes: firstly, it signals superiority to the world outside of Russia, and secondly, it portrays Putin as a man-of-the-streets for Russian citizens—one who is not afraid to be direct and ruthless with the enemy. Sociologists Tatiana Riabova and Oleg Riabov (2010) examine forms of hegemonic masculinity in contemporary Russian politics by conducting an extensive survey of Russian citizens on the meaning of the concept "real man" as it pertains to Russian politicians. The authors find that the image of the "real man" relies on processes of militarization, eroticization, and nationalization of masculinity. Firstly, a "real man" is a warrior, who does not show weakness in times of crisis, is capable of making hard decisions, is tough on the enemy, and is competent in commanding the military. Secondly, a "real man" is desired by women. Thirdly, he is simultaneously down-to-earth, a

tough leader who expresses his anger and frustration in a direct manner, and is an opposite of the Western liberal man, who is seen to be too tolerant of homosexuality and too scared of being accused of sexism.

The visual representation of President Putin fits these characteristics quite well. The militarization of his masculinity is achieved through multiple images of him operating military machinery, such as flying a fighter jet or testing firearms. Putin's consistently confident posture and calm focused facial expressions project professionalism. His image of strength and superiority is underscored by publicizing his engagement in combative sports, such as martial arts, and outdoor activities requiring endurance, such as hunting, fishing, swimming, and horseback riding. The images of Putin engaging in outdoor activities come from his vacations, a time of leisure in remote Russian wilderness. Since these are the times when Putin is understood to be engaging in acts of self-care and pleasure, recordings of these activities seem intimate, inviting audiences to witness the President being his "authentic self" without the presidential suit. Finally, the equation of Putin with the Russian nation is demonstrated through his closeness to nature and mastery of it, and especially through the use of such symbols of Russian natural resources as the remoteness of the Siberian wilderness of Tuva, Siberian tigers, pike, the Black sea, and activities of fishing and hunting.

Another point of desire for Putin is the performed devotion of the racial/ethnic Other. This can be illustrated by representations of Putin with the Head of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov. Kadyrov is well-known for his expressions of loyalty and devotion to Putin. Although he is not the only one among state officials expressing such devotion, representations of Kadyrov are often markedly different. For example, the body language within the representations is particularly expressive. If Putin's bodily interactions with other state officials take form of a handshake or a brotherly pat on the shoulder, images with Kadyrov express much more intimacy. One of the famous representations of such kind is the image, which Kadyrov posted on

Figure 7. Putin and Kadyrov. The image was posted on now defunct Instagram account of Kadyrov when he congratulated Putin on his decision to run for the fourth presidential term. Source: *Komsomolskaya Pravda* (2017, June 12).

his Instagram account after Putin's announcement of running in presidential elections for his fourth term in 2018 (Figure 7). In this photograph, smiling Kadyrov is holding Putin's forearm instead of his hand, their suits are ruffled up by their strange leaning into each other, and their torsos and faces are touching so that their interaction resembles a cuddle rather than a formal embrace. This embrace seems heartfelt to the point of awkwardness expressed on Putin's face.

Such imagery of Putin and Kadyrov circulates frequently in Russian media. Posing with Kadyrov in a performatively intimate fashion strengthens Putin's claims to hypermasculinity by creating a mythology of his ability to turn a "barbaric" violent Chechen into a cuddly devotee. This dynamic is particularly symbolic after the end of the Second Chechen War (1999-2009). During Putin's first two presidential terms, his discourse on Chechens was characterized by violent rhetoric of anti-terrorist politics, the frequent use of crude emotional language and references to Chechen bodies, sexuality, and bodily functions, as well as symbolic threats of castration (I discuss this discourse in more detail in Chapter 4). By contrast, the imagery that circulated after the war, and after Kadyrov came to power, is that of Chechen devotion to Putin and the celebration of his power. Images of Kadyrov wearing T-shirts with Putin's portrait are another common form of expression of loyalty and devotion (Figure 8). These representations can be interpreted as supporting Putin's white Russian masculinity by taming the racial/ethnic Other. Kadyrov, with his typical Chechen physique and facial features, is a particularly good object for the creation of such a symbol.

Figure 8. Kadyrov wearing a T-shirt with a picture of Putin in Judo attire. The letters on the T-shirt say "Victory". Image credit: EchoMSK (2015, May 12)

According to Helena Goscilo (2013), "Putin's masculinity is grounded in the body and what the body can withstand—a material guarantor that, as Putin learned, reassures the public" (p. 184). Putin's calm and almost blank stare in photographs of him in action suggests an aura of self-restraint and complete mastery of the body, the natural environment, and the racialized/ethnic Other. Contrary to other scholars, Alexandra Novitskaya (2017) reads Putin's performance of masculinity not as a strategy of legitimacy but

rather as a form of "male hysteria," a panicked reaction to the fragility of the image of the indestructible patriarchal heteronormative nation. Interpreting texts of Putin's public addresses, Novitskaya notes the way in which Putin attaches "bad feelings" (Ahmed, 2005) to non-heterosexual Russians by linking non-heterosexuality and feminism with the moral degradation of the West. In this context, Novitskaya sees Putin's machismo as a reactionary political overcompensation that results from vulnerability rather than from a coherent political strategy. In my research, however, I am less interested in the motivation and strategy behind these images and more concerned with the place they play in visual culture and the ways they may enable discourse on sexuality, white Russianness, and political power.

In addressing such discursive impacts, Cassiday and Johnson (2010) analyze the cult of personality of Putin, in particular the constant reproduction of Putin's image by regular citizens creating fan art, such as comic books, music, paintings, poetry, or internet memes (Figures 9-10), as well as in a wide variety of everyday consumer goods, from T-Shirts to iPhone cases to chocolate (for a list of products with Putin's image on them, see "Putin na prodazhu," n.d.). Comparing the canonization of Putin to earlier cults of personality, such as Stalin's, Cassiday and Johnson (2010) argue that proliferation of Putin's imagery does not exist because of official forms of coercion, where one's participation in the glorification of a leader is a prerogative for access to resources and public institutions. On the contrary, because of such an omnipresence, accessibility, and ease of reproduction of Putin's image, this image becomes a part of neoliberal interactive individualized consumer culture and thus is sustained through the masses. In all

Figure 9. Putin riding a bear. Photo-collage (creator unknown). (Vesti.ru, 2018, March 10).

Figure 10. Putin riding a crane. Photo-collage (creator unknown). (sta-sta.ru, 2012, September 6)

cultural and consumer products, the meaning of Putin's image remains elusive: Is the anonymous creator of a collage, in which shirtless Putin is riding a bear, glorifying the President or laughing at him? Is Putin's portrayal as a superhero in comic books poking fun at his tough-guy image or playing along with it? As Cassiday and Johnson argue, the polysemic nature of Putin's image enables the consumption and proliferation of these images, as well as recreating/changing their meanings through memes, photo-collages, and other social media material.

Putting the President's body on display constructs Putin as an archetype of virility, white Russianness, and as an object of sexual desire. Sexual desire for a brutal heterosexual virility has been also expressed in such video clips like "I want someone like Putin," a song by the female pop-band Singing Together (*Poyushie Vmeste*), released in 2002, and the more recent song "Baby boy" ("Malysh") by the Russian pop singer Alisa Vox, released in 2017. A comparison between these two songs demonstrates the way in which sexual desire for hegemonic masculinity also expresses social regulations and an attempt to discourage protest by associating it with failed masculinity and feminization.

The catchy disco-pop song "I want someone like Putin" (MsRussianMusic, 2012, November 11) paints a picture of a protective man who is full of strength, one who doesn't "get in trouble," unlike the song protagonist's boyfriend. The video shows two men dressed in suits, one of them presumably the President, watching the video of three women singing about their love for Putin (Figure 11). These men are watching the videos with serious facial expressions, sometimes they quietly talk to each other, which suggests that they are perhaps evaluating the women's performance. The camera lingers either on these men from below—so that they are imposing on the picture, filling the frame—or from behind, so that the viewer sees the backs of men's heads watching the video on a TV. This positioning poignantly illustrates the difference between the female subject on the screen, which exists to be looked at, and the male subject, who exists to watch the women (Berger, 1972; Mulvey, 1999). Close-ups of the women are filmed from above, diminishing them and adding to the ways their role can be read as submissive. Throughout the video, excerpts from Putin's presidential inauguration, speeches, and footage of him

body-slamming opponents in a judo competition act as interstitials, underscoring Putin's desirability and illustrating the positive qualities that singers attribute to him.

It is important to mention that this song is not a stand-alone piece but rather is just one of many examples of cultural productions that build on the expression of female desire for the President. If during the nineteen-nineties, as Borenstein (2007) demonstrates, popular culture was characterized by overkill with repeating images of grim hopelessness and joyless sex, popular culture of the Putin period overkills with sexual desire for the President: from humorous songs about a whole village of people unable to achieve orgasm until Putin visits them ("Neschastnyi sluchai," 2014, April 27); to a photo competition for an iPad, in which women were asked to make videos "ripping (their clothes off) for Putin" (ArmiaPutina, 2011, July 13); to a calendar with young women in lingerie proclaiming "Vladimir Vladimirovich, you are the best" and "How about a third time?" (the latter suggests an invitation to run for the third presidential term, while playing on sexual innuendo) (Figure 12). According to Mosse's (1985) comparison of the use of masculinity and femininity in national symbols, the masculine represents depth and seriousness of patriotism, while the feminine is portrayed as shallow, frivolous, and driven by desire. This dynamic is
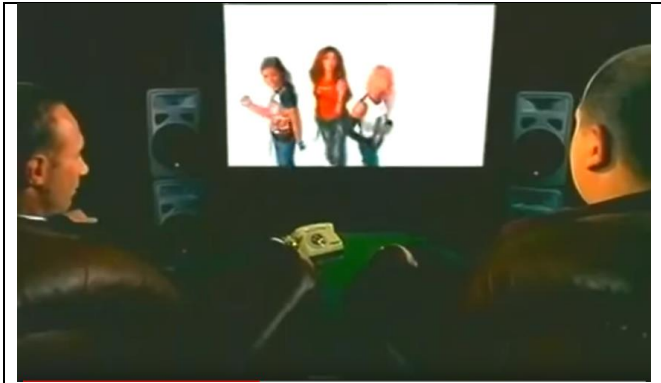
Figure 11. Screenshot from the music video for "I want someone like Putin" by Singing Together. (MsRussianMusic, 2012, November 11)

Lyrics:

My boyfriend is in trouble once again
Got in a fight, got drunk on something nasty
I got fed up, I kicked him out,
And now I want someone like Putin

Someone like Putin, full of strength
Someone like Putin, who wouldn't drink
Someone like Putin, who wouldn't hurt me
Someone like Putin, who wouldn't run away!

I saw him on the news last night
He was telling us that the world has come to crossroads
With one like him, it's easy to be home and out
And now I want a man like Putin.

[Refrain][11]

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[11] Translation my own.

visible in popcultural representations of Russian women desiring president Putin. The seriousness of Putin's macho image could be safely accompanied by feminine passion for him, which is expressed as excessive, hysterical, and frivolous. Additionally, these expressions of female desire for Putin serve the function of saving Putin's sexualized image from being read as homoerotic. Since

Figure 12. Erotic calendar for 2011. The text says "Vladimir Vladimirovich, you get better with age" (left) and "Vladimir Vladimirovich, what about a third time?" (right). Photo credit: Maksim Perlin and Vladimir Tabak (yuga.ru, 2010, October 7)

nationalism relies on clear and unambiguous signals of masculinity, any signs of homoeroticism must be exorcised from masculine beauty (Mosse, 1985), and the omnipresent performances of female desire do just that.

Providing a contrast to the image of macho Putin, Alisa Vox's music video titled "Baby boy," produced in 2017, infantilizes a male protester against Putin's regime and portrays him as effeminate, weak, controlled by his mother, and irrational. The video contains quite an eclectic set of images: a sexy blonde woman posing as a high school teacher and scolding a male student (Figure 13), a young man waving an unspecified protest flag, grimacing monkeys (perhaps suggesting stupidity), and pink liquid being poured on a brain, a quite literal depiction of brainwashing. For those who are familiar with protest cultures in Putin's Russia, "Baby boy" alludes to the protests started by an anti-corruption activist and Putin's presidential opponent Alexei Navalny in 2017. Navalny and his team at the Anti-Corruption Foundation investigated and published information about embezzlement schemes through property and luxurious possessions, which they exposed using drone-camera footage of a number of government employees. In skilfully using social media, the short films about corruption, his charisma, and his quirky sense of humour, Navalny succeeded in mobilizing many people to protest all over Russia. He especially sought to appeal to young populations, people who have not experienced any other regime in their adult

lives than that of Putin. As a result, many of Navalny's followers and protest participants were indeed young professionals, college and even high school students. The government attempted to spin this against Navalny, suggesting that he is brainwashing youth and that his followers are too young to understand politics. Alisa Vox' video emerged in this context.

The lyrics of the song provide a coherence to otherwise quite disjointed imagery of the video (Figure 13). The references to misspelled words on the poster and failing an exam in history are meant to infantilize the protester as a silly school kid who is failing at Russianness. Perfection of the Russian language and a deep knowledge of history are regarded as fundamental values of Russian ethnic identity and are highly praised in Russian culture. Therefore, this mentioning of insufficient knowledge of Russian grammar and history is a stab at the protester's inability to know his own country and culture. Furthermore,

Figure 13. Screenshot from the music video for "Baby boy" by Alisa Vox. (Stepan G-nko, 2017, May 16).

Lyrics:

On a nice sunny day, he heads out to a protest.
His weak hands grip the poster.
There are errors on the poster, four in just two words.
But his heart is pounding thunderously.
And there is rage in his eyes.

It's not too late to learn from your mistakes.
If your heart wants changes, start changing yourself.
It's not too late to learn from your mistakes.
Do you want changes, baby boy? Start from yourself.

He failed his history exam,
But someone promised him tons of gold and euros.
He is just a puppet, he lost out in this life.
His mommy chases after him and tells him to keep warm.

[Refrain]

Mistake after mistake will teach you eventually,
But do you really need to make the same mistakes again?
There's determination in his eyes to fight and to change
But tomorrow is an early rise again for school.

[Refrain]

Freedom, money, girls—you'll get it all, even power.
Stay out of politics, baby boy, go prepare for your math test.[12]

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[12] Translation my own.

the lyrics are dehumanizing the protester through the image of the monkey and the brain immersed in pink liquid. The promise of "gold and euros" refers to the government's attempt to claim that those coming to Navalny's protests were paid and that Navalny was sponsored by the West (Kornya, 2018, May 31). The neoliberal message about starting from fixing one's own mistakes as a first step in making change also fits well within Russian contemporary culture, which values self-growth (Salmenniemi & Adamson, 2014) and shames political activism (Henderson, 2011). Finally, the song is using a negative image of femininity—that of an aggressive sexual woman—to infantilize and emasculate the protester, simultaneously instilling a controlling image (Collins, 2008) of the protester who is supposed to keep a lower rank in the Russian hierarchy.

Both videos use tropes and stereotypical images that employ highly heterosexualized representations of women to express sexual desire and, as I would argue, sexual submission and sexual dominance in relation to men—the nation's leader in the first case and the protester in the second. These songs are examples of erotic patriotism exercised through gendered representational practices. The two videos both support Berger's (1972) claim that men most often take the position of the surveyor and women, the position of the surveyed or the object to be looked at. What is interesting, however, is that the scopophilic pleasure (Mulvey, 1999) here is mobilized for the political message, which positions the pro-government subject as the one for whom this pleasure is accessible, and the oppositional subject as the one for whom this pleasure is dangerous or castrating.

Should we consider these videos, as well as other cultural elements that can be seen as glorifying Putin, as serious or as ironic? It is easy to dismiss such cultural producers as Singing Together and Alisa Vox as being blatantly anti-feminist and sexist. While I do not deny that the performers are firmly situated within heteropatriarchal representational codes, I claim that there is a certain irony in them that destabilizes such a straightforward reading. The exaggeration and performativity in these representations can be interpreted through the terminology of camp and the rhetorical tactic of *stiob,* specifically because the songs and videos are so excessive in their expressions of erotic patriotism.

The videos share something with practices of camp. Specifically, they involve artifice and exaggeration, two of the qualities that Susan Sontag (1964) highlights in "Notes on Camp." According to Sontag (1964), camp is a mode of seduction that relies on the double interpretation and ambiguity of things represented, an artifice. In these two songs, the campy aesthetics of devotion to the masculine strong leader and disdain towards the effeminized childish protester point to the performativity of heterosexuality. Sontag writes that when "camp" is used as a noun, it means that "behind the 'straight' public sense in which something can be taken, one has found a private zany experience of the thing" (n. 17). While "Baby boy" and "A man like Putin" reinforce heteropatriarchal scripts, in analyzing these songs, there is, however, a small chance left that this is, in the end, a mockery of this patriotic devotion through exaggeration, artifice, and a private zany experience of a viewer. The artificial element of these videos and the exaggeration of desire are the same elements that allow it to not be immediately dismissed by the viewer, who is likely to continue viewing, even if in disbelief. These heightened aesthetics, similarly to camp, can be seen as either bad art or kitsch (Sontag, 1964). Sontag writes that "camp is art that proposes itself seriously but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is 'too much'" (n. 26). Perhaps it is this notion of too-much-ness in the videos, alongside the cult of Putin, that hides the political message behind a kitschy extravagant aesthetics of performative heterosexuality. This is the point where tactics of *stiob*—namely, artifice, performativity, and exaggeration—that are often employed by Russian art-activists (discussed further below), can also be coopted by mainstream political powers. Specifically, because these representations overidentify with the authoritative discourse of heteropatriarchy and the gender roles exaggerated to the point of grotesque, they retain a possibility of irony. This *stiob* irony allows the Russian audience to recognize these representations as excessive and performative but still leaves an invitation to partake in their performative pleasures.

In a patronizing verse, Alisa Vox sings, "Freedom, money, girls—you'll get it all, even power. / Stay out of politics, baby, go prepare for your math test." This advice suggests that the young protester's objects of desire, which he is attempting to access through an inadequate participation in protest politics, will come to him in due time if only he would remain compliant. This same messaging is suggested by

the image of Putin appearing on consumer goods, where Putin's face creates an object that is meant to evoke a smile—for example, a chocolate bar with the face of Putin kissing a puppy is called "Kind chocolate" and the one with him shedding a tear is called "Bitter

Figure 14. Promotional photos. Left: *Dobryi* [Kind]. Image of Putin with a puppy. Right: *Gor'kyi* [Bitter]. Image of Putin with a tear in his eye. Photo credit: Shokobox (n.d.).

chocolate" (Figure 14). Would one take this object of propaganda seriously? Perhaps not, but one will mostly likely smile or at least roll their eyes, or perhaps buy this chocolate as a joke, thus perpetuating the circulation of Putin's image as a symbol of the Russian nation and reinforcing banal nationalism (Billig, 1995).

In her anthropological book "Youth Politics in Putin's Russia," Hemment (2015) demonstrates the way in which Russian nationalist performances of heterosexuality and the rituals in which young supporters of Putin engage are responses to geotemporal interpretations of Russia as being stuck in "backward" times of sexism and homophobia, unable to reach the contemporary liberation of sexual openness. Young pro-Putinist activists, who Hemment had interviewed, engaged in sexualized rituals of devotion to the President (women ripping their shirts on camera, for example, proclaiming "I will rip for Putin") and heteronormativity for the sake of politics (such as marrying someone they met through political youth camp for Putin supporters right at the camp itself). However, in her interviews, Hemment found that these youth not only knew about feminism and feminist critiques of such heteronormative sexualized behaviour, but they also engaged in this behaviour despite such knowledge, laughing at it, marveling at the feeling that Western feminist researchers would not really be able to comprehend the true meaning of their acts. Specifically, the image of a liberal Westerner includes the presumption that liberals support certain social causes, the ridiculousness of which is common-sense for Russians. These social causes include an acceptance of transsexuality, gender and sexual inclusion, support for women's sexual

autonomy and anti-harassment campaigns, gender and sexual diversity, anti-racist and pro-immigration politics, and political correctness.

The liberal in Russian mainstream popular culture is seen to be "silly" in her claims for inclusion of unnatural things and "hysterical" in her suspicion of harassment and oppression at every turn. Thus, the performative heterosexuality seen in actions such as "I will rip for Putin" are also acts of enjoyment taken in expressing something that is, presumably, an impossibility for politically correct and feminist liberals, and in confusing the Western gaze. As Hemment writes, young Putin supporters' "use of young women's bodies was a provocation that deliberately sought to flout liberal norms as they are currently construed in much Russian popular discourse, in a context were 'liberalism' and 'liberals' are widely disparaged" (p. 193). Hemment contends that "Putin-era sexualized patriotic performances talk back not only to the decade of the 1990s and the humiliations and unwelcome international interventions it entailed, but to the disciplining reach of global liberal norms and global governance that continued in the 2000s as well" (p. 194). Hemment suggests that we can see Putin-era sexualized patriotic performances as propelled in part by the desire to confound the Western gaze, or "judging western eye" (Greenberg, 2010, p. 44). These campaigns direct themselves not only to foreign liberals, but to domestic critics of Putin's regime as well – the liberal-oriented urban professionals, or "creative classes," who in recent years have expressed opposition to the Putin administration (Gapova, 2011). These kinds of sexual political play use sex, excess, and satire as a challenge to Western conceptualizations of what sexual freedom and sexual modernity means. Thus, Hemment very poignantly suggests seeing these campaigns as geopolitical performances. Interestingly, this ironic tactic is similar to the strategies of camp, which relies on a flashy but flat character (i.e, a woman securely attached to her object of desire, an omnipotent and beloved nation's leader) and theatricalizes the experience through exaggerated performances of gender that are simulteneously serious and ironic. Both theatrical patriotic devotion and camp share a strong relationship to artifice and exaggeration.

As Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner (1998) argue, "national heterosexuality is the mechanism by which a core national culture can be imagined as a sanitized space of sentimental feeling and

immaculate behavior, a space of pure citizenship" (p. 549). The iconography of the strong and virile leader that was meticulously constructed during the years of Putin's rule firmly established an archetype of national heteronormative masculinity in Russian visual culture. The visual tropes associated with Putin include mastery over one's body and environment, taming and owning nature and national culture, and commodifying the masculine body as a popular object of female desire. Female desire is also used to emasculate Putin's opposition. In these popular representations of the national ideal masculinity and femininity the place of non-ethnic Russian bodies is extremely marginal: in fact, it is only present in a form of a prop for president's mastery over the environment. Through such symbolic annihilation of non-ethnic Russians from popular representations, the hegemony of Russian whiteness in nationalist imagery is reinscribed.

Prohibited representations: The limits of patriotic sexualities

The hegemony of heteropatriarchal representations of national Russianness is secured not only by dominance of idealized white Russian masculinity in popular culture, but also by censorship and expressions of public contempt toward those images that challenge the ideal. According to Andrei Erofeev, who curated the exhibition Forbidden Art in 2007, there are four categories of censored works in Russia: those that include swear words; those that take religious elements out of their usual context; those that use corporeality and play with various erotic representations; and those that employ irony to comment on political issues (Zaitceva, 2009, August 20). The Forbidden Art exhibition happened in March 2007 at the Sakharov Centre, a cultural hub in Moscow that hosts projects related to the history of Soviet repressions as well as more current issues of human rights and political freedoms in Russia. The exhibition brought together paintings, collage-works, and installations by 12 individual artists and two art-collectives. These works were previously censored by Moscow museums and galleries in 2006. The exhibition showed the works behind a faux wall; the visitors were only able to see the artworks by standing on a stool and looking through a small peep hole. Some of the works used religious objects to criticize post-Soviet consumerism, such as an icon frame filled with black caviar by Aleksandr

Kosolapov. After several Orthodox organizations' protests against the exhibition and a two-year long

trial, the director of the Sakharov Centre, Yury Samodurov, and the show's curator, Andrey Erofeev, were

found guilty of offending the religious feelings of Orthodox believers (see Jonson, 2015).

At the same time, there were repressions of representations of sexual pleasure that, allegedly, worked to

corrupt heterosexuality and Russianness of the nation. Such was the case of a series of protests in 2017

launched against the feature film *Matilda*, directed by Aleksey Uchitel, which narrates a love affair

between Nikolay Romanov, the crown prince of the Russian Empire (Tsar Nikolay II), and a Polish

ballerina named Matilda Kshesinskaya (Figure 15). Though Nikolay II's interest in Kshesinskaya has

been historically and factually confirmed, the specific historical details of their relationship are unknown

and the film fictionalizes their encounters. The film portrays the Emperor being overtaken by his passion

for Kshesinskaya. It includes several sex scenes and a short reveal of a bare breast, but it is no more

sexually explicit than, for example, *The Barber of Siberia*, a well-beloved Russian historical fiction

romance film of comparable budget created in 1998 by avid Putin supporter Nikita Mikhalkov.

This high-budget production, filmed in imperial palaces and cathedrals in St. Petersburg and

Moscow, was originally scheduled for release in 2017. However, protests held the process up. The

instigator of the protests was Member of Parliament Natalya Poklonskaya, who claimed that a number of

concerned citizens had complained to her about the film and asked the prosecutor general to investigate it on the basis of insulting religious feelings. Additionally, several movie theaters across the country reported that they had received letters urging them to not show the film. After an inspection by the prosecutor's office found no violations, the situation escalated. The building of Uchitel's film studio was

Figure 15. Still from the film "Matilda" picturing Polish ballerina Matilda Kshesinskaya (Michalina Olszanska) and Russian Tsar Nikolay II (Lars Eidinger). (regnum.ru, 2017, November 3)

vandalized, one of the movie theaters that showed the film was hit by a van, and two cars were set on fire

in front of Uchitel's lawyer's office windows. Notes were left on these burnt cars, stating, "Burn for

Matilda." Due to threats they had received from anonymous sources, several movie theaters decided not to show the film. There was also an anonymous protest video, in which a portrait of Nikolay II was sprinkled with blood, claiming that the blood was menstrual ("Feministki okropili," 2017, August 29).

Part of the reason for such intense backlash was the fact that the image of Romanov is an important symbol of nationalism. The crown prince Nikolay Romanov became the Emperor of the Russian Empire in 1894. Nikolay II was killed by the Bolsheviks in 1918, and in 1981, he was canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church as a saint.[13] The icons portraying Nikolay were juxtaposed with the controversy surrounding actor Lars Eidinger, who played Nicholay II. In public interviews, Natalya Poklonksaya repeatedly invoked photographs of Eidinger in violent and erotic scenes, also wrongly naming the actor a pornography performer. And so Nicholay II became contrasted with Eidinger: saint vs. "pornographer." The representation of the tsar being overtaken by passion is so deeply uncomfortable for Russians not only because of its adulterous consequences and the challenge to respectability, but also specifically because of Kshesinskaya's position as a foreigner. The foreignness of Kshesinskaya threatened the ethnic homogeneity of Russian nationalism.

