

8 ‘Home is where the cat is’

The here-there of queer (un) belonging

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Introduction

This contribution revolves around our experiences within the queer and feminist framework in constructing solidarities, transforming them, and sometimes watching them fade or reconfigure. Our histories are interconnected, since we are both activists, and beyond other more personal identifications, we both identify as lesbian, and queer. Simona’s activities consisted of, among other, art teaching at the National University of the Arts in Bucharest and in less formal contexts, organising contemporary art spaces and groups (Platforma Space, FemCAV), events such as workshops, performances, exhibitions and talks opening the discussions on relevant social themes, while Ramona was navigating different feminist and queer groups (both informal and NGOs), in search of belonging and ways to self-educate on issues that never passed through the Romanian education filters and later on include these “new” dimensions in her incipient research. Due to our age difference and to the fact that, within queer temporalities, ten years represent, from a generational standpoint, a generation of activism and political transformations, we do think of ourselves, in a sense, as being formed—as queer persons starting to get awareness of our surroundings—within different generational spans. In short, and for the sake of simplification, these generations could be formulated in terms of the *pre-2001* and *post-2001* context¹ in Romania, 2001 being the year that saw the repeal of article 200 from the Romanian Criminal Code, in preparation of Romania’s coming inclusion into NATO and process to join the European Union. While all public LGBTQAI+ activism could only be developed locally after 2001, the years prior come back to Simona’s memory through deep layers of stigma, secrecy and random discoveries.

Feminist and queer organising was sporadically present in the interval 2001–2010, and we would argue that 2010–2011 was the most visible turning point for Bucharest-based activism in terms of groups and collectives being formed, public spaces becoming available for the presentation of queer cultural products (Dumitriu, 2020), as well through a rise in official NGO activity, a subtle rise in number of queer events and their public. We were

both active in different contexts during this turning point, and, unbeknown to each other, we had started a process of education and self-education, within local, Romanian activist circles, or in academic and international contexts (mostly Western-centred). While we had glimpses of each other over the years, our work and life partnership started in 2014, and it often functioned between the realms of the private and the public (through public performances, or through our involvement in academia or transnational networks developing specific projects, queer workshops, feminist meetings, conferences, etc.). Very briefly described above, we consider our activities, as well as our interactions as partners in life and thought, as building stones for site-specific activist selves, constructed in a very specific, often stigma-laden local environment which led to, in our case and the case of other persons around us, a need to search for, build, cling to and value safe spaces and groups that would comfort and offer a counteracting environment of respite, education and radical strength.

We are now positioning ourselves at a turn of our activist identities, triggered by our relocation in Sweden in February 2018. Apart from economic reasons, our move to Sweden had another dimension based on a vague, indescribable desire to experience “queer freedom”, in a country that our parents, then ourselves, mythologised as a socialist, queer utopia.

Sweden and other Nordic countries seem *exceptionally* good at creating the image of a safe queer land, although this image nonetheless hides other struggles: those of queer asylum seekers who must *prove* their sexuality (see Akin, 2019), those of queer people of colour that are tokenised in various projects depicting inclusivity and diversity, those of poor queers that are made invisible by the State, for example. This homotolerant image of the Nordic states is one of the mechanisms for advancing homonationalist and racist discourses (Liinason, 2020: 115) in line with the current tendencies of right-wing policies and parties which are on the rise across Europe. Nordic exceptionalism can thus be analysed through the concept of homonationalism which is seen by Puar as a way in which nation-states redefine their positions as protectors of queerness, of “(some) homosexual bodies”, in a shift of the connections between capitalism, the very notion of state and different sexualities (Puar, 2013, 2017). In this way, homonationalism deepens the existent forms of exclusion (e.g., the “progressive” West vs. other spaces), also contributing to the institutionalisation of sexualities (see how categories of non-normative sexualities are constructed and defined by states in asylum seeker cases) and ways to exercise the power relationships between nation-states and individuals.

A little over four years into our adventure, we experience something quite different: the loss of an activist self, an acute feeling of un-belonging as our ties to our own queer community, back in Romania, slowly dissolve, and as we feel less and less that we have the right to get our voice heard in the struggles we left behind, while realising that we still have to belong somewhere in the new surroundings. Yet, we feel estranged from the queer history of

Sweden. We feel solidarity with fights that LGBTQAI+ persons are leading within other diasporas, and in this feeling, we also realise that our experience and the history of our own bodies may find a place, but the process is a slow one, of careful learning and continuous repositioning of privilege.

