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**GENDER PERFORMATIVITY AND UNSTABLE IDENTITY IN
CONTEMPORARY QUEER ROMANIAN PROSE**

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Abstract

Despite its importance in the analysis of gender in various research fields, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity circulates in rather restricted academic spaces in Romania, as her gender studies is not yet a wide field of research. The importation and particularization of the discussion of gender as a social construct is influenced by various factors: from the persistent patriarchal structure of a society in which the post-communist legacy is still felt, to the simultaneity of theoretical receptions of works authored by Butler and several other types of feminist discourse, such as Rosi Braidotti's posthumanist approach. This paper analyses to what extent these theories produce effects in contemporary Romanian literature, especially in prose with queer issues at its core. The paper further examines the way in which the category of socially constructed gender can be used as a tool for analysing the configurations of the human subject as a sexualised Other in contemporary Romanian literature.

Keywords: gender, queer, Butler, Romanian, identity, performativity, posthumanism.

The understanding of gender as a social construct represents a core discussion node in feminist theory and remains a focal point, given the adjacent issues it raises: that of identity formation, the stability of the generic category of "Woman", and political

agency. Despite the existence of a well-established international feminist theoretical tradition concerning the category of gender (and not only), it has not yet been widely integrated in the Romanian cultural space. Academic gender studies remain a relatively narrow research field in Romania (Tăriceanu 139), and the circulation of these ideas on a social level is quite limited (see Băluță, Tufiş). The instrumentalization of gender as an analytical category in current literary studies in Romania is, thus, at an early stage, manifesting itself in local and disparate approaches (see ed. Ursa). The application of such an analysis is increasingly necessary, especially given Romania's complex socio-cultural and political context, which includes a blend of patriarchal heritage, communist influences and, respectively, the new climate of late-capitalist society.

The Romanian prose published after 1989 rescues fundamental moments and attitudes related to the experiences of female and queer subjects, especially those under the communist regime, while also connecting to other historical periods, such as the interwar period, the transitional phase between 1990 and 2000s, or the post-2010 era. Women's status was significantly affected by Decree 770/1966, which prohibited abortions, while LGBTQIA+ individuals were impacted by Article 200 of the Penal Code, which mandated imprisonment from 1 to 5 years for homosexual intercourse. Unlike the decree, Article 200 was only repealed in 2001, considerably prolonging discrimination against LGBTQIA+ people. The effects are still felt today, as one of the most remarkable examples shows, namely the 2018 referendum organised by *Coaliția pentru Familie* [Coalition for the Family] to amend Art. 38 of the Romanian Constitution, in order to define the family as a marriage "between a man and a woman". Although the low turnout invalidated the Referendum, the legislative initiative that preceded it remains symptomatic of the persistent intolerant attitudes towards queer people.

Given these aspects, I aim to investigate how the experiences of queer subjects from different historical moments are reflected in the Romanian prose published after 1989, using gender as an analytical category, with intersectionality as the foundational perspective (Hill Collins, Bilge 1). I will, therefore, also adopt a diachronic perspective, since the four volumes¹ considered in my analysis cover a time span stretching from the interwar period up to the present moment. More

¹ In chronological order of the historical periods outlined in the volumes: *Straja dragonilor*, by Ion Negoitescu (interwar), *ca și cum nimic nu s-ar fi întâmplat*, by Alina Nelega (communism), *Soldații. Poveste din Ferentari*, by Adrian Schiop, and *Dezrădăcinare*, by Sașa Zare (2000-2010).

precisely, I will explore the extent to which the characters in these prose texts are constrained by the act of performing gender according to the rules of the hegemonic discourse in which they are placed, as well as the way in which this continuous dramatisation of the socially prescribed gender influences, through dislocation, the formation of their identity and their subjectivity. Concurrently, an equally important aspect of this paper involves tracing to what extent gender performativity theory is steeped in the ways of reflecting the queer experience that the mediated space of literature presented by the selected texts offers. In other words, one of the guiding questions of this approach seeks to distinguish between the use of the gender category as a tool for reading and analysis, and the intentional use of a gendered perspective in the author's writing process.

Gender as performance

The notion of gender as a social construct was not introduced by Judith Butler, but it is through their voice that the deconstruction of gender binary and the supposedly indissoluble link between gender and sex (or body) have crystallised. In the process of making the identity formation mechanism transparent, Butler introduces the concept of *matrix of intelligibility*, an instrument that distinguishes between unitary, coherent identities and discontinuous ones, classified as culturally unintelligible (Butler 23). A series of cultural laws – which, through a recourse in psychoanalysis, will prove themselves to be the incest taboo and the homosexuality taboo, respectively (Butler 75, 79) – establishes a connection between the biological sex, gender, and their expressions in the guise of *desire*, thus ensuring the coherence of a subject's identity (Butler 23). Identities which do not conform to this matrix are deemed socially unintelligible. Along the lines proposed by Foucault, if the gender identity is constituted by framing certain bodily attributes within cultural structures designed to ensure coherence, then this identity turns out to be a regulatory fiction: “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very «expressions» that are said to be its results” (Butler 33).

Another important analytical instrument upon which Butler insists refers to the *regulatory practice of compulsory heterosexuality*, or, under another denomination, heteronormativity (Butler 24). This regulatory practice stands for the arbitrary correlation of sexual practices with the desires that, within the heterosexual matrix, should stem from a subject's gender identity. The repetition of regulatory

practices is precisely the one that ensures the cultural reproduction of gender identity, whose unity is merely an effect of this reiteration (Butler 42). In other words, these regulatory practices can be understood as repeated acts, performed ritualistically, that stylize the body in order to make it appear as the cause of preset binary gender expressions (Butler 43).

