

(Post)Communist Queer Identities in Uroš Filipović's *Staklenac* and Michał Witkowski's *Lovetown*

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Fine. On closer inspection,
it isn't entirely true.
- Jessica, *Lovetown*.

Abstract: Published around the same time, both Uroš Filipović's *Staklenac* and Michał Witkowski's *Lovetown* came to be recognized as the first gay novels in their countries and have since acquired a cult status there. After establishing the historical, political and cultural contexts from which the two texts produce similarities in representing and narrating queer identities, the paper will then focus on those aspects in which they begin to produce differences. One of the main points of intersection is the repressive communist societies of former Yugoslavia and Polish People's Republic, yet it is the modern, post-communist societies of Poland and Serbia, with their promises of democracy and liberalism, that – paradoxically – bring those identities into a crisis and mark the crucial point separating these texts.

Keywords: Polish literature, Serbian literature, Yugoslavia, cruising, non-normative sexualities

If disclaiming this paper's abstract at the very beginning of its presentation, given in Ljubljana at the Go East! conference – however deliberate and limited to its opening sentence – seemed like an odd way to delve into the suggested matter, the ending deconstruction of one's own proceeding's title – it, too, wilfully left here unchanged – might come across as even more uncommon an approach. Yet it is both these authors' theoretical awareness and authoritativeness, and the texts' resistance to any easy categorization, especially when confronted or compared, as well as their protagonists' inability to neatly fit into the Western historical and analytical models of homosexuality and masculinity, that embolden, if not compel such a *queer* reading.

Written less in haste than with hesitance that *Staklenac* can at all be subsumed under the rubric of Eastern European literature, the abstract proposed what the title introduced, and the paper will hope to show: how, were one to try and pin them under the same, “Eastern” experience, the two books will reveal differences and show similarities where one would least expect them. For, not only does it cover the period of Yugoslavia’s non-alignment and the so-called soft communism, but it was issued well after the federation’s demise, by which time the former, Southern European republics had come to be referred to as the Western Balkans; *Lovetown*, on the other hand, was automatically relegated to the “dark” side of the pink curtain, since its principal focus is on the deepest communism of the Polish People’s Republic, whilst forgetting, for a moment, that its publication followed the III Rzeczpospolita’s accession to the EU and doing injustice to its long endeavour to be recognized as Central-Eastern Europe. Moreover, were one to try and assert the utopian position of a *non-aligned* scholar and point out the conference’s critically unquestioned East-West dichotomy, both texts will (re)affirm it with their (dis)similar representations of the lives of homosexuals under and after communism, each on its own, rather unpredicted side of the divide.

Neither of the novels’ publication would have been possible had it not been for the favourable socio-political conjuncture. In Filipović’s case, it was the October 5 revolution and the overthrow of Milošević, with its promise of democracy and the pressing need for all minorities’ equal rights, as well as the efforts of the publisher, which had then started the first queer series in Serbia in support to the LGBT population (itself a political act); although being against the then dominant gay activism for its sensationalist, and therefore counterproductive discourse, in an interview added to the book he denied having any anarchic intentions and stated that the political situation and the historical events were merely the hazy backdrop of a personal drama. The historical moment in which Witkowski printed his first novel, gave rise to the LGBT identity politics and sanctioned the growing visibility of sexual minorities in Poland at the turn of the century with the fresh EU membership after a decade-long process of economic and cultural transition, but it was the mainstream, politically correct media discourse on gay marriage and adoption, with its inauthenticity and ideologization that he protested against in the book’s digital foreword, opting for a (re)turn to intimate stories and private experience (Witkowski 2005).