Another case of sexual repression can be seen in the currently ongoing charges of money-laundering against theatre director Kirill Serebrennikov. This case exemplifies a form of sexual repression that can be seen across the arts. It is no coincidence that Serebrennikov was arrested in August 2017 as he was in the middle of preparing *Nureyev*: an incisive new ballet for the Bolshoi theatre. The ballet tells the story of Rudolf Nureyev, an accomplished Soviet ballet dancer, who defected from the Soviet Union while on tour in Paris in 1961 by requesting political asylum. Living and working in the West, Nureyev openly dated a Danish male dancer, Erik Bruhn, and eventually died of AIDS-related illness in 1993. The ballet reflects Nureyev's hotheaded temperament and non-conventional lifestyle through homoeroticism

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[13] Nikolay's recognition as a saint is controversial: while some branches of the Russian Orthodox Church canonized him in 1981 as a martyr saint, regarding him as a man of exceptional piety and moral leadership, other branches condemned him for weakness and incompetency that brought the country to revolution and argued against his canonization.

in both the choreography and flashing video projections, taken by Richard Avedon, featuring a nude Nureyev (Figure 16).

Was Serebrennikov's arrest related to the artistic choices he made as director of this explosive ballet? The answer to this can be only speculative, as Serebrennikov was charged with embezzlement of public funds
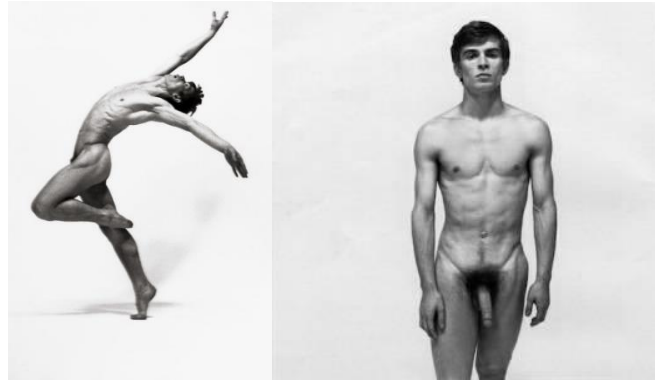
Figure 16. Rudolf Nureyev. Photographs by Richard Avedon intended as projected decorations for the ballet. Photo credit: The Richard Avedon Foundation. (artwise.live, 2016, November 4)

unrelated to this specific ballet production. Notably, however, there is a total absence of evidence, and a large number of his colleagues—well-known people working in theatre, ballet, and film—see these charges as ungrounded and completely absurd ("My potryaseny," 2017). It would rather make sense to see his arrest not as a direct punishment for the representation of sexually explicit content, but rather as an act of disciplining meant to reinforce self-censorship among artists and the repressive use of culture.

These unexpected and unjust accusations brought against Serebrennikov, as well as the pressure on Aleksey Uchitel, the director of *Matilda*, make it easy to see these events as expressions of anxiety about the corruption of Russian national pride—specifically, corruption by desire that is too passionate, too conflicting with the needs of the nation, and too perverse. These repressions, however, have happened at the same time as the sexual desire for the "right" object is becoming increasingly present in popular national culture and when the object that is not "right" is constructed not only as challenging heteropatriarchy but also whiteness of the Russian nation. For example, this connection is present in expressions of public contempt for challenging representations. Such contempt was represented by Nikita Mikhalkov. Mikhalkov, director of *The Barber of Siberia* (mentioned above), is a successful film director known for his high-budget films that glorify Russian nationalism and Russian character—loyalty, patriotism, self-sacrifice, openness, and uninhibited strong emotions. In Russia, he is regarded as an important cultural influencer. On his YouTube channel, which is devoted to discussing cultural life in the country, Mikhalkov addressed the scandal around the *Nureyev* ballet and expressed his contempt for

representations of homosexuality in Russia (Mikhalkov, 2017, August 21). The tone, structure, and

discursive codes used in his commentary are telling in terms of establishing the link between

representations of sexuality and a sense of cultural belonging. The narrative of the commentary is

roundabout, not clearly structured, doesn't have a clear addressee (only a broad "you"), and highly

emotional. This is the tone of a father scolding his child, just barely suppressing his anger, accentuating

each word with elliptic pauses.

First, the commentary accuses the creators of the ballet of lying. Specifically, he claims, the

creators were lying when they said they did not expect the backlash against the performance, since

everyone knows that the imposition of homosexuality on Russian people causes a negative reaction.

Further, Mikhalkov explains that just as Russians would not be able to understand the traditions of

various racialized and indigenous peoples, they would also not be able to accept homosexuality, as it is

foreign to Russian culture. Illustrated by images of a variety of non-specified non-white people in

traditional or ceremonial attires, Mikhalkov narrates:

> Young women of certain tribes in India marry for just three days, after that they can have
>
> as many lovers as they want. Australian aboriginals, for instance, within the same kin can
>
> share wives. Indigenous peoples of South America greet each other by spitting at each
>
> other.

These words are supposed to educate the audience about the impossibility of bridging cultural gaps with

those who are so foreign to Russian culture and create a parallel between such impossibly distant

traditions and homosexuality. After that, Mikhalkov scolds the creators again for thinking that the image

of Nureyev's naked body in the Bolshoi theatre would not provoke "aversion in a huge number of

people." Finally, he reads the "harsh but heartfelt" public statement from a famous actress who expresses

her disdain towards "sexual filth" and the word "tolerance." This segment emphasizes that the Russian

cultural elite is rightfully and whole-heartedly angry at sexual perversion being imposed on Russian

people. This logic of rationalizing the feelings as something "of the nature" brings up the way

racial/ethnic boundaries are constructed in Russian nationalism as *etnos*. As discussed in Chapter 1, *etnos* refers to biological and evolutionary explanation of racial, ethnic, and cultural differences, and perceives the world through the prism of survival of the fittest *etnos*. By evoking cultural difference through the image of racialized cultures and by portraying them as abject, this public expression of contempt for homosexuality rationalizes both heteropatriarchy and whiteness of Russian culture.

This seven-minute-long monologue has a faint soundtrack. The music comes from the long final scene of Mikhalkov's film *The Barber of Siberia* (1998). In this scene, the main protagonist, a Russian soldier in exile in Siberia, watches from afar as the love of his life, an American bourgeois woman, rides away across the vast Siberian landscape. This highly emotional scene portrays the soldier choosing his country, and the extremely rough life in the wilderness, over passionate romantic love for a foreigner. The background music accentuates the emotional purity and authenticity of Mikhalkov's anger, because it legitimates this anger as a natural expression of the feeling of patriotism and his concern for the nation. It produces his anger at homosexuals as a national feeling of contempt. This music also is a subtle link— perhaps only visible to those intimately familiar with Russian cultural production and emotional codes— between sexual representation, cultural belonging, and the inescapability of Russian *etnos*.

Policing representations of sexuality is an ongoing process of regulation. However, besides regulating sexuality, it also functions to thwart the expression of other forms of political resistance. This silencing mechanism, silencing alternative sexualities, is just as important as regulating possibilities for people to create art and culture that offer alternative readings of history, challenge norms of respectability, and deter critical action. Heteronormativity and gender conformity here play as modes of social cohesion. Mainstream discourse makes it seem as if Serebrennikov is punished for appropriating public funds rather than for his non-traditional beliefs and for representing the non-representable—i.e., the dominant social discourse is obscured by an economic one.

If in case of *Nureyev* the creator of offending cultural production was censored by accusing him of corruption, the grassroots cultural productions are more directly regulated through discourses on morality and patriotism. In December 2017, students of the Ulyanovsk Institute of Civil Aviation filmed a video to

the 2002 electro house hit "Satisfaction" by the Italian DJ Benny Benassi (Figure 17; Ulnfox info, 2018). In the video that eventually made its way to YouTube, approximately 15 male students dance dressed in underwear, boots, and academy pilot caps, along with playful accessories such as neckties, leather harnesses, and suspenders. The video is set in the bleak environment of a student dormitory. The dance includes hip thrusting while doing

Figure 17. Screenshots from the video "Satisfaction" by the students of the Ulyanovsk Institute for Civil Aviation. (Ulnfox info, 2018, January 16).

household chores such as cleaning and ironing, grinding on brooms and doorframes, and doing pushups. The culmination of the video is a group scene of nearly naked college boys shaking their butts together. The video mocked the original "Satisfaction" music video, which shows women in bikinis using power tools. The idea of this parody was not new; the Ulyanovsk student creation was nearly identical to one filmed by British military personnel in 2013 (xSynapse, 2013).

Originally, it seemed like there was no deeper meaning to the video beyond being a frivolous college student joke (as the students themselves said, "we were just joking" (Berg, 2018, January 17)); however, there was a tremendous reaction to this video from a variety of organizations, including educational and government authorities, student groups, staff of different workplaces, and media outlets. Clearly, the pilots would have been aware of the semiotics of the leather harnesses, but this homoeroticism was glossed over and not talked about by the students themselves. The media used exaggerated terms to describe the short clip, such as "sex-video," "erotic performance," and "BDSM-video." The Dean of the Ulyanovsk Institute pronounced that the video insulted something sacred, pointing towards the patriotic symbolism of Russian aviation. He also compared the students' act to performances by Pussy Riot and threatened to expel the students from the Institute (Berg, 2018, January

17). The federal authority of aviation started an investigation into this event, which it called "outrageous," "amoral," "repulsive," and "desecrating," and ordered an evaluation of the students' mental health (Rosaviaciya, 2018). Several popular TV shows of the largest national broadcasters joined in on the criticism. The audience repeatedly watched and dissected the video, discussed whether it should be taken seriously, whether it should be considered homosexual propaganda, and how the students should be punished (Novosti, 2018; Politics Russia, 2018). In response to this incredibly heated discussion, many student groups across the country, as well as various organizations and random groups of citizens, filmed their own versions of the "Satisfaction" video. Perhaps the avalanche of tributes to the Ulyanovsk students was effective in creating a moving target and also demonstrating the absurdity of the discussion, as the investigation by the federal aviation authority eventually came to a conclusion that there was no violation of conduct, and the students faced nothing more than reprimands.

As Eliot Borenstein (2018, February 27) argued, the viral campaign in support of the Ulyanovsk students fights not for gay rights, but rather for the right to frivolity, the right to not be taken too seriously. Moreover, in my reading, there is also pleasure to be had in engaging the comedic sexuality. This video might also be similar to camp through its heightened erotic patriotism. However, again, as Borenstein argues, this campaign rests on heterosexual privilege and the invisibility of gayness: it is precisely because the Ulyanovsk boys' heterosexuality is not seriously undermined that they can enjoy this public support. Because they are performing this dance as a sort of "gay drag," wearing leather harnesses and parodying the sexual body on display, their heterosexuality is emphasized. The entry into visual space is denied to certain representations of sexuality through laws on homosexual propaganda and the prohibition of lewd language. However, through the cases of public scandal and incitement to discourse, the repetition of these images, and the fetishization of these images, the public learns about the boundaries of the patriotic body and patriotic sexuality. In all of these cases, the dominant discourse is not actually about sexuality but rather about patriotism.

The analysis of the three cases of censorship and expressions of public contempt towards representations of "non-patriotic" sexuality demonstrates that the production of the Other occurs through

a constant pushing of things into the realm of the "private." Only patriotic eroticization of public space is allowed, while protest eroticization is punished by discarding it as insanity, as depravity, as non-Russian, and/or as sexual perversion. Through the scrutiny of "offending" images, the limits of patriotism are set through representations of specific stereotypical figures: the overly sexual homosexual; the youth with a dangerous untamed sexuality; hysterical oversexed young women and crazy feminists; and sexually fixated cultural producers. These figures serve as controlling images (Collins, 2008)—i.e., images that maintain the hierarchy through stereotypical representations of marginalized subjects.

Sex, body, and satire as resistance to heteropatriarchy in Russian art-activism

The links between heteronormative expressions of gender, heterosexuality, and patriotic notions of Russianness are well understood by the countercultural movements and are at the center of critical artistic engagements with Russian nationalism. Late at night on April 14, 2007, during the wave of Russia-wide anti-government protests known as the March of the Dissenters, an old dusty Zhiguli car drove around Moscow while a heterosexual couple had sex on a mattress that was affixed to the roof (see video: Nikolaev, 2008). The car moved slowly through busy streets, while surprised but enthusiastic onlookers yelled bawdy jokes at them. The couple did not react to the yells, nor did they pause their activity when the seemingly indifferent driver of their car stopped to get some gas and cigarettes. The "Auto Ride of the Dissenters" was staged by the art-group *Bombily*, which formed in 2004 and was run by two young visual artists, Anton Nikolaev and Aleksandr Rossikhin.[14] As Nikolaev later explained, the action referred to the demonstration of sexual freedom as the only possible protest that cannot be appropriated by the political games of Putin's regime (Nikolaev, 2008, September 17). While I think that Nikolaev was too optimistic about his creation and, as the previous discussion in this chapter shows sex and satire has been, and continues to be, appropriated by the hegemonic culture in Russia quite successfully, satirizing heteronormative nationalism is a potent tactic of Russian countercultural representations.

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[14] Unfortunately, I wasn't able to find the name of the woman participating in this action. All sources only credit Nikolaev and Rossikhin.

According to the arts scholar Alek Epstein (Epstein & Langenburg, 2012), contemporary Russian art-actionism, such as *Bombily*, traces its roots to the Russian avant-garde movement, which started with the suprematism, futurism, and cubism of the 1910s. Moscow conceptualism, developed in the 1960s and 1980s, became a first wave of performance art in the Soviet Union. It was represented by such well-known artists as Andrei Monastyrsky, Dmitri Prigov, Lev Rubenstein and others. Their performances explored the nature of art itself, in particular the notions of spectatorship, audience, event, and artwork. They often blurred the boundaries between artist and spectator by involving the audience in their performances. Sometimes, they took their performances out of institutionalized contexts by not announcing them and staging them in difficult-to-access spaces. They also questioned the limits of the artwork by refusing fixed meaning or creating the meaning only after the performance had happened. These forms of Russian avant-garde challenged the conventions of art, perhaps even commenting on the politics of art in the context of repressive Soviet ideology and the explosion of neoliberal consumerism in the 1990s. These principles of the avant-garde artistic form were carried into art-activism of the Putin era, criticizing the institutionalization of art while also articulating wider political criticism.

Putin's cultural politics involved the growing censorship of the visual field and the exclusion of political art from the institutionalized spaces of museums, galleries, and cultural centres (Jonson, 2018), as well as the appropriation of contemporary art for political purposes (Chukhrov, 2011). Perhaps as a result of this, performance art, which was squeezed out of institutionalized spaces, became more actively involved with political commentary and provocation. The most recent wave of art-actionism emerged in the context of protest culture against Putin's regime. This protest culture has experimented with carnivalesque humour and the representational device of *stiob*, as discussed above. One example of *stiob* in Putin's era that employed sex and body as conduits for a political message was the performance action by the art-group Voina ("war") titled "Fuck for the heir Little Bear!" This performance employed overidentification with patriotic rhetoric and eroticizing the pro-natalist politics of Putin's administration. On February 29, 2008, two days before the election of Putin's chosen candidate Dmitry Medvedev, five

heterosexual couples undressed and had sex in public at the State Museum of Biology in the hall of "Metabolism, energy, nutrition, digestion" (Figure 18).

While they were having sex, Voina's chief media artist, Alexei Plutser-Sarno, wearing a tuxedo and a top-hat, held a black banner reading "Fuck for the Heir Little Bear!" According to

Figure 18. Voina action "Fuck for the Heir Little Bear!" The State Museum of Biology, Moscow, 2008 (Plutser-Sarno, n.d.).

Plutser-Sarno's account of the action on his blog, the couples were also shouting "We have to support the Little Bear! We will pass down the energy of our bodies to him! We must fuck for him!" The joke played on the soon-to-be president's name; "medved" is a Russian word for "bear." The bear was also an emblem of the Putin and Medvedev party "United Russia" and one of the symbols of Russian nationalism. This sarcastically celebratory action mocked the farcical elections in the country, which passed down the presidency to Putin's puppet and left Putin in control as Prime Minister. At the same time, the performance grotesquely parodied Putin's heteropatriarchal pro-natalist politics, which sought to increase the birthrate of the country and financially rewarded women giving birth to a second or third child (Avdeyeva, 2011). One of the women taking part in this action, future member of Pussy Riot, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, was noticeably pregnant. In a classic *stiob* move, the artists used the tactic of overidentification, reproducing the authoritative form: the pro-natalist slogans, the gestures of voting in favour of the current leader, and the nationalist symbols (see Yurchak, 2005).

It is unclear whether this performance had any audience in real time; however, the photos and a detailed description was published on Plutser-Sarno's blog, which, at the time, served as an archive of Voina's work and generated more than two thousand comments. The images resurfaced again years after the performance: In 2012, during the trial of Pussy Riot members, these photographs were put under scrutiny on numerous talk shows, in internet discussions, and in the courtroom. The image became iconic,

as it was often used in discussions on Pussy Riot in which the speaker sought to dismiss any claims to seriousness on the part of Pussy Riot members by invoking the image in order to show the lack of morals of Tolokonnikova, discrediting her as insane, immature, and sexually depraved (e.g., the talk show "Let Them Speak" (Pust Govoryat, 2012, March 15)).

Later actions by Voina continued similar commentary: "A cop in a priest's robe" saw Oleg Vorotnikov dressed in a priest's robe worn over a police uniform, walking past the cash register at a supermarket without paying for a shopping cart full of items; "In memory of the Dekabrists" staged a hanging of three migrant workers and two queer people at a grocery store and referenced the failed revolt of 1825 against the authoritarian regime of tsarist Russia[15]; "The storm of the White House" projected a giant image of a skull and crossbones onto a government building; and "A dick held hostage by the FSB," where members of the art group drew a seven-meter long phallus on the drawbridge seconds before the bridge was raised, erecting the phallus in front of the Federal Security Service building. This last action brought a prestigious Innovatsiya prize to Voina in 2011. Each of the performances was filmed, photographed, and narrated online. In this way, even though the performances had no direct audience, they became widely distributed and well-known in online communities. Voina performances used playfully grotesque actions in order to draw attention to and criticize the seemingly limitless power of the church, police, secret service, and corrupt justice systems. Their performances can also be understood as a form of "culture jamming." Coined by Naomi Klein (2010), culture jamming refers to a resistant cultural practice of parodying public messages created by corporations and state institutions, such as advertisement billboards, in order to create a new radical meaning, deconstruct oppressive discourse, and voice political concerns. As Klein (2010) argues, the most successful culture jams "hack into a corporation's own method of communication to send a message starkly at odds with the one that was intended" (p. 281). The object of Voina's culture jam is the authoritative form itself as they hijack political discourse, the disciplinary power of the secret service and police, and the privacy of the sexual

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[15] Footage from this action was used in the documentary film, *Grey Violet – Odd one out*, (Juntunen & Aalto, 2017) narrated from the point of view of gender-queer participant and member of Voina Grey Violet.

act. The eroticism here is not a direct criticism of the power, but rather, as Jonathan Platt (2018) points

out, is a staged enjoyment of bare life, "an erotic enjoyment that is obscene, even traumatic, and which

troubles the desiring, disciplined subject" (p. 145).

Pussy Riot continued these practices of

stiob, culture jamming, and erotic enjoyment.

On February 21, 2012, several women dressed

in bright-colored dresses, tights, and balaclavas

and stormed the nearly empty Cathedral of

Christ the Saviour in Moscow. They proceeded

to sing a "Punk prayer," accompanying their

Figure 19. Pussy Riot action "Punk Prayer." The Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, Moscow, 2012. (Pussy Riot, n.d.)

song with grotesque dancing and jumping (Figure 19). The performance took place on the ambo, an area

of the church reserved for clergy, the pulpit, and the altar, and women's access to it is strictly regulated.

The lyrics of the song read:

> Black robe, golden epaulettes
> All parishioners crawl to bow
> The phantom of liberty is in heaven
> Gay pride sent to Siberia in chains
> The head of the KGB, their chief saint,
> Leads protesters to prison under escort
> In order not to offend His Holiness
> Women must give birth and love
> Shit, shit, the Lord's shit!
> Virgin Mary, Mother of God
> Put Putin away!
> Virgin Mary, turn into a feminist!
> Become a feminist! Become a feminist!

The performance was interrupted by security personnel in mere minutes; the participants barely managed

to unpack a plastic guitar and start jumping and shouting as they were dragged off the ambo. Still, the

action gained international attention as the next day, the video clip appeared online and went viral. The

video clip used footage filmed at the Cathedral the day before as well as materials from previous actions.

Pussy Riot's "Punk prayer" was not the first performance of this kind. The group formed in 2011,

when, according to historian Masha Gessen (2014), Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and a friend were preparing

a public lecture on the third wave of feminism and the riot grrrl movement when they decided to form their own riot grrrl group. However, if Pussy Riot's aggressive punk aesthetics and feminist commitments were similar to those of North America's Bikini Kill and alike, the actions of the Russian version of riot grrrl differed significantly. Pussy Riot staged their actions in unexpected public places: on top of a bus, in a crowded subway station, on the monument wall of the Red Square, and on top of the glass enclosure of a luxury car in the posh shopping district. Their texts were feminist and pro-LGBTQ, aggressive, mocked Putin's government, the police, and the institution of the Orthodox Church, and full of direct references to corporeality, such as pissing, shitting, and fucking. They criticized the Orthodox Church for promoting the "religion of a hard penis," claimed that "feminist whip is healthy for Russia," and called for "the end to sexist fucked-up Putinists." All of their performances, with detailed explanations of the actions and the lyrics, were posted on the Pussy Riot blog (Pussy Riot, n.d.). The blog also provided the explanation for the band's actions and cited artists and philosophers—including Slavoj Žižek, Judith Butler and Rosi Braidotti—as inspirations.

When the video footage of young women in bright clothing and balaclavas performing the "Punk prayer" erupted in the world news in 2012, the Pussy Riot art collective was quickly celebrated in Europe and North America as a symbol of feminist courage and strength in the face of authoritarian patriarchy. Their aesthetics of carnival, satire, and punk female aggression sought to provoke and challenge the power of the state that was backed by the Russian Orthodox Church, while their music condemned Putin's regime, systemic sexism, and oppression of LGBTQ people. The world closely followed the trial that would result in a two-year long sentence for two leading members, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina, on the grounds of hooliganism committed for reasons of religious hatred. After their release from incarceration in December 2013, these two activists became even more popular in the West, and the image of bright balaclavas circulated widely in North American and European media as iconic markers of feminist struggle. Romanticized as symbols of white feminist return (Groeneveld, 2015), Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina were invited to take part in Western visual culture. They published memoir books in English (Alyokhina, 2017; Tolokonnikova, 2018), appeared in *Vanity Fair* (Gessen,

2014, July), *Rolling Stone* (Kelley, 2015, August 19), and the Netflix show *House of Cards*, and they participated in public conversations with famous artists and philosophers, such as Marina Abramovic (TimesTalks, 2018, May 14), Slavoj Žižek (Tolokonnikova & Žižek, 2014), and Judith Butler and Rosi Braidotti (The First Supper Symposium, 2014, May 21). They also went on music tours across North America, expanding their political focus. Their new music video, "I can't breathe" (wearepussyriot, 2015, February 18) criticized police brutality in the U.S., while "Make America Great Again" (wearepussyriot, 2016, October 27) mocked Donald Trump's presidential campaign. The DIY punk aesthetics and carnivalesque humour of the pre-trial Pussy Riot got lost; their bright balaclavas were exchanged for multicolored hair and stylish glasses, their videos are now professionally filmed, and their performances moved from hard-to-access and politically charged spaces to regular music halls.

Pussy Riot's performances also exemplify the typical Russian silence on issues of racism in Russia. The broad agenda of Pussy Riot expressed through their performances and the lyrics of their songs tackled such varied issues as sexism, infringement on reproductive rights, LGBTQ issues, capitalist exploitation, corruption of the Russian Orthodox Church and Russian politicians, and the ties between clergy and political leaders. Yet, the problems of racism were absent from the band's agenda until the continuation of their artistic endeavours in the West. For instance, their video "I can't breathe" addresses the murder of Eric Garner by New York police in 2014, illustrating issues of anti-Black racism. Their art has never addressed the massive violent anti-migrant protests in Russia in 2010 and 2013, however, which were backed by the state and resulted in mass detentions and deportations of immigrants from Central Asia (see Zakharov, 2015). This omission of racism within Russia is a common tendency in Russian mainstream and countercultural discourses, as race is seen as something extraneous to the country and as a problem of the West.

It is not surprising that feminists in Europe and North America celebrated Pussy Riot, since the collective used language and imagery familiar to Western audiences—that of third-wave punk feminism, social media-based activism, and identity politics (Gapova, 2015). As media scholars Kathie Wiedlack and Maria Neufeld (2014) argue, there was quite a bit of misinterpretation involved in Western readings

of Pussy Riot: their actions were often misunderstood as anti-religious, while their appropriation of the

riot grrrl movement's representational techniques was interpreted as a sign that Russia is following in the

footsteps of white Western feminism. In Russia, the support for the collective was far less celebratory and

was primarily situated within a discursive framework that criticized the state's excessive punishment for

minor offences rather than the framework of feminism (Gapova, 2015). Many Russian feminists felt

Pussy Riot did not express a clear feminist message, that their methods were too violent, and that they

failed to consider that their rhetoric and aesthetics would be inaccessible to most of the Russian

population who were not versed in third-wave feminism (Sperling, 2014). However, I maintain that the

role of Pussy Riot in Russian popular culture was both misunderstood by Western *and* Russian feminists.

Despite the murkiness of their message and the questionable success of their achievements in Russia, the

imagery produced by Pussy Riot effectively highlighted the ways in which gender and sexuality is

recruited in maintaining nationalist ideals, values, and symbols. The practice of sexualizing national

symbols and expressions of national belonging—Hemment's (2015) "erotic patriotism"—is a hegemonic

practice of representation in Russian popular culture in Putin's years of governing. Pussy Riot's

performances demonstrated that sex and gender work both to legitimize nationalist heteropatriarchy and

resist nationalism and oppressive state practices. Pussy Riot continued the work of earlier countercultural

anarchist art collectives, such as Voina, which sought to interrupt the nation-making and body-policing

processes of the state while focusing on female interpretations of these processes.