The disclosure of the fictional nature of gender identity occurs, in the Butlerian approach, by extensively discussing the mechanisms of fictionalised incorporation, by the subject, of the lost image of the parents, following the prohibitive action of the homosexuality taboo, mutated into a cultural *Law*. Essential here is the Law's dual function: it simultaneously prohibits and produces identities. As a prohibitive instrument, the Law generates the binary sexual predispositions that Freud conceptualises as the engine of the Oedipal drama. Simultaneously, however, the Law of heteronormativity manages to position itself into an ulterior moment to this production, as being only a control and regularisation apparatus. In the synchrony of the two operations, what is a product – the gender binary – appears as a natural cause, and it is thus naturalised based on certain bodily attributes, specifically reproductive organs. Consequently, it becomes evident that the gender binary and its distribution on the surface of the body are effects of naturalisation, a fiction that skilfully conceals its own genealogy (Butler 82).

The *concealment* of the genealogy of gender identity, carried out discursively, represents an indispensable aspect in the instrumentalization of gender as an analytical category. One's positioning in relation to this almost invisible genealogy in daily life indicates the extent to which said subject succeeds or fails to embody the ideal identity assigned to them. As observed in the selected volumes, the subjects are often aware of the artificiality of the gender roles they are compelled to perform, yet their lack of access to the development process of these roles destabilises them, pushing them into marginal, culturally unintelligible spaces, thus having disruptive effects on their identity. The disruptive effect occurs as a result of the division between the real body and the ideal one, coupled with an entire mimetic identity construct.

In Butler's view, the division of bodies into the categories of "male" and "female", based on the reproductive organs, is, in turn, a social construct. Perceiving bodies this way reveals that they have already been subjected to discursive practices designed to frame certain attributes into unitary classes. This explains the gap

between the subjects' real bodies and the ideal image of the body, which is already imbued with its cultural meanings of gender — an image that cannot correlate with reality, as it is in itself “an imitation without origin”. As Bulter continues to suggest,

Always already a cultural sign, the body sets limits to the imaginary meanings that it occasions, but is never free of an imaginary construction. The fantasised body can never be understood in relation to the body as real; it can only be understood in relation to another culturally instituted fantasy, one which claims the place of the “literal” and the “real”. The limits to the “real” are produced within the naturalised heterosexualization of bodies in which physical facts serve as causes and desires reflect the inexorable effects of that physicality. (90)

Thus, a gender ideal is created, which subjects must permanently embody in order to be enrolled in the heterosexual matrix that ensures their intelligibility. The problem that Butler highlights here is the inevitable failure to fully and coherently embody this ideal, precisely due to its rupture from the lived reality of the subjects (Butler 155). In the selected Romanian prose texts, the subjects' ability to identify this failure provides them with an access path to the hidden genealogy of their identity. However, as it will be shown, they do not possess the necessary levers to escape or to subversively embody these gender roles.

In the paradigm proposed by Butler, the said levers refer to the ability to highlight and enact, within the play of gender roles, the discontinuous elements that disrupt heteronormative coherence (173). By this enactment, “[t]hat regulatory ideal is then exposed as a norm and a fiction that disguises itself as a developmental law regulating the sexual field that it purports to describe” (Butler 173). To the extent that the expression of certain acts and gestures produces the effect of a gender identity *on the surface of the body*, these actions are *performative*. Hence, they constitute both a discursive and material game, an enactment of the *fabrication* of a *naturalised gender core* (Butler 173). The performative nature is ensured by the ritualised repetition of specific gender expressions (Butler 178). Given these observations, “gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (Butler 179).

The posthumanist feminist subject

The relatively unexplored field of gender studies in Romania enables a synchronic metabolization of the different perspectives that contribute to the feminist theoretical

tradition. Postmodern stances, such as Butler's, can intersect with more recent posthumanist perspectives. One of the theoretical voices of posthumanist feminism is Rosi Braidotti, who discusses gender and the subject's status through a Deleuzian-inspired vitalist materialism. The posthumanist turn is evident in the changes Braidotti brings, in various works, to her concept of the posthumanist feminist subject as a *nomadic subject*. In this regard, I will highlight two theoretical moments that are relevant to the analysis of the selected corpus. These moments work synergistically, outlining an image of the posthumanist feminist subject that engages in a productive dialogue with Butler's perspective on gender identity. The points of convergence and divergence between the two theoretical voices create a nuanced framework for understanding the identity of the characters in question.

In discussing the concept of the *nomadic subject*, Braidotti emphasises the need to preserve, at least temporarily, sexual difference as a functional analytical category, while resignifying it positively (*Nomadic Subjects* 149). The notion of sexual difference has its own theoretical tradition, initially used to denote the mechanisms by which the category of the feminine has come to signify, in the *phallogocentric*² cultural economy, the position of the *Other*, where difference marks inferiority (Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects* 152). Given that the phallogocentric patriarchal system is neither rational nor historically necessary, and that the feminine and masculine positions are asymmetrical, Braidotti argues that sexual difference can be reconfigured to indicate the formation process of the subject in a specific context of *situated knowledge*³, both material and discursive (*Nomadic Subjects* 156). Such an application of the concept allows for understanding the subject as a proliferation of difference, not in a dialectical, negative sense of a *Same–Other* sort, but in a positive sense of multiplicity:

In other words, what emerges from these new developments in feminist theory is the need to recode or rename the female feminist subject not as yet another sovereign, hierarchical, and exclusionary subject but rather as multiple, open-ended, interconnected entity. (Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects* 158)

² The term represents a Derridean wordplay between *phallus* and *logos*, meant to concisely reproduce the linguistic economy that places the position of the male subject at the centre, as a universal criterion.

³ Braidotti borrows Donna Haraway's concept and uses it alongside the one theorised by Adrienne Rich, *politics of location*. In Braidotti's view, these terms refer to the assumption of the local perspective, specific to each subject, in contrast to the male subject's point of view, which is claimed to be universal. Reformulated, these notions can be understood as an intersectional lens of analysis.