Belonging, in essence, can be measured in terms of affection, topological certainty, and language. We exist the most in the realm of our *lägenhet* (transl. apartment), as the poster stating “*Home is where the cat is*” is the last object we move every time we move from one place to the next, together with our cat.

We exist in Romanian at home and with a few good friends, over the phone with our mothers, in English and Swedish at work. As English is still our main language to express our soul to friends that do not speak Romanian, and Swedish will probably never be more than a vehicle for work, the O Horizon² of each new friendship is hard rock, rather than easy soil, with nuances and emotions being hard to convey. Within that, the Romanian diaspora is a “little Romania”³ in which traditions and the sanctity of family become walls of separation from Swedish homonationalism (Puar, 2013, 2017).

All these questions

Bearing this in mind, we are asking ourselves (and not only) how does one transition from an activist *locus* to another and how could this function within two very different systems in terms of history, identities construction and types of solidarity? How to transmute our criticism and positionality as we practiced it in Bucharest to Sweden, and to the city of Malmö? Moreover, how can we imagine another kind of feminist, queer movements within the Western and Nordic contexts that could be both critical and engaging without obviously setting aside history and differences whenever these traits might become inconvenient for the neo-liberal sense of diversity?

We will respond to these questions in a vignette-like manner, as this contribution is primarily built on continuous discussions, snippets of life and reinterpretations of moments that affected us and shaped our understandings regarding solidarity, humanity, belonging and *lagom*-ness (where *lagom* means *moderate*). This is done through an (auto-)reflexive methodology, an autoethnography which combines our dialogues and memories (retrosexuality) on past situations which reverberate in our commonly lived present.

Theoretical background

This contribution draws from transnationalism as the central theory; more specifically, we closely follow the lines of transnational feminisms, which interrogate the hierarchies existing both within a particular national frame

and an international one (Chowdhury, 2009: 53). Direct experiences with how hegemonic Western academia and “peripheral” academia and the way feminisms, queerness and solidarities are constructed, discussed and reconstructed with relation to the nation-state and the East/West divide is one of the meanings we attach to the term “transnational”. While being aware of the critique of power relations between the West and “the rest” (Hall, 1992), we function within both frames of reference: as Eastern European scholars, artists, activists and as migrants, academics, artists in the European North.

Through our work, we seek to rescale our personal and local experiences and add them to the collective memory reformulated through the lenses of transnationalism, i.e.: “not as a horizontal spread or as points or regions on a map but as a dynamic operating at multiple, interlocking scales and involving conduits, intersections, circuits, and articulations” (De Cesari & Rigney, 2014: 6).

“Who are these persons, De Cesari, Rigney?” Simona asked. “Why are you referencing them? The transnationalism thing is tricky, look closer: [sending a link to Transnational Feminism article by Asha Nadkarni]”.

Because we are aware that transnational discourses from the Global South are usually erased from mainstream global feminist discourses thus maintaining the hegemonic relationship between Western and Euro-centric academia (Chowdhury, 2009: 72), we have developed a practice in which we try to read, self-educate and reference bodies of work coming, as much as possible, from outside the Western/North American contexts.

As Patton and Sánchez-Eppler argue, when related to queer identities construction with regard to diasporic experiences, the focus is shifting from this constant process of construction or failure of construction to how the queer bodies reinvent and renegotiate themselves between the new and old “homes” thus making movement, translocation, theoretically relevant for sexualities studies (Patton & Sánchez-Eppler, 2000: 2–3).

Queer sexualities function, in this case, as a mediator between “homes”, the diasporas and the nation-states and offer an opportunity to connect different scholars, activists (all diasporic subjects) and their discourses, in attempts to question and reinterpret nationalism and the construction of identities in different contexts (Cruz-Malavé & Manalansan, 2002: 2). The relationship between national/local and regional or global queer communities is essential when discussing the way solidarity takes shape both within and outside designed borders. In this light, our personal intervention subscribes to this framework as it aims to address the commonalities and the identities of activist and artistic groups we have been a part of, through intersections between Romania and Sweden, between East and West, across what *seems* to be the unified idea of solidarity.

Methodology

Our contribution is based on dialogues and the way we work in our artistic practice: a constant back and forth, an exchange of self-reflections and thoughts on our positions triggered by our relationship with the outside world, be it through the form of its institutions, persons, bureaucratic systems, academia or different groups and movements. This approach led us to use autoethnography in this study as well. It is for the first time when we use it in an academic piece.