Both authors reach for the “lower strata” to uncover a deeply hidden homoerotic subculture of former Yugoslavia and communist Poland, portraying men who roam railway stations, bus depots and parks at night in search of same-sex pleasure and meet in relatively concealed, tacitly tolerated public toilets. They both choose toponyms for their novels’ titles. *Staklenac* (Eng. *glasshouse*), takes it after a comfort station in a down-town Belgrade underground passage, with its urinals surrounded by huge glass shop windows. *Lubiewo*, translated into English as *Lovetown* (but in the second chapter as *The Lewd*

Beach), is a pun on the name of a Baltic seaside resort, a cognate of the insatiable lust and libido (Pol. *lubież*). This queer community, which flourished during socialism and whose glory days were ended with the outbreak of the war in Yugoslavia in 1991 and the final withdrawal of the Soviet troops from Poland in 1992, is represented via analogous meta-fictional narrative strategies, a subversive play with the writers' autobiographies, highly covert in *Staklenac* and utterly overt in *Lovetown*. Doubtless insiders, they take on the roles of ethnographers of a lost era, attesting to the existence of a homosexual subgroup which otherwise would have disappeared, while building the authenticity of their texts through a collection of radically intimate diary entries and oral histories.

Doubly subtitled as *Notes from an underground passage/Diaries of a different seducer*, and tasselled with literary and philosophical epigraphs spanning from Kiš to Kierkegaard, *Staklenac* is structured around the chapter called *Diarium Sodomitae* (1985–1993), which is preceded by memories from the earliest childhood and the initiation into manhood, *Via Dolorosa* (1955–1969), and followed by an appendix in the form of an undated Orientalist travelogue, titled *Nil nova sub sole*. As Filipović explains in the lengthy interview – conducted by the book's editors and integral to the entire text – out of the initial, Barthesian empire of signs, a complicated system of squares, crosses, triangles and circles he started out of fear for his own life after a friend got diagnosed with AIDS and committed suicide, grew an irregular, telegraphic record of Uroš's sexual activities and erotic adventures, which he kept until eventually emigrating to London and indulging in radical hedonism and self-oblivion. The endless encounters during those eight years and the necessary verbal ritual which served him as sexual overture, are described with an amputated style of oral-anal repetitions and intertwined with sexological theorisation or speculation on the (genetic) origins of homosexuality, man's innate bisexuality – as are the latter memoirs with anachronistic Freudian analysis of his own earliest sexual inclinations. With the breakup of Yugoslavia drawing near, an infinite line of usually harmless episodic characters (and a few near-deadly affairs) – naive youths lost in the big city, students and provincial intellectuals, Romani and Muslim street cleaners, (bi)curious militiamen, cadets from all over Yugoslavia, Russian marines and refugees from Lebanon, etc. – gets disrupted by an inflow of mobilizees, war volunteers and murderers. The economic sanctions and inflation infused organized crime and provoked juvenile gangs, intensifying the anti-gay oppression and making cruising highly unsafe, but also coinciding with Filipović's growing midlife frustration.

Witkowski's ageing heroines, the queens of communism, some of them thieves and prostitutes, some retired hostesses, orderlies, cloakroom attendants or German teachers now barely scraping by, are watching the little that is left of their world being bulldozed by capitalism and consumerism. Casualties of Poland's transition to neo-liberalism – "What can a bag lady like me do? Lay into Big Capital with my walking stick? Hit it over the head with my handbag?" (*Lovetown* 8) – they have been mourning over Russian

soldiers for a decade, left with nothing but military paraphernalia and confabulation, and driven by an unparalleled urge for storytelling: “queens will tell you anything about anyone, for them nothing’s sacred” (221). Such are the bitter and bitchy Patricia and Lucretia, who in an interview to a young reporter share their memories of picking up men at the Soviet army barracks, headquarters and parks of former Breslau – only to quickly take over the narration, *outing* the journalist along the way as an aspiring novelist called Michał Witkowski, a bit older than *Lovetown*’s author and already known to the “ladies (gentlemen?)” (10) since his teens as Snowflake. Their cruising history, *The Book of the Street*, recounted in the first section of the novel, soon turns into “a faggy Decameron” told by a cacophony of voices and co-written over the phone by half the Wrocław picket line playing Chinese whispers and making the young *literato* a mere proofreader.

Uroš Filipović’s biography of a PhD in architecture and a professor at the Belgrade University, also supplemental to *Staklenac*, is identical to its narrator’s. His name, however, is just one amongst many pseudonyms he uses to acquire more freedom in anonymity and give more truthfulness to his prose, while repeatedly denying it any literary ambitions, calling it collateral profit and himself an amateur writer (366). Yet a series of contradictions, most evident in the interview, reveals the author to be as fictional as his narrator. The activist phase he briefly got into, holding debates for students before leaving the country in 1993, could not have been possible until 1994, when the first ever campaign against homophobia was launched in Yugoslavia – to mention but one of the structural inconsistencies and highlight his identity as crucial to this reading. Still, “Filipović’s” Filipović is of almost the same age as the Wrocław queens (the writer behind the alias is known to the local gay scene as “the patriarch of Belgrade cruising”). An upper-middle class intellectual from a pre-WWII capitalist family, a self-professed *citoyen du monde*, a hellenophile and an americanophile (hence an anti-communist) – he could not be further from them on the social divide. Moreover, while continually identifying as a gay man (only on occasion as bisexual in order to attract the more sceptical potential partners), and without ever referring to the terms of either *gender* or *queer*, he insists on how he “hate[s] all that camp transvestism and feminized behaviour. Men disguised as women repulse me sexually and disgust me” (*Staklenac* 87).

Despite everything, there is a certain, correspondingly homonormative alignment. Witkowski’s queens deem themselves the founders of the so-called Wrocław school which, compared to the one in Legnica, a small town a little further to the west and closer to the German border, “wasn’t tranny at all”: “The Legnica queens would stroll by the barracks all tarted up like women. At first they actually pretended they *were* women” (*Lovetown* 45). For Patricia and Lucretia, two queens together would be “lezzing”, while for Filipović, “homosexuality is in some pure ideal form the mutual attraction felt by two masculine, rather than two feminized men or transvestites” (*Staklenac* 364). As disapproving of the queens as he is unable to understand women who seek companionship

or pleasure among gays, Uroš is even more puzzled by the discovery that a guy he met at the cinema frequented by fags is, in fact, a young and attractive short-haired girl, dressed as a man.

What he and Witkowski's queens undoubtedly have in common is the object of their lust. All fond of using atavistic metaphors of hunt for cruising and wild forest or jungle for parks, these "nocturnal beasts" prey on a specific "species" of "straights". Unnamed yet ever-present in *Staklenac*, fixed in gender yet sexually ambiguous, in *Lovetown* they are called grunt, for these "drunken Orpheis" are uncultured, often cruel working-class men and low-rank soldiers, and "there are dozens of stories of straight grunt willingly going off with some queen, playing the homosexual in bed, and only afterwards turning violent, stealing, murdering" (*Lovetown* 12). Juxtaposing their Balkan pendant with the "usual, blasé homosexuals", Filipović describes it as a raw, marginal, but wild and much more passionate type, which defies the category of "self-conscious, ghettoised and ideologized" gays (*Staklenac* 370).

A strong demarcation line is drawn – and symbolically marked by a defunct radar and a red flag that the sea tossed upon the shore just up the Polish-German border – between the pre-emancipatory queers and post-picketatory gays from Ahlbeck and Poznań. When, armed with books on cultural criticism, she hits the lewd beach to hustle queens for more stories, Michalina La Belletriste runs into a group of straight-acting, butch men, with their talk on marriage, adoption, monogamy, safe sex and friendship. While the ancient divas, with only their noses covered by maple leaves, have long fled the scene, exposed and overcome by the body-waxed, plastic masculinity of the younger gays, Witkowski is being persuaded into writing pro-equal rights articles for glossy magazines and asked to join their team. Instead of siding with his peers – "you'd fit in perfectly", they say – he rushes back to the pre-1989 Poland, turning into an intolerant camp queen, deaf to their obsessive discourse "like a communist-era butcher at six in the evening" (*Lovetown* 162-164). An array of both lascivious and morbid, yet ever-nostalgic anecdotes, as well as post-communist complaints on how the absence of prohibition erases all the filth and wrongdoing, leaving no place for the imagination in the neo-liberal reality, is now completed by *The Theory of Swish*, and *The Great Atlas of Polish Queens* is open. In it, amongst the endangered old queens, mock-grunts, numerous permutations (ballet, opera, pantomime queens) and hybrid combinations (art fag + style queen = gallery queen), or rarer species of press spokespersons for the LGBTIQQ – are also the demi-queens, like the lads from Poznań, whose deep-voices and masculine pronouns hardly conceal their orientation.

Lacking the self-irony of *Lovetown*, unless read as meta-ironical towards its own narrator, who is personally disinterested in bridge species but equally inclined to taxonomies – e.g. bio-political half-breeds such as a Serbian-Muslim narc-fag or gay fathers – whilst not refraining from a slightly, and similarly, (auto)pathological rendering of

homosexuality, in what could as easily be called *The Great Atlas of Yugoslavian Grunts, Staklenac* displays the politics and poetics of macho-homosexuality as a punishment to the repressive society (Perišić) – or even psycho-political pornography (Maljković) – via Filipović's desire to humiliate, desacralize and devirilize straight men and take symbolical revenge on heterosexual masculinity.

Witkowski's "Witkowski", on the other hand, is sympathetic to the effeminate, submissive fairies he gives voice to. Although apolitical, anti-assimilationist and "ardent in their adoption of old-fashioned female characteristic" (307), his "dancing Eurydices" are well aware of the fictive character of their transgressions and metamorphoses: "they don't want to be women at all; they want to be swishy men: pretend femmes" (6-7). Is it sex or gender – he asks and, breaking the Butler theory (or re-naturalizing the social constructs?), replies: "Because if it's gender, queens should by all rights be turned on by butch lesbians. But that, alas, never happens", since their view of women is conditioned by the fact that "queens are still men after all" (307).

What these sexual dissidents and erotomanes seem to be less aware of – Filipović, too, together with the class privileges he is so unwilling (but still able) to waive that he will flee the country – is not just the messy dialectics and the constructedness of sex and gender, but of their position in society and the places they cruise being a sign of discrimination (as much as their desire is tightly knotted with dread). For, the essential question of their identity lies not so much in being condemned and bound to the wrong, as much as to the impossible identity in manifestly patriarchal countries.

Hiding under the radar during communism and having the bare necessities secured by the subsidies of socialism, the queens are happy to compromise and accept the "luxury" of the available, straight Soviet soldiers and the safety of army barracks; for the rest they compensate with their imagination. After this relatively secure, however (willingly) unrecognised and even abject existence that ended with the demise of communism, the elderly queens had not just been doubly marginalized – "first, you're poor; second, you're a poofter" (Witkowski 92) – and more threatened by the growingly dangerous, criminalized grunt, but also reduced to an almost non-existence, a non-identity. No longer able to hold on to his superior, masculine-gay identity, built on distancing and dis-identifying himself with the society he always despised, nor to ultimately dominate the already dominated and re-assert some portion of power that he had been denied, Filipović had by then escaped the horrors of the nineties without ever lamenting for Yugoslavia's liberal eighties. Yet, it is not until the post-communist demand for social definition in Poland which, paradoxically, increased hostility, and the clash between the communist queers and the modern gays, that this "rift" in the homosexual population (unwillingly) gained visibility and identity – by dis-identifying with them.

Locked in binarisms – non-normative in relation to the heterosexual norm and heteronormative in relation to homosexuals, and both anachronistic in respect to the

contemporary identity politics – neither Filipović nor Witkowski's queens can therefore be called queer in the anti-identitarian sense of the term, even if one would catchily call them “queer-before-gay” (Warkocki). Therefore the title of this paper hides several oxymora, but perhaps the genuinely queer (queerest?) is, in fact, the grunt, whose both sexual and gender identity remains entirely unquestioned.

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