

# **Guest editors' introduction: Central and Eastern European sexualities "in transition":**

Reflections on queer studies, academic hegemonies,  
and critical epistemologies

**TWENTY YEARS AFTER** the fall of state socialism in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), the academic field of Slavonic and East European studies is a burgeoning field of scholarship focused on what is commonly referred to as the "post-communist transformations." Although broad in geographical scope, "Slavonic studies" comprise a rather narrow area of study. Disciplinarily overshadowed by economics and politics, and perhaps history and literature, the Western "area studies" of Central and Eastern Europe are something of a monolith (dare we provocatively say?), not always as permeable to "critical studies" (e.g. cultural studies, sexuality and queer studies, critical and cultural sociology, postmodern historiography, to name a few) as one would want contemporary research to be. Although we may slightly exaggerate here (do we?), we do so with the purpose of draw-

ing the reader's attention to some glaring imbalances and divisions in the content, topics, methodologies, epistemologies, and disciplinary distribution within and across what is called "area studies"/ "Slavonic and Eastern European studies". Often values and issues concerning the "intimate" sphere of lives, and their tangible interconnectedness to the "post-communist transformation" are researched using quantitative methods (think Eurobarometer and other studies alike), which, although useful for shedding light on some aspects of the social life, they are not, according to us, able to deeply engage with the rich and complex issues at the national, regional, and pan-European levels.

Our particular concern is sexuality and queer studies in and of the CEE, an area where there remains a significant paucity of works (especially in comparison with other regions of Europe and the world). However, we are pleased to note that in the last years a number of articles and a few books have come to life (Štulhofer and Sandfort 2004; Weyembergh and Cârstocea 2006; Kuhar and Takács 2007; Baer 2009). Some other fascinating projects are also already underway, and coming very soon (e.g. Balogh and Fejes 2012)! It is not our intention, nor is it possible, to list all these articles and chapters here, but it was on this wave of growing interest in the sexualities and geographies of the Central and Eastern Europe, and the temporality of "post-communism" where we located our interdisciplinary collection *De-centring Western sexualities: Central and Eastern European perspectives* (Kulpa and Mizielinska 2011), and, most notably, the same wave is informing our inspiration for this current issue of *lambda nordica*, which we present to you with great pleasure.

### **Critical Epistemologies**

As is always the case when editing special issues or collected books, we have faced many challenges on the way, some of which we would

like to share here, as we believe this insight into the production process is a valuable learning point not only for us, but also more generally for the academic community of queer studies, Slavonic studies, and others. These challenges arise not only from the process of amalgamating an issue/volume, but also stem from the critical epistemological perspectives that form queer studies (or are at least rudimentary elements of *the* "queer studies" that are close to our hearts).

One of the major issues arising is the almost unquestioned acceptance of English as the *lingua franca* of the academic knowledge production process, and the problematic notions of "academic quality" and "proper knowledge." No doubt we do need to have a common language to share across borders, and to mutually inspire and learn from each other in all the various localities where we live, write, and do research. What is perplexing to us is the role of the "perfect pitch" of English, when the ability to "write in (ideal) English" becomes not only the tool of communication across dissimilarities, but also becomes the oppressive tool of controlling access to, and distribution of (academic) knowledge. (How many times have we, as non-native English speakers, experienced the feeling of being "put in place," ordered in some sort of invisible, yet surely not less real and oppressive, hierarchy, by a "simple" yet powerful reprimand of style: "The command of English is unsatisfactory/disappointing...") As non-native English speakers, editing a collection of articles written in English by mostly non-native English speakers, for a journal outside of the Anglo-American cultural/academic context, but remaining within the academic system that has adopted English as its language – the pressure "to get it right" is significant. Better still, writing in English is not only (nor primarily) a matter of different language (and thus, some sort of translation, so to speak), but writing in a different language is to construct/conceive knowledge differently.