Braidotti highlights three stages of sexual difference, specifying that they unfold simultaneously and thus constitute a cartography of *the becoming-subject* process for the feminine subject. The first stage refers to the difference between the “Men” and “Women” categories and involves a critique of the Enlightenment heritage. This critique addresses the identification of the rational subject with the incorporeal image of the male subject and the restriction of the feminine to the sexualized, deprecatingly inscribed bodily dimension (Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects* 152, 159). The objective here is “the political will to assert the specificity of the lived, female bodily experience” (Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects* 160), reappropriating sexual difference to affirm and define the female subject with corporeal existence, beyond the stereotypical representations in the phallogocentric symbolic system. The second level distinguishes between the representation of the category of “Women” as Other and the sexual differences embodied by women in their specific, situated positions. This differentiation aims to deconstruct the general term “Women,” exposing it as a cultural and normative model for female subjectivity and transforming it into a topos that can be analysed (Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects* 162, 164). The third stage involves recognizing the multiplicity inherent in each female identity, understanding this identity as “a play of multiple, fractured aspects of the self” (Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects* 166).

Here, a dialogue can be established between Butler's and Braidotti's conceptualizations of the feminine subject. While Butler deconstructs the feminine subject, sometimes to the point of dissolution, Braidotti retains certain aspects to socially and discursively resemanticise them. Braidotti seeks to understand the subject not only as feminine but also feminist, in a double sense: historically determined and, at the same time, multiple. While Butler views the grammatical subject strictly as a socio-cultural construct, Braidotti asserts that “the power synthesis of the ‘I’ is a grammatical necessity, a theoretical fiction that holds together the collection of differing layers, the integrated fragments of the ever-receding horizon of one’s identity” (*Nomadic Subjects* 166). In other words, until the abolition of gender, there remains a need for the affirmation of feminist identity through sexual difference, a gendered identity that is strongly localised but avoids the trap of biological essentialism (Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects* 169, 171). This contrast is relevant for the types of subjectivities encountered in the proposed literary texts, as the dissolution of their identity would deprive them of the mechanisms necessary to

transgress the heterosexual matrix in which they are encapsulated. As seen in the case of Alina Nelega, for example, it is precisely the possibility of asserting a (non-unitary) identity that offers a way out of oppressive power structures. The nomadic character of the feminist subject theorised by Braidotti is defined here as “sexual difference providing shifting locations for multiple female feminist embodied voices,” a tool for bringing multiple ways of forming a gender identity into the signifying field (*Nomadic Subjects* 172).

In a more recent theorization with a pronounced posthumanist imprint, Braidotti approaches the relationship between the subject and gender through the notion of sexuality, emphasising its more comprehensive nature. While maintaining the importance of recognizing sexual difference, Braidotti argues for a reconfiguration of sexuality that is not necessarily post-gendered, but genderless, “starting from a vitalist return to the polymorphous and, according to Freud, ‘perverse’ (in the sense of playful and nonreproductive) structure of human sexuality” (Braidotti, *Four Theses* 36). Working within a Deleuzian paradigm, Braidotti posits that sexuality is a force belonging to the multiple virtualities that matter, including human matter, can actualize in specific ways within various territorialisations (*Four Theses* 36). In other words, sexuality exists outside of identity, as something both prior and ulterior. Hence, “one is always already sexed” (Braidotti, *Four Theses* 37). The problem here is that Butler rejects this Freudian-inspired notion of sexuality, arguing that such a perspective is merely the discursively naturalised effect of the law exercised through repeated locutionary acts (146). Butler contends that this pre-gendered sexuality is inaccessible, as it can only be sought through language, which forms the subject by obscuring the radical genealogy of gender identity (97). Therefore, this polymorphous sexuality would be nothing but an effect of language.

A meeting point between the two theorists, however, can be found in their shared perspective on how binary gender is formed. Despite starting from the premise of an unfettered sexuality, Braidotti shares with Butler the hypothesis that the sex-gender dichotomy and, implicitly, gender identity are “a social-symbolic system of attribution of qualities and entitlements – for the purpose of disciplining and punishing the social body” (*Four Theses* 37). Furthermore, both authors view gender as a process of *becoming*, achieved through repeated actions over time, rather than a static cultural element.

In this context, Butler locates the possibility of subjects' agency in what they call "complex cultural exchanges among bodies," where "identity itself is ever-shifting (...), constructed, disintegrated, and recirculated only within the context of a dynamic field of cultural relations" (Butler 161, 162). This perspective resonates with Braidotti's Deleuzian view on the capacity of the feminist subject to manifest its identity in multiple directions through de-territorialization and re-territorialisation. Thus, a game of theoretical mirroring is constructed: while Butler argues for the need to articulate "the convergence of multiple sexual discourses at the site of 'identity' in order to make this category, in whatever form, permanently problematic" (163), Braidotti states:

Sexuality beyond gender is the epistemological, but also political, site of contemporary vitalist neomaterialism. It consolidates a feminist genealogy that includes creative deterritorializations, intensive and hybrid cross-fertilizations, and generative encounters with multiple human and nonhuman others. (*Four Theses* 39)

Subjects and identities in contemporary queer Romanian-language prose

The theoretical framework outlined above serves as a map for exploring the identities proposed in the selected volumes of prose. These works span an approximately tumultuous 100-year period, illustrating both paradigm shifts and elements of continuity in heteronormative culture across eras. The autofiction component is particularly significant in this regard. With the exception of Alina Nelega's novel, the other works are based on the authors' real experiences, translated into varying degrees of fictionalisation. *Straja dragonilor* [Dragons' Watch] includes two chapters from the autobiography that Ion Negoïtescu began before his death, as well as an excerpt from his unpublished diary. In *Soldații. Poveste din Ferentari* [Soldiers. A Story From Ferentari], Adrian Schiop portrays a love story between a white man and a Roma man, based on an explicit process of autofiction. *Dezrădăcinare* [Uprooting], the novel published under the pseudonym Sașa Zare, also involves autofiction through the multiple juxtapositions between Sașa-the-author and Sașa-the-character. The narrowing of the gap between text and reality helps to more accurately map the experiences of subjects in different socio-cultural and geopolitical settings. At the same time, this approach facilitates the theoretical reception of these texts. In the volumes by Ion Negoïtescu and Adrian Schiop, the gender lens functions primarily as an externally applicable tool for decoding the subject positions illustrated. Although

Alina Nelega's novel does not explicitly adopt a theoretical grid, it can be intuited through the authorial processes used in constructing the female characters. Conversely, Saşa Zare's novel explicitly starts from the deconstruction of heteronormativity at an individual level, so the theoretical element is perceived differently.