The final example of art-
actionism I will discuss in this
chapter is the work of Piotr
Pavlensky. Pavlensky's first well-
known action in July 2012, titled
"Stitch," happened just before the
judge made the decision to sentence
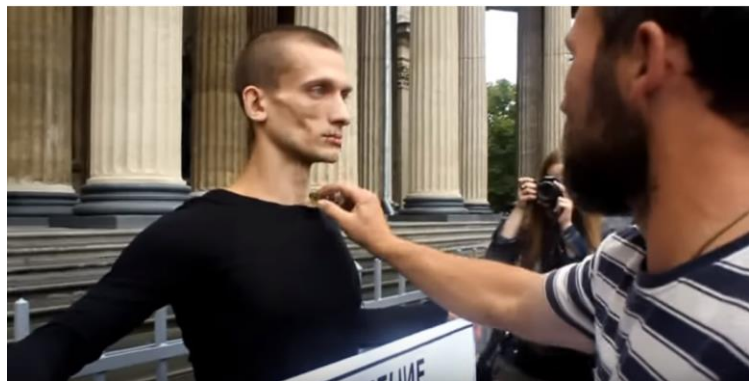Pussy Riot members Tolokonnikova

Figure 20. Screenshot from the video of Piotr Pavlensky's action "Stitch" in front of the Kazan Cathedral, St. Petersburg. (xpitercorex2012, 2012, July 24).

and Alyokhina to two years of imprisonment (Figure 20). Pavlensky appeared in front of the Kazan

Cathedral in St Petersburg with his mouth stitched shut,[16] holding a banner stating, "The performance of

Pussy Riot was a repetition of the action of Jesus Christ." The artist was silent, calm, and passive, as he

stood there watching the crowd of passers-by react. One of the onlookers came up to him and crossed him

while reciting a prayer. Another attempted to take the banner away. Finally, police officers and an

ambulance arrived, taking Pavlensky to a psychiatric hospital, where he was promptly released

(xpitercorex2012, 2012, July 24). In his next action, in May 2013, "Carcass," Pavlensky wrapped himself

in a cocoon of barbed wire in front of the Legislative Assembly building in St Petersburg (Figure 21).

He lay naked and silent inside the cocoon until
police officers cut the wire open and released him. In
November 2013, in an action titled "Fixation,"
Pavlensky nailed his scrotum to the pavement in the
Red Square and, again, sat there naked and silent
while puzzled police officers walked around trying
to figure out what to do (Figure 22). Since the artist
was harming no one except himself during the

Figure 21. Screenshot from the video of Piotr
Pavlensky's action "Carcass" in front of the
Legislative Assembly, St Petersburg (Sergeev, 2013,
May 27).

actions, he managed to avoid being arrested and charged. However, after each of these actions, Pavlensky

was requested by the authorities to undergo psychiatric evaluation—a common response of Russian

authorities to both sexual and political transgressions (remember the required psychological evaluations

of the students who filmed the "Satisfaction" video discussed in the previous section)[17]. The evaluations

found the artist sane and in good health. In October 2014, an action titled "Separation" addressed the

topic of abuse of psychiatric diagnosis for political means: sitting naked atop a high concrete fence of the

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[16] The symbolism of the mouth shut has been used in multiple activist and artist works around the world, from the
ACT UP activist David Wojnarowicz' work in in Rosa von Praunheim's 1990 AIDS documentary, *Silence* = Death,
refugee protests against detention and the process of asylum seeking (Goldsmith, 2002, January 19).
[17] For history of political abuse of psychiatry in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet countries, see van Vooren (2009)
and, specifically on psychiatric treatments for sexual "perversions" see Essig (1999).

Figure 22. Screenshot from the video of Piotr Pavlensky's action "Fixation," the Red Square, Moscow (Grani.ru, 2013, November 10).

institute for forensic psychiatry, Pavlensky sliced off his earlobe with a big kitchen knife and silently waited for police and firefighters to intervene and take him off the fence.

Each of Pavlensky's art-actions involved not just his body as a means to convey his message, but also the reactions of the governing and policing systems. In each action, Pavlensky's body was naked and extremely vulnerable as it was stitched shut, entrapped by the barbed wire, nailed to the ground, suspended and bleeding on the high fence. In each case, the system responded to his voluntary vulnerability with puzzlement: the video of "Fixation" (Grani.ru, 2013, November 10) shows a police officer coming up to the naked artist and, in a tone that conveys irritation and expectation of immediate obedience, addresses the artist "Dear, we get up now!" The gloomy November day and wet grey pavement amplifies the contrast between the bare, pale skin of the artist and the puffy uniforms of the police officers gathered around. The extreme vulnerability of the artist's body on display makes him difficult to remove, to police, and to govern. Pavlensky's naked torso provides stark contrast with hegemonic images of masculinity that circulate in Russian popular culture, particularly those of President Putin. The irrational, vulnerable, and self-harming image of Pavlensky contrasts with Putin's self-restraint and mastery over his own body and its surroundings.

Hlebowitz (2015) maintains that there is a similarity between these forms of art-action and the Russian tradition of holy foolery (*iurodstvo*), which also treats the body as a conduit of the message of engagement with the state's power. He states, "both phenomena employ nudity, dramatic gestures, silence and mortification of the flesh. Even if holy foolery and Pavlensky's art are based on different premises, the fact remains that they share a close aesthetic affinity" (p. 66). Pavlensky's actionist art, which is gendered and sexualized, is a political protest that is juxtaposed with the consuming and healthy body of the President, with its heteronormative happy sexuality. His art clearly also engages with sadomasochistic

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exhibitionism placed in the context of the national body—e.g., the Kremlin wall, the Red Square—playing with the image of the sexual body in pain in public, and perhaps taking the proposition of Berlant and Warner (1998) for the politics of the public sex to the point of grotesque. All of these actions employed rebellious bodies and sexuality in an attempt to shed disciplining power. These representations are in stark contrast with the images of sexualized bodies that are proliferated by mainstream culture.

The representations that I have discussed in this chapter are of exclusively white Russian bodies. Even Nureyev, whose ethnicity is Tatar, was never really represented as a non-white person. Perhaps especially since his life was rooted in the Soviet era, which sought to make ethnicity obsolete, his ethnicity was never a point of public discussion. This exclusivity of whiteness in Russian popular culture that focuses on representations of the body is a crucial component of my analysis—it constructs a particular ethnic/racial imaginary (Rankine, 2015) wherein hegemonic representations of masculinity and femininity, as well as homoerotic and aggressive types of femininity, are represented as being the exclusive domains of white Russianness. In this context, non-Russian and non-heteronormative subjects are seen as outsiders and are written out beyond the ethnic/racial imaginary (see Chapters 3 and 4). White Russian bodies in Russian counterculture are seen to be inherently more subversive than others.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined the notion of erotic patriotism and the uses of heteropatriarchal codes of sexuality and gender for maintaining national ideals. Specifically, I discussed representations of President Putin as symbolizing the face of the country through virile and self-restraining masculinity, and I highlighted how support for this national symbol appears through representations of female sexual desire for the President and representation of racial/ethnic Other loyal to the President. I have also provided examples from popular culture where aggressive and dominant femininity is employed in representations that attempt to humiliate and devalue male anti-Putin protesters. As I argued, the representations of erotic patriotism are enforced through the use of rhetorical tactics that are historically

familiar to Russian popular audiences: humour, irony, and heteropatriarchal codes of gender and sexuality. Furthermore, the producers of hegemonic culture appropriate such resistant forms of representation as *stiob*, sexual pleasure, and grotesque in reproducing heteropatriarchal hegemonic culture. The employment of playful discursive and representational tactics ensures that erotic patriotism is produced not only by authorities, but also by larger national publics who willingly participate in the recreation of national symbols, such as Putin's image, and circulates it in public spaces.

Next, I confirmed that the protection of heteronormativity and patriotic sexuality of Russian national cultural symbols manifests through the censorship of non-heteronormativity initiated by government agencies and the demonstration of public contempt for sexualities that are deemed to be "non-patriotic." To illustrate this, I discussed three cultural flashpoints where representations of sexuality became the focus of scandal, not only because they transgressed heteropatriarchal values but also because they violated the rules of erotic patriotism. These examples included the feature film *Matilda*, which told a story of a love affair between the Russian Tsar Nikolay II and a Polish ballerina; the ballet *Nureyev*, which follows the story of a gay HIV-positive ballet dancer in the Soviet Union; and a viral homoerotic video filmed by students of the Ulyanovsk Institute of Civil Aviation. Finally, I provided examples of countercultural performances that challenge the link between national symbols and hegemonic representations of gender and sexuality, including representations of erotic patriotism—namely, performances by Voina, Pussy Riot, and Piotr Pavlensky. Although these resistant representational practices are often celebrated as challenging Russian heteropatriarchy, they often stay within heteropatriarchal logics. What I see as their main contribution to Russian public cultures is the way they interrupt the hegemony of erotic patriotism, where heteropatriarchal representations serve to uphold nationalist symbols and to silence "non-patriotic" representations of gender and sexuality. The countercultural sexualized representations are powerful precisely because they interrupt patriotic eroticism and take over public spaces that are reserved for patriotic sexuality. Occupying the same niches as patriotically erotic bodies, these images of sex in public, citizens taking ownership over their body and the space they occupy, and gender non-conformity create a collection of resistant iconography. They

intervene in the expectation of erotic patriotism and moralization through culture jamming and taking over public spaces.

Representations of gender, sexuality, and the body establish power and control, and the use of sexual and gendered hierarchies is a conduit for making claims about that power and control. The language of the nation, feelings of patriotism, and authority of the state are all ways to legitimate the control of how bodies are represented. Each of the examples that I have discussed in this chapter is an example of representing white Russianness which symbolically annihilates the racialized/ethnic Other and writes racial/ethnic difference out of the body of the nation. In the following chapters, I turn to the function of gender and sexuality in discursive and representational practices that maintain the boundaries of Russianness through sexualized images of the racial/ethnic Other.

Chapter 3

Othering one of us: Codes of Gender, Sexuality and Race/Ethnicity in Political

Cartoons on the Russia-Ukraine conflict

Introduction

In the last decade, online communities in Russia have seen an increase in sexist, homophobic, and racist language, particularly in relation to military conflicts. Through this language, the enemy is often described as lustful, sexually perverse, and/or gender-non-conforming. I suggest that this language should not just be seen as a result of Russian heteropatriarchy and homophobia but rather as a response to the ways in which gender and sexuality play out on a global scale, and, specifically, in Russia's relations with Western Europe and North America. The use of codes of gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity offers an insight into the geopolitics of zones of conflict. This is especially visible in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict that led to Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and the war in Eastern Ukraine in 2014. Focusing on the employment of sexist, transphobic, homophobic, and racist language in political cartoons, this chapter analyzes the intertwined and sometimes contradictory discourses on Ukrainian–Russian relations. At the centre of my analysis are the following questions: How do representations in political cartoons shape reality; what are the geopolitical meanings of transphobia, homophobia, sexism, and racism in these cartoons; and, how can we understand it in relation to Western neoliberal discourses on women's and LGBTQ rights?

Though Ukraine and Russia have had a long history of both closeness and tension, recent years have seen an increase in conflict. The latest political tensions between Russia and Ukraine were sparked by a protest known as the Euromaidan—an action that took place on the Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) in Kiev in November 2013. The protesters opposed Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovych's decision to stop preparations to join the European Union (EU), a pursuit of the previous twelve years, and instead continue to develop economic partnerships with Russia. Similar protests quickly

spread around the country, escalating into violence and leading to more than 50 deaths of protesters and police officers (Gatehouse, 2015, February 12). In February 2014, President Yanukovych was removed from office and an interim government was established. In the spring of 2014, in response to events in Ukraine, Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula using undercover Russian troops. At first, Russian President Putin denied the involvement of Russian military forces in Crimea and claimed that the region, which has a large Russian-speaking population, voluntarily joined the Russian Federation (Collett-White & Popeski, 2014, March 16). Later, however, he addmitted that the Russian military was present there to ensure peace during the referendum on Crimea's separation from Ukraine (RT.com, 2014, April 17). That same year, protests in the region of Donbass, Eastern Ukraine, evolved into an armed conflict between supporters of the newly established Ukrainian government and the pro-Russian separatists who were aided by Russian support. The conflict is ongoing at the time of this writing.

The conflict in Ukraine has created strong divisions in Russian society. According to data from the independent pollster Levada Centre (2014, November 11), in October 2014, 86% of Russian citizens supported Crimea's unification with Russia; the main reason respondents gave for their support was the belief that Crimea was "Russian land" that needed to be protected. The annexation of Crimea also positively affected the popularity of Putin and entrenched imperialistic beliefs in Russia's military and symbolic might globally (Rogov, 2017). The popular slogan "Crimea is ours!" (ru. *Krym nash!*) became not only an expression of one's position on annexation but also a marker of wide and passionate support for the Russian government (and, sometimes, a subject of ridicule by political opposition—see Edenborg, 2017) Popular figures publicly opposing Russia's involvement in Ukraine, including public speakers, actors, and musicians, found themselves facing a variety of problems, from violent threats to sudden performance cancellations. At the same time, the government started large-scale, rapid economic and infrastructural development of Crimea and sought to attract Russian tourists into the region through a carefully crafted advertising campaign.

The political discourse at the beginning of the conflict relied heavily on ideas of commonality between Russian and Ukrainian peoples. In the popular imagination of the last two centuries, Russian and

Ukrainian peoples have been conceptualized through narratives of brotherhood, close ethnic bonds, aligned values, and shared pasts. The idea that East Slavs were inherently Russian became hegemonic in the last quarter of the nineteenth century (Snyder, 2003). This idea has been further entrenched in travel writing, fiction literature, history textbooks, and popular culture, while centuries of Ukrainian traditions of resistance against Russian imperialism have been omitted (Shkandrij, 2001; Kappeler, 2014). This imagined commonality has also been sustained in times of the current Russia–Ukraine conflict. For example, in 2015, at the International Economic Forum in St Petersburg, Vladimir Putin commented:

> Speaking about cooperation, we always said and will always say that—and there is nothing new to it—even in the face of today's challenges, as I have always thought and still do think, that Russians and Ukrainians are one people, one etnos with their own, of course, peculiarities, their own cultural traits, but common history, common culture, common spiritual roots. Whatever happens, in the end Russia and Ukraine are in one way or another meant to have a common future. (qtd. in Stenogramma, 2015)

The term "etnos" used by Putin in this speech is telling. As I discussed in Chapter 1, *etnos* stems from the absence of categories of race and ethnicity under Soviet ideology and refers to the biological and evolutionary explanations of physical, social, and cultural differences among ethnic groups (Oushakine, 2009; Zakharov, 2015). Putin used this term in his speech to emphasize the inescapable commonality among Russian and Ukrainian peoples deriving from nature. How is it possible then that while official discourse rests on the idea of such inescapable "natural" commonality, Ukrainians are simultaneously marked as the Other of Russians and the occupation of Ukrainian territories is justified? As I show in my analysis in this chapter, despite Putin's symbolic imagining of Russians and Ukrainians as "one people," cultural representations of the Russia–Ukraine conflict position Ukrainians as losing their whiteness and thus distancing themselves from Russianness. This, as I claim, is done with the help of codes of gender, sex, and race/ethnicity.

During the protests and subsequent violence in Ukraine, popular images of Ukrainians changed drastically within Russian contexts. Symbols of brotherhood and aligned values were replaced with discourses and derogatory images of Ukrainians as lazy, lost, deranged, and primitive. A non-representative survey of passersby in Moscow conducted by Radio Svoboda in the fall of 2016 showed that ordinary people described Ukrainians as less educated than Russians, confused, brainwashed, and mentally unstable (Rykovceva, 2016, October 18). One important conduit of this stereotyping was the discourse on gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity. Specifically, the reconstitution of Ukraine as a European nation was commonly positioned in Russian hegemonic discourse as a departure from heteronormativity and whiteness and an embrace of sexual perversion. These representational moves echo those in other zones of conflict; even though the content of gendered and sexualized discourses varies, in words of Lindsey Feitz and Joanne Nagel (2008), "the gendered, sexual nature of war is not simply a historical artifact of warfare or the military, but is an ongoing, evolving feature of military organization and operations." (p. 202)

In this chapter, I argue that—following processes of sustaining of white Russian heteropatriarchal nationalism through popular culture, explored in Chapter 2—stereotypes that maintain sexualized ethnic boundaries in the context of the Russia–Ukraine crisis function to establish the geotemporal placement of Russia as a space of alternative (sexual) modernity and maintain the symbolic border between two nations. Specifically, I claim that the figure of Ukrainian man in political cartoons is represented as the Other through its portrayal as a *khokhol* (a Ukrainian peasant), through metaphors of gender confusion, and through racialization of this figure through its proximity to Blackness and Muslim femininity. Such representations, as I suggest, support spiritual justifications of Russian occupation of Ukrainian territories. Having set the scene for the Russia–Ukraine conflict, I will now present my methodology for the analysis of the representations in political cartoons before discussing my findings.

Both Stuart Hall (2012 [1997]) and Roland Barthes (1977) maintain that the visual image does not represent reality but rather constructs it through the creation of meaning. In "Rhetoric of the Image," Barthes (1977) argues that the reproduction of an image encodes "natural" reality by encrypting signs and

symbols with cultural meaning, which are then read through the viewer's cultural knowledge of these signs and symbols. Political cartoons are especially fruitful for analyzing the creation of reality—or, in this research, the geopolitical meanings—through representations because, by the nature of their ironic genre, they heavily rely on the viewer's ability to read the culturally available codes, hyperbolization, and simplification of abstract concepts, as well as the layering and slippage of meanings that enables their humour. Media scholar Josh Greenberg (2002) provides a useful explanation of the meaning-making potential of political cartoons as a genre:

> Political cartoons provide metalanguage for discourse about the social order by constructing idealizations of the world, positioning readers within a discursive context of "meaning making" and offering readers a tool for deliberating on present conditions. Cartoons "frame" phenomena by situating the "problem" in question within the context of everyday life and, in this way, exploit "universal values'' as a means of persuading readers to identify with an image and its intended message. (p. 182)

In order to examine the metalanguage of political cartoons in the Russia–Ukraine conflict, I use a Cultural Studies Approach (Lister & Wells, 2004) to analyze the images and, specifically, the terminology and methods of semiotics (Jewitt & Oyama, 2004; Van Leewen, 2004). My interrogation of images includes the identification and interpretation of thematic patterns in the cartoons, visual and textual codes, rhetorical processes (Greenberg, 2002), metaphors (Bounegru & Forceville, 2011; El Refaie, 2003), narrative structures (Jewitt & Oyama, 2004), and mechanisms of producing humour (Mazid, 2008).

One of the central concepts for my analysis is "code." In semiotic analysis, a code refers to a set of signs that operate like a language to convey meanings (Lister & Wells, 2004). In this chapter, I pay attention to specific codes of gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity. For example, one of the central codes that I discuss is a depiction of a Ukrainian man through physical characteristics of hypermasculinity, peasant attire, and the "lowly" pleasures of food and sex. Another rhetorical tool that is pervasive in political cartoons is that of metaphor, a representation of a complex concept through something more

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familiar and easily imaginable (El Rafaie, 2003). Building on the theory of conceptual metaphor, Bounegru and Forceville (2011) show that pictorial metaphors are manifestations of underlying conceptual ones. They quote Lakoff and Johnson (1980), writing that "metaphor is primarily a matter of thought and action and only derivatively a matter of language" (as cited in Bounegru & Forceville, 2011, p. 209), and they add that abstract ideas are often conceptualized in terms of experiences that pertain directly to the body. By focusing on the use of metaphors, I illuminate how codes of gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity are put to work in pictorial representations that are employed for explaining the Russia–Ukraine conflict, and I identify the abstract concepts that hide behind them.

In this chapter, I interpret cartoons and put them into the context of Russia–Ukraine relationships while considering the creation, circulation, and discussion of these cartoons online as a representational praxis. The set of cartoons analyzed in this chapter consists of drawings created from a pro-Russian perspective and published in Russian-speaking online spaces between 2013 and 2018 (although I include one older image to provide further context). The cartoons were gathered using the keyword "Ukraine" through the search function on the websites caricatura.ru, anekdot.ru and pikabu.ru—all of which are devoted to archiving and sharing cartoons, jokes, gifs, and memes. I have further selected twelve cartoons that stand out for their explicit use of sexualized and gendered codes. Some of these images were used in online news or opinion articles, some of them were exchanged on chat forums, and some were untraceable to their original creators. Because of their diverse textual contexts, I focus specifically on the images themselves and their captions, rather than on the articles, discussions, and other major textual content surrounding their appearances. Since the selected corpus of images is small and has been gathered through only a few databases, this collection of cartoons should not be seen as a representative sample. Nevertheless, I believe it provides valuable insights about the availability of codes of gender and sexuality, and their intersections with race/ethnicity and nationalism, for Russia's geopolitical positioning and its border control.

The figure of *khokhol* and the metaphor of gender confusion

   The political cartoons focusing on Ukraine derive their humour from a range of stereotypes,

symbolizing Ukrainians in three primary ways: (1) through the traditional image of Cossack or Ukrainian

peasant (*khokhol*), (2) as an emasculated man, or (3) as a woman in

distress. The images are accentuated by depictions of vulgarity and

sexual perversity, through exaggeration of simple emotions (such as

lust, anger, or fear), and by ethnic markers of dress and facial

features. The most wide-spread symbol for Ukraine during the

conflict has been the image of a stocky man, coded through a

distinctive Cossack look: a shaven head with a scalp lock, a long

horseshoe mustache, and an embroidered shirt, wide pants, and high-

knee boots. An example of such an image can be seen in Figure 23.

Figure 23. "Me, a Khokhol?!"
(Original caption) No image
credits. Posted by Awful
Avalanche (2016, July 16).

   A short historical overview is needed to explain this figure. In the fifteenth century, Cossacks

were an indigenous population of what is currently the territory of Ukraine, known for their socio-

political organization as they formed small self-governing martial communities (see Kappeler, 2003;

Kohut, 2011). With the growing control over the territory by the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the

sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the Russian Empire in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,

some of Cossack groups were enserfed and became peasants. The Cossacks often initiated mass

rebellions, escaped serfdom, and formed militarized nomadic groups. Some groups managed to preserve

their administrative autonomy in exchange for military service and loyalty to the Russian Emperor.

Cossack traditions were neglected during the Soviet era; however, recently, Vladimir Putin sought to

revive the relationship between Cossacks and Russian governance (Herpen, 2014). Cossack groups loyal

to Putin reinstated their paramilitary organization, albeit in a form that resembles a cultural institution or a

club rather than a politically autonomous community. Today, they are sometimes involved in Russia's

military operations and aiding the police forces. Modern Cossack organizations are known not only for

their military tradition, but also for their loyalty to authority, Orthodoxy, macho masculinity, rustic

culture, and traditional gender roles, as well as their strict and harshly enforced moral code. In 2014, Cossacks made international news when they captured and publicly whipped Pussy Riot band members during their protest performance at the Sochi Winter Olympic Games (Walker, 2014, February 14). In the contemporary Russian and Eastern European public imaginary, the figure of the Cossack collapses both the image of a militarized patriarchal ethnic minority of Russia and that of a Ukrainian peasant, a primitive rural man serving nobility.

Modern Ukrainian national identity is complex, historically influenced by often-changing relationships between many ethnic and socio-political groups, of which Cossacks are just one. Therefore, the choice to symbolize Ukrainianness through this particular figure is significant. The traditional scalp lock not only marks Ukrainianness but also signifies a derogatory Russian word for Ukrainians, *khokhol* (literally, "lock of hair," pl. *khokhly*). As scholar of Ukrainian nationalism Myroslav Shkandrij (2001) contends, the figure of the *khokhol* first appeared in narratives of imperial frontiers established in the early-nineteenth century by Russian writers (p. xxi). These narratives described the Ukrainian frontier (similarly to Caucasus, Poland, or Siberia) in feminizing terms, associating it with the rural, the violent, and the primitive. Besides its ethnic meaning, *khokhol* also has a distinctive class meaning. As historian Andreas Kappeler (2003) explains, the wide mass of people in nineteenth century-Ukraine was comprised of peasants who were dependent on the elites—either Russians, or Poles—or a small number of Ukrainian nobility who were loyal to the Russian Emperor. Because of this, categories of ethnicity became closely associated with differences in class and socio-economic status. In the eyes of Russian people, this dependent mass of the Ukrainian people became *khokhly*—the stereotype of uncivilized peasants. *Khokhly* were seen as incapable of rebellion, unlike the freedom-loving Cossacks, and thus were not considered a threat; as a result, they were generally derided as barbaric but harmless. By comparison with Russia, Ukrainian peasant culture was seen as uncultivated and inferior. In derogatory images of Ukrainians, such as Figure 23, this primitive nature is often accentuated by including depictions of pigs, lard, and vodka, as well as of the fat body.

The connection of this collapsed figure of Cossack and *khokhol* to the codes of gender and sexuality further entrenches the ideas of inferiority and lowly pleasures as characteristics of Ukrainian people. An example can be seen in Figure 24. Preceding the development of the Russia–Ukraine armed conflict, this image depicts the presidential elections of 2010, an earlier period of tension between the two states over political loyalties. The cartoon shows a Ukrainian man

Figure 24. "Ukraine is tired of elections. Bosoms of teenagers holding posters 'Stop raping Ukraine' overshadowed the qualities of the candidates." (Original caption) Image credit: Evgeny Kran (2010, February 12).

voting in favour (of what is unspecified), while excitedly marching towards four smiling naked women and ignoring the ballot boxes held by two opposition leaders, Yulia Tymoshenko and Viktor Yanukovych, who both supported political distance from Russia. The cameraman in the image is also ignoring the candidates, instead directing his camera at the women. The caption for the cartoon reads "Ukraine is tired of elections. Bosoms of teenagers holding posters 'Stop raping Ukraine' overshadowed the qualities of the candidates."

The image of naked women refers to the Ukrainian women's activist group Femen. Members of Femen are known for their public stripping, which they call "sextremism" (FEMEN, n.d.) in protests against sex trafficking, corruption in Ukraine, anti-abortion legislation, religious events, and many other issues.[18] In the media reporting on Femen, the content of their political messaging is often lost behind sensational commentary regarding their acts of stripping and interrupting of political meetings and events. Contrary to the title of this cartoon, the protesting women here are not even holding posters. Instead, they are merely represented as objects of lust. The misrepresentation of Femen here is significant, given that feminist groups were active and visible during the Euromaidan protests in attempts to connect the struggle for political independence from Russia with the struggle for women's rights (Bociurkiw, 2014, June 20;

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[18] Femen has also been criticized for anti-Islamic and neocolonial forms of feminism (see Eileraas, 2014, p. 42).

Plakhotnik, 2017). As a result of this sexualization, this image not only misrepresents women's participation in political protest but it also portrays Ukrainian women as promiscuous—a classic tactic of dehumanizing and Othering the enemy in militarized contexts (Feitz & Nagel, 2008).