While searching for a method that could better fit this contribution, we kept in mind the fact that queer autoethnography was formed as a reaction to existing mainstream oppressive knowledge that also functions in the same oppressive manner when it comes to research methodologies (Jones & Harris, 2018: 4). We decided to use our own experiences as data and transfer them into the form of vignettes, trying to make sense of how *movement* affected our activist selves.

This process, for us, and following Halberstam's arguments inspired by Foucault, also means that we work by avoiding external measurements for the specificities of our experiences (Halberstam, 2011: 12). Another dimension that we avoid is perpetuation of the hegemonic practices towards queerness that are mainly constructed within and by the neoliberal framework. In their introduction to *Queer Futures: Reconsidering Ethics, Activism, and the Political*, the editors highlight the importance of addressing the exclusionary practices not only with regards to queer theory but also to the products themselves (Yekani et al., 2013: 10), be it artistic interventions, academic articles or publications and other mediums in which the authors construct their arguments in a self-reflective manner.

By making use of vignettes as a way for constructing this contribution, we are offering a glimpse into the *exclusionary moments* some queer migrants might face. This concept usually refers to an intersection of marginalised identities and how these function for migrants excluded by their families or their sending societies, for example, as well as how these persons manage to negotiate their identities within the receiving societies (Guðmundsdóttir, 2018: 37).

Starting from this idea, we propose another look, stemming from our retrospective thoughts and experiences, this time through another nuanced mechanism: while apparently these short snippets of our lives show the openness of Swedish society concerning queerness and creating a false impression of belonging, this is, in fact, a way of under-representing the core issues of the liberal model transposed to queerness. The exclusionary moments at place in those examples were the ones left in the background: using queerness as a tool for gentrification, for furthering socio-economic disparities, for rainbow-washing, etc. In other words, while some queers may be involved in different projects and types of work, some of their peers are left behind, sometimes silenced and deemed invisible by the same

projects and work, as if being *too* critical might hurt the *progressiveness* and the *positivity* required to achieve the “safe” and “good” way of liberal life.

These exclusionary moments were sometimes initiated by us, in a form of self-exclusion. In this respect, at some points, we choose to opt out; *opting out* is another concept at work in this contribution and we borrow it from Mari Ruti (2017). Through our journey together, we could not help but to observe and react to the double standards and the positivity pushed by institutions and groups dealing with queer issues that had the role to advance a “false cheerfulness” (Ruti, 2017: 2) that deems any critical attitudes as undesirable and leaves aside any issue that might bring up “negativity” into question.

Consensus and non-confrontational attitudes are key elements of success, at least in the mainstream discourses, yet we often choose to reject these attitudes as being superficial and sometimes dangerous for other persons left behind. The opting out is a strategy of defeating *cruel optimism*, that is: “the hope that our relentless efforts (say, our efforts to fit into neoliberal society) will bring us the love, intimacy, success, security, harmony, or financial reward—in sum, the good life—we crave even when they are extremely unlikely to do so” (Ruti, 2017: 29).

Looking back, or as Shahani (2011) calls it, making use of “*queer retrosexuality*”, is our preferred way of work, facilitating both understanding and drawing meaningful (political) reflections while offering time to step back and reorganise our feelings and thoughts over the emotionally charged situations we refer to. Our failures and nostalgia, as well as some achievements, are rethought and reconsidered with the help of the presented vignettes that offer only a glimpse into what belonging and (un)belonging feel or felt at particular moments on time in our shared experiences.

Context(s)

Romania

I remember Stonewall, but not my sister's story

– a saying we wrote a few years ago, and keep repeating to this day, while living in a country with a different experience of its queer activist past.

Our activist story in Romania starts from us knowing, through social positioning, what tasks we could perform as part of a queer or LGBTQAI+ movement which was not devoid of its problems.

Belonging was clear and phenomenological: we belonged to certain well-known geographies, to specific groups with which kinship was possible as such, we felt we had the support to start building spaces that were queer,

or queer moments in the academia, or to act out our presence for events supporting specific queer or LGBTQAI+ causes. We had our paths through our city of residence, we were informed of and in contact with groups and persons active in various other CEE (Central and Eastern European) countries and the Balkans or organising in other bigger Romanian cities.