This simple argument was first put forward decades ago by linguists and anthropologists such as, to start with, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf. The basic premise is that different languages denote different social worlds and different universes. Hence to write an (academic) article in another language is necessarily to face the challenge of differently constructing one's own argument and train of thoughts, as the line of reasoning and style of writing are altered, and the poetics of the (academic) text is modified. Is it possible for such "translation" / "transliteration" / "transposition" / "transformation" / "transient" / and other "trans-" processes to avoid impacting the outcome of *what* is written?

In light of these dynamics we ("the academics") need to reflect on what constitutes a "proper" expression of academic article/knowledge, and what it means, "to achieve quality" in academia. One fear we have here is the dangerous, as we see it, penetration of (neo) liberal language (and measures) into the academia. Other fears we have are focused on the "possibilities of speaking" by those who will not (or strategically would rather not) grasp English as their primary academic mode of expression. We are concerned about these "academic subjects"/writers who are already at disadvantaged positions/locations within the hierarchical structures of world-wide academic knowledge production systems because they are not from the "West," but from geographical, and thus intellectual "peripheries," from the "outskirts," from the "wilderness" of academia. That there is no balance between the over-dominant "West," and the "Rest" of the world, and that such an imbalance translates into unequal relations between (respectively) the "knowledge producer"/"theorist" and the "knowledge consumer"/"informant," we do not doubt. For example, in Slavonic studies, these imbalances translate onto the narration of "post-communist transformations" and "CEE in tran-

sition." But "transition" from what? And to what? These were the very first questions we asked ourselves when we started preparing this special issue of *lambda nordica*. We all are well familiar with the over-dominant discourse around Central and Eastern Europe, framing it as some sort of a "poor cousin" to the "West". After years of being kept in history's freezer (a.k.a. "communism") CEE is now, supposedly, catching up with normality (a.k.a. the "West"), after coming out of history's closet in 1989. We want to highlight the tensions between (the possibility of) CEE agency and "Western" structural enclosing of CEE in toxically imbalanced relations of passivity and (expectations of) activity. The "Western" (non-)recognition of the CEE geo-temporality in hegemonic Occidentalist discourses (e.g. through the rejection of state communism as Modernity, one of many projects of it, and alternative to the "Western" one, which is mounted as *the* one), such framing of relations between the two geo-temporal "destinations" poses a series of problems and questions that we should be suspicious about.

Finally, the last point to raise is *how* and *what* we, as editors and guest editors, do to counter such power imbalances and hegemonies? And here we need to succumb to admitting that we did not find any simple (are there ever any?) solutions to these troubles... Our attempts may be (and indeed, they have been) interpreted variously as "hit" or "miss". But we are not afraid of a failure, as we feel that there is a lesson to be learned from a fiasco. Still, sparking debate and inviting reflection from the reader *is* our success and motivation to further work. Embracing critical self-reflexivity, in the best feminist traditions (e.g. Anzaldúa 1990; Minh-ha 1990; Perreault 1995), is another mode of facing these challenges. Finally, using English "at the minimum" – i.e. ensuring that we write grammatically correctly, but are not trying to polish out all the "odd structures", "odd expres-

sions” and ”ESL issues” (”English as the second language”) – may be a strategy too. In other words, we suggest an active creolization of (English-speaking) academia, which includes hybridization, and doing/writing ”mimicry English”. (For more inspirations one may look to e.g. these works: Mignolo 1993; Mignolo 2000; Mignolo 2003; Bhabha 2004; Lal 2005; Kelertas 2006; Cohen 2007; Connell 2007; Cohen and Toniato 2009.) This not only relates to the use of English, but also to the process of editing and composing journals and books. For example, when editing this special issue we received *some* mixed reviews concerning *some* proposed articles, and we ourselves were also in *some* disagreement over *some* of them. For example, we argued over what is more important, the author’s ability to raise some crucial and so far unaddressed issues and examples, or (among other ”problematic issues” arising) the scholarliness of the articles, as supposedly evidenced by ”quotation politics” and the level of discussion of other texts and concepts? In some cases we decided in favour of the article. In other cases, we rejected – with hesitation and unease – what we found to be extremely interesting and motivating pieces of writing but which were perhaps not ready for publication as ”academic” articles. For us, it is a tough and saddening moment to arrive at, and we are by no means comfortable with the decisions. What we feel we can do, is to critically reflect upon our own editing practices in introductory articles like this one, and at least voice our concerns and share them with others in the academic communities we inhabit, hoping that our lesson will be useful and inspiring to others too.