The voting man in Figure 24, the collapsed figure of a Cossack and a *khokhol*, symbolizes the duped mass of Ukrainian people as seen through the eyes of the artist. The exaggerated lust and grotesque stupidity of the man alludes to the primitive mind unable to comprehend the democratic ritual of voting for the candidate with the best political program. It is interesting that political leaders, such as Timoshenko and Yanukovich in this image, are not marked by the scalp lock, which puts them in stark contrast with the "ordinary man." This difference in coding points to the fact that *khokhol* is a metonym for the Ukrainian nation and "the people," while the formal dress of the Ukrainian politicians marks their supposed distance from "the people."

The following two images (Figures 25 and 26) offer an interpretation of geopolitical dilemmas that Ukraine faced in 2013 and use a structure of a dualistic world. The image titled "Ukraine at the crossroads" (Figure 25) portrays a Ukrainian man, represented as *khokhol*, choosing between two worlds––the world of the devil, naked and unashamed of its uncovered genitals, and the world of the angel, modestly dressed in traditional peasant attire and pointing his finger to the skies. The devil's world includes the EU flag and the rainbow flag; Adolf Hitler addressing a crowd; kissing men and a person in a flashy pink costume holding a rubber chicken (drawn from a specific photograph of the Kiev Gay Pride widely circulated in the media); a roll of money; and recreational drugs symbolized by a syringe. By contrast, the world of the angel offers the three knights on horses, who are immediately recognizable from Slavic folk tales and symbolize traditions, might, and spirit; the Orthodox Church; the Soviet space pioneer Yuri Gagarin and a space station; a fighter jet; a peasant family with six children; and a monument celebrating the Soviet Union's victory in World War II. All symbols of the angel's world refer to the past, whether imaginary (the knights) or real (WWII, Gagarin, and peasants), while the devil's world represents the evils of the contemporary world. I would argue that even the depiction of Hitler, although drawing on a real historical figure, does not necessarily refer to a specific event; rather, in my

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reading, it represents fascism as an abstraction. This suggests that the juxtaposition here is not just cultural but also temporal: the world of Good is represented as a space of continued history, while the world of Evil is coded as being void of historically significant content.

Figure 25. "Ukraine at the crossroads." (Original caption). No credits. Image illustrates an article by Margarita Knyazeva (2017, December 25).

Figure 26. Untitled. No credits. Posted by Yagiza (2014, April 9).

The untitled image in Figure 26 is similar to "Ukraine at the crossroads" in its binary narrative structure, featuring a Ukrainian man with a pig on a leash. The man faces two choices depicted as two roads. The first road, indicated by the marker "European Union," leads to characters associated with moral depravity: a large woman in fishnets and lingerie holding a whip; a devil with a sack of money; and a pair of kissing men in fascinators. The kissing men refer to a stockpile image of gay pride, which is frequently used for shock value by the Russian media in articles opposing LGBT issues and is a well-known signifier of Gay Pride for Russian audience. The second road is indicated by the marker "Eurasian Customs Union," which refers to the economic union between Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. This road leads to a series of characters whose ethnicity and cultural belonging is clearly signified by the clothes they wear and the rituals they preform: a Russian woman, offering bread to her guest (a traditional ritual of hospitality); a Belarussian man welcoming his guest with open arms; a Kyrgyz elder offering a cup of tea; and an Armenian, who is stereotypically running late. This image

suggests that the Ukrainian people have to make a choice between the supposed consumerism and sexual perversion of Europe and hospitality of the member-countries of the Eurasian Customs Union.

The images in Figures 25 and 26 suggest the duality of the world. The rhetorical device used in these drawings is what Theo Van Dijk calls an "ideological square" (cited in Mazid, 2008, p. 436). The ideological square refers to an extreme exaggeration of "our good things" and a misrepresentation of "their bad things." The function of the ideological square is to polarize while concealing differences within the group. So, in Figures 25 and 26, the Evil is marked by consumerism, perverse sex, and excess. The excess is underscored by such metonyms as the nakedness and the flamboyant posture of the devil, the fatness of the woman, the size of the money sack, and the extravagance of kissing queers. On the Good side of both images, each character's appearance, action, and pose refer to ethnic and cultural belonging. The absence of ethnic markers on the Evil side is stark and suggests that the binary in this world is not between two sets of cultures. Rather, it rests between the clear demarcation of ethnicity on the Eurasian side and the "unnatural" absence of ethnic demarcation and cultural belonging, which is substituted by consumerist and sexual excess, on the European side.

These images of the binary world are hardly unique to the context of the Russia–Ukraine conflict. A cultural historian Andreas Önnerfors (2018) collected popular images across Eastern and Central Europe and traced similar representations of a Good/Evil binary to Augustine of Hippo's "the City of God Against the Pagans" (426AD). As Önnerfors points out, this genre of dualistic political cosmology requires the central character, "the people," to choose between "us"/Self and "them"/Other. "Us" is imagined as a space of historical and cultural symbols, nuclear family, harmony, and nature; while "them" is marked by signifiers of death (fire and war), capitalist symbols, refugee crisis, and non-heterosexuality. The one commonality between these images, overlooked by Önnerfors, is that they contrast the world of clear gender and sexual boundaries with the world where these boundaries are confused. In Augustine's original depiction of the Evil, the City of Pagans, this confusion is represented by half-female half-animal creatures, while modern variations on this theme copy the most sensational photographs from recent Gay Pride celebrations portraying transgressions of sexual and gender binaries. Therefore, this confusion is a

code marking the clarity of boundaries on the side of the Self and underscoring the blurring of boundaries on the side of the Other.

The Othering of Ukrainians is further enacted through representations equating Europe with homosexuality. In Figure 27, a Ukrainian couple is depicted watching *Eurovision Song Contest* on a TV that features a close-up shot of hairy male buttocks. The man exclaims in distorted Ukrainian, "Look, Galya! Ukraine is indeed Europe!" The room is decorated in

Figure 27. "Eurovision!" (Original caption). Image credit: Oleg Zhornik (2017, May 25).

yellow and blue, the colours of the Ukrainian revolution. The walls are adorned with several telling images: a rainbow flag with a derogatory word for homosexuals; a banner with the slogan "Ukraine Above Everything"; an American flag; and the red and black flag of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, overlaid with a made-up word that could be translated as "right-wing-sexuals," alluding to the collapsed meaning of Ukrainian nationalism, anarchy, and sexual perversion. The artist also posted an additional satirical explanation of the image, which could be approximately translated as follows: "Eurovision-2017 hosted by the Glorious This-Is-Europe [Ukraine] ended with the triumphant performance consisting of demonstration of an ass by the famous prankster and the hero of Ukraine, Vitaly Sediuk." In this cartoon, the speech bubble, the slogans, and the surrounding text all use a distorted Ukrainian language; this distortion combines Russian and Ukrainian orthographies, uses Anglicisms, and employs phrases associated with Euromaidan slogans (such as "This Is Europe!") to create a sarcastic tone that presents Ukrainians as stupid and culturally confused.

The show the couple is watching—*Eurovision*—is a popular music contest organized and televised by the European Broadcasting Union. Each season of the competition has singers performing songs that are selected by national audiences and meant to represent the diversity of European cultures, including some countries beyond the EU (such as Russia), while simultaneously engaging with questions

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of European identity. The winner of the contest is chosen by a combination of jury members and a popular vote from each country (see Montoya, 2017). Most often, instead of assessing the quality of the song, voting reflects political loyalties and public sentiments in regard to a vague notion of "brotherhood" between European nations. With an audience of more than 200 million people (Eurovision.tv, n.d.) and its campy extravagant aesthetics, *Eurovision* is a mega-event of significant influence on hegemonic representations across Europe. Because of its influence and reach, it is a heavily politicized event that infuses cultural representations with political meanings in relation to national identity. Given this cultural and political dynamic of the show, it is not surprising that Ukraine won the contest in 2016, when most countries in Europe were demonstrating their support for Ukraine in its struggle against Russia's aggression. That year, Ukraine was represented by the singer Jamala, who is of Crimean Tatar origin, an ethnic group of indigenous Muslim people of the Crimean Peninsula. Her song, which she sang in a combination of English and Tatar, critically alluded to the annexation of Crimea. When Ukraine hosted *Eurovision* in 2017, Jamala's performance was interrupted by a controversial Ukrainian TV persona, Vitaly Sediuk, as he burst onto the stage and exposed his buttocks.[19] It is this event that the cartoon in Figure 27 references.

In my reading, the narrative of this cartoon involves sexuality not only because it includes symbols of homosexuality but also because of its reference to *Eurovision*. Gay culture plays a significant part in the articulation of European identity at this event. Embracing *Eurovision*'s campy aesthetics functions as a way to claim political and cultural belonging to Europe (Szulc, 2014; Tobin, 2017). This is especially important for the countries whose European belonging can be contested, such as countries in Eastern Europe, or Israel, with its desire to distance itself from other nations of the Middle East by claiming exceptional modernity. Russia's participation in the contest is notable as it also meant engagement with *Eurovision*'s sexual cultures: In 2003, Russia was represented by a faux-lesbian pop

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[19] Sediuk is well-known for pranks of a similar crude style and has been previously charged with hooliganism and sexual harassment. The information that I was able to access suggests that his actions don't have a political (or any other) message, and I am therefore not analysing this element in more detail.

group, t.A.T.u., and in 2006 and 2008 by Dima Bilan, with performances that effectively blurred the lines between heterosexual romance and homoeroticism (Cassiday, 2014). As scholar of post-Soviet media Galina Miazhevich (2010) convincingly argues, Russia's participation in *Eurovision* has always been employed as a way to engage in dialogue with European identity, though frequently in an ironic way. Russian performers have repeatedly used references to camp aesthetics, faux-homosexuality, and *stiob* (see Chapter 2) in order to position itself as at once engaging with the West and creating distance from it. Miazhevich explains:

> [Russia's contestants] ironise the global media's obsession with gay culture using a
> manufactured "western" homoeroticism in order to flatter (Western) European viewers, and
> at the same time knowingly to disparage the West's cultural imperialism for the benefit of
> domestic audiences. (p. 260)

In Figure 27 the artist distances Russia from the *Eurovision* sexual discourse through an extensive use of the symbolism of homosexuality, as if Russia has not engaged in this discourse previously. At the same time, markers of homosexuality work to condense complexly related events—Ukraine's representation at *Eurovision*, Sediuk's prank, and aspirations for proximity with Europe—to a singular frame of *khokhol* inferiority.

The next two cartoons (Figures 28 and 29) further condense the symbols of (homo)sexuality, gender confusion, and Ukrainian aspirations for belonging to Europe. Figure 28 shows two Ukrainian men, both portrayed as *khokhly*. One of them is asking, "Where are you going, Petro?" The other answers, "To the EU." The one going to the EU has fashioned his scalp lock into "girly" pigtails. A similar cartoon (Figure 29) portrays two Ukrainian men, again coded as *khokhly*, looking at the viewer with excited expressions. One of them is cross-dressed as a woman. The couple is holding a poster that says, "Ukrainians are for European values!" Both cartoons play on the ideological juxtaposition of traditional values, such as heteronormative family, and "perverse" European values, such as homosexuality and gender fluidity. The corruption of masculinity in these simple images exemplifies feminization of the

Figure 28. "New cartoon on Euromaidan."
(Original caption). No credits. Posted by rubanok
(2013, December 7).

Figure 29. "Ukrainians are for European values!"
(Original caption). Image credit: Evgeny
Samoylov. Image illustrates a blog post by Kerb
(2015, June 4).

enemies as symbolic domination (Goldstein, 2001). The juxtaposition is further emphasized by the

traditional macho look of an uncultured Ukrainian peasant, for whom posing as a woman is meant to

seem especially ridiculous since his rustic masculinity—with a long black mustache, hairy chest, and

scalp lock—is impossible to erase.

Considering what, exactly, makes these images humorous might offer perspective on the

intersection between gender confusion and national belonging. The Incongruity Theory of Humour

(Mazid, 2008) suggests that what creates a joke is the use of incompatible elements in such a way that this

incongruity disguises any aggression and is perceived as humorous. The mechanism of humour in Figures

28 and 29 is precisely the incongruity between Ukrainian's hypermasculinity and the perceived essence of

Europe—i.e., its tolerance of homosexuality. This mechanism can also be explained through the rhetorical

device of transference. According to Greenberg (2002), "transference normally operates in an implicit

way that absolves the cartoon's actors of their absurd actions or commentary by displacing blame to

another, normally non-visible, actor" (p. 187). In this cartoon, the absurdity of Ukraine's geopolitical

belonging to Europe is transferred to the absurdity of gender confusion.

Theorizing nationalism's symbolic investments in the family trope, Anne McClintock (1993)

argues that portraying nations through the iconography of familial and domestic space creates a

naturalized hierarchy that is based on the subordination of women to men and children to adults, and

which supports a supposed unity of interests independently of one's status in this hierarchy. The nation symbolized as a family justifies the subordination of ethnic, racial, and/or cultural subjects who are imagined as women and children for the sake of imagined common interests, such as "progress" or "security." Referring to important work by Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias (1989), McClintock (1993) also notes that women typically become the symbolic bearers of the nation through their role in reproduction, biological and cultural, as well as maintaining boundaries of national groups through restrictions on sexual or marital relations (pp. 62-63). Therefore, McClintock claims, nationalism is necessarily constituted as a gendered discourse and relies on gender difference between women and men to symbolically define the limits of national difference and power between men. Given the centrality of gender difference in symbolizing boundaries of the nation, portraying Ukraine—especially within the context of the Russia–Ukraine conflict—through the trope of gender confusion becomes a code for the symbolic loss of the nation. Moreover, through the use of cross-dressing as a metaphor, an abstract notion of national belonging is conceptualized through specific forms of embodiment. This metaphor helps viewers experience something distant and conceptually complex, such as political conflict, through the more simple and familiar codes of physical bodies (Bounegru & Forceville, 2011). The next set of political cartoons will further explain this logic through the analysis of employment of tropes of family and race/ethnicity in representations of Ukraine's cultural belonging.

Tropes of family and race/ethnicity in the geopolitics of Ukraine

One of the common tropes in political cartoons interpreting the Russia-Ukraine conflict is that of family relationships and the threat posed to masculinity by non-heteropatriarchal sexuality. Emasculation works as a narrative device in the series of cartoons that directly refer to annexation of Crimea. In Figure 30, a man with "Crimea" written on his shirt peaks under the blanket at an orgy. The blue and yellow blanket symbolizes the colours of the Ukrainian revolution, while the colourful socks indicate that the participants of the orgy include the European Union, the United States, Poland, the United Kingdom, and Ukrainian insurgents. Frustrated with the debauchery going on, the man addresses his wife, who is hiding

under the blanket: "Think whatever you want, my dear, but I'm leaving you for my ex." The ex is peaking from the corner, represented as a stern-looking woman in a traditional Russian headdress who is holding a rifle. In contrast to the images emphasizing the hypermasculinity of *khokhol*, the hunched and misshapen figure of the Crimea-man portrays him as an emasculated softie who is submitting to a dominant, rifle-bearing woman.

Figure 30. "I'm leaving." (Original caption) Image credit Vitaly Podvitskyi (2014, March 6).

Unlike the image of *khokhol*, who stands in for "the people" of Ukraine, the Crimea-man symbolizes the people of the Crimean Peninsula who, from the Russian point of view, are ethnically Russian. This cartoon suggests that Crimea joined the Russian Federation in reaction to the decisions of Ukrainian leadership in order to strengthen ties with the West. Further, as the sexual content suggests, it implies that these political ties are primarily driven by consumerist and perverse desires. Thus the cartoon shows Crimea as a "husband" who, tired of the debauchery and unfaithfulness of Ukraine, has decided to return to Russia where it used to belong. The rhetorical device used in this cartoon is opposition, which indicates a reduction of a complex problem to a binary struggle (Greenberg, 2002). In this drawing, the

Figure 31. "Black master." (Original caption) Image credit: Vitaly Podvitskyi (2014, March 12).

complex problem of geopolitical relationships is reduced to a simple binary choice of liberalism/promiscuity versus authoritarianism/faithfulness.

Another cartoon by the same author (Figure 31) depicts a hairy-legged Angela Merkel scolding two women, a Ukrainian and a Russian, who are fighting over the Crimea-man. Interrupting their fight, Merkel

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proclaims, "Damned barbarians! In a civilized world, who lives with whom is decided by the black master!" Behind her, Barack Obama lies on top of the White House in BDSM attire, including a leather cap, pants, boots, and a chest harness. The Crimea-man is emasculated through his bewildered look, his submission to women, and his inability to stand on his own two feet. His emasculation is juxtaposed with the image of Obama as a leather-daddy in charge. Obama's superiority is indicated by his position above other characters in the drawing and by Merkel's words. Similar to the previous cartoons, the joke is on the non-heteronormativity of "the West," depicted through the codes of Merkel's lack of femininity, Obama's leather attire, and his reign over family affairs. However, the introduction of Obama and the phrase "black master" points to an additional layer of incongruity—the joke is played not only through the reversion of gender roles, but also on the reversion of racial hierarchies. This racist rhetoric condenses the undermining of masculinity with an attack on the superiority of whiteness. At the same time, the artist repurposes discourses of modernity: the ironic use of the phrase "damned barbarians" ridicules the civilizational narrative that identifies the West as a space of cultural progress.

The symbolic threat of race is further employed in the cartoon in Figure 32. This drawing portrays Ukraine as a woman in traditional attire—an embroidered white dress, with flowers and ribbons in her hair. The woman expresses a desire for Russia, symbolized by a speech bubble in the colours of the Russian flag, while the green and brown creature sitting on her head stabs that desire with the symbol of Ukrainian nationalism. The creature, with its colours and the symbol on its sleeve suggesting that it represents Ukrainian Insurgents, spits in anger and yells that the woman should choose the Ukrainian Revolution instead. The choice to represent Ukraine as a woman signals innocence, cultural tradition, and choosing with one's heart. Similarly, the symbolization of the creature with its brown skin underscores the whiteness of the woman in distress.

Figure 32. "Ban on Russian language in Ukraine." (Original caption) Image credit: Igor Kolgarev (2017, January 26).

The imperial conquests of the Russian Empire have historically conceptualized expansion to new territories through the romantic discourse of men's conquests of native women and the need to protect native women (see Shkandrij, 2001). They also echo similar tactics of gendering and sexualizing war elsewhere. For example, Feitz and Nagel (2008) analyze the employment of the damsel in distress trope by the US military in the Iraq War. Similarly, Bruce Grant (2005) describes construction of kidnapping myths in North Caucasus and argues that kidnapping myths naturalize violence in the conflict zone in ways that enable the public to frame their government's military actions there as a moral imperative. The cartoon in Figure 32 continues this tradition, imagining the Ukrainian nation as a woman who is being abused by abstract military forces—the latter of which are, in this image, bordering on non-human. Recalling the media discourse on gendered and sexual violence used in the constitution of North Caucasus as a space of lawlessness in 2017 (see Chapter 4), the idiom of kidnapping of a woman that is invoked by this cartoon is a part of constituting Ukraine through similar tropes of Otherness.

The employment of race/ethnicity to criticize Ukraine's geopolitical aspiration is especially potent in the last cartoon that I discuss (Figure 33). This image, captioned "Once upon a time in Europe," portrays a man with a cigar and a tea pot of Hennessy Cognac addressing a sex worker, who is portrayed as a *khokhol* dressed as a woman. Another jolly male character is looking out from the sewage hole, perhaps signifying the bottom of moral decay. The standing man says "Gulchatai, cover your face," alluding to a well-known Soviet comedy film, *The Prisoner of the Caucasus* (Gaidai, 1967). In the film,

one of the male characters repeatedly asked Gulchatai, a North Caucasian woman wearing a burqa, to uncover her face as he wanted to see her beauty. The comedic plot of the film heavily relied on the exotification and barbarization of North Caucasian Muslim traditions from the point of view of white Russians. The cartoon plays on the reversal of these racialized and gendered roles, substituting white Russian suitors with consumerist

Figure 33. "Once upon a time in Europe." (Original caption) No credits. Posted by Sergei Korsun (2018, August 25).

Europeans, and racialized Muslim women of North Caucasus with Ukrainian men forced to dress as women and sell sex in Europe. This joke is a racializing tactic, suggesting that joining the EU will cause Ukrainians to take the place of racialized women in the gendered and racial hierarchy. Therefore, this cartoon exemplifies the way in which sexual and gender liminality serves as a code for losing whiteness.

In all of the above cartoons, metaphors create Ukraine as a target, but more specifically, they take aim at Ukraine's relations with "the West" and "Russia" (or "the East," of which Russia is the center). These cartoons create and employ several key messages through the use of metaphor: "the Ukrainian voter is like a lustful man," "the Western world is like hell," "the Russian world means culture and history," "Ukrainian political confusion is like gender confusion," "Crimea's referendum is like choosing a wife," and "Ukraine is like a battered woman." The most often satirical representation of the Ukrainian choice of political alliance lays blame on the mass of ordinary Ukrainians, many of whom are unable to see the traps of the EU. Such traps are represented through a fixation on sex and through gender and racial "anomalies," where culturally and historically established demarcations are blurred through capitalism and consumerism.

As a result of these multiple portrayals that combine the derogatory and fictional image of *khokhol* with codes of gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity, Ukrainians' whiteness becomes contested. Aniko Imre (2005) writes that for Eastern Europeans claiming whiteness is a way to claim Europeanness. At the same time Zakharov (2015) demonstrates that for contemporary Russians white identity means distancing yourself from those engaged in manual labour and those making inappropriate, "lowly," cultural choices. The humour of the political cartoons discussed in this chapter plays on both of these desires for approximation of whiteness. Metaphors of gender and sexual confusion, as well as of the reversal of the racial hierarchy, transfer the complex concept of Ukraine's claims for Europeanness into a suggestion that Ukrainians embracing European values is inherently foreign, a marker of inferiority, and a blurring of all kinds of boundaries. At the same time, Russia is imagined as a superior space of clear boundaries, but also a space of exceptional whiteness as the Other is defined through the figure of a simple man.

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Sara Ahmed (2002) refers to "the grotesque" in the context of racism, describing the grotesque excessive body as emphasizing orifices and shapelessness. The excess of the figure of cross-dressing *khokhol* is created through representations of a grotesque fat, gender-confused, and lustful body. Ahmed (2002) points out that with the help of representations of excessive body "others become racialized through economies of desire and repulsion" (p. 57). The constitution of the Ukrainian as Other here is indicative of the creation of Russia as a space of whiteness, and the creation of Europe as a space that is off-white. I also suggest that these cartoons actively engage with discourses of homonationalism, because they repurpose representational codes that exist in the homonationalist discourse—codes of gay marriage, merging of national pride with gay pride, celebratory rainbow capitalism—in order to create comedic effect and to portray Russia as a "naturally" heteronormative national space.

Beyond the trivial: Crude humour as a means of heterosexualization in a conflict zone

A visual analysis of political cartoons is not able to fully explain how these images are interpreted by viewers and what material effects they have on lived realities. For example, evaluations of whether these cartoons cause increasing levels of interpersonal aggression based on xenophobia, racism, sexism, homophobia, and/or transphobia cannot be made without empirical research on the interpretations of and effects on the viewers of these images. However, with this caveat, I suggest that, as minor cultural productions that are circulated on social media and interactive websites, these cartoons come to support banal nationalism, a daily and mundane reproduction of beliefs, assumptions, habits, and representations that maintain the ideology of nationalism (Billig, 1995). As such, these cartoons can be understood as fortifying other oppressive processes. Specifically, in this section I propose a connection between the political cartoons analyzed in this chapter and the Russian occupation of Crimea.

Establishing Russia as an opposition to the "West" is particularly visible through Russia's tourism policies and aggressive advertising campaign that seeks to bring tourists to the Crimean Peninsula (Ministry of Resort and Tourism, 2016). Beyond its function as simple commercial propaganda, the

campaign establishes Crimea as an inherently Russian land by spiritualizing it as a location of the Russian essence, underscoring the heteronormativity of the region by marking it as family-friendly, cool, and hip, by appealing to adventure-seeking and higher-income young people, and by romanticizing it. The campaign strengthens the image of Crimea belonging to Russian territory, Russian identity, and Russian history, while Russia is also rapidly developing infrastructure in Crimea, including a new bridge that connects Russia's mainland with the peninsula and eliminates the need to travel through the territory of Ukraine. At the same time, the advertisements portray Crimea as a unique spiritual and healing resource available for Russian people and a spectacular tourist destination (Ministry of Resort and Tourism, 2016).

The main justification provided by the Russian government for their military aggression in the Crimea and Donbass regions, as mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, was the need to protect ethnically Russian populations who reside in these territories. This has been popularized by the slogan "Crimea Is Ours!" and a rhetoric that reimagined these regions as inherently Russian land. For example, the multi-episode documentary *Crimea: The Sea of Rus'* (Strizhak, 2013/2014) was devoted to locating the origins of the Russian spirit in Crimea. Building its argument on the history of philosophers, artists, and spiritual leaders of the region, it created a metaphysical explanation for the Russianness of the Crimean Peninsula. I suggest that such underlying spiritual explanations are further strengthened by attaching notions of heteronormativity, family, and white Russianness.

In accordance with the Program of Resort and Tourism Development (Ministry of Resort and Tourism, 2016), the advertising campaigns underscore Crimea's natural and historical beauty, luxurious services, and adventure sports. Judging from the images featured in one of the promotion videos (visitcrimea guide, 2016), the campaign targets the corporate class as well as young couples and families with enough money to spend on sky-diving, spa services, and yachts. Another video advertisement, "So, to Crimea!" (rusreklama, 2015), shows an eight-member Russian family having a meal in a sunny kitchen. The father asks, "So where are we going this summer?" All of the family members list their priorities for a vacation: sunny beaches and sightseeing attractions to luxury hotels, and a place where "everything is ours, familiar." After all the wishes are listed, the dad pronounces "So, to Crimea!" Such

advertisements normalize Crimea as a space that is available for consumption by heteronormative Russian families and young heterosexual Russian couples. These advertisements create a simplification of the world that is similar to the dualistic world of Good/Evil in the political cartoons depicting Ukraine "at the crossroads" (Figures 25 and 26). As I proposed in my interpretation of these cartoons, the juxtaposition between Russia and the West in such binary images is not between two different cultures but between the clear demarcation of ethnicity on the Russian side and the "unnatural" absence of ethnic demarcation underscored by sexual perversity on the side of the West. Taking into consideration the parallel between these political cartoons and the heteronormative advertisements discussed here, it is clear that the outcome of advertisements that normalize the consumption of Crimea as a public space accessible to white Russian heteronormative subjects is the geopolitical establishment of Crimea as not just a heteronormative space but also a space of Russian culture in its supposedly pure spiritual form.