Through this lens, the characters become eloquent examples of the myriad ways in which gender identity is formed and destabilised. My aim, through this analysis, is to investigate the effects of the confrontation between the subject and their inscription in the heteronormative matrix on their identity. To what extent does the incoherence of identity categories offer the characters possibilities of transgression, and in what ways does it destabilise their existence as a whole? How do the subjects of these texts relate to their positioning on the queer spectrum within a constraining social framework? What kind of access do they have to the genealogy of their own identity?

Identity juxtapositions

The autobiographical fragments in *Straja dragonilor* record a series of encounters and practices, both corporeal and discursive, concerning the child and adolescent Ion Negoïtescu's homosexuality. To analyse the juxtaposition of experiences and their role in forming an identity on the borderline between the intelligible and the clandestine, the actual biographical persona can be temporarily set aside.

One of the first aspects referring to the process of gender identity formation within the matrix of intelligibility is the numerous games and acts of children imitating socially accepted sexual and discursive practices specific to reproductive heterosexuality. In one scene, the child imitates a heterosexual act with a friend, hiding in a closet (Negoïtescu 55). This recollection is part of an approach that touches on the genealogy of the internalisation of specific gender norms. The two children already know the pattern of the ritual act designed to frame their identities in coherent gender directions. Recognition of these acts does not necessarily prove awareness of some forms of expression as fabrications, but their continued identification remains significant. The repetition of such games, whether individual or collective, demonstrates the ways in which this matrix is perpetuated according to Butler's scheme. Another episode recounts how the children play "mother and father" (Negoïtescu 60). The name of the game marks the material and discursive appropriation of existing gender norms through the performance of acts that

construct the gender binary. One can identify the embodiment of gender roles based on the culturally drawn line of coherence between physical attributes and binary ways of expressing them, embodied in two ideal images – mother and father, woman and man.

In the transition to adolescence, the perception of one's own position as a subject, played out retrospectively, becomes more pronounced. Here the reader may notice the mix between traits normatively associated with masculinity and those understood as expressions of femininity, correlated by the adult voice with homosexual orientation. The succinct self-portrait points to the discontinuity between gender norms and the nascent identity of the subject: "a tremendous drive for affirmation, an acute individualism, perhaps even an instinctive desire for domination" are "later defeated by homosexuality which imposed shyness on me"⁴ (Negoïțescu 71, 72). At this same age, the exploration of different body practices diversifies. Homosexuality is experienced between passivity and initiative, through acts that mimic intelligible heterosexual structures. Moreover, the gesture of lingering one's body to that of another is constantly repeated, symbolising unification but stopping at this level (Negoïțescu 90, 106, 140). This intense clinginess is reminiscent of the bodily exchange Butler identified as the focus of agency, of the non-deterministic possibility of action. Adjacent to these episodes are numerous scenes in cinemas, depicting gestures of physical contact to varying degrees (Negoïțescu 105). One relevant detail is the atmosphere: the darkness of the cinema, an element that hides these practices and places them at the edge of social intelligibility. Placing oneself in darkness is an aspect found in other volumes, such as in Sașa Zare's work, but with different, deconstructed implications. In Negoïțescu's case, the need for obscurity for such practices can also be explained by the public opinion specific to the interwar period, which delimited the intelligibility of non-heterosexual orientations based on the dichotomy between public and private life: anything that emerged from private life and entered the public imaginary was labelled reprehensible, especially male homosexuality (Buhuceanu 46).

There is a significant scene in the book regarding the narrator's own gender identity. In an exam paper, the then-student somewhat candidly confesses his homosexual orientation, recalling some emotional structures: "I felt strange, special,

⁴ "un nemaipomenit impuls de afirmare, un individualism acut, poate și o instinctivă dorință de dominare"; „înfrânte mai apoi de homosexualitatea care mi-a impus timidități” (My translation).

and yet normal. I was only ashamed of the fact that, at the age of prohibition, I was practising sexuality.”⁵ (Negoițescu 119). Here, there is an awareness of difference, but it is not yet pejoratively categorised as the Other. The shame does not stem from incorporating a socially tabooed identity but from the awareness of something perceived as illicit, namely the manifestation of sexuality at an age when the body is socially purged of desire. The absence of shame and the feeling of “normality” can be explained by another reported episode: meeting an individual whose sexual orientation was publicly visible. The young man’s reaction is one of revulsion and disgust, accompanied by a vague sense of threat. In fact, the category of homosexual is attributed only to the Other, not to oneself. Although aware of the difference he embodies, the adolescent distinguishes between himself and that man, who embodies the stereotypical image of the homosexual as a “roué”⁶ (Negoițescu 152)—a suggestive term connoting moral decay and mental illness. Rather than a denial of his own identity, this scene illustrates Butler’s observation that queer culture is embedded in the larger structures of the heterosexual matrix (153).

The similarity between Butler’s statement and Negoițescu’s adult memoirs is also evident in another confession: “(...) I was steadfastly maintaining in my subconscious a cult of the phallus, of narcissistic-infantile significance, which vehemently coloured my ego that had grown without measure”⁷ (189). What significance does this cult of the phallus have for understanding embodied gender as performance? I would argue that it marks a juxtaposition between homosexual desire and identity formation, navigating the socio-cultural universe within heterosexual structures. The gender identity performed here is a phallogcentrically constructed one, where the male subject’s position is deeply intertwined with the bodily dimension. Simultaneously, this corporeality assumes the contours of the unattainable masculine ideal. In this case, homosexual desire is based on the hyperbolisation of the intangible image of masculinity, with its attributes translated into highly stylized expressions. This ideal portrait is not embodied by the subject but is adored—demonstrated by the attraction to the military order under the father’s subordination (Negoițescu 91).