We also found ourselves, at times, to be critical towards more mainstream feminist or LGBTQ initiatives, although it is quite difficult to completely consider mainstream even such bigger NGOs, as they are comparatively small, *niche* fighting against the much stronger winds of Romanian politics. Even the few established Romanian LGBTQ NGOs are fragile institutions in the public realm. Unfortunately, their usual strategy of counteracting public fragility is to fit into heteronormative frames, discouraging or not promoting activist presences that would steer them away from a heteronormative conventionality. This is a standard critique that can be brought forth globally to organisations mainstreaming LGBTQ rights, but one that, although applicable in Romania's case, needs to be nuanced by the local postcolonial, homophobic context.

Our standpoint, as activists and as queer bodies in a hyper religious, homophobic and racist peripheral-European country characterised by poverty, corruption and by the aftereffects of overlapping imperialist systems, was to search for or contribute to building safer spaces that were an alternative to both mainstream NGOs and to the daily grind.

The in/visibility of our queer or lesbian identity in Romania is multi-layered. Many persons there, ourselves included, practice *visibility*, or the trope of *being out* in a fragmented manner: while being visible in activist circles, or in some of our work circles, or becoming *visibilised* in public sphere (see Gopinath, 2002: 151–152) through cultural products or due to various behavioural or appearance cues—always with a certain degree of negative consequences—we, as queer cisgender women, slipped in and out of visibility with regards to our families, and with regard to having a weighty enough voice and presence in the small mainstream activist world. Thus, we have positioned most of our implications in public activism within the already-classical area of *killjoy* dissonance (Ahmed, 2017), focusing in an often separatist way on activities made by and centred on persons identifying themselves as women or as non-binary.

In Bucharest, we frequented a small group of queer women who met weekly around cooking and separatist women and transgender only reading circles.⁴ As part of their strength and importance for grassroots activism in Romania, they delimited themselves often from the mainstream activist world. Progressively, fragments of their speech, knowledge and practices got nevertheless swallowed and appropriated by newer, stronger queer-leftist organisations.

Before deciding to move from Bucharest to Malmö, our position had become that of *opting out* of many of these new initiatives, just as we had *opted out* from the more mainstream ones. Not because we saw ourselves as

paragons of virtue but simply because we had lost friends in activist conflicts, or we had witnessed the silencing of persons we had respect towards. Our *opting out* was an invisible gesture, a form of symbolic absence, one of retreat into personal experience.

Even if some of our paths diverged slowly some years ago, many of the persons from the reading circle still feel like chosen family, like a distant bond impossible to break. When thinking around *imagined communities* (see Browne & Ferreira, 2018), this is what we imagine, perhaps, finding again, or building again: a momentum of commonality, a group committed to each other and to a certain cause, strength in critical positioning, while also having the capacity to work in a project-building manner, in wider networks, in collaboration with other like-minded groups or organisations.

Life goes on, as we have now become observers, switching the “here” and “there” in our mind, and still trying to find a correct, ethical methodological frame for our possible involvement in our current “here”—and from our current “here” to our former “here”, which is becoming a “here-there”. How can we interact back in our Romanian queer and transgender community, a very concrete, not imagined one, made of people in Romania and people in the diaspora? Why do we feel that we “ran from our responsibility” to look for a somewhat better situation, and where lies the legitimacy, when it comes to us intervening into the situations “there”, “at home”? Will we ever find answers to these questions, as we look for models and possible inspiration in other diasporic activists? How stuck are we in the meantime and how does this affect our attempts at contributing to the *imagined community* from “here”?

Vignettes

The recipe for lentil stew

After we had an art residency at MuseumsQuartier Vienna during which we met one of the financiers, Ramona decided to apply for funding to organise what would become the first openly queer and feminist conference hosted by the University of Bucharest (Queer Feminist SEE⁵ International Conference, November 17–19, 2017). Since the grant was small, we decided that all our project management and implementation efforts will be not remunerated so that the funds will be directed to paying the visa fees, accommodation and transportation for the participants who needed them (over 30 persons).

Catering options were expensive (and not tasty), therefore we also decided to cook for the three days lunches and dinners, having our mothers and friends from activist circles (but not exclusively) help us with buying, transporting, and cooking the food. This whole process, in which people worked voluntarily, was indeed a clear sign and example of solidarity that might be less understood in the larger Western context where if not remunerated, at least the prestige of an event or a university might be the main factor

in deciding to lend a hand in an event or another. The lentil stew and the smoked eggplant salad were some of the stars of the menu—and the secret in the lentils was indeed sumac.