Other kinds of cultural production engage in similar discourse through the romanticization of Russian–Ukrainian relations. For example, the film *Crimea* (Pimanov, 2017) romanticizes the peninsula, including its luscious vegetation and hospitable population, by creating a romance story between a young Russian man from Sevastopol (a major city in Crimea) and a young Russian woman from Kiev (see Figure 34). Their love affair is interrupted by the political crisis of 2014, and they must overcome their opposing views to continue their romance. The slogan of the film, "Don't leave your loved ones," points towards the

Figure 34. *Crimea* movie poster. Image credit: Pimanov i Partnyory. (Pimanov, 2017).

didactic nature of the film that romanticizes human connection, plays on the old trope of juxtaposition of romantic and patriotic forms of love, and trivializes Ukrainian insurgence as disrupting the beauty of young love.

In the context of Crimea's annexation, reestablishing heteronormativity is particularly potent as it creates associations with familiar feelings of romance, the purity of love, the nationalistic trope of sacrificing love for Mother Russia, and opportunities to sustain and protect one's family. At the same

time, the conflict regions are reestablished as both white and ethnically Russian—not only at the level of the population but also, perhaps even more importantly, at the level of their spirituality. What is being erased through these portrayals is the existence of non-heteronormative citizens, as well as the non-Russian and non-white populations of Ukraine, such as Crimean Tatars.

The strengthening of these heteronormative aspirations is also important given that Crimea has been known as a gay-tourism destination and a place with a significant LGBT population. After the annexation, Russian homophobic laws and reduced protections against violence and discrimination expanded to the annexed territories. Extensive research conducted by the human rights organization Memorial (2016) showed intensified violence on the basis of perceived gender and sexual orientation in the conflict zones of Donbass and Crimea, as well as heightened vulnerability of LGBTI refugees from these zones. The media also reported the closure of or difficulties in sustaining gay-friendly clubs, beaches, and organizations in Crimea ("Pod Radugoi," 2018, September 20; "Vlasti Kryma," 2016, April 25).

In this context, both romanticizing the region as heteronormative and making non-heteronormativity invisible create and sustain the conflict zones in Ukraine as Russian territory, not only geopolitically but also symbolically and metaphysically. Aiding in developing of infrastructure and the ideological basis for occupation, political cartoons that use codes of gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity establish the Otherness and inferiority of Ukrainians and the invisibility of other ethnic populations. Despite how trivial they may seem at first glance, the powerful effect of these cartoons is created through the repetition of codes. After all, Roland Barthes (1977) argued that the repetition of a code, however banal, binds the repetitive images into a coherent utterance that creates ideologically determined meanings as a result of this repetition. Moreover, in *Mythologies*, Barthes (1973) developed the concept of the "myth," the diffuse process that condenses everything associated with a particular represented people, place, or thing into a single entity. The emphasis on non-heteronormativity in political cartoons adds the modes of gender and sexuality to the mythology of Ukrainianness that is created from the position of Russian imperialist superiority. In addition, when metaphors are routinely and powerfully

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employed, it is possible for the message to be transformed from the metaphorical to the literal (El Refaie, 2003). Although it is unlikely that the audience will truly believe all Ukrainian men are effeminate, the mundane homophobic, transphobic, and xenophobic humour present in these cartoons should be seriously considered as a building block of systemic and physical violence (see Boellstorff, 2004; Kimmel, 2003; Pascoe, 2005). Furthermore, the repetition of jokes about Ukrainian cross-dressers, European/Western depravity, and Russian sexual purity naturalizes heteronormativity, homophobia, and transphobia and entrenches the mechanism of banal nationalism. If we consider the question posed by visual anthropologist J. W. Mitchell (2005) about the desires of pictures, we could speculate that political cartoons desire attention: they want to be circulated on discussion boards, blogs, and social media; they want to cause visceral reactions of laughter or gasps. It is through these bodily reactions that they enter the realm of banal nationalism. Michael Billig (1995) writes, "An identity is to be found in the embodied habits of social life. Such habits include those of thinking and using language" (p. 8). If we consider political cartoons as a form of metalanguage for discourses about social order that exploits the code of the body, as I discussed in the beginning of this chapter, they should also be considered potent tools of habituation. In turn, the codes of gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity employed in this metalanguage should be further deemed to be what Feitz and Nagel (2008) call "a critical libidinal infrastructure for war" (p. 217).

Finally, the importance of trivial and mundane forms of humour, such as political cartoons, can be illuminated by the current political changes in Ukraine. In the spring of 2019, Volodymyr Zelensky, a maverick politician, won the presidential election against Petro Poroshenko, who became the symbol of Euromaidan and the Ukrainian pro-EU movement. Until these elections, Zelensky had never participated in politics. Instead, he was famous as a comedian. The content of his lowbrow comedy skits rest on stereotypes and include joking about ethnic differences among various post-Soviet peoples (Ukrainians included), poking fun at his wife, and homophobic humour. During his election campaign, Zelensky did not present a clear political program and generally avoided any serious political discussion. Capitalizing on his outsider status, Zelensky built his campaign on criticizing political elites and posting light-hearted

videos on Instagram. His lack of political platform also means that he does not have a clear position on resolving the situation in conflict zones. Zelensky's success in the 2019 presidential elections demonstrate the power of trivial humour such as that of the political cartoons discussed above. Such humour trivializes racism, xenophobia, sexism, and homophobia and establishes them as a repertoire of banal nationalism.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I used a visual semiotic analysis of political cartoons that use codes of gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity to articulate the Russia–Ukraine conflict from the perspective of illustrators who are critical of Ukraine's geopolitical reorientation towards the European Union. The Otherness of Ukrainians is signified in these cartoons through representations of a Ukrainian peasant through an abject figure of *khokhol* and through a simplistic portrayal of the dualistic world, where the Good is signified through cultural belonging and proximity to Russia, and Evil is represented through the excessive consumption and sexuality associated with the West. I observed that in the cartoons, homophobic, transphobic, and racist representations are used as vehicles to make critical comments about Russia's and Ukraine's geopolitical belonging, and to position Russia as exceptional in its heteronormativity and whiteness. This exceptionality is coded primarily through articulations of clear gender, sexuality, racial, and ethnic boundaries. I proposed that, although I cannot draw conclusive statements about the reception of cartoons through the semiotic analysis alone, they should be seen as naturalizing heteronormativity in territories occupied by Russia through banal nationalism.

I suggest that homophobic, sexist, transphobic, and racist codes, while located in Russian heteropatriarchal nationalism, can also be understood as a response to the homonationalist discourses of Western Europe and North America. These discourses fold homonormative subjects into ideologies, structures, and practices of nationalism. This is specifically identified in the cartoons by metaphors of gay marriage, performative celebration of gender-bending, and celebrations of gay culture. The cartoons address these practices by making them look ridiculous and by making them into the object of a joke. I suggest that without homonationalist discourses of the West such metaphors would not be accessible to

Russian artists. Homonationalism on the global scale, as many scholars have argued, relies on the idea of the homophobic Other, which includes racialized populations but also ethnically othered white populations, such as Russians. Therefore, in the political cartoons analyzed in this chapter, Russian artists respond to these processes of othering by the West to further perform and exaggerate homophobia. In doing so, they repurpose homonationalist discourses in order to distance Russia from the West and to justify the occupation of Ukrainian territories. In the next chapter, I offer another form of Russian response and participation in global homonationalist discourses by looking at the representations of the racialized/ethnically othered sexuality offered by the Russian media that is opposed to Russian heteropatriarchal nationalism.

Chapter 4

Haunting Homonationalism: Russian Oppositional Media Discourses on the Persecution of Chechen Gay Men

Introduction

In April 2017, the Moscow-based newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* published an investigative report about the organized persecution of men suspected of homosexuality in the Chechen Republic[20] (Milashina, 2017, April 1). The anonymous testimonies of survivors and witnesses narrated stories of abduction, torture, humiliation, and killing perpetrated by Chechen state security agencies and Chechen government officials. The articles included information on a secret prison near the Chechen capital, Grozny, where men were detained for several weeks and were only released if they provided names of other gay men. Some were murdered in the prison; others returned to their families severely injured. *Novaya Gazeta* also reported that security agencies pressured relatives of suspected gay men to execute "honour killings." Their investigation prompted other oppositional media in Russia and a variety of media abroad to cover the story, while Chechen and Russian officials actively denied not only that organized persecution was taking place but also that gay people existed in Chechnya at all. In this chapter, I examine the range of oppositional media discourses on this issue that emerged in January-December 2017. I argue that the coverage of anti-gay persecution appealed to white Russians' feelings of heteropatriarchal national identity while simultaneously engaging with homonationalist rhetoric. I further claim that while this discursive practice was effective for mobilizing much-needed help, both from across Russia and internationally, and led to the evacuation of some[21] persecuted people to countries in the EU and North America (LGBT-Network, 2018), it contributed to further ethno-racial othering of Chechens and the production of aspirational white Russian nationalism.

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[20] The Chechen Republic – commonly called "Chechnya" – is a federal subject of the Russian Federation, and it is therefore under Russia's jurisdiction.

[21] The report of the LGBT-Network (2018) informs that of about 200 people who contacted the organization, 119 people were evacuated by the end of 2017. The total number of those targeted, threatened, or detained is unknown.

Russian oppositional media played a crucial role in pressuring Russian authorities to investigate the crimes in Chechnya and in mobilizing help from outside parties. The reports of the persecution drew international attention: media around the world (including *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *Time*, *Vice*, *BBC*, and *CBC*) published numerous articles on the topic; LGBTQ and human rights activists organized protests and demonstrations in multiples countries; and Canada and several of the EU states granted asylum to refugees from Chechnya. This attention came during an interesting time. Since the end of the Second Chechen War (1999–2009)—a devastating decade during which Russia ensured political control over the territory—the international public has not heard much about Chechnya. Chechen authorities, fiercely pro-Putin, have established the image of a rehabilitated, even somewhat prosperous, autonomous republic within the Russian Federation. During the last decade, the international public has been more concerned with Russian homophobia than other kinds of human rights abuses in Chechnya. When news of crimes in Chechnya picked up international attention, it was specifically and notably the anti-gay violence that prompted action. How, then, do the discourses on the persecution of gay Chechens and their evacuation fit into broader discussions on Russian homophobia, Russian–Chechen relationships, and Russia's geopolitical positioning vis-à-vis the West?

In this chapter, I suggest that Russian oppositional media discourses on the persecution in Chechnya illuminate the ways in which the issue of anti-gay violence accomplishes two key tasks: (1) animating articulations of geopolitical claims, and (2) positioning Russia on the map of sexual modernity. Moreover, I argue that the oppositional media's framing of the persecution reveals important racial/ethnic and sexual hierarchies in the contemporary Russian state and the ways in which non-Western countries participate in homonationalist practices of the West. In order to support these arguments, I apply methods of critical discourse analysis to examine discursive and representational practices employed by Russian oppositional media in their coverage of the persecution. First, I demonstrate the ways in which media sources analyzed describe Chechnya as a geographical and cultural space. Through these descriptions, I argue, oppositional media (re)produces cultural heteropatriarchy in Chechnya by putting emphasis on constructions of lawlessness and racial/ethnic difference. Second, I analyze discursive constructions of the

figure of the gay Chechen and argue that the media analyzed portrays Chechen gay people through a framework of "haunting," which symbolically annihilates, mystifies, and eroticizes them, and, in certain cases, trivializes persecution. Third, I examine stories of refugee migration from Chechnya. In so doing, I claim that the framing of gay Chechens' narratives of escape rests on the homonationalist rhetoric of liberation and entrenches racial/ethnic hierarchies within Russia and on a transnational scale. However, because the racialized Other is portrayed as a mystical and unintelligible ghost, I name the Russian version of homonationalist rhetoric as "haunting homonationalism." This chapter illuminates how and why the sexualized and racialized figure of the Chechen gay man has become valuable in the geopolitical context of Russia, including in Russian relations with Chechnya and with the West, and within the Russian national imaginary. I conclude with a discussion about the significance of homonationalist frameworks for oppositional discourse in a state where homosexuality is positioned as being outside of the national imagination.

The theoretical framework of this chapter rests on three fundamental concepts: "heteropatriarchy," "homonationalism," and "homotransnationalism." This chapter relies on an understanding of the Russian organization of governance as one that is fundamentally heteropatriarchal. In Chapter 1, I discussed how Russian gender and sexuality scholars explain heteropatriarchal organization of social and political life in Putin's era. In Chapter 2, I demonstrated that heteropatriarchy dominates cultural representations and is firmly connected to Russian nation-making processes. Feminist theorists of colour have underlined the link between heteropatriarchy, colonialism, and white supremacy and use the term "heteropatriarchy" to theorize the "social systems in which heterosexuality and patriarchy are perceived as normal and natural, and in which other configurations are perceived as abnormal, aberrant, and abhorrent" (Arvin, Tuck, & Morrill, 2013, p. 13). This theory argues that heteropatriarchy is a building block of nation-state governance and serves to support other pillars of white supremacy—capitalism, (settler) colonialism, and imperialism/war (Smith, 2016). Specifically, Andrea Smith (2016) demonstrates that "in order to colonize peoples whose societies are not based on social hierarchy, colonizers must first naturalize hierarchy through instituting patriarchy" (p. 72).

I maintain that a similar understanding of colonization through heteropatriarchy can be applied to the case of Chechnya, though there is a lack of research on the details of these processes in this context. There are debates among scholars on whether Chechnya should be considered a postcolonial or neocolonial space given the dependency of Chechnya on Russian Federal authorities and the limited sovereignty it has (Reznikova, 2014). Regardless the precise terminology, the history of Russia's military control of the territory (Politkovskaya, 2009), its economic and political dependency on the Russian centre, and its cultural representations that firmly re-inscribe the image of the Chechen as an ethnic/racial and religious Other (Russel, 2005) all suggest that Chechnya can undoubtedly be considered as existing under colonial political, economic, and administrative structure. The contemporary Chechen Republic, even though it enjoys relative political autonomy from the Russian state in exchange for loyalty to Putin (Sakwa, 2010), adopts Russian institutionalized heteropatriarchy through Russian Federal jurisdiction. Its political discourse also uses the hegemonic rhetoric of heteropatriarchy through sexist and homophobic statements by figures in positions of authority. The development of patriarchal gender orders in contemporary Chechnya is complex; some scholars link it to long periods of violent conflict and economic devastation (Szczepnaikova, 2012), while others show an increased entrenchment of patriarchal and heterosexist organization of everyday and political life that has been part of political processes of "Chechenization," a Chechen national revival, especially under the governance of Ramzan Kadyrov (2007–current) (Erbslöh, 2016). While the detailed account of Chechen heteropatriarchy is beyond the scope of this chapter, I hope to demonstrate that coverage from Russian oppositional media (re)inscribes heteropatriarchy as a cultural category of Chechen society.

Another fundamental concept of my argument is "homonationalism." Coined by Jasbir Puar (2007), homonationalism refers to an assemblage of ideas and practices that include the homonormative subject into regulatory national and racial norms, structures, and ideologies. Homonationalism is embedded in regulatory state practices of neoliberal democracies, such as, for example, immigration controls that require non-heteronormative asylum seekers to adhere to homonormative models of sexual orientation and gender expression (Murray, 2016), or marketing police forces as gay-friendly through

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their inclusion into gay pride celebrations while simultaneously increasing the violent and coercive policing of spaces used by racialized and poor queers (e.g., Kinsman, 2016, November 16). It also saturates individual practices of citizenship, such as, for example, queer reclamation of urban spaces inhabited by Muslim populations in order to challenge the supposed homophobia of these racialized communities (Bachetta, El-Tayeb & Haritaworn, 2015; Wahab, 2015). Homonationalism also circulates transnationally, through a wide variety of discourses and practices that reproduce racist hierarchies of queer subjects on a global scale and entrench neocolonialist and neoliberal ideologies around the world. Jin Haritaworn and Paola Bachetta (2016) theorize this as a process of "homotransnationalism" and ask how homonationalism travels across borders, and what makes it so transposable. In this chapter, I consider the ways in which homotransnationalism emerges through Russian oppositional media discourses on persecuted Chechen gay men. I argue that while homonationalism is *not* currently a building block of Russian nationalism, the rhetoric of opposition to homophobic persecution in Chechnya makes use of homotransnationalist ideologies, structures, and practices that place neoliberal Western states as an ideal model of gay nationalist citizenship.

My methodology combines two approaches: the Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse (SKAD) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). SKAD, as proposed by sociologist Reiner Keller (2011), is a sequential analysis of data, which includes step-by-step coding and mapping in order to identify interpretative schemes, classification categories, phenomenal structures, and narratives that organize meaning-making and legitimations for action in relation to a particular phenomenon or social problem. I code and analyze causal relationships, classifications, concepts, signs, symbols, images, and the writing style that is used to name and describe gendered, sexualized, and racialized groups of people. I examine the use of narrative structures, appeals to emotions, rhetorical devices (such as sarcasm, irony, sensationalization, hyperbole, metaphor, and comparison), visual elements (such as illustrations, photographs, and videos), and elements of evidence (such as photo-evidence and testimonies). I also pay close attention to how events are described and named, and what is implied in those descriptions. I find such a step-by-step approach to data analysis particularly useful, because it allows for an empirically

grounded and systematic way to identify how facts and claims are used and organized and how actions are legitimized. At the same time, SKAD is interested in revealing the power-effects of discourse—the way in which discourse is a part of the social infrastructure that works to solve a social problem—and thus it is also, in a sense, a case study, an observation, and even an ethnographic description (Keller, 2011). In my analysis, a combination of this systematic and multi-method approach helps me examine the spectrum of meanings and connections between claims about race/ethnicity, sexuality, gender, and political regimes.

However, since I seek to analyze processes of sexualization and racial/ethnic othering within discourse, my goal is not merely to identify the spectrum of claims proposed by oppositional media, but rather to analyze the role of discourse in the (re)production of and challenge to dominance (van Dijk, 1993). Therefore, in accordance with the methodology of Critical Discourse Analysis, I take a critical stance and seek to identify and examine hegemonic discourses and look for sites of resistance. I analyze the ways in which groups are named and described, whose agency is encoded in narratives, and whose voices are expressed. This plane of analysis is more interpretative rather than being an impartial analysis of grammar and semantics and is heavily influenced by my own political commitments to feminist and anti-racist social justice.

The media sample of this study consists of 57 items published in 2017, from the first report on persecution on April 1, 2017, mentioned above, to a photo-essay on the lives of Chechen refugees abroad, published on December 27, 2017. My sample includes articles, video clips, and news snippets found on the websites of three media sources: the newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* (28 articles), the online-based newspaper and news aggregator *Meduza* (24 articles), and an online-based television channel *Dozhd* (5 video clips with accompanying articles). These sources were chosen because they represent the most popular oppositional media sources for Russian audiences[22] that, according to my comparison of a wide

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[22] According to the Russian media monitoring company *Medialogia*, *Novaya Gazeta* is on the list of top-ten most popular newspapers in the country, *Meduza* is the most-often quoted internet-based news source on social media, and *Dozhd* is the most popular TV channel among non-government owned channels and the sixth in the popularity rating of all federal TV channels ("Top-10 SMI," 2018).

variety of media sources, covered the story of persecution the most extensively. Sometimes these three sources are described as "liberal;" however, I suggest that it is more accurate to use the term "oppositional," because what constitutes "liberal" in Russia at the present moment is a particularly vague and wide category of political positions (for analysis of Russian alternative media spaces, see Edenborg, 2017). Additionally, I describe these sources as oppositional to mark their independence from state funding and control as well as their critical stance towards Putin's government. These sources covered the story of persecution in detail, each conducting complex investigative research and publishing interviews with persecuted people. In contrast to the oppositional media, major state-controlled media, including the national television channels *Channel 1*, *Rossiya*, and *NTV*, completely ignored the story, continuing the Russian government's negation of the existence of gay people in Chechnya.

Before presenting my findings, I will provide some important background on the sources used in this research, since the medium, political history, and reputation of each affects the way information is presented and received by audiences in Russia. *Novaya Gazeta* is an investigative newspaper that was founded in 1993 and has been critical of the Russian state apparatus and its politics in Chechnya ever since. The newspaper positions itself as an expert on Chechen politics due to its long history of journalism in the region. The newspaper originally broke the story on persecution on April 1, 2017, and since then has continuously put pressure on Russian authorities to start an official investigation. Throughout the year, *Novaya Gazeta* continued to publish details of their journalistic investigation, explanations of the context and reasons for the persecution, testimonies from survivors and witnesses, and criticism towards Russian authorities for their failures to address the situation in Chechnya. *Novaya Gazeta* was the leading investigative news source on the issue of persecution, and therefore it is more present in my analysis than the other two sources. *Meduza* often worked in collaboration with *Novaya Gazeta* on the story of persecution. The materials in *Meduza* consisted of commentaries on the issue from Chechen and Russian officials and original investigative research, including interviews with survivors of the persecution. The third source of oppositional media, *Dozhd*, is an internet-based television channel known for its positive coverage of anti-government protests in 2011, anti-corruption campaigns in 2016

and 2017, and other oppositional events. The channel affiliates itself with the liberal political opposition, Ksenia Sobchak and Alexey Navalny. *Dozhd* picked up the story of persecution one week after the original publication by *Novaya Gazeta* and conducted its own investigation. Although this media source published only five videos on the topic of persecution, the videos included extensive research and interviews with those who fled Chechnya.

My analysis includes an examination of the investigative stories, opinion pieces, visual images, and factual information in these three media outlets, including news snippets on statements from public figures and state authorities. I pay close attention to the choice of this factual information itself because it provides important insight into the origins of the discourse and who controls it. For example, I consider that many of the testimonies—although presented as stand-alone monologues—are based on interviews in which the interviewer has shaped what has been asked and answered, and has later edited the text, probably omitting some of the details. Each news source has also carefully chosen which statements from public figures to include and which to exclude from their coverage. So, for instance, *Novaya Gazeta* only published a few statements from Chechen public figures, perhaps in an attempt to exclude homophobic statements, while *Meduza* published statements from both sides—those who negated that persecution was happening and those who called for the investigation. Therefore, I treat these statements not just as neutral objective facts, but rather as curated content that frames the discourse and systematically produces the objects of which it speaks (Foucault, 2002). In this study, my goal is not to compare these sources but rather to examine the general framing of the issue within the most popular oppositional Russian media. My choice of terminology to refer to those persecuted in Chechnya for their sexual orientation is deliberate in this chapter. Judging from the media reports, the majority of targeted people are cisendered men. All of the media sources in my sample used the terms "gay man" and "LGBT," which are both direct transplants from Anglophone discourses as I discussed in Chapter 1. Despite the frequent use of the abbreviation "LGBT," none of the sources analyzed mentioned lesbian women[23] or bisexual people.

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[23] The fact that the organized persecution in Chechnya targeted non-heterosexual ciswomen has been confirmed by my personal contacts. However, the information of persecution of Chechen women only appeared in the media in the end of 2018 (Khazov-Kassia, 2018, October 20) and thus is not included in my analysis.

Although it is possible for the reader to imply bisexuality in some of the stories—some testimonies, for example, mention gay men living happily in a heteronormative marriage—the term itself was never used. There were only two mentions of transgender people (Badanin & Zhuk, 2017, May 18; Vachedin, 2017, December 5), however in both cases these were people who left Chechnya and Russia before 2017. In light of this limited visibility of lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people, I think that using the term "LGBT" in the analysis of specific stories would be misleading. Therefore, in this chapter I refer to persecuted people as "gay men," unless quoting or paraphrasing from the media.

It is important to mention that as a Russian-Lithuanian queer woman I am an outsider to the Chechen culture, and my understanding of it comes from scholarly and media texts like the ones I am analyzing in this chapter. Additionally, my position is informed by my experience of volunteering as a translator and advocate for Chechen refugees in Toronto in 2017–2019. These people know and support my research; nevertheless, I made an intentional decision to separate my volunteering from the research and not use these people as informants out of concern for their well-being. My position towards media discourses is a critical one. However, I do not wish to deny or downplay the violence that non-heterosexual and gender-nonconforming people experience in Chechnya, nor do I want to imply that Russian oppositional media is insincere in their attempts to shed light on the corruption and cruelty that has occurred in Chechnya since (at least) 2017. By adopting a critical position, I seek to explore the modes through which media discourses are framed and imbued with constructions of gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity and the ways in which discourses simultaneously challenge and reproduce hegemonic representations.

Cultural difference as origin of violence: Reporting on lawlessness and patriarchy in Chechnya

In the media discourse on the persecution of gay Chechens, Chechnya was described as a peripheral territory of the Russian Federation where cultural difference creates a state of lawlessness and exceptionally strong patriarchal traditions. The oppositional media emphasized the oppressive governing

of the Head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov and the backwardness of the Islamic moral

traditions by using such descriptions of Chechnya as a country "stuck in the Middle Ages" (Sobchak qtd.

in Tomin, 2017, April 23), as being filled with "backwards people with the Stone Age in their heads"

(Vachedin, 2017, December 5), and as an exemplar of "the lawlessness of the previous century" (Sulim,

2017, April 17). The most common explanatory frames for the levels of violence were "lawlessness" and

"patriarchy," while none of the articles used the term "homophobia." Moreover, the oppositional media

overwhelmingly claimed that the persecution of gay Chechens is a *particular* manifestation of the *general*

massive and absurd character of repressions in Chechnya. *Novaya Gazeta* wrote about the overall

insubordination of Chechen authorities to the Russian federal law and the expectation of impunity among

Chechens. The journalists tended to attribute this heightened sense of impunity to unsolved crimes linked

to criminal networks in Chechnya, such as the murder of opposition leader Boris Nemcov in 2015

(Milashina & Gordiyenko, 2017, April 4; "Zayavlenie novoy gazety," 2017, April 13). *Novaya Gazeta*

claimed that the repressions resulting from a sense of impunity and a state of lawlessness took the form of

persecuting people who are either critical of Chechen authorities, such as human rights activists and

journalists, or those violating moral codes of behaviour, specifically drug users, women having

extramarital relationships, and LGBT people (Milashina, 2017, April 24).