If homosexual orientation is framed within the structure of a gender identity constructed according to the patterns of the matrix of intelligibility, there is, among

⁵ “Mă simțeam ciudat, aparte, și totuși normal. Rușine îmi era doar de faptul că, la vârsta interdicțiilor, practic sexualitatea” (My translation).

⁶ “detracat” (My translation).

⁷ “(...) întrețineam cu stăruință în subconștientul meu un cult al falusului, de semnificație narcisic-infantilă, care îmi colora vehement orgoliul ce sporise fără măsură” (My translation).

Negoïțescu's childhood memories, a practice that transgresses the heteronormative system: the child's game of putting on his mother's "prom dress"⁸. This mechanism is akin to that of drag practices, which Butler discusses as levers of subversiveness staged from within the gender binary (Butler 161). The temporary incorporation of fascination with the image of the mother in a ball gown—an image of ideal femininity—points precisely to performance as the spring of identity construction. The search occurs in multiple directions, channelling itself into masculine gender norms, the enactment of which is naturalised through identification and internalisation. However, this intelligible coagulation is no less a performance repeated under the pressure of a social discourse with a regulatory role.

In regard to the multiplicity of incorporation possibilities, one can identify aspects that do not fit entirely into the Butlerian framework. Braidotti's perspective supports this observation. The adult's recollections of exploring different homo- and heterosexual bodily practices suggest understanding these dispositions through Braidotti's concept of polymorphous and vitalistic sexuality. There is a fluidity in these episodes of searching and knowing, keeping the subject open to new possibilities of affirmation. Moreover, this flexibility becomes transparent through its correlation with the ever-changing environment in which the young Negoïțescu is formed. The constant movement from one city to another, from Transylvania to the former Kingdom of Romania and back again, testifies to the repeated re-territorialisations of the subject, who continues his search into sexual orientation with great regenerative capacity wherever he finds himself.

Coherence does not save

Alina Nelega's novel, *ca și cum nimic nu s-ar fi întâmplat* [*as if nothing had happened*], foregrounds the love relationship between two lesbians during the latter half of the Ceaușescu regime. Through the female protagonists, Cristina and Nana, the novel outlines two types of positioning towards one's own gender identity and sexual orientation, each having different effects on the subject's lived experience. Although Nana manages to find ways to transgress the strict matrix of intelligibility (influenced by the geopolitical context), both women ultimately remain trapped within the structures that contain them.

⁸ „rochia de bal” (My translation).

One of the recurring themes in the novel is that of bodies. Confronting other people's perceptions of her body destabilises Cristina, and society's expectations of her female body irreparably dislocate her identity. Often, Cristina's body, and therefore her lived experience, is reified and reduced to her sex, an overlap she tries to counteract by nullifying the body, primarily as a sexual object, by transferring it to an age when sexuality is socially expelled from the body because it is no longer productive—old age. However, she is denied this position, knowing that only men are able to incorporate such expressions (Nelega 79, 80). Moreover, Cristina is aware of the fabricated nature of the gender role she is forced to embody, but deconstructing social cues about gender expressions does not help her overcome them, placing her in a double bind. The ideal of femininity is unattainable, established not only socially but also politically, and Cristina can identify naturalised attributes as the cause for strict bodily and social contours—female reproductive organs. Transgressing these delimitations would mean, in society's eyes, incorporating the opposite pole, that of male, and the negation of sexual difference is forbidden in the heteronormative matrix (Nelega 81). Cristina's status can also be decoded through Braidotti's schema of sexual difference. Cristina is in permanent turmoil in the second level of sexual difference, between the phallogocentric representation of Woman and the real, lived experience of her own femininity that does not intersect with gender norms.

Forced motherhood, following rape, marks Cristina's inability to embody her assigned gender role. What should provide her with an understandable social position—motherhood—only deepens her inner split. Cristina's gender identity becomes a role she has to play and fails to embody. The physical violence of childbirth is a traumatic experience that depersonalises her and sends her outside of humanity. It acts destructively, especially through the biological brutality Cristina is socially forced to assume as the essence and ultimate cause of her gender identity (Nelega 166, 167). Moreover, the position of mother is permanently dislocated and transferred to the grandmother because of Cristina's inability to identify with and incorporate this maternal ideal.

Cristina is a character trapped in her own deconstruction, largely because of the geopolitical context in which she finds herself. Her subject position is apriori positioned between two legislative prohibitions (Decree 770 and Article 200), so her subjectivity can never be fully articulated; the grammatical "I" necessary for agency is impossible for Cristina to achieve. Acknowledging her own identity as a fabrication

does not help its subversion—in a totalitarian regime, with a failed career, she has nowhere to escape the strict norms around her. Her only option remains to shelter in an imitation of the gender ideal, which promises a familiar, coherent, and intelligible ground. Cristina thus has access to the genealogy of identity, but its practice is not possible. At the same time, the constant attempt to enact an improper role pushes her alienation to paroxysm in the form of self-hatred (Nelega 270). Paradoxically, in the end, imitation has the same effect as deconstruction: it does not save her but throws her into unintelligibility.

The allegorical representation that Cristina constructs as an image of the self in one of the stories for Ștefan, her son, is indicative of her struggle. Rosi Braidotti uses the term “figuration” to denote the alternative, relational representations of the non-human that Donna Haraway proposes for the female subject (Braidotti, *Four Theses* 28). Although Braidotti works in a positive key, the concept can also be applied here; the image of the “crocodile” becomes one such alternative representation of the subject position assigned to Cristina, especially through the use of the feminine for a masculine epicene noun. Moreover, the instability of the boundary between simple anthropomorphization of the animal and the more complex representation it suggests—the expulsion of the human into the non-human due to the lack of space for the articulation of the “I”—is also relevant.