But the process of securing a conference room was more time and (mental) resource consuming than the actual cooking. After an initial (cautious) expression of support before finding out that the project was granted financing, a back-and-forth with the director of Ramona's Doctoral school followed: Ramona was told that since she is in the last year of her PhD studies, she should concentrate on the thesis and not on organising conferences. She was then offered advice on transforming the three days conference into a few hours' colloquium; the decisions of not asking for a conference fee and that of paying for some transportation costs were criticised, since "prestigious events" would never offer travel grants for participants.

Although Ramona only requested a conference room in her Faculty (Journalism and Communication Studies) and no other logistical help, in the end, the request was refused, as the Doctoral school director decided that they cannot be involved with organising the event, invoking the lack of human resources and logistics. We finally managed to secure a conference room and a kitchen in the Faculty of Sociology's building, but the covert homophobia of the previous situation continued to linger as an after taste for a while.

Of toilet rolls and silencing

This story is only partially ours to tell, and it needs to begin with its poetic end, or rather with the conclusion that love, and solidarity, are expressed in toilet rolls sometimes. Some years ago, in Bucharest, Platforma Space hosted two months of political theatre, a festival organised by a leftist, socially driven theatre NGO that became stronger each year. Indeed, such theatre is needed in the world, yet artists often speak for or instead of the under-represented, often in well-praised plays that tackle topics such as work, migration, poverty or racism. We learned to take such projects with a grain of salt.

Three of Platforma's collective at that time, namely Simona and artists Ileana Faur and Marian Dumitru, were the ones spending time to keep the space open during production, rehearsals and performances, making sure there will always be clean water to drink, tea and coffee to brew, and toilet paper, amenities always bought from their own pockets, as is the custom in some self-sustained spaces. Somehow, in Simona's mind, the group had equally meagre means to sustain themselves—which she believed until one day when someone else said only: *oh, you are so naïve, they have received (insert considerable amount by local standards) as support from (insert national cultural funding authority) and (insert second, a bit smaller amount) from (yet another funding authority)*. She came back to dusty Platforma, where, with just a few more performances, the political theatre season was

nearing its end, and checked the funding authorities' websites. Marian and Ileana were there too. They looked at each other and said: *well, they had all this money all along. At least they could have bought some supplies of toilet paper, instead of eating up ours all the time.* The toilet paper thus became a symbol by which the members of the collective would measure solidarity. While it is, of course, a cheap and necessary good, at the same time, given the precarious situation of Platforma and the fact that a well-funded NGO had access to the space, and its resources free of charge, without sharing anything in return, helped the humble toilet paper to achieve this symbolical status. It also became a symbol of economic precarity edging on poverty, as the collective kept the doors to the space open to other initiatives, even when their own economic resources were nearing the end.

As a side note, the same political theatre group, later that year, silenced a now well-known Romanian Roma stage and film actress, by speaking up instead of her within the scopes of a play she had written, that dealt with her own life experiences, which lead to one of the least mendable wounds in recent Romanian intersectional activism.

Fast forward seven years after, the birthday celebration of a queer friend in a studio/gallery space in Malmö, with someone requesting on Facebook a supply of toilet paper for the party. To close a loop, as a symbolic gesture, although our finances in Sweden were still relatively scarce, we arrived at the party with a substantial pack of the best paper sold by the closest supermarket. Jokingly, one of our friend's friends commented: wow, there is so much toilet paper now from everyone! Is this a white people's thing, to bring so much toilet paper, or a corona thing? The times, and the context, had indeed changed.

Sweden

How to transmute our criticism and positionality as we practiced it in Bucharest to Sweden, and to the city of Malmö?

After moving to Malmö, *queerness*, or *transnational symbols of queerness* (Klapeer & Laskar, 2018), have been anchor points for our journey here: from meeting, confiding and trying to live and work with and around persons from the queer, transgender and enby spectrum, either Swedish or belonging to various diasporas. Our chosen extended family here in Sweden includes us and a friend, also Romanian, and transgender. He was our point of entry into Swedish society from before we even moved to our current home in Sweden. We met our chosen relative through a common friend living in Romania. That friend, also an activist, put us all in contact and we have tried to be a system of support for each other ever since.

In Malmö, we (together or separately) got invited to speak a few times by institutions curious about our queer experience "back home", in a very clear attempt at a pedagogical/ going through the motions, inclusion of diversity in their programming, then never heard from said institutions again after the

talks. We also emailed several times the Malmö office of the main Swedish LGBTQ rights organisation, which boasted a programme of welcoming newly arrived queer persons, without ever getting an answer in return.