Similar explanations also appear in other sources. In the video clip titled "The Third Chechen

[War]" (Badanin & Zhuk, 2017, May 25), *Dozhd* juxtaposes the image of a post-war, prosperous

Chechnya, promoted by Kadyrov, with accounts of repressions faced by those who have recently fled the

republic for various reasons, including homosexuality and being targeted as rebel fighters. These accounts

challenge the official narrative of a peaceful Chechnya and suggest that the repressions signal a

continuation of the state of war. *Meduza* quoted several public figures who shared this position. For

example, the Gender Officer of the Russian liberal party *Yabloko*, Galina Michaleva, stated that

repressions in Chechnya remind her of the Islamic State or Third Reich and that the "situation over there

has been outside of the legal field for a long time" (Sulim, 2017, April 3). Similarly, the Chief Editor of

the radio station *Echo Moskvy*, Aleksey Venediktov, commented on Chechen authorities' attempts to

silence journalists and stated that "while federal special investigation units chase after teenagers,[24] they have overlooked the rising power within the state, which is impudent, uncontrollable, and hostile to the state, and which dares to threaten the citizens of Russia" (qtd. in Sulim, 2017, April 17). This statement clearly separates "the citizens of Russia" from "the rising power" in Chechnya, even though it doesn't specify who is included in each category. It is significant that the oppositional media overwhelmingly sees the persecution of gay men in Chechnya as a symptom of an overall state of lawlessness in the republic; meanwhile, none of the articles use the term "homophobia" explicitly. The solution to the problem of lawlessness, according to the media and public figures it quotes, is to "promptly and rigorously" investigate the case of *all* missing and murdered people in Chechnya, including but not limited to those persecuted on the basis of sexual orientation ("Budte dobry," 2017, April 18).

What does it mean that this frame of violence is distanced from homophobia? I suggest that it is a discursive tactic that allows the oppositional media an avenue to address anti-gay violence from within political conditions of widespread homophobia and heterosexism. Under institutionalized and legalized heteropatriarchy in Russia, the explicit use of the term "homophobia" is not likely to prompt actions from authorities, while appealing to familiar accusations of lawlessness and patriarchy in Chechnya is seen as more legitimate. At the same time, because anti-gay violence is seen to be a taboo topic, the media attempted to use the attention attracted by the sensational tone of generalized news in order to inform about other cases of murdered and missing people in Chechnya and to put pressure on Russian authorities to open official investigations. In July, 2017, *Novaya Gazeta* published 27 names of people they believed to have been executed for minor crimes or with no charges at all (Milashina, 2017, July 10). This public naming of victims put pressure on Russian ombudsman Tatiana Moskalkova, the Investigative Committee, and the Prosecutor General to look into cases of missing people and start a pre-investigative assessment. Despite this effort, an investigation into missing people who were suspected of homosexuality had not yet been opened at the time of this writing. *Novaya Gazeta* published numerous

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[24] Here, Venediktov is referring to the government's campaign against youth participating in anti-Putin protests in recent years.

articles describing how Chechen authorities attempted to cover up the story by stalling the investigation, leaking sensitive information and intimidating relatives of missing, murdered, or detained people (Milashina, 2017, July 9).

Gay Chechens are seen to be central in solving the problem of lawlessness, primarily because their persecution provided an opportunity to draw attention to *other* human rights abuses in Chechnya as well. As *Novaya Gazeta* claimed (Milashina, 2017, May 22; "Moskalkova Provela v Groznom," 2017, September 19), the story of gay Chechens became a catalyst for bureaucratic and legal procedures, such as the pre-investigative assessment, that had not been possible in other cases of human rights abuses in Chechnya under Ramzan Kadyrov's governing. However, contrary to the hopes of journalists, the pre-investigative assessment did not go smoothly. In the report published by *Novaya Gazeta* in May, 2017 (Milashina, 2017, May 22), the author described a malfunction in the pre-investigation that stalled the opening of a criminal case. It is explained that the main obstacle was the anonymity of the survivors and their reluctance to file complaints. Because the survivors had not filed official complaints, it was easy for perpetrators to cover up evidence, claim that missing people have emigrated, and continue negating the existence of gay people in Chechnya. The article concludes:

> For the first time, citizens of the [Chechen] Republic have hope for achieving justice. Unfortunately, the position of federal authorities is the following: in order to fulfill this hope and to open the criminal case, the complaints from specific victims are needed. So it seems that Chechens today are dependent on the bravery of that category of Chechen citizen that includes the most unprotected, ostracized, and persecuted by the authorities as well as the society. All Chechens are dependent on the bravery of Chechen gays.
> (Milashina, 2017, May 22)[25]

Here, the emphasis is on remedying a state of lawlessness, and I will return to the way in which this discourse puts responsibility for change on Chechen gay people in the next section.

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[25] All translations from Russian in this chapter are my own.

Although journalists frequently blamed administrative and legal failures for the persecution of gay men in Chechnya, the lawlessness was not the only explanation provided. Much journalistic labour is put into providing visual and textual explanations of how the roots of the tragedy can be found in the Chechen *culture* and its aversion to change. Many scholars have analyzed the simultaneous romanticization and demonization of people of the North Caucasus in discourses ranging from Russian literature (Friedrich, 2003; Hope, 2008) to anti-terrorist rhetoric (Banner, 2008; Russel, 2005). Congruently with these discourses, the story of persecution of gay men in Chechnya continues a tradition of describing Chechen culture as exotic, mysterious, temperamental, tradition-bound, and fundamentally patriarchal. This is particularly evident in the illustrations that accompany publications on persecution (Figures 35-38). The

Figure 35. "Traditional Chechen clothing. Museum, Grozny" (Original caption). Photo credit: RIA Novosti. Illustration to the article "Honour killing: How the ambitions of a famous LGBT activist awakened a terrifying ancient custom in Chechnya" in *Novaya Gazeta* (Milashina, 2017, April 1).

Figure 36. No caption, no photo credit. Illustration to the article "Reprisals against Chechen gays: We publish the stories of surviving witnesses" in *Novaya Gazeta* (Milashina & Gordiyenko, 2017, April 4).

Figure 37. No caption. Photo credit: Valery Sharifulin, TASS. Illustration to the article "Whether you kill him, or we will kill him, your choice: Monologue of a homosexual who fled Chechnya" in *Meduza* (Kostyuchenko, 2017, April 16).

Figure 38. No caption. Photo credit: Aleksandr Astafyev. Illustration to the article "Mass media announced that a deadly purge of homosexualists is happening in Chechnya" in *Moskovsky Komsomolec* (Nedugin, 2017, April 1).

illustrations include Chechen culture exhibit in a museum, traditional Chechen warrior clothing, the mosque in Grozny, and stock-pile images of camouflage trousers and military boots. Without directly relating to the events of human rights abuses, these illustrations set the story of persecution in the context of cultural customs, traditions, and ethnographic knowledge about Chechnya. It seems that in order to comprehend the reasons for the persecution of gay people in this part of the world, readers need to have a firm understanding of the domains of cultural history, military, and religion, which are seen to be organizing elements of everyday life in Chechnya. It is precisely these elements that are seen to be the sources and conduits of strict policing of heteronormative gender roles and gender hierarchy. The patriarchal aspects of Chechen culture are fundamental assumptions that significantly impact the way the story of persecution was framed.

Besides the illustrations placing persecution in the context of a militarized and strict culture, the often-repeated metaphor of "suddenly awakened danger" also alludes to cultural inflexibility in relation to the patriarchal order. An example can be found in the article by *Novaya Gazeta* that broke the story, entitled "Honour killing: How the ambitions of a famous LGBT activist awakened a terrifying ancient custom in Chechnya" (Milashina, 2017, April 1). This article informed readers that a careless action of a Moscow-based LGBT activist, Nikolai Alekseev—namely, his knowingly futile request to organize marches for tolerance in four cities in the North Caucasus—prompted violence against gay men. In March, 2017, Alekseev petitioned local municipalities for permission to organize the marches. The petitions were promptly denied. Alekseev did not consult with local LGBT people prior to filing the requests, which, according to *Novaya Gazeta,* showed that his purpose was not representing the interests of those LGBT communities but, rather, to create precedents for filing claims of discrimination with the European Court of Human Rights for personal gain. Even though Alekseev's requests were denied by the authorities, the newspaper claimed that they prompted a public outcry against homosexuality in the form of public protests and the organized detention of suspected gay men. The article stated,

The issue is that having significantly shaken up patriarchal Caucasus, [Alekseev] did not

secure at least some minimal shelter, at least some sort of a way out for his allies over

there. Having absolutely no knowledge and understanding of local specificities, he

obviously didn't take into account what kinds of consequences people would face after a

simple mention of such intentions, even if no one was going to act on them. The problem

is that in Caucasus they still take your words seriously. (Milashina, 2017, April 1)

The journalists maintained that Alekseev did not consider cultural differences when he requested

permission for his marches, nor did he account for the supposed incompatibility of Islamic cultural

patriarchy and gay visibility. Within such narrative constructions that focus on cultural difference,

Chechen people are seen to be a tightly-knit ethnic collective that exemplifies the Muslim culture of the

North Caucasus—bound by tradition and "ancient customs," static, averse to change, a sleeping danger

that has been "shaken up" and "awakened" by claims for gay visibility. They are also described as unable

to comprehend the world as different from itself, as if they didn't and couldn't understand that Alekseev

wasn't going to actually organize the marches and "took his words seriously."

An emphasis on cultural difference and collectivity also found its way into grammatical

constructions. Many articles described the events of persecution using verbs in the passive voice or not

specifying the grammatical subject in the text: "In Chechnya, *they use* similar methods not only for

fighting terrorists, Salafis, and homosexuals, but also for drug users and even traffic offenders"

(Milashina & Gordiyenko, 2017, April 4); "Mass capture of gays *was arranged* in Chechnya"

("Genprokuratura Nachala Proverku," 2017, April 17); "Ahmed *is not being threatened* only because his

phone number *hasn't been found* yet" (Yapparova, 2017, April 8) (emphasis added). On one hand, these

rhetorical devices pointed towards the systemic and institutional origins of violence and harassment,

suggesting that the persecution was organized by Chechen authorities and state security agencies. On the

other hand, the use of passive voice combined with emphases on the customs, collective shame that is

inflicted on the culture by homosexuality, and retaliation that relatives would bring on gay members of their families pointed towards a collective responsibility of the Chechen culture.

Even though some of the articles named individuals executing arrests and torture, the publications in the oppositional media underlined that what is most terrifying in this story is the role of family members in the violence. According to the media, torture and humiliation have not only been not condemned by relatives of the accused, but it is often relatives who eventually murder a person suspected of homosexuality in order to "wash the stain off the family's name with blood" (Borisov, 2017, June 20). The following explanation from the leader of the LGBT-Network, Igor Kochetkov, exemplifies this reasoning:

> Yesterday I talked to one of those who escaped. And he was saying that the most dangerous people for them are their relatives. I was just shocked by this; they love their relatives, they worry about them. But at the same time, they clearly understand that relatives are ready to kill them. And they don't condemn [their relatives]! Their reasoning is that, well, that's how it is, what can you do, there's nowhere to run. But they do have somewhere to run. (qtd. in Kostyuchenko, 2017, April 16a)

In this passage, Kochetkov suggests that people can run with the help of the LGBT-Network. However, this narrative also produces the Chechen body as an object of torture through the discursive repetition of violence and through positioning this violence as a regular occurrence in Chechnya, which underlines the Chechen Republic as a space of exception within the Russian federation. Achille Mbembe offers an understanding of necropower, as the power of controlling the death of populations through particular destinations for death. Mbembe (2003) considers the notion of sovereignty and writes that "the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" (p. 11). The sovereignty of Chechnya, within the state of Russia, is granted through permission for the torture and killing of undesirable populations with support from the Russian government. Chechnya illustrates perfectly the operation of sovereignty as the right to kill and the right to

decide on states of exception, wherein the laws are lifted. Analyzing the discourses on sexual torture of perceived Muslim terrorists in Abu Ghraib prison and building on Giorgio Agamben's theorization of the state of exception, Jasbir Puar (2007) writes that neoliberal discourses surrounding events of sexual violence rely on three rhetorical practices: (1) positioning sexual violence as an exception to regularly occurring violence, (2) understanding sex and body as sacred and, therefore, as the sites of extreme violation by comparison with other violations of individual rights, and (3) imagining sexual violence as a clear overkill in relation to other wartime violence (p. 81). This analysis is applicable to the discourses perpetuated by the Russian oppositional media discourses. While Chechnya is not currently described as a zone of military conflict, many have observed that the aftermath of the Second Chechen War and establishment of Kadyrov's government kidnapping, torture, and intimidation of regular citizens points to Chechnya as a place of permanent proximity to war (Erbslöh, 2016; Politkovskaya, 2009). The torture of gay men, however, stands out among these other crimes in the discourses of oppositional media and the LGBTQ activists. While the LGBTQ activists in Russia are very vocal about homophobic violence that happens across the whole country, the particular framing of violence against gay men in Chechnya as an effect of the Chechen culture points to framing Chechnya as the state of exception.

Narratives that underscore cultural responsibility for persecution and those that highlight the participation of family members in violence both attempt to create empathy for the persecuted people who have "nowhere to run," as Kochetkov put it in the quote above. These explanations attribute blame to the significance of clan relations in Chechnya. A scholar of Chechen society Gisela Erbslöh (2016) notes that Chechen identity rests, among other things, on "strict morals and customs linked to clan hierarchies, and an ancient code of ethics based on holding one's word" (p. 204). The significance of clan relationships and the moral code supported by them have been mostly eroded during the Soviet rule through displacement of Chechen people and Soviet politics of annihilation of ethnic and cultural differences (Katz, 1999; Sokirianskaia, 2005). However, in the last decade, Kadyrov attempted to revive Chechen traditions and the moral code, especially the shared responsibility of the family for a crime committed by a family member. As Erbslöh (2016) argues, the kinship-based liability has been revived in a badly

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distorted form that includes punishing the family in addition to punishing the criminal relative. This distortion leaves criminalized people particularly vulnerable to blackmail, threats against their families, and the inability to seek justice via legal means. In the oppositional media covering the persecution of gay Chechens, this social vulnerability is easily converted into a discourse that gives prominence to ethnicity and Islamic faith through racialized terms such as "honour killings," and a narrative of the Chechen culture as being stuck in the past, as seen in phrases such as "backwards people with the Stone Age in their heads" (Vachedin, 2017, December 5) and "the lawlessness of the previous century" (Sulim, 2017, April 17). These discourses further naturalize the relationship between cultural difference and heteropatriarchy.

The assumption that heteropatriarchy is a fundamental aspect of Chechen culture can also be seen in discursive representations of gender in oppositional media articles on the issue of persecution. In the articles from my sample, Chechen women were described as vulnerable, traditional, submissive, and emotionally unstable, while Chechen men were represented as extremely protective, controlling, tough, and violent. According to the testimonies of men who managed to escape detention by authorities, the persecution was continued in the family and perpetrated by fathers, brothers, and uncles. By contrast, female family members would often beg forgiveness for the person accused of homosexuality. For example, one of the articles provides the following testimony from one of the survivors:

> My mom gifted me life for the second time. My father and brother locked me in a room for four days. They were debating whether to kill me or not. My mom was on her knees begging them, crying, "Let him out! He won't do it again! He will marry!" My mom managed to persuade them. (Deny, qtd. in Milashina & Artemyeva, 2017, December 27)

This image of a caring Chechen mother sits in juxtaposition with another common image: that of a mentally unstable, perhaps hysterical, Chechen woman in a position of authority, exemplified by Kheda Saratova, a member of the human rights council in Chechnya. Commenting on the first media coverage of the persecution of gay people, she stated,

I am Chechen, I live in this society, and this thing you are saying [homosexuality] is even

worse than war. […] I can tell you that in our Chechen society, a person who has respect

for himself, for traditions and customs, he will on his own, without any institutions,

engage in persecution and do everything so that these people do not exist in our society.

("Chlen SPCH Chechni," 2017, April 1)

After vigorous criticism ensued in Russian oppositional media, Saratova claimed that she was

misunderstood—that she was so stunned by the very topic of homosexuality that she wasn't able to think

clearly:

That these people [gays] exist in the world, of course, I knew that, but I never heard that

they exist in our society. All of this put me in great shock. Perhaps I was even a bit

mentally unwell when I was giving that interview. ("Kak chlen SPCH," 2017, April 3)

Each of the quotes from Saratova were published seven times in the media sources I analyzed, which is

more often than any other statement, save those from Kadyrov. Saratova's last statement was also

included on the page "In One Image" on *Meduza*, a rubric that describes the most telling news or

statements of the week in a form of a snapshot ("Kak chlen SPCH," 2017, April 3). Clearly, these

statements were identified by oppositional media as exemplary of the hostility towards gay people in

Chechnya and of the malfunction of the justice system: What would you expect from ordinary people if

even the human rights council member, a woman, says that they deserve persecution? However, the

reiteration of these quotes also portrays Saratova as overly emotional, the emphasis on her ethnicity

creates a clear causal relationship between her being Chechen and her absurd justification of hostility. In

order to make sense of Saratova's comments, oppositional media sources framed the justification of

violence supported by Chechen women primarily through mental instability.

While Chechen women appear in these narratives only as either caring mothers or mentally

unstable women in positions of authority, Chechen men likewise occupy two narrow positions, either as

enactors of patriarchy or as its effeminized gay victims. The primary image of heteropatriarchal leader

can, of course, be found in the Head of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov, who is primarily marked

as an ethnic Other. Kadyrov is often quoted in Russian media, perhaps because of his direct and non-

diplomatic manner of speaking that provides a lot of scandalous material for publications. His words in

Russian are often quoted verbatim, including his awkward grammatical sentence construction and

utterances that interrupt his speech. These editorial choices emphasize his ethnic difference. His

statements are usually peppered with the use of mythological and religious references, as well as with

nationalistic bravado. In an article titled "Kadyrov suggested Canada should take gays out of Chechnya if

they exist there," *Novaya Gazeta* quoted his words from an interview for the HBO channel:

> "America is not strong enough to be considered an enemy of Russia," Kadyrov said. "We
>
> are a strong country, a nuclear state. Even if our country was completely destroyed, our
>
> nuclear missiles would strike automatically. We would turn the whole world on its head
>
> and bend it over. ("Kadyrov predlozhil Kanade," 2017, July 15)

Kadyrov's reference to (homo)sexual violence in the threat to "bend the world over," paired with

his nationalist rhetoric, supports a hegemonic masculinity that relies on threats of emasculation, not unlike

the hypermasculinity of President Putin (discussed at length in Chapter 2). Journalists from oppositional

media attempt to undermine Kadyrov's authority by portraying him as a corrupt, lying, manipulative, and

unintelligent leader, describing him as "vassal"[26] (Milashina, 2017, October 16); the leader trying to

impose Sharia law on his people (Vachedin, 2017, May 22); and a regional authority who "tests the limits

of what is allowed in our country" (Sulim, 2017, April 3). Although both President Putin and Ramzan

Kadyrov can be seen as heteropatriarchal leaders, it is through such culturally marked descriptors of

Kadyrov that Chechen anti-gay violence is explained as being rooted in ethnic Otherness.

The dominant image of the Chechen, as the racialized Other of the Russian national self, has

always been significant for Russian political discourse, from the beginning of the Russian Empire through

the Soviet period and into contemporary Putin's Russia. The notion of the Oriental Other examined by

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[26] A person who has been granted land by a lord in feudal society.

Edward Said (1979) is helpful in illuminating Russia's discursive construction of the North Caucasus in general, and the Chechen people in particular.[27] Said's term "orientalism" is "ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, 'us') and the strange (the Orient, the East, 'them')" (p. 43). Orientalist discourse, as a rich body of anthropological, literary, and psychological knowledge about the "Orient," constructed the racialized ethnic Other in essentialized, exoticized, homogenized, and sexualized terms as an opposite to the "Self," which simultaneously relies on the image of the excluded Other. Said (1979) writes:

> On the one hand there are Westerners, and on the other there are Arab-Orientals; the former are (in no particular order) rational, peaceful, liberal, logical, capable of holding real values, without natural suspicion; the latter are none of these things (p. 49).

In an Orientalist fashion, Russian literature, art, and scholarship homogenized the ethnically and culturally diverse region of the North Caucasus, of which Chechen people are just one of many, and painted a monolithic picture of "temperamental mountain warriors" (Nagorny, 2017; Pyanzina, 2011). In mass media as well, as Valerya Achmetyeva's (2007) broad analysis of media representations of Chechens demonstrates, "Chechens are understood and described in a rhetorical tradition of the Middle Ages: as something strange and unintelligible" (p. 209).

The racialized otherness of Chechens is particularly visible in Russian political discourse on anti-terrorism, where it has also been bolstered by the focus on the body and sex. In the beginning of the

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[27] In this chapter, I rely on the term "Other" that was developed by a wide array of psychoanalysts, feminists, and queer studies theorists. Besides Said's significant contributions to our understanding of how the notion of the Other buttressed the post-eighteenth century colonizing and civilizing projects of European empires and continues to do so today, it is important to note several others. Julia Kristeva (1991), for instance, eloquently theorized the relationship between the foreigner and Otherness, by discussing that living with the foreigner, seeing and understanding foreignness, requires a citizen to be able to find an Other within oneself, to occupy the space of alienation from the self, to feel discomfort through one's own sexual, national, political, or professional identity. My understanding of the Other is also informed by the rich literature based on lived experience and phenomenology from the position of racialized and queer otherness, including Chandra Talpade Mohanty's (1986) critique of the generic construction of the "Third World woman," Gloria Anzaldua's (1999[1987]) examination of "mestiza consciousness," bell hooks' (1992) critique of commodification of ethnic otherness, and Sara Ahmed's (2007) analysis of the phenomenology of whiteness. What is particularly relevant in this scholarship is that it demonstrates the paradoxical and simultaneous position of the Other as an object of animosity and as an object of fascination, obsession, and fetish.

Second Chechen War—Russia's major anti-terrorist campaign that was devastating for both Chechens and Russians—prime minister and soon-to-be president Vladimir Putin became internationally known for his harsh rhetoric aimed at Chechen terrorists. At a press-conference in 1999, Putin commented on his intentions to fight Chechen Islamic terrorism: "We will pursue terrorists everywhere. [If they are] in an airport, we will pursue them in the airport. Pardon my expression, but we will catch them on the toilet, we will rub them out in the outhouse if need be" (Rod TV, 2013). In 2002, frustrated with a French journalist who had critiqued Russian military activity in Chechnya, Putin snapped,

> If you'd like to become an Islamic radical and take the step of getting yourself circumcised, then I invite you to Moscow. We are a multiconfessional country, we have experts on this issue as well, and I recommend having this procedure done in such a way that you will never have anything growing out down there again" (Kremlin, 2002).

Several scholars have analyzed this "tough guy" rhetoric with its abundant references to body parts and bodily secretions to explain Putin's deployment of masculinity as a strategy for establishing political dominance (Riabova & Riabov, 2010; Sperling 2014; Wood, 2016). Unfortunately, these analyses say nothing of the image of the Chechen that has been central in these discourses for creating a hypermasculine image of the Russian leader. Putin's statements have simultaneously marked Chechens as objects of sexual humiliation through references to catching them at their most vulnerable (e.g., on the toilet) and as monsters capable of castrating the enemy. Putin's toughness relies on these particular images of the ethnic other, which also points towards the deployment of corporeal politics and sexualization in Russian-Chechen relationships. Chechens in this discourse emerged as hypermasculine, dangerous, and monstrous, but also as highly vulnerable, particularly in the realm of the body. Although oppositional media wants to subvert certain discursive constructions of vulnerable people, they rely on similar portrayals of the monstrous Chechen.

As historians of Putin's Russia have noted, it was the Second Chechen War that propelled Putin, then barely known by the Russian public, to presidency (Gessen, 2012). The War also justified the

increasingly authoritarian means of Putin's governing. During his governing years from 2000 to the present (2019), Russia established federal control over Chechnya and ensured the loyalty of Chechen authorities to the Kremlin. The Head of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov, worked to establish the image of a peaceful and prosperous Chechnya that is well-integrated into the Russian Federation (Erbslöh, 2016). For Putin, today's Chechnya is also an example of the successful coexistence of the Russian Orthodox Christians and Chechen Muslims (Markosian & Matloff, 2012). Yet, Russian oppositional media that reports on human rights abuses significantly subverts this image. Investigative journalistic and research centers, such as *Novaya Gazeta*, *Kavkaz-Centr*, and *Memorial*, continue to publish materials that demonstrate the harsh repressions in Chechnya and Russian authorities' complicity in it. Threats and silencing have been common responses of the state—both in Chechnya and on the federal level—to these reports.

So far, this chapter discussed how the problem of persecution of gay men in Chechnya has been framed by the oppositional media. The three main interconnected framings include the overall state of lawlessness in Chechnya, cultural heteropatriarchy that sanctions violence against gay men, and blaming Moscow-based LGBT activists for provoking the "patriarchal Caucasus." Journalists' illustrations, grammatical choices, narrative constructions, and framing and selection of quotes are the discursive devices that point to a collectivity and emphasize cultural responsibility for the persecution of gay men in Chechnya. This, as well as the focus on cultural heteropatriarchy, firmly secure the image of the Chechen other as culturally static, tradition-bound, and ultimately racially/ethnically different. Within this framing, gay men are seen as having a unique ability to interrupt this ethno-racial difference. In the next section, I turn to an analysis of those portrayed as victims of lawlessness and cultural heteropatriarchy in Chechnya.

Activists or ghosts? Constructing Chechen gay men in oppositional media discourses

The understanding of homosexuality that dominates the reports on the persecution in oppositional media is that you can't change your sexual orientation (similar, in media's framings, to how you can't change your skin colour), and therefore that LGBT people have no other choice but to fight repressions.

In my sample, journalists expressed this view with passion and firmness, which was emphasized by a frequent use of modal verbs and expressions. For example, in one of the first reports on persecution, *Novaya Gazeta* journalists wrote,

> The problem is that members of the LGBT community differ from all other activists and human rights protectors. You *can* stop being a human rights activist, you *can* change your political views, you *can* even change your faith. But it is *impossible* to change your skin colour or your sexual nature. This is why LGBT activists and black people in America became the engine of the movement for human rights. This is why persecuted homosexuals in Chechnya are starting to break the silence. (Milashina & Gordiyenko, 2017, April 4, emphasis added)

As shown in this quote, LGBT people are seen to be exceptionally fit to fight lawlessness and injustice. The journalists, however, see only certain kinds of fighting for human rights as valuable. This is evident through the condemnation of the actions of Nikolay Alekseev (discussed above), who was accused of prompting violent retaliation against gay people in Chechnya because of his activism (Milashina, 2017, April 1; Sulim, 2017, April 3). In my article sample, Alekseev was portrayed as selfish, greedy, and driven by his personal ambitions. Articles stressed the amount of compensation Alekseev had previously received as a result of his complaints to the European Court of Human Rights and claimed that "by requesting permits to organize parades in various regions of Russia, he is fighting for *his own* constitutional rights, freedom of assembly, and abolition of the gay-propaganda law" (Milashina, 2017, April 1, emphasis added).

A photo of Alekseev accompanying the article (Figure 39) is telling: Immaculately dressed in a business suit, he is shown talking to journalists. His self-confident and theatrical pose and the limp wrist of his hand clearly and stereotypically mark him as a gay man. This image sits in stark contrast with the pictures of anonymous Chechen gay people included in other articles, whose bodies express vulnerability and suffering (discussed further below). Portraying Alekseev in such stereotypically gay manners is in

accordance with the condemning tone of the article, which accused him of cultural insensitivity. In this way, journalists suggested that activism prioritizing LGBT visibility is necessarily harmful to LGBT people in "patriarchal Caucasus" (Milashina, 2017, April 1). The image, the tone, and the arguments presented by the journalists all discredited Alekseev in his role as an expert on LGBT issues in Chechnya.

Figure 39. Nikolay Alekseev. Photo credit: RIA Novosti. Illustration to the article "Honour killing: How the ambitions of a famous LGBT activist awakened a terrifying ancient custom in Chechnya" in Novaya Gazeta (Milashina, 2017, April 1).

Representations of Chechen gay men, the central figures in the story of persecution,[28] are undoubtedly complex. The subject of the gay Chechen interrupts the two fundamental assumptions of Russian cultural imaginary: the heteronormativity of Chechen people and the whiteness of LGBT people in Russia. This interruption, as I show further in this section, has had significant effects on their representation. On one hand, published testimonies, photographs, and interviews gave Chechen gay men a much-needed voice and space in the public discourse. On the other hand, this anonymity, which was crucial for their safety, impacted how their stories were framed by figures of authority, journalists, and media editors. In particular, there are three processes that shaped the representation of gay Chechens: (1) symbolic annihilation through the denial of their existence; (2) the mystification of their lives; and (3) the trivialization of persecution. In what follows, I discuss these three processes in detail.

As the story of persecution unfolded, Chechen authorities firmly maintained that the information presented by journalists was a part of a smear campaign that sought to hurt the Chechen people ("V

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[28] There were only two mentions of transgender people, one being the story of Leila, a Chechen transwoman living as a refugee in the U.S. (Badanin & Zhuk, 2017, May 18). Leila migrated to the U.S. prior to the 2017 wave of persecutions in Chechnya. In the video, her face was blurred out to preserve her anonymity. Leila's narrative was illustrated by close-ups of her body that underscored stereotypically feminine behaviour, such as making tea or choosing dresses at a clothing store. Another article featured Deny, a young Chechen transman living in Germany (Vachedin, 2017, December 5). Similarly to Leila, he migrated abroad before 2017. The article featuring Deny's story described the process of his gender transition, his estrangement from his family, and his persecution within the Chechen diaspora in Germany.

Groznom nazvali," 2017, April 1; "Kadyrov schitaet," 2017, July 13). Kadyrov and his representatives

repeatedly announced that "there are no gays in Chechnya, but if there are any, Canada may take them

away" ("Kadyrov predlozhil," 2017, July 15). Several religious and political figures in Chechnya

threatened journalists of *Novaya Gazeta* with reprisals for even suggesting that some Chechens might be

gay ("Sovetnik glavy," 2017, April 14), and other Chechen public figures claimed that the mere

proposition of gay people existing in Chechnya would provoke feelings of injury and disgust against

Chechen Muslim identity (Kotova, 2017, April 22). Russian federal authorities have also dismissed the

issue; Putin's press secretary, Dmitry Peskov, said that problems of homosexuals are not a priority for the

Kremlin and that survivors should file lawsuits if they have any complaints (Obuhov, 2017, April 3).

Novaya Gazeta, *Meduza*, and *Dozhd* all refrained from reporting on statements that were directly insulting

to LGBT people. However, pro-government media sources exploited the homophobia and xenophobia of

some public figures to produce more sensational texts. A telling example of such sensationalization is an

article published by *Moskovsky Komsomolec* titled "The Minister of Press of Chechnya cursed demons

hiding in journalists and liberals: He claimed that with one glance at him they would drop dead instantly"

(Obuhov, 2017, May 18). In this article, the newspaper quoted a Facebook post from the Chechen state

official wherein he engaged in passionate homophobic speech, claimed that those who sympathize with

gay people are possessed by demons, and wished death upon human rights defenders. This symbolic

annihilation (Gerbner & Gross, 1976) of gay people in Chechnya, enacted through injurious speech,

attempted to cast gay Chechens as phantoms created by human rights activists and foreign interests

seeking to undermine Chechnya.

Another way to describe what was happening in the Russian oppositional media in 2017 and how

the figure of the gay Chechen emerged in the public imagination is through the notion of haunting. Avery

Gordon (1997) explains haunting as a sociopolitical-psychological state of animation, in which an

unresolved social violence makes itself known. One need not look hard to find unresolved violence in

Chechnya: massive displacement of people during the Soviet period, excessive violence of two wars and

their mass graves, kidnapping and disappearance of people during the 1990s, and secret prisons, the

existence of which are denied by the state (Katz, 1999). By covering the persecution of gay men, *Novaya Gazeta* has attempted to lift the story of state repressions out of the domain of denial, out of the "shadowy knowledge," to use Gordon's words (1997, p. 79). Journalists sought to provide evidence to the crime through pictures of injuries and multiple testimonies that described specific places, people, and actions of persecution. However, the limited representations of persecuted gay Chechens did not fully bring them out into the world of the living and known. Fearing retaliation for testifying, people who fled concealed their identities. Despite multiplying evidence of the crime, the figure of the "gay Chechen" remained ghostly as it emerged through the statements by public figures and representatives of the state, the faceless photographs of injured bodies, and the anonymous testimonies of those who had fled the violence.

Perhaps the figure of a ghostly homosexual is always present in homophobic discourse. David Murray (2012), in his analysis of homosexuality in the Barbadian media, proposes a term "spectral sexuality," which denotes the image of homosexuality that is associated with "a threatening, perverted, and/or sick sexualized body or group of bodies [that] are continually incarnated in discourse but never fully instantiated in the flesh" (p. 17). Similarly, Adi Kuntsman (2009) examines haunting figures in the wounding words of homophobic discourse among Russian diasporic subjects in Israel. One of the figures that Kuntsman describes is the "Shadow by the Latrine," a figure of a passive homosexual in the Soviet Gulag whose social position at the bottom of the prisoners' hierarchy was marked by designation of the sleeping place next to the toilet. Kuntsman shows how this figure of the Shadow and its symbolic placement by the latrine returns again and again through hateful name-calling, expressions of disgust, and imagery originating in Gulag through the injurious speech of the Russian-language media in today's Israel. Following Gordon's positioning of the ghost as a social figure that serves as an epistemological tool for comprehending the past and the present, Kuntsman proposes that "it is the circulation of Gulag imagery and the use of Gulag language that makes the Soviet past part of the Israeli present" (2009, p. 59).

A similar kind of ghost is present in the negation of existence of homosexuality in Chechnya. However, it can also be found in the oppositional media discourses which portray the survivors as strange, ambiguous, and anonymous. The readers see these people's tortured bodies and close-ups of their bruises, but they always turn their backs on the audience and their faces are never included in the picture. Their stories can be heard in video clips, their words are included in the testimonies, but their voices are distorted, and their testimonies are so repetitive with details of abduction and violence that they seem to blend into one.

One of the ghostliest visual representations of Chechen gay men can be found in the web-project by *Novaya Gazeta* entitled "Acceptance," published at the end of December 2017 (Milashina & Artemeva, 2017, December 27) (see Figures 40–43). I suggest that the "Acceptance" project represents gay Chechens as mysterious, difficult to know, and unintelligible. The website hosts twelve pages, eleven of them containing anonymous pictures and testimonies of persecuted Chechens who have successfully escaped to elsewhere. The project takes the form of an online archive; readers can click through the pages containing photographs of the characters, texts of their testimonies, and short looping videos of mostly urban landscapes from destination countries of Chechen gay refugees. The photographs portray the protagonists against a static silent darkness, showing each person from the back or with their faces concealed by shadows. The photos are very expressive through only shadowy body postures and details: they convey masculinity, secrecy, anonymity, and hiding. The testimonies tell of their arrests, interrogations, releases, and evacuations with the help of the LGBT-Network, as well as their settlements in host countries. Placed in between the testimonies, the looping videos portray different bodies of water: birds flying across Niagara Falls in Canada; snow falling on the Neris River in Vilnius; cars rushing across the bridge over the Seine in Paris. The sound and movement of the looping videos provide a stark contrast to the silent and static media of text and photographs. Such visual format of the project alludes to the darkness of suffering, movement of water, migration, fluidity, and change.

Figure 40. One of the pages from "Acceptance" project, a snapshot of a looping video. Photo credit: Anna Artemyeva. https://chechnyagate-eng.novayagazeta.ru/country_1/

Figure 41. A testimony page from the "Acceptance" project. Photo credit: Anna Artemyeva. https://chechnyagate-eng.novayagazeta.ru/tarkhan/

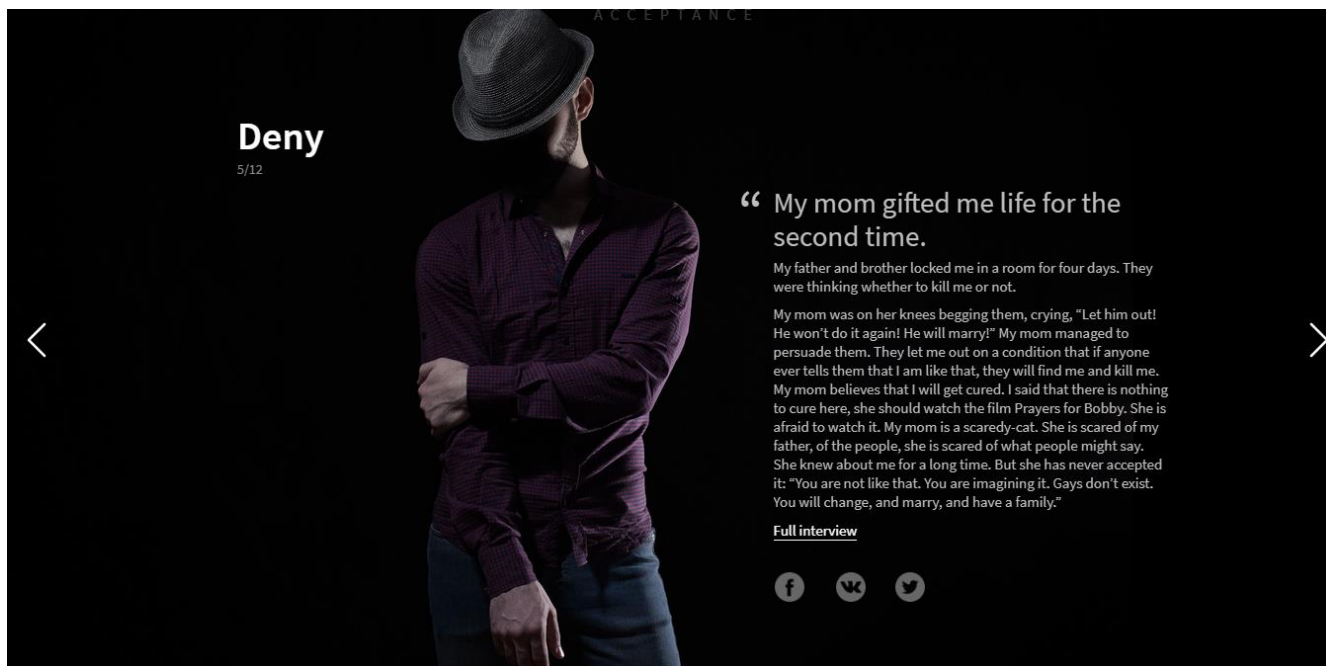Figure 42. A testimony page from the "Acceptance" project. Photo credit: Anna Artemyeva. https://chechnyagate-eng.novayagazeta.ru/deny/
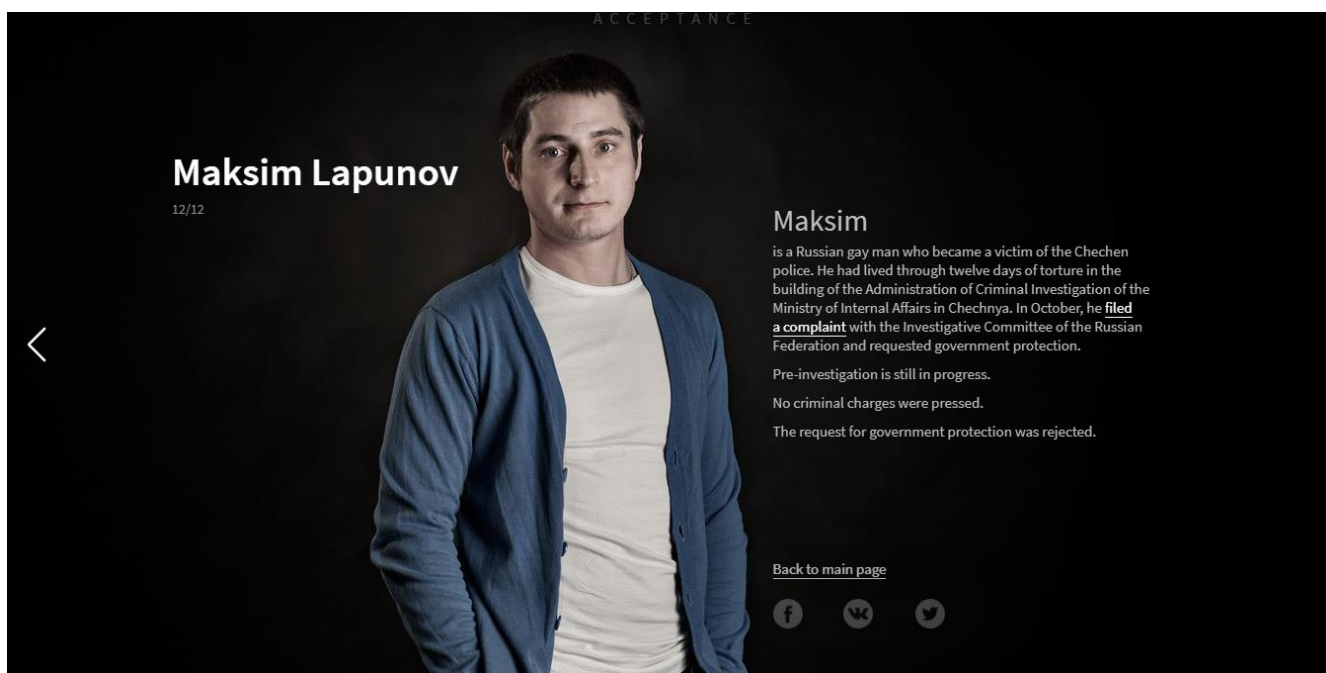
Figure 43. The page from the "Acceptance" project featuring Maksim Lapunov. Photo credit: Anna Artemyeva. https://chechnyagate-eng.novayagazeta.ru/maksim/

The only non-anonymous figure in the project is found on the last page: this is a photograph of Maksim Lapunov and a short blurb about his legal case (Figure 43). Lapunov was the first and so far, only, survivor who made a non-anonymous public statement about his experience and filed a complaint requesting an official investigation of his detention ("Moskalkova vidit osnovaniya," 2017, November 1). Unlike all other survivors, Lapunov is ethnically Russian and has no family in the Chechen Republic. This, I suggest, placed him in a less vulnerable position and allowed him to give public testimony and pursue legal action.[29] Inadvertently, the different visual and discursive representation of Lapunov in the "Acceptance" project underscored the racial/ethnic hierarchy in oppositional media.

Although the figures in the "Acceptance" project are not directly represented as threatening or as objects of humiliation, the qualities that homophobic discourse ascribes to spectral sexuality, their framing in the static silent darkness, marks them as subjects beyond what is known and can be intelligible. Although the subjects are represented as victims of persecution, their suffering remains out of this world, excessive, mysterious, incomprehensible, and is thus reiterated again and again in their repetitive stories of torture and humiliation. The juxtaposition of eleven anonymous gay Chechens against one open ("out") face of a gay Russian on the last page suggest a trajectory, an expectation—Chechen gay ghosts might at some point acquire a face, just like this one Russian gay person does, but not yet, not while their culture—and, the unmentionable, their race/ethnicity—is keeping them stuck in the dark clutches of the past.

There is another discursive device that works to mystify the gay Chechen subject: the framing of the story of persecution as a story of dark irony. By repurposing familiar children's storytelling devices—namely, those of fairytales and "scary tales"—media coverage in my sample sometimes worked against itself to trivialize the severity of gay persecution. For example, a video clip published by *Dozhd* with the sensational title "Some were killed, some were tortured: Confessions of Chechen gays" (Yapparova, 2017, April 8) included two stories of gay refugees from the North Caucasus: Ahmed, a Chechen man

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[29] Unfortunately, despite this less risky position, by the end of 2018 the legal case came to a dead end and Lapunov had to leave Russia because of the threats of retaliation (Radio Svoboda, 2018, November 27).

from Grozny living in Berlin, and Dalgat, a Dagestani[30] man living in New York City. In the short interviews, these two migrants recounted finding out about persecution through social media and coming to terms with their gay identity despite the hostility they faced. The narrative voiceovers between interview snippets frame the story. This narration is quite peculiar: the voice uses a tone that is strangely fairytale-like in terms of its choice of phrasing, sentence construction, and intonation.

The video opens with a person scrolling through Facebook while the narrator explains: "Every evening before bed, Ahmed sits down in front of his computer and reads scary tales on social networks." Ahmed is shown, his face concealed, as he describes living with the fear of being caught. Then the audience is introduced to the second protagonist: "A bullet will not reach a Dagestani man Dalgat. On New York streets, he walks without hiding." After Dalgat talks about his newfound feeling of freedom, the narrator finishes the video with concluding remarks:

> The most important thing [for a gay Chechen] is to gain freedom in such a way that no
> one knows about it, because far away, across the ocean, across a really black city, hurries
> a really black convoy. That drives Ramzan Kadyrov, the only male love object of the
> Chechen people. (Yapparova, 2017, April 8)

The metaphor "scary tales" at the beginning of the narration indicates the way this journalistic reporting is framed in reference to short horror stories, a genre of oral storytelling that was popular in Soviet and post-Soviet society. The most recognizable feature of a scary tale story is the repetitive use of the mysterious phrase "really black," sometimes multiple times within the same sentence.[31] The repetition of this phrase creates a slow monotonous development of the story in order to scare the listener with an abrupt violent ending; for instance, a "really black hand" would jump out of a "really black box" and choke a

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[30] The Republic of Dagestan is a subject of Russian Federation, an ethnically heterogeneous territory that neighbours Chechnya in the North Caucasus. The politics and histories of both republics are closely intertwined and, although inhabitants of Dagestan are not necessarily ethnically Chechen, media often conflates the two.
[31] I translate the phrase here as "really black," but the literal translation would be "black-black" (*chornyi-chornyi*) or "black-extrablack" (*chornyi-prechornyi*). A typical scary tale would be a variation on the following: In a really black city, on a really black street, there was a really black house. In that really black house, there was a really black room with a black box in it…

protagonist. The video clip employs some of the conventions of this popular genre: The narrator creates a tone of tension and suspense through the inverted sentence construction using a prepositional phrase first ("On New York streets, he walks"). The tone of the narration is melodic, fairy-tale like. The tension is further dramatized by the use of hyperbole and repetition ("across a really black city hurries a really black convoy"). This hyperbole, as well as the sentence construction that emphasizes the importance of the grammatical subject ("that drives Ramzan Kadyrov") marks Kadyrov as the villain of the story. However, unlike in a usual scary tale, the video clip ends not with an abrupt violence but with a joke played on Kadyrov. The narrator ridicules Kadyrov's power and homophobia by describing him as a male love object of the Chechen people.

What does such a choice of framing mean? The content and tone of this video, despite its peculiarity, is sympathetic to the persecuted people and is congruent with *Dozhd*'s usual position of moderate criticism towards Putin's government and political regimes, in both Russia and Chechnya. The framing of the information in the video quite tellingly reveals tensions surrounding the gay Chechen, the clash and seeming unintelligibility of the subject that occupies a position of both racialized other and antithetical queer, which is a category associated with modernity and whiteness.

On one hand, framing the grim story of persecution as a scary tale, a genre of horror fiction intended for children, can be read as a form of trivialization, i.e. a disavowal of violence by expressing it through banal, ordinary, and humorous language. Analyzing ironic and kitschy popular culture representations of Guantanamo Bay prison, Marita Sturken (2011) observes that trivialization of torture "provides the means for consumer-citizens to feel 'authentically' close to traumatic events while also feeling innocent and detached." (p. 425) The format of a scary tale marks the story as absurd, laughable, involving characters who are odd: Chechen men who instead of presenting the familiar form of masculine brutality talk about their feelings and the leader of Chechnya with his exaggerated performance of power. Such trivialization marks the subjects of the story as peculiar but simultaneously relieves the Russian audience from feeling too concerned by keeping torture as a moral problem at a comfortable distance.

On the other hand, the scary tale framing can be seen as an attempt to interrupt the official discourse that negates the very existence of gay Chechens and prohibits the so-called propaganda of homosexuality. Placing the characters of the real-life story into the conventional form of a scary tale brings the figure of the gay Chechen into the cultural imaginary through employing a familiar and mundane framing. This framing has the potential to interrupt the symbolic annihilation within mainstream discourse that assumes heterosexuality of the racialized/ethnic Other and thus renders the gay Chechen impossible.

This framing is exemplary of the "dead irony" aesthetics that was a significant part of late Soviet popular culture along with the practice of *stiob* discussed in Chapter 2. Cultural theorist Alexei Yurchak (2005) describes the aesthetics of dead irony as a form of humour of the absurd that refuses to accept boundaries between seriousness and humour, state support and opposition, sense and nonsense. Yurchak found such irony in a variety of cultural forms: from folkloric poetic genres of the nineteen-seventies and eighties to public performances that took the form of spontaneous public events that meant nothing and had the sole purpose of confusing the viewer. Dead irony can be characterized by grotesque connections: describing little children as agents or objects of extreme violence, spontaneous bursts of aimless collective action, and imitating forms of authority in a way that neither supports nor criticizes it. The scary story form, mixed with journalistic reporting on state-sponsored violence, could also be interpreted as a form of dead irony. Framing the story of persecution as a scary tale, *Dozhd* takes up a position that neither negates the existence of gay Chechens nor fully engages with them as subjects of political and human rights. Although the content of the video is sympathetic to the suffering of Chechen gay men, the narrator creates distance between the audience and the protagonists in the story by adopting the style of children's fiction.

In addition to mobilizing the scary tale and dead irony, media sources in my sample emphasized the strangeness and absurdity of gay people in Chechnya themselves. This is a similar mechanism of trivialization that simultaneously works to bring the topic of homosexuality and Chechnya into the

domain of the cultural imaginary. Narrating the story of Maksim Lapunov, a Russian survivor of the persecution in Chechnya, a journalist explains,

> Maksim is an incredibly soft and well-mannered person. Maksim is an ordinary person, a small entrepreneur. Maksim, in addition, is a very naïve person. A gay person selling balloons in Chechnya. What a surreal story. (Milashina, 2017, October 16)

Here, the emphasis on valuable qualities of his character—softness, good manners, simple naivety—are used to invoke empathy in the reader. However, through the exclamation "What a surreal story," the author points to the surprise of the situation, the unlikely juxtapositions of gay desire and brutal machismo of Chechnya, perversion of marginalized sexuality and the childishness of a person selling balloons in this gruesome place. Similar to the framing of the scary story, employing affects of surprise and wonder works to humanize the subject, to bring it from the domain of the unimaginable to the domain of possible, even if the subject remains strange and peculiar to readers. In addition, this underscoring of the surrealism of the situation reinscribes Chechnya as a space of Other, in which naivety, softness, simplicity, and childishness are fundamentally out of place.

Within the story of persecution of gay men in Chechnya, Russianness emerges as an unmarked category, which is only reflected upon in the case of exception. Such a case of exception is, of course, the story of Lapunov, who is the only non-anonymous survivor of the persecution. The journalists explain that Lapunov was only able to lift his anonymity because he is less vulnerable than Chechen gay men: unlike them, he doesn't have any family in Chechnya that could be endangered by his public statements, and the social repercussions of the stigma are less harmful to him than to Chechen gay men (Milashina, 2017, October 16). This acknowledgment of Lapunov's privilege is important, however the radically different way in which he is portrayed in the oppositional media—with his open face gazing back at the audience, on the final page of the "Acceptance" project, with detailed descriptions of his occupation and soft character—demonstrates that his whiteness further organizes the Russian racial/ethnic imaginary and supports mystification of Chechen gay lives. Unfortunately, the Russian ethnicity of all journalists

investigating the story, as well as their sexual identity, was never discussed or reflected on. Claudia Rankine and Beth Loffreda (2015), in their analysis of fiction writing, propose to think about race as a structure of feelings, imagination, and embodiment and discuss a culturally set repertoire of narratives that is available to authors writing about racialized people. The Russian media narratives about Chechen gay men create the set repertoire of the racial imaginary in Russia through narratives of sexuality and sexual violence. The normalization and invisibility of Russian ethnicity in discourses on anti-gay violence points to the ways in which questions of racialization/ethnic othering are intimately connected with questions of sexuality. The way in which the oppositional media mystified and trivialized Chechen gay men through discursive and representational practices which I explained in this section suggests the peculiar position that Chechens occupy in the Russian racial imaginary: even though the reader reads testimonies from gay Chechens, their sexuality still remains mysterious, ghostly, and at odds with their race/ethnicity.

Chechnya vs modernity: Narratives of liberation in refugee migration stories

Kathi Wiedlack (2017) has shown in her work on the representation of Russian gay youth in Anglophone media that Western reporters are quick to place Russia in the developmental scale of moving *away* from religious fundamentalism and *towards* gay liberation. In particular, Wiedlack analyzes the creation of "Russian gay martyrs" in Anglophone media. These martyr figures resignify the West as progressive and gay-friendly, and Russia as backward and heteropatriarchal. Wiedlack argues that "such discourses miss the problem at hand, which, arguably, is not the majoritarian homophobia of Russian people, culture or the state, but the propaganda of heterosexuality, procreation and the family as a Russian nation-building project that uses homophobia as expedient" (p. 14). However, the representation of Chechen gay men in Russian oppositional media adds another complex layer to the developmental scale, which, I argue in this section, points towards the participation of Russian oppositional media in the discourses of homotransnationalism. In other words, I claim that Russian oppositional media appeals to models of the nation-state which include homonormative LGBTQ subjects in its ideologies, structures,

and governing practices by marking the Muslim North Caucasus as inherently heteropatriarchal and homophobic and by calling for an alternative vision of the Russian state which distances itself from the Muslim North Caucasus and adopts the Western forms of homonationalism.

The inclusion of a particular brand of homosexuality into national projects in North America and Europe—what has been coined "homonationalism" by Jasbir Puar (2007)—emerges in non-Western spaces as an aspiration for a specific kind of modernity, the kind that marks homosexual inclusion as a necessary attribute of civilized modern society and names anti-gay violence as non-modern and non-white. What has been named "homotransnationalism" refers to "specifically *transnational* circulation of neocolonial, orientalist, sexist and queerphobic discourses, such as about persecuted Muslim women or queers" (Haritaworn & Bachetta, 2016, p. 134) For the Russian subject whose whiteness is often implicitly questioned on the global political arena, and who, due to Russia's authoritarianism, is frequently positioned as being on the fringe of modernity, participation in the homotransnationalist project is particularly seductive. This is because, as Aniko Imre (2014) writes, "East European nations' unspoken insistence on their whiteness is one of the most effective and least recognized means of asserting their Europeanness" (p. 82) Therefore, by portraying Chechen gay men as victims of a regime that is even more authoritarian than that of Russia and of a culture that is more distanced from whiteness than Russian culture through its connections with Islam, the ascendancy of Russian whiteness through queerness is maintained. I further suggest that we should recognize these discourses in Russian oppositional media as homotransnationalist and not just homonationalist. This is because they elevate North American and Western European homonationalist inclusions through claims of Western superiority and call on Western-based and corporate-sponsored homonationalist activists (e.g. Rainbow Railroad in Canada) to rescue Chechen and Russian queers. Under the conditions of the heteropatriarchal nationalism of the Russian state, homonationalist aspirations in Russia emerge in forms that seek to first fold homonormative subjects into the models of neoliberal West, and then later demand that the Russian state replicate Western ideologies and nationalist structures.

The discourse of Russian oppositional media produces racial/ethnic difference through detailed explanations of torture and imagining who gay Chechens are. The result of this particular framing of the persecution of gay Chechen men is, to use Puar's words, "the reintensification of racialization through queerness" (p. xii). As I explained in the previous sections, this effect is particularly visible through the way homophobic violence in Chechnya is tied to tradition and Chechen heteropatriarchal brutality. Since the ethnic Other is assumed to be straight, Chechen gay people are seen to be exceptional to Chechen culture, not because they are outside of the sexual heteronorm, but rather because they are placed outside of the racial/ethnic norm. At the same time, the figure of the gay Chechen in the oppositional media also subtly reinforces the failure of Chechens at heteronormativity, as it reports on Chechens' excessive cult of masculinity expressed through performative devotion to Kadyrov and Putin, pathological homosociality through popularity of fighting clubs and martial arts, impossibility of feminism, and polygamous familiar structures[32]. Therefore, paradoxically, Chechens—not unlike other Muslims-ascribed-terrorists within the global neoliberal discourse (Puar & Rai, 2002)—are simultaneously excelling and failing at heteronormativity in these discourses. In this section, I demonstrate how the homotransnationalist logic is further perpetuated in the oppositional media stories that focus on the lives of Chechen gay men *after* they have fled Chechnya and Russia.

In relation to these stories of persecution, the LGBT-Network, a country-wide organization for advocacy around gay issues, established a hotline for those experiencing persecution and organized their evacuation from the Chechen Republic. By the end of 2017, the LGBT-Network helped more than one hundred Chechen men escape to Moscow, and, subsequently, to several countries in the EU and to Canada (LGBT-Network, 2018). Within the media analyzed in this chapter, many articles focused on what happened to Chechen gay refugees *after* their emigration. Some of the articles focused on the cases of those Chechen men who were evacuated in 2017 after being aided by the LGBT-Network. However,

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[32] One of the other issues of Chechen society often mentioned by Russian oppositional media (and media abroad) is polygamy and arranged or forced child marriage (e.g. see Tetrault-Farber, 2015, May 18)). Although the detailed analysis is out of the scope of this chapter, it can be argued that the critical discourses on Chechen polygamy and forced marriages are also reverberations of homotransnationalism.

there were also numerous articles that focused on migrants who fled Chechnya and Russia prior to the persecution wave of 2017. These stories give an opportunity to see how Russian oppositional media describes the lives of Chechen gay migrants in their host countries.

David Murray (2016) examines the repetitive hegemonic narrative of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) refugee migration to Canada, which positions refugees' countries of origin as places of acute homophobic hostility in contrast to host countries, which are depicted as places of freedom, safety, and acceptance of queerness. He calls this framing "queer migration to liberation nation" (p. 19). This narrative can also be found in the way Russian oppositional media frames stories of Chechen migration. For example, this is how the article published by *Dozhd* describes the experience of one of the survivors after migration to the West:

> The first public employee, whom Ahmed met after emigration, left a lasting impression on him; the German taught the [North] Caucasian to pronounce the phrase 'I am gay.' [Ahmed says,] 'I just couldn't say this phrase by myself, and he just looked me in the eyes and said that I shouldn't be scared, shouldn't hide. [He said,] "You deserve respect. You are not worse than everybody else."' (Yapparova, 2017, April 8)

This discourse frames the migration as a didactic experience, during which a Chechen man learned from a German citizen not only self-respect but also what to name himself. Therefore, migration here is described as a transformation of the self. Further, the web-project "Acceptance" (Milashina & Artemeva, 2017, December 27) offers an abundance of queer migration to liberation nation narratives:

> I was supposed to be born here. This is the place for me. People are calm here. They couldn't care less if you wear a tutu. It's your life and they have no reason to care what you do with it. They won't blackmail you or fire you from your job because you are gay. You can be whoever you want. If a person feels good this way, he should live the way he wants. After all, he doesn't harm anyone. I am in love with this country. As if for twenty years I was on a contract that said that I had to live in fear and disdain for myself. And

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now, boom! This contract has expired. And I have magically appeared in a place where my life is starting anew. Just me and my life. (Deny)

I always thought that people are scary here. But they were the first ones to offer us a helping hand. And not even once have I felt that we are out of place here. Every desire of yours, every fantasy or wish are acceptable and are not frowned upon. It is your own private life. No one will judge you. Everybody is tolerant. Everyone belongs here. Nobody will hurt you here. On the contrary, they will smile, help you, and then still apologize for something ten times. It's peaceful here. Would I want to press charges against them [the perpetrators]…? There will never be any justice. Even if someone gets punished for this, the people will never accept you and say, 'Here, this person has really suffered, he is worthy of respect and support.' If you are gay, you are a second-class person. Your own relatives won't understand why you pressed charges. If you make it public, you put shame on your kin. In Chechnya, we have our own code of responsibility. The oldest one is always responsible for his family. It's not like brothers have their own separate lives and don't care about each other. Everyone is responsible for each other. Even if they are not keeping in touch. You just can't break those ties. (Usman)

When you are Chechen, you have to understand that you will never be able to be free and safe. You always have to think, 'What will happen if my parents see this? What will happen if Chechens see this?' […] Somebody has to tell Chechens that they have to respect every life like their own. (Yusuf)

All of these testimonies show that to come to terms with one's gay self means to detach from the Chechen culture, familial ties, and what they call "responsibility," even as some interviewees attempted to still hold on to their Chechen identities. If familial attachment and tradition are central for Chechen people, what does it mean to become accepted as a gay refugee for these people? Can they remain Chechen and still enter this state of acceptance? This is a primary tension in the coverage of gay persecution.

There is a strong emphasis on familial and clan ties in narratives of persecution. Chechens are seen as particularly vulnerable subjects because of their relations with their families and the strong cultural valuing of responsibility. In the majority of testimonies, interviews, and journalists' coverage of gay Chechens, a lack of individualism in Chechen culture is a crucial component of the story. Explaining Chechen culture through a lack of the individual as an autonomous free subject is meant to evoke emotions of shock, pity, and compassion from the (presumedly non-Chechen) audience. Since the human rights framing of the global LGBT subject is conceptualized through an ability to exercise free will, individuality is crucial for the global sexual liberation project. To quote Puar (2007), "Queer secularity demands a particular transgression of norms, religious norms that are understood to otherwise bind that subject to an especially egregious interdictory religious frame. The queer agential subject can only ever be fathomed outside the norming constrictions of religion, conflating agency and resistance" (p. 13). Essentially, for Chechen refugees to be rescued means to adopt the narrative of individualism and separation from the family, clan relations, religion, and ethnicity.

There was only one moment in my media sample and discourses analyzed where testimonies diverged from the "queer migration towards liberation" narrative. This is the criticism that one of the transgender refugees commenting on the persecution expressed towards the United States. In the video coverage of her story (Badanin & Zhuk, 2017, May 18), transwoman Leila expressed her frustration with the legislation and bureaucracy of the asylum-seeking process, being stuck in the shelter for many months, and her inability to receive a work permit. As she says, she expected more protection of her freedom from powerful states such as the U.S. This opinion, however, is the only exception and drowns in the endless repetition of the narratives with celebratory attitudes towards the West.

The story of persecution of gay Chechens provides a particular view of the world, one in which Chechnya, Russia, and the destination countries for Chechen refugees have particular positions on the global geopolitical and geotemporal maps. The oppositional media discourses, however, paint several distinct maps at the same time. The first map is created by representatives of the state, who deny the existence of gay people in Chechnya and the importance of homosexuality as a political issue. This frame

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marks the West as overly concerned with sexuality and, thus, as perversely overdeveloped. It refers to a

self-positioning of Russia as an alternative modernity—a happy middle ground between an overdeveloped

West and an underdeveloped East. This can be exemplified in the following statements by government

officials:

> Yunus-bek Yevkurov was surprised that leaders of France and Germany, Emmanuel
>
> Macron and Angela Merkel, are bringing up the topic [of homosexuality]. He emphasized
>
> that the LGBT movement is included in the list of traditional values of Europe. 'These
>
> are their traditional things. This notion [of homosexuality] doesn't even exist in
>
> Caucasus, or in Russia, or among Slavic people. We never had that in our traditions. We
>
> have to understand that we will never be Europeans,' said the Head of Ingushetia.
>
> ("Glava Ingushetii," 2017, June 11)

This quote also exemplifies what I analyzed in Chapter 3 as an ideological square, the positioning of

"our" Slavic heteronormativity as the natural opposite of "their" Western homosexuality. By contrast,

oppositional media discourse attempts to provide an alternative mapping of Russia. The producers of this

discourse maintain that Chechnya is backwards because of their repressions and that Russian authorities

and law are ineffective in addressing these repressions. Metaphors of time (e.g., "Middle Ages," "people

with the Stone Age in their heads"), used alongside descriptions of culture focused on collective

responsibility, religion, and familial relationships, mark Chechnya as permanently stuck in the past and as

oppressive. This mapping of Chechnya as hopelessly stuck in the past and Russia as still on the road to

modernity is particularly poignant in the following op-ed by Alexander Melman, a Russian observer for

Moskovsky Komsomoletc, titled "Chechnya is an ideal Russia that has reached its limit of absurd":

> If you can easily rehabilitate us, 'Europeans,' by setting TV on rewind, vainakhs[33] are
>
> indeed the way they are. Traditional to the bone. Allah help them! But what for

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[33] "Vainakhs" is an ethno-linguistic term that refers to people of the North Caucasus speaking Nakh languages, including Chechen and Ingush languages.

Milonov[34] is fun, for Chechens is deadly. All those European laws—they hate them with all their guts. But Sharia—that's a different story! Their leader Kadyrov knows what's trendy currently. Therefore, Chechnya is an ideal Russia that has reached its limit. The limit of absurd. So now we have to choose. Either we make the laws of the Russian Federation universal on the whole territory [of Russia], which is impossible in our circumstances, or we all have to start living like they do in Chechnya. Can you offer a third solution? (Melman, 2017, April 14)

This commentary is written in a hyperbolic, exclamatory, and somewhat incoherent style that is typical of this tabloid. By contrast, the oppositional discourse marks Western destination countries as modern and ethical through narratives of freedom, democracy, tolerance towards queerness, and individual expression. I suggest that the quintessential question that emerges through the stories of gay persecution and liberation covered by Russian oppositional journalists is "Are we with Chechnya, or are we modern?" This question, however, is not just a question of geotemporal belonging; this question is also a question of contemporary Russian ascendancy of whiteness, as the violent heteropatriarchy is ascribed to Chechens as inherent, unredeemable quality by comparison to Russia, that still has potential to transform.

Conclusion

It is clear from the data I have analyzed in this chapter that addressing the state of lawlessness in Chechnya was a key goal for journalists writing for *Novaya Gazeta, Meduza,* and *Dozhd*. Their framing of the violence and persecution served several purposes: First, to rescue Chechen gay men and enlist diverse and powerful allies in this process. Second, to prompt investigations into the frequent violent repressions in Chechnya—not only against gay men but also against other vulnerable Chechens such as human rights activists, people accused of extremism, those executed without trial for drug use or minor crimes, and anyone else targeted by Chechen authorities as an enemy, a rebel, or otherwise as undesirable.

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[34] Valery Milonov is a member of the Russian Parliament who is famous for his anti-gay rhetoric. He was also the initiator of the anti-gay propaganda law in 2013. Here, the author ironically suggests that Milonov's struggle against "gay propaganda" is just for fun.

This second goal became more possible specifically because of the folding in of non-heteronormativity into the idea of modernity in the West through ideas, structures, and practices of homo(trans)nationalism. Journalists were not merely asking for justice for Chechen gays, they were mobilizing progress narratives by using this discourse strategically, since violence on the basis of sexual orientation invites certain affects that prompt action in Western neoliberal states if it is expressed in the right terms. The global neoliberal gay movement, which constitutes a part of nation-building project in all Western countries, has resources that can be accessed and employed through participation in particular gay discourses. These discourses are most effective when aligned with homotransnationalist projects, processes of racialization through queerness, and death-life frameworks that underline a specific conceptualization of modernity. Therefore, through this particular framing of the stories of persecution and refuge, the Russian oppositional media appealed to the exceptionalism of Western countries framing these places in utopian terms through the juxtaposition of persecution and liberation, there and here, Chechnya and the West.

The failures of the justice system and bureaucratic inefficiencies, also at the center of journalists' attention, resonate with what has been discussed by social and queer theorists as a way of governing so-called superfluous populations. The aim of this type of governing is to manage the superfluous population in such a way that it remains low-skilled, dependent on the system, always in proximity to death, and close enough to inflict bodily and psychological harm through violence and torture. The preoccupation with state repressions means that Chechens are likely to remain an anonymous mass of religious fanatics, maniacal brutes, and murderous leaders committing heinous crimes. The Russian government here is not only complicit; rather, it is an active agent in creating and maintaining these conditions.

Mbembe (2003) points to the fact that "colonies might be ruled over in absolute lawlessness," because savage life is just another form of animal life, and "they" behave like a part of nature (p. 24). As the media analysis in this chapter illuminates, both oppositional media and state-owned discourse portray the drive to persecute, torture, and kill as an inherently animalistic part of Chechen nature. The oppositional media points to it as a state of horror, but nevertheless finds an inherent logic to it. For

Chechnya, necropolitics manifests in the ways that Russian law fails to function on its territory and the ways in which Chechen citizens are submitted to excessive surveillance, torture, and premature death.

The figure of the Chechen gay refugee represents the violent excess of Chechnya as the racialized/ethnic Other. I suggest that this figure serves two purposes: first, it supports the oppositional media's call for Russia's intervention and control of Chechnya; and second, it creates an alternative image of homonationalist Russia. This image, of course, is just a fantasy, as Russia's current legal system and hegemonic political discourse are based on heteropatriarchy and exclusion of non-heteronormativity from modes of nationalism. However, by participating in global homonationalist discourses and exploiting the haunting figure of the Chechen gay man, oppositional media creates an image of the progressive and more "civilized" Russia, providing an alternative to heteropatriarchal nationalism.

With this discussion, I want to point our attention to the ways in which local politics of queerness and racialization are embedded in the matrix of global processes of sexual politics, such as homotransnationalism, queer migration, sexual orientalism, and global LGBT rights frameworks. Therefore, in this chapter, I propose that what is happening in Russia can be understood as a "haunting homonationalism." By this I mean that Russian oppositional media appeals to homotransnationalist politics through evoking the ghost of the gay Chechen as a signifier of the exceptionalism of neoliberal West, as a measure of homonormative queerness, and as a tool for sustaining the exceptional whiteness of the Russian ethnic subject. The homonationalism in Russia is haunting because LGBTQ people are not fully folded into the state at the current moment—they are seen as oppositional, but oppositional media is seeking for them to be folded in as a method of dealing with the supposed lawlessness, excessive religious devotion, authoritarianism, and repressiveness of racialized others.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, my goal was to examine how issues of gender and sexuality animate the positioning of Russia vis-à-vis the rest of the world, how representations of gender and sexuality intersect with Russian nationalism and racial/ethnic hierarchies, and how discursive and representational codes of gender and sexuality are employed in resistance to heteropatriarchal nationalism. My main thesis is that within Putin's Russia, the hegemonic political discourse on gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity is one of nationalist heteropatriarchy, which is then used to assert Russian exceptionalism against the West and justify colonial expansion. In this context, I identified three types of resistance: (1) scholarship and activism that seeks to decentralize white Russianness and build coalitions among post-Soviet diaspora; (2) Russian countercultural movements that satirize Russian heteropatriarchal nationalism; and (3) oppositional media that appeals to Western forms of homonationalism via marking Russia's racialized/ethnic Other as backwards, sexist, and homophobic.

In Chapter 1, I explored the history and development of gender and sexuality studies in the Soviet Union and Russia, establishing the socio-political context for codes of gender and sexuality in Putin's Russia (2000–Present). Providing a comprehensive literature review, this chapter demonstrated that theory and research on gender and sexuality in Russia has been significantly affected by political climates, especially those surrounding sexuality, gender, and nationalism in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. Most significantly, the processes of opening borders and international collaboration during the period of democratization in the nineteen-nineties ensured the establishment of gender centers and boosted research in gender and sexuality studies from non-medical, feminist, and LGBTQ perspectives. It also, however, brought orientalizing sexuality research to Russia that continued to "invent" (Wolff, 1994) Russian sexual difference from the West. As my overview of recent Russian gender and sexualities studies scholarship showed, the discipline of gender and sexualities studies during Putin's era faced a

broader decrease in Western support for research institutions in Russia, as well as a hostile political climate, censorship, and pressure on feminist and LGBTQ scholars and activists that forced many of them to leave the country. With the passing of the law in 2012 that required institutions and organizations collaborating with researchers in countries of Western Europe and North America to register as "foreign agents," gender and sexuality studies centers were fundamentally positioned as non-Russian entities, or as interfering with Russian national interests. In this situation, gender and sexuality scholarship became not only about education and research but also, importantly, about forms of activism, as activist and academic worlds continued to intertwine and share common goals. I discussed the conference "Fucking Solidarity: Queering Concepts On/From a Post-Soviet Perspective" as an example of collaborative work that unites feminist and LGBTQ scholars and academics across the post-Soviet region and diaspora working from anti-oppressive perspectives. As I argued, under the unfavourable political conditions in Russia (as well as, to varying degrees, abroad), feminist and LGBTQ scholars and academics have worked to challenge not only Russian repressive regimes and centralization of white ethnic Russians in research and activism but also Western-centric perspectives and solidarity projects that exotify, objectify, and orientalize sexualities in Russia and other post-Soviet countries.

Chapter 2 continued to explore the politicization of gender and sexuality in Russia and its intersections with Russian nationalism by examining the use of codes of gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity in popular culture representations. The cases analyzed in this chapter further illustrate what I have identified in Chapter 1 as the constructed "foreignness" of non-normative representations of gender and sexuality. Analyzing case studies of popcultural representations, I demonstrated that Russian popular culture of the Putin era is characterized by close links between nationalism and heteropatriarchy. These links are continually secured by the creation of iconic images of white Russian national heteropatriarchal masculinity and subservient femininity and the racial/ethnic subject. Additionally, iconic images are engrained by using sexualization, humour, and the Soviet ironic representational practice of *stiob* to increase circulation of hegemonic representations. Further, the case analysis of public scandals around "offensive" representations of sexuality—including the ballet *Nureyev*, the feature film *Matilda*, and the

parody video by the male students of Ulyanovsk Institute of Civil Aviation—showed that censorship and expressions of public contempt are routinely employed in Russia to regulate representations of gender and sexuality that contest the dominant symbols of nationalism and patriotism. Finally, I provided three examples of countercultural production by art-activists Voina, Pussy Riot, and Piotr Pavlensky, which target the link between heteropatriarchy and nationalism in three ways: (1) by playfully exposing and grotesquely exaggerating heteropatriarchal nationalism, (2) by revealing mechanisms of censorship and policing and creating alternative images of masculinity; and (3) by producing alternative images of public femininity that name and mock patriarchy, sexism, and homophobia. While these representations have importantly challenged repressive cultural mechanisms, they should also be viewed critically; some of them reproduce sexist and white-centric discourses by failing to decentralize masculinity and/or white Russianness. Finally, as I argued in this chapter, rather than seeing Russia as a place of radical cultural difference in relation to/against the West or as following (read: as lagging behind) the West in women's emancipation and gay liberation, we should take into account the ways that Western audiences are strategically considered in Russian cultural productions. Furthermore, we should understand that in Russian cultural spaces, historically and locally established representational practices—such as *stiob*—enmesh with representational practices borrowed from Western public spaces—such as the Riot Grrrl movement. I offered the case of Pussy Riot as a particularly poignant example of such strategic maneuvering between codes of gender and sexuality that can be read differently within Russia and through the Western gaze.

In Chapters 3 and 4, I turned to examining how gender and sexuality are employed for maintaining the symbolic borders of Russian national whiteness. Chapter 3 investigated how codes of gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity were exploited in political cartoons created by pro-Russian artists within the context of the Russia–Ukraine conflict (2014–Present). My focus was on sexist, transmisogynist, and racist representations created in response to Ukrainian geopolitical orientation towards the European Union. My semiotic analysis of the selected cartoons showed that artists used ideas of Russian white heteropatriarchal exceptionalism to rewrite the historically popular narrative of

sameness between Russian and Ukrainian nations, and to mark Ukrainians as both geopolitically confused and as a racial/ethnic Other of Russia. In the cartoons analyzed, this was expressed through representations of the historical figure of *khokhol* (Ukrainian peasant), signified by the "lowly" pleasures of the body, sexual and gender confusion, and proximity to Blackness and Muslim femininity. As I discussed, these representations also create a simplified vision of the world, in which Russia is a space of uncorrupted heteropatriarchal whiteness and European and North American whiteness is compromised by multiculturalism and decreasing sexual and gender normativity. This chapter also examined how these representational practices work to sustain the normalization of heteropatriarchy in the Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia and enable the development of tourism and infrastructure in these territories, and, therefore, should be understood as key tools of occupation.

Finally, Chapter 4 analyzed the discursive and representational practices in coverage by Russian oppositional media regarding the persecution of Chechen gay men in 2017. My discourse analysis of three oppositional media sources revealed three important tactics with which journalists sought to drive attention to the problem of persecution and lawlessness in Chechnya and aid in the rescue of persecuted persons: (1) identifying heteropatriarchy in Chechnya as an outcome of "pre-modern" Chechen culture and Islamic tradition through the racialization/ethnic Othering of Chechens, (2) producing exotification and mystification of Chechen gay men as "ghostly," and (3) adopting the narrative of "queer migration to liberation nation" (Murray, 2016) in stories of Chechen gay refugees. I identified these tactics as each being related to homotransnationalism (Haritaworn & Bachetta, 2016), the constantly changing processes of including homonormative queer subjects into the ideologies, structures, and practices of nation-making, and expanding North-Western imperialism and the ascendancy of whiteness on a global scale. The discourses of "haunting homonationalism"—as I named these practices of Russian oppositional media—work to resist Russian heteropatriarchal and homophobic regimes and involve Western neoliberal governments in the mission of rescuing Chechen gay men. However, as I argued, one dangerous outcome of these practices is the entrenchment of Russian white supremacy and the deepening of racialization/ethnic Othering of Chechnya.

My analysis in these four chapters has shown that questions of gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity are read as metrics of modernity and are used to symbolically and physically circumscribe the Russian nation and its frontiers. Russian nationalism and identities occur in a multifaceted cultural field which cannot be characterized as radically different from the West, nor can they be read as being in the process of "catching up" with Western ideas of multiculturalism and gay liberation. Criticizing heteropatriarchy in the Russian public sphere should be done cautiously and only when taking into account historically rooted cultural practices. As Julie Hemment (2015) cautions, Russian responses to sex in public culture require understandings of sex, gender, satire, and politics that are quite different from Western feminist approaches, and Russian uses of public sex and feminist critiques are enmeshed in global systems of power and political economies that redefine our relationship to and understandings of authoritarianism, liberalism, and capitalism. In this dissertation, I provided careful readings of cultural cases that take into account discursive and representational practices that are necessarily grounded in Russian history and culture, such as *stiob,* dead irony, and Russian traditions of representing race/ethnicity. At the same time, I highlighted how some feminist and sexual Russian subjects are recognized by Western audiences as being "global" or "universal"—for example, a riot grrrl, an LGBTQ activist, a gay Muslim refugee. There is a danger in reading these subjects as globally universal and, therefore, as already familiar to Western audiences: the reinscription of the West as progressive, liberated, and ethical. As I argued, these figures of representation in Russian cultural spaces are complex and are often created in a sort of, as Alexei Yurchak (2005) wrote, "double-speak" (p. 287): they are created simultaneously for the Russian audience and for the Western one and run the risk of recreating both Russian heteropatriarchal nationalism and global transnational hierarchies.

My dissertation offers an insight into the ways in which Western hegemonic homo(trans)nationalist discourses circulate in non-Western contexts. My readings of Russian nationalism, its engagements with intersecting issues of gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity, and the ideas and movements emerging in opposition to it propose an alternative to the civilizational narratives which mark Russia as lagging behind the West. By contrast, I suggest that Russian heteropatriarchal nationalism *is*

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Russian modernity in itself as Putin's Russia actively engages with homo(trans)nationalist discourses and positions itself as the space of exceptional white heteropatriarchy between the multicultural and gay-friendly West and the excessively violent racialized/ethnic Other.

In such geopolitical contexts, where variously marginalized people are subjected to oppressive powers of heteropatriarchal white-centric nationalism and, simultaneously, to neoliberal and neoimperial Western gaze and homotransnationalism, it is particularly important for scholars to work from intersectional, anti-oppressive perspectives and create coalitions that resist these simultaneous oppressions. Therefore, further scholarship should prioritize collaboration in research and activism among those working from a variety of post-Soviet spaces and with post-Soviet diasporas in the West. Any critical interrogation of the intersections between Russian nationalism and heteropatriarchal, racist, and xenophobic cultural representations must come with an analysis of the global processes which reinscribe the imperialist, white supremacist, and homotransnationalist ideologies that function in post-Soviet spaces.

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