## **Content**

Let us now briefly outline the thematic content of this special issue of *lambda nordica*, intended as an exploration of the relation(ship)s between the ”West” and the CEE within a context of sexual poli-

tics, sexual cultures, sexual practices, and sexual discourses. Some of the questions we initially asked authors to ponder concerned the relations of power between the "West" and the CEE: Does "Western" always necessarily mean "better"? Does CEE have/need to look only to the "West" in search of "role models" or are there other historical, geographical, cultural and political inspirations available to people in the CEE? We were interested in finding out if the relations between the two geo-temporal locations are always hegemonic and one-directional, and if not, what inspirations for sexual politics and queer studies could the "West" draw from the experiences and practices of the CEE?

Finally we also wondered about the local narratives and reflections on the so-called "post-communist transition"? What are the strategies of subversion and resistance to various discursive framings? And what is the role of material living conditions (and by implication, of neoliberal capitalism) in shaping relations between the "West" and the CEE? We asked some questions about history and what queer life was like under state socialism. How has it become forgotten/excluded from present narratives? And what remnants of history are present in modern day sexual politics in CEE?

The number of responses was overwhelming, and it was a privilege to be able to read about some of the projects in which people were engaged, spanning across all these and many other topics and themes. But, as always, in the end many people could not contribute to this special issue, as they would have wished. We do hope that they will find the time and space to finalise these ventures and to share them at some point as articles. Nonetheless, we present five articles that provide us with a great deal of complexity (of methodologies, of epistemologies, of disciplines, of topics), addressing many of the above questions, but also stirring them in new directions.

*Anastasia Kayiatos* boldly opens the issue by returning "to the primal scene of post-socialist transition – the year 1992 – in order to unpack the political and cultural baggage that the era's primary metaphor of shock therapy smuggles in from the preceding episteme of cold war." The author presents us with the case of Alla Pitcherskaia, a Russian lesbian woman seeking refuge in the USA, as the "convergence point" of the neoliberal economics, civilizational ideologies, post-cold war geopolitics, and historical "chronotype" of queer theory.

Also *Lukasz Szulc* in his article addresses questions of historiography, albeit of the LGBT&Q communities in Poland. He looks at the challenges non-English speaking communities face when adopting English names (and the historical narratives of development they inhabit). Szulc comes to the conclusion that the use and reuse of non-native vocabulary is a move pointing neither backwards nor forwards, as such understanding would presume a certain universalising normativity of the English-conceived historiography, disregarding the specificity of the local setting.

*Samuel Buelow* continues the debate on borders, but with the focus on the Europe-Asia dichotomy, and the role of Russia and other Others for non-heterosexual people in Kazakhstan. Buelow's anthropological commentaries are valuable as they shed some light on a country that hardly ever appears on the map of queer studies. His observations teach us an interesting lesson about the possibilities of alternative, and not always "Western," role models for the LGBT&Q communities in CEE.

With *Rasa Navickaite*, we head to Lithuania, where we are introduced to the drag queen performance of the pan-CEE Soviet-era symbol of femininity and fame – Alla Pugacheva. This case serves Navickaite to explore the ambiguities of Lithuanian sexual cultures and nationalist discourses together, as the performance reproduces



and subverts the (non)normative sexual and national structures of representation.

Finally, in the last article, *Katalin Kis* takes us on a journey through the "gay boom" in Hungarian television and cinema during the 2000s. By comparative examination of Hungarian cinematic production, Kis is able to capture the dominant narrations of non-normative sexual subjectivities. She also elaborates on the tensions between Hungarian and "Western" modes of representation, further proliferating our understandings of the connexions and alterations, frictions, abrasions and familiarities between the "West" and CEE.

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