Fortunately, we found a few groups of activists, a local library and a small local bookshop where we could look in, with respect and composure, at the work that is being done by QTBPPOC for themselves, often in a separatist manner, at the work done by fat queers, Muslim queers and so on. We further looked for, and never found, dedicated queer places or spaces of gathering beyond a large array of parties that function as networking devices, and often as places of developing activism or cultural projects. As we are not party goers, where should we go, in this post-queer society?

We also learned that “here” things do not have the truth to matter simplicity usually found “back home”, where homophobia and transphobia, racism and nationalist-religious feelings melt together in the public realm, in an obvious manner, while various groups that are discriminated against usually perpetuate the other types of discrimination against each other. “Here” is shrouded in all the right words, but the feelings behind public space politics and behaviours are never clear to our means of interpretation, never decipherable with the keys we have amassed so far from our readings, personal and joint experience, to the point where to us, it may look like they are non-existent. These *right words* are the most up-to-date terms in activism which stem from grassroots experiences and are soon after used by large Pride NGOs in their discourses around Pride. For instance, when the city of Malmö organises different talks in the frame of Pride month, relevant topics are usually touched: the marginalisation of different groups, critiques about the participation of the police in the Pride march, anti-capitalist critiques about the commodification of Pride, or discussions about how the initial meaning of these events was lost. At the same time, all the critiqued elements co-exist with their critique, which may be seen as a paradox of the right to free speech: for instance in 2021, in a small, corona-regulated, march at Malmö Stadion, a group of QTPOC literally “ambushed” the police by walking in front of them with banners denouncing police violence towards people of colour, yet this did not convince the City, nor Pride organisers, to refuse the presence of the Police in the 2022 march. On the contrary, apart from police employees, a group of prison employees (Kriminalvården) also joined the 2022 march. Even when it comes to self-defined radical organisations such as Malmö’s *Rosa/Svart*, things remain within the paradox sphere. Instead of creating alternative movements, these groups are still present in the march, ending the Pride parade with their van blasting some antifascist songs between a flood of latest pop hits.

As per the adage *better with the evil you know than with the one you don’t*, we counter-intuitively think, sometimes, that old, well charted hatred may just be better than blankly staring into an abyss that may consist, under its shiny surface, of any unimaginable kind of hatred or instrumentalisation. Better for what? Unclear, yet this needed mentioning.

We even crossed the bridge and went to Copenhagen Pride, where we experienced our first taste of a huge, mostly corporate, slow moving, over-boozed street spectacle that felt strange, in the absence of history. A pride-separatist alternative, Nørrebro Pride, was taking place at other dates and on other routes than the city-organised Copenhagen pride. It centres on the experience of BPOC queers, and offers an ethical response to the bigger corporate event. In Malmö, we are lending our voice to some of the fights queer persons in the city can be in solidarity with—such as anti-deportation work, no borders work, anti-racism work. We are also lending our body to the overall head count of official pride.

At the same time, we started to understand the emotional support of living within a diaspora, as many of our closer friends are indeed Romanian persons living in Malmö. Worldwide, the Romanian diaspora is a political force able to change—and changing—politics internally. Several million people have left the country to work and have taken as much as possible of their homes with them, from Christian orthodox churches to Romanian shops selling familiar name brands, to bus routes connecting like a lifeline the home country to the country of residence, bringing in and out relatives, goods, packages from home. We receive such packages from our mothers every few months and each time we open them, full of unnecessary goods and food laboured with love, *distance* blurs a little.

Evidently, diasporas move their beliefs and class differences with them to their countries of residence, where these sets of beliefs and statuses get confronted and transformed by factors pertaining to the new social context they encounter. Within the Romanian diaspora in Sweden, for instance, queer and transgender visibility are conditioned, as the risks of hypervisibility in a smaller community are harder to assess. On the other hand, queer or transgender members of the Romanian diaspora are a direct extension of home, and as such, become our strongest connections in the new land, as we bridge for each other the distance from “here” to “there”. These elements could very well be at the core of an “alternative construction of diaspora” as Gayatri Gopinath (2005: 194) proposes, where the whole concept of diaspora is centred on the queer sexualities dismissed by nationalist diasporas or states.

And so it is that we have extended our chosen family in the queer Romanian diaspora to include us, our cat, our transgender Romanian friend based in Malmö, and his cat.