The lesbian relationship between Cristina and Nana is followed over many years, with all the fluctuations that occur in their lives. From the very beginning of the novel, the portraits of the two are sharply differentiated. Nana seems closer to embodying the socially established feminine ideal, but that does not save her from confronting strict norms. Like Cristina, Nana’s identity is also formed in close connection with gender violence, enhanced by the misogynistic environment of the theatre (the second protagonist is an actress), which translates into suicidal ideation. The relationship between the two is often characterised by physical and emotional violence, for which the author only suggests an explanation. The impossibility of making this bond tangible, even in a subversive position, and the confinement in darkness and clandestinity, are felt as a condemnation to unintelligibility, making the violence turn inward toward the partner. This results in a permanent struggle between homosexual desires and the heteronormative matrix that oppressively regulates their feminine gender identities into straightness.

Despite the change of political regime, compared to the historical context of Ion Negoïtescu's memoirs, the element of placing homosexuality in the inherently pejorative position of the *Other* remains constant. The only admissible image of lesbianism is that of the epitome of the grotesque, superimposed on the stigma of mental illness. The major difference between Cristina and Nana lies in the latter's ability to maintain her inner coherence by assuming a subversive gender identity. In Braidotti's scheme of sexual difference, Nana succeeds in appropriating her distancing from phallogocentric representation towards the assumption of a multi-layered identity. At the same time, Nana's reconfiguration as a subject further makes use of the unitary mechanism of identity, be it a subversive one; she needs the fiction of a coagulated identity self to overcome the externally imposed one. Nana's ability to articulate her own "I" is due to her nomadism, placed, however, on the borderline between agency and chance. Nana happens to meet a couple of gay men in Bucharest and, also by chance, later has the opportunity to flee the country, to Paris, where the two (Șerban and Marteen) had moved in the meantime. The acceptance of a subversive identity, as a lesbian, would not have been possible for Nana either, however, had she not been willing to embrace failure in the face of heteronormativity (Nelega 217-220). Cristina cannot give up her own territorialization, so she attempts to deceive it through heterosexual mimesis. At the opposite pole, Nana de-territorialises her identity by giving up social performance. The process is not easy, and this is visible in the violence of asserting her lesbian sexual orientation as a transgression of the phallogocentric structure. And yet, Nana does not fully transgress the coordinates that constrain her either, because the fulfilment of her relationship with her childhood friend Cristina fails. In the early days of the 1989 Revolution, Nana returns to Romania, but Cristina's death is hinted at before the reunion occurs.

The end of the novel, through the dialogue between Cristina and the episodic male character, Béla, settles, to a certain extent, Cristina's position without fully resolving its complexities. His lines function as a societal verdict on Cristina. The protagonist's guilt lies precisely in her attempt to be "normal," to imitate what she is not. Cristina takes refuge in morality, but in the context of the communist regime, morality becomes obsolete. Moreover, an equally oppressive and productive heteronormative structure inherently violates the idea of morality, which is itself a historically determined fabrication. If the verdict can be understood as one issued by

the matrix of reified intelligibility, it will obviously condemn Cristina's claim to morality. This personified instance of the Law recognizes the innocence of the subject it produces through oppression but does not save it, because innocence is naturalized as the cause of condemnation. This mechanism is visible in Nana's reaction when she learns that Ștefan is conceived by rape (and not with Radu, Cristina's husband and Nana's brother)—blaming the victim (Nelega 347-349).

The theoretical authorial position underlying the construction of the characters is not explicitly stated in the novel but is evident in Cristina's reply to Béla (Nelega 430-433). Alina Nelega's text highlights and engages in a dialogue with Butler's theory, reversing the normative pole. Cristina retells the story of original sin, identifying it not in knowledge but in the incestuous relationship between Adam and Eve. This narrative of the incest taboo, naturalized as a cause for the formation of the sex-gender dichotomy that dictates and produces the identity of subjects, is inverted so that "normality" is socially constructed not as heterosexual but as homosexual. Deconstruction is followed by a projection towards an alternative—the naturalisation of homosexuality as an element of identity structuring, aimed not at oppression but at liberation (which comes too late for Cristina and too early for the Revolution):

But if you really want eros and magic and merging with godhood, and especially if you want love, normal sex is with your own kind. Mirroring each other. The desire to never end. That's permissible, it's legitimate, it's guilt-free, no matter what this fucked-up world that sees things skewed says.⁹ (Nelega 432)

“Just like the shenanigans, homosexuality is silenced and done”¹⁰

Adrian Schiop's novel, *Soldații. Poveste din Ferentari*, operates within the convention of autofiction and stands out from the other two texts analysed due to its focus on racial components and the prison environment, which frame the gay relationship between the protagonist Adi and his partner Alberto. The localised backgrounds of the two characters are particularly significant: Adi is a white man who has come to Ferentari to document a doctoral thesis on manele, while Alberto is a Roma man who has spent more than half his life in prison and currently (circa 2012) lives without income in a cousin's house. The narrative addresses issues of

⁹ “Dar dacă vrei cu adevărat eros și magie și contopire cu dumnezeirea, și mai ales dacă vrei iubire, sexul normal e cu cei asemenea ție. Ogîndirea în cealaltă. Dorința să nu se termine niciodată. Asta e permis, e legitim, e scutit de orice vinovăție, orice-ar zice lumea asta dată dracului, care vede lucrurile deformat” (My translation).

¹⁰ “La fel ca șmecheria, homosexualitatea se tace și se face” (My translation).

gender identity and sexual orientation, with a particular focus on the genealogy that Adi traces concerning Alberto's subject position. This analysis is intentional, with the understanding that it is more of an anthropological and sociological endeavour, aligning with Adi's research on the predominantly poor and strongly patriarchal environment of Ferentari.

Alberto's exposure to homosexual practices begins in adolescence, within the violent, deeply patriarchal prison environment, where survival necessitates adopting a specific image of masculinity, which Adi gradually reconstructs from Alberto's stories. This image involves the hyperbolisation of the heteronormative masculine ideal, redirected in the absence of women into homosexual acts but inscribed within heterosexual structures (Schiop, *Soldiers* 36). The cult of the phallus is emphasised in a heterosexual context to preserve male sexual difference in its patriarchal sense. Consequently, sexual practices among prisoners maintain the power dynamics established by the phallic symbol: the passive partner is stripped of his human status, while the active partner enhances his power through performative virility. This social structure also shapes homosexual relations in Ferentari. Alberto is unaware of this organisation and its culturally manufactured nature; he identifies the representations of "Man" and "Woman" – power and weakness, respectively – based on their subject positions as male or female/homosexual Other.

Alberto's gender identity, like Christine's, forms through oscillation between socially imposed norms and the inability to fully embody them. Alberto frequently demonstrates his physical strength through overtly performative acts, but their artificiality is evident not only to Adi but also to other characters who interact with him. This performance ultimately disrupts Alberto as well, as he is forced to continuously stylize hyperbolized features that he cannot truly embody. His image of virility and physical strength turns out to be a facade, designed to create an impression of identity coherence amidst discontinuous attributes and blurred practices. Far from the glory of masculine representation, Alberto's gender identity is inextricably linked to sexual violence in prison:

(...) it took me some time to realise that his bravado and foolish bluster were trying to hide the shame that he had been humiliated head to toe in the slammer, that he had learned to be submissive and a slave – and that after his release, so as to accept that

past without dissonance, he had trained himself to resemanticise it, to see the humiliation endured there as his trick. (Schiop, *Soldiers* 144)¹¹

Alberto constantly attempts to reinscribe his relationship with Adi within heterosexual frameworks. In private, within their intimate interactions, Alberto identifies more with the subordinate position associated with women, expecting Adi to embody the patriarchal image of a man. Adi had, in fact, promised him this by offering to handle his paperwork and find him a job (Schiop, *Soldiers* 222). The issue is that neither of them can fully embody binary gender norms; both are situated in borderlands, in diffuse interstices that do not align with each other. This mismatch quickly becomes a recipe for the dysfunctionality of their relationship. Moreover, their relationship is marked by the ambivalence of their statuses. Alberto emotionally manipulates Adi, leveraging his physical strength, but in the social field, Adi holds the position of power. In a deeply racist society, Alberto's Roma ethnicity is stigmatised and marginalised. Adi possesses an agency that Alberto, as a Roma man from a disadvantaged background, finds inaccessible.

Schiop's novel highlights the significance of transgressive bodily practices and their place in a patriarchal environment. The gay relationship between Alberto and Adi involves, on Alberto's part, a performance of bodily gestures that cross socially accepted boundaries. His physical presence becomes unacceptable in the family environment of his cousin's home, leaving him in a position of total social vulnerability (practically homeless following his separation from Adi). This disruption of norms places Alberto, more than Adi, in a stigmatised situation, intersecting with other forms of discrimination. In a world organised by a strict binary system, Alberto lacks the mechanisms to construct an intelligible identity. The performance of the masculine ideal quickly reveals the artificial stylization of acts that Alberto cannot truly embody, while the assumption of a subversive identity remains inaccessible in the marginal social environment to which he belongs.

Identity as multiple unfoldings

Published in 2022 under the pseudonym Saşa Zare, *Dezrădăcinare* is the novel that most explicitly assumes a theoretical position in its construction. While the reference

¹¹ "(...) mi-a luat ceva timp să mă prind că bravada și caterinca lui prostescă încercau să ascundă rușinea că la pârnaie fusese umilit cap-coadă, că s-a învățat submisiv și sclav – iar în libertate, ca să poată accepta fără disonanțe trecutul ăla, s-a antrenat să-l resemanticizeze, să vadă umilința mâncată acolo ca șmecheria lui" (My translation).

to Butler is expressly mentioned, numerous fragments also indicate the adoption of a posthumanist feminist stance, intended to offer a liberating perspective for both the protagonist, Saşa, and the novel's audience, whom the author recurrently addresses as "female reader"¹². The novel's structure plays an important role as well. The first part distinguishes between Saşa as the author-protagonist, whose voice is heard through diary fragments, and Saşa as a character, a semi-fictional entity in a text-in-progress. The second part of the novel, in a symbolic gesture, undoes this distancing, while the third part recovers a lesbian relationship from late adolescence, emphasising the feminist positioning of the narrative voice.

One of the fundamental aspects of the text is its relationship with writing and, implicitly, with language. Saşa's subject position is placed between geopolitical spaces and contexts, specifically between the Republic of Moldova and Romania. The uncertainty between verbal tenses and between the literary Romanian language and Moldavian grammar highlights the difficulty of navigating a stable position in the world, particularly under external pressures for unification (Zare 43). This performance embraces not only gender norms but also the sense of belonging to a geopolitical space, taking the form of a "theatrical performance" imbued with a sense of falsity (Zare 106). Saşa's identity is formed through successive re-territorializations that transform her into a nomadic subject; rather than repudiating her fragmentation, she embraces it, following a deconstructive and liberating approach. The transgression of the matrix of intelligibility (applied not only to gender but also to nationality, language, social status, etc.) occurs through the awareness that, beyond the naturalised norms of the Law, identity need not be univocal but can unfold manifold, in varied and non-canonical expressions of performance (Zare 106). Language becomes, through writing, the site for negotiating ways of embodying identity performance. By writing without restraint, Saşa traces the genealogy of her own identity, formed between territories, languages, and diverse, multiple forms of sexuality. This perpetual negotiation, which does not allow itself to be fixed in entrenched structures, is intertwined with the re-discussion and dismantling of heteronormative gender roles.

The genealogy of Saşa's gender identity is greatly facilitated by the therapeutic process depicted in the novel. The psychotherapy office becomes the laboratory for dissecting all those acts that, through repetition, have formed an identity that Saşa

¹² "cititoare" (My translation).

attempts, in the present tense of writing, to redefine on her own terms, affirming the “I” as a locative position. In other words, the whole novel can be seen as a personal, literary genealogy of the process of female gender incorporation, i.e., the effort to (re)become a woman according to her own specific standards. Access to this genealogy is, therefore, retrospective and guided, designed to delve deeply into the subject’s position. Saşa navigates all three levels of Braidotti’s proposed scheme of work without settling definitively at any point. The protagonist becomes aware of her sexual difference from the privileged subject position of men (especially in the story between her, Alice, and Razvan), from the normative representations of femininity whose incorporation fails, and from herself at different moments of her life. The fragments that make up Saşa’s selfhood (family, literature, the queer environment) are perceived as disparate, yet the therapeutic approach does not seek to meld them together but to bring them under the sign of identity, allowing them to manifest multiply (Zare 246).

In childhood, gender norms and religious affiliation shape identity according to a prudish feminine ideal. Even before it is fully defined, sexuality is marked by shame and fear, internalized as instruments of control. These gendered behavioural norms function as both oppressive and productive laws: they limit the child’s forms of expression while simultaneously constructing her identity under a triad of feelings culminating in fear: “(...) Christian guilt, Christian shame, Christian pity” (Zare 75). Similar to the female subjects constructed by Alina Nelega, Saşa’s identity is formed in close connection with gender violence, which often represents the first contact with sexuality. The internalisation of gender violence has a dual effect: it shapes Saşa’s identity around the assumption of externally projected and naturalised guilt (based on bodily attributes), imprinting a sense of inadequacy and pejorative difference. This genealogical approach is intentional and explicitly expressed (Zare 156). The ideal of intelligible femininity that guided Saşa’s identity formation as a child is thus reconstructed and proves to be the image of the mother, trapped in an “extremely absurd social contract”¹³ (Zare 177). Attempting to embody this ideal disrupts Saşa’s subjectivity, which increasingly perceives the gap between her own capacities to enact her assigned gender role and society’s demands of her (ranging from her mother to the literary world).

¹³ “contract social extrem de absurd” (My translation).

The third part of the novel, which delves into explorations of queer sexual orientation and the dysfunctional relationship with Alice, is also the most theoretical, featuring two key sequences. The first concerns the negotiation of the term “lesbian” as a marker of gender and sexual identity (Zare 235-238). The debilitating effect of societal norms is visible in the inability to name one's own gender and sexual identity as lesbian, associating it with shame and taboo. Saša recognizes the mechanism by which the feminine category occupies an inferior status in society, making a term such as “bisexual” a more intelligible and easier identity to fit into the heteronormative matrix. In society's perception, the phallic symbol has the power to trivialise or invalidate attraction to the same gender, making lesbianism socially unintelligible and often perceived through stigmatisation or fetishization. Total association with femininity thus remains inexpressible.

The author also discusses the classification regime of sexual practices. In the heteronormative system, only certain practices are considered valid, naturalised as definitions of sexual intercourse that necessitate the presence of the phallic symbol. Practices that transgress this basic schema have a duplicitous status: they are accepted in heterosexual relationships because they preserve reproduction as their purpose, but become inadmissible between two people of the same gender. Identity is a performance where only certain theatrical techniques are accepted. Stigmatisation and unintelligibility manifest through shame, turning the subject against the self and operating the entire regulatory mechanism. Given this double standard, Saša rejects the term “lesbian” to avoid fitting into heteronormative representations of lesbianism, which are often exoticized, fetishized, and stigmatised. This rejection is a refusal to let the multiplicity of sexual desire fall into marginalising categories. The game of alternative assumptions of sexual orientation, between *bisexual* and *lesbian* (names that lose some connection with the orientation itself) translates into the perpetual negotiation of the subject's position in a heteronormative socio-cultural field. The deconstructive approach is accompanied by projection, imagining a world where the gender binary is overcome and dissolved in the fluidity of identities, decoupled from sexual practices. The objective is to transform lesbian identity from a “cult” to a “sanctuary.”

By questioning the relationship between hegemonic and marginal cultural discourses, the author intentionally chooses not to conform to the dominant fashion of writing literature (Zare 330-333). The position from which she writes, her specific

location in Braidotti's terms, underscores the disruptive effect that performing a gender-assigned role has on the subject. The norms and rules of expression, both bodily and in writing, cannot encompass the experiences the female writer¹⁴ seeks to communicate. The disruption of the narrative voice symbolises the effort to break the heteronormative matrix, both materially and discursively, by assuming the position of the writing subject within a phallogocentric linguistic economy. In other words, this gesture marks an explicit refusal to abandon writing or the position of subject, necessitating a third, subversive option—redefining writing on one's own terms. Additionally, the overlap between the pseudonym of the author and the protagonist highlights the awareness of the fabricated fictionality of identity and its continuous performance. The performative act is, however, positively resemanticised—it does not indicate the pulverisation of identity as an unusable falsehood but rather an understanding of its construction and denaturalization.

The conceptualization of a third alternative to writing literature is situated between Butler and Braidotti. It is a subversive alternative, emerging from within the binary system, not seeking to parody the system but to fragment it beyond binarity and dichotomies into a juxtaposition of multiplicities. This third way translates, in the narrative, into a refusal to portray Saşa (the teenager) as a perfect victim or martyr—essentially, not as an exception of marginality that gains the privilege of being categorised as human. The right to exist should not be based on exceptional status, as it implies a false integration that perpetuates exclusion mechanisms in the formation and legitimization of identity. Simultaneously, the author's assumption of a situated position manifests in the awareness that each of the three characters—Saşa, Alice, and Răzvan—is part of a network of well-defined norms: “All three are already distributed in clear places, from which it would require a super-effort and often some losses to break away, to rewrite their own destinies”¹⁵ (Zare 333). This understanding extends further by recognizing how the privileged position of the male subject (and his implicit ability to erase other subjects from the category of the human) arises not from reasons outside the social structure (such as ill-will) but through performative acts that perpetuate tangible material conditions. These conditions centre on a socio-cultural system that, through repetition over time, creates naturalised historical

¹⁴ Saşa Zare deliberately uses the feminine for the position of the writing subject, precisely to highlight the particularity of this position