Vignettes

The rainbow flag

We were encountering the rainbow flag everywhere in the city, for Pride week, even since 2017, then again after our definitive move to Malmö. At first, seeing the rainbow, or more rarely, transgender flag, randomly in the

city, hanging from windows or balconies, did have on us a special effect, giving us the sense that we *belong* to an unknown, uncharted, *imagined community*. This was not a sight that was familiar to us; in Bucharest, that would be a most rare and exquisite demonstration of bravery, to keep the rainbow or transgender flags visible at one's window, something that would lift one's heart to unimaginable heights but also marking the living space of someone that we knew in real life, a friend or fellow activist.

Or Ramona hanging the rainbow flag out of the windows of the main university building in Bucharest, while sitting on the windowsill, smoking and talking to some colleagues, during the times smoking indoors was allowed but the flag not quite. As long as the university brings into discussion *objectivity* towards issues and values, the flag will not be anchored and all that is deemed acceptable will remain in the form of annual Christmas trees and reminders of Orthodox saints' celebrations on the institution's social media.

Whilst in Malmö, seeing various flags in various places seemed a more *casual transnational marking of queerness* (Klapeer & Laskar, 2018: 526), while also charting our paths through the city that we were discovering. To a large extent, a few years into our move, this *imagined community* remains unknown and uncharted to us. If, by moving to Sweden, we were envisaging us, perhaps with an ease which pertains to our privilege as white peripheral Europeans, almost as if moving directly to a *queer nation* (Ibid.: 529), one which had progressed beyond recognition towards a space of safety which extended to its territorial borders, we were in fact moving to a handbook case of homonationalism.

Luck, activism, or maybe just the rules

We moved to Malmö after Simona received a contract to work for two years as a curator at a local gallery. The work contract was by no means generous, at only 40% employment, yet we took the chance that was offered, as a fortunate event, were lucky enough to find a second-hand rental with the help of an acquaintance and decided to move. Immediately after arriving in Malmö, we applied to Skatteverket (the Swedish Tax Agency) for what is essential for existing in Sweden: a Swedish personal number. In our application, we argued that Ramona had moved as a *sambo*, a live-in partner, as we had lived together for two years prior to moving and were able to prove it with a document issued in that sense by the administration of our apartment building in Bucharest.

We feared the worst: we hadn't lied by any means but were doubtful that any Swedish authority would take into consideration a document coming from Romania, even if legally translated. The only way Ramona could have started a life "here" was by getting a personal number, a real, not temporary one, recognising her as Simona's partner. And surely enough, our proof of

cohabitation was considered sufficient by our case worker whom we never met and both of us received personal numbers.

Nonetheless, to our close friend from the queer Romanian diaspora, the fact of us getting our personal numbers with such simplicity was nothing short of a miracle: many de facto cohabiting heterosexual couples, coming from Romania, had been subjected to rejections upon rejections, sometimes taking years. Was it not the same for us simply because we had the more proper documents, or was it that the case worker, let's even imagine a queer person themselves, understood somehow our difficulty, our need for a moment of peace, and decided to go beyond any eventual (and often present) xenophobia-based beaurocratisation and grant us, as EU citizens, the much-needed figures? Or was it merely another example of homonationalism at work?

Was it perhaps a decision based on class, as Simona was coming as a middle-class, cultural worker, while others perhaps did not? With just a simple exercise of imagination, especially after learning about the grinding that everyone else was subjected to with even the best documents in hand, we could picture ourselves as a possible success story of homonormativity, the nice, middle class-y lesbian couple that people in more "advanced" societies can easily be lenient towards even if more xenophobic clichés could point otherwise.

With relative ease, which was to be dismantled quite soon in the years to come, we had found our *imagined community* in a person whom we were never to meet, our case worker. Did they have a rainbow flag on their window? Or were they simply a correct office worker and nothing else had learnt in our favour or against?

"Looking for more women and non-binaries"

The above was heard by one of us during a meeting with a Swedish gentrifier. At one moment in early 2019, one of us, together with a performance artist (who happened to be queer and not born in Sweden) got an appointment with a city employee who also runs a cultural NGO famous for driving a well-known one-day street festival in Malmö. We were, at that point, together with a small group of artists, looking for a possible space to rent for multiple cultural uses, and the performance artist had heard of this blonde Swedish cisgender man in his 50s, who apparently was a sort of middle person between a large company which owns land and industrial buildings in semi-central Malmö and the eventual cultural and artist groups looking for cheaper rental spaces for their activities. Prior to our meeting, we did not look too much into who the man was, simply because we had considered him a real estate agent, or a representative of this large Malmö-operating company. Our purpose was to ask what kind of buildings were there to rent, what would be the price per square metre, and if we could perhaps visit the

buildings and see what was available, while also being aware, and wary of the fact that the area we were looking into, situated between the Rosengård and Persborg train stations, was planned to undergo heavy gentrification soon. In brief, we were mostly curious to see what was on offer.

The man received us and quite fast established himself as the deciding factor of whether we would have access or not to any building in that industrial area and to which building. He was by no means an estate agent, but a cultural agent who informed us that we would have to submit a cultural proposal to him, and then he would decide if we would get any space from the ones available, at what monthly rent, and under which conditions. He boasted himself as a factor of progress and praised the intentional gentrification behind his actions: he had already established several Malmö independent cultural initiatives in the area (all with a visible queer component) with the same method and was looking for more “women and non-binaries” to, as he said, counteract the fact that there were so many men in the area. Besides one big, dominant factory and its various adjoining buildings, that area has many car wash and repair businesses owned by non-European migrants, several Muslim and Christian prayer houses, and is generally inhabited by racialised persons.

To us, this was a crystal-clear example of how rainbow-washing and gentrification can join in discriminative actions and to this day our interaction with the man is a shocking display of how so-called cultures of inclusiveness can function. In a sense, this vignette is a cautionary tale, if there ever was one: we learned to *opt out* once more, obviously. But we also learned that projects with radical intentions can befriend the devil if that grants them access to space and lowers the rent.

A conversation at work

This happened to one of us: I speak Swedish moderately, enough to get by in most interactions, with an accent that travels from Paris to Iași in the span of a minute. So, it is obvious that I am “not from here”. Which makes people curious sometimes—although for the many white Swedes I work with curiosity is manifested in truly queer ways. And one person was so curious as to start the following dialogue:

– *So, were you born in Sweden? (???what?)*

Me: *Well, from my random Swedish you would guess no, right?*

– *Well, you can't know... So, where do you come from?*

Me: (states country)

– *Oh... (face gets a bit shrivelled) I had many from your country when I was teaching SFI.⁶*

Me: ...

– *And do you think you'll be staying here?*

Me: (apologetic, explanatory, timid) *Well, I think so, since I work here and have my family here, and so on...*

– Oh (says person who does not know me), yes, do stay, it would be so cool to have you!
(Thanks?)

Concluding remarks

Through this contribution, we showed a few of the similarities and the differences between our subjectivities and activist selves in Romania and Sweden. We have also inquired on how Romanian queer diaspora might be constructed within the new surroundings and acceptances of queerness. While the struggles differ because of the contexts and country-specifics, we could find some connections between the queer Romanian scene and the Swedish one: in/visibility functions in both cases but on different levels (there is still a tendency of leaving other voices behind), the commoditisation of queer related events and issues is more pregnant in the more neoliberal scene (Nordic/Western area) but other areas are rapidly reaching this stage, the *inclusive* discourses can sometimes be a code name for something else (gentrification, choosing the “desirable migrant”, dismissing a group as “too radical” in relation to the mainstream, etc.).

We are yet to draw more conclusions, as our stories keep intersecting and many were left outside this contribution for varying reasons (too close to us, too specific, too harsh, and ongoing).

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Notes

- 1 In 2001, Article 200 from the Criminal Code which made illegal same-sex relationships was repealed.
- 2 The layer of loose leaves and organic debris at the surface of soil¹.
- 3 Romania is a post-imperialist country, as an Eastern European state put together after the transformation of the Austro-Hungarian, Habsburg, Ottoman, and Russian empires that ruled over portions of land called, up till the end of the First World War, *principalities*. It became a state under German influence (with German kings who decided to reinvent Byzantium for a while), had its share of fascist governments, constructed Communism under different rulers and even made it work for a short while, enslaved Roma persons for 500 years, is the fourth top nation that sent persons to Nazi camps during Holocaust, or directly to their deaths. It boasts an independent Christian Orthodox church which is extremely rich, tax-exempt and outspoken on matters of “normality” and Christendom. Romania did not ever truly begin to question its national queer & trans bashing, racism and ethnical discrimination, and violence against women besides some window legislation passed to gain integration in the EU which was granted in

view of its NATO and US-strategic role against Russia, or in other words to act as a bumper between the *old* and the *new empires*.

4 See: <https://fia.pimienta.org/>

5 South Eastern Europeⁿ.

6 Svenska för invandrare/Swedish for immigrants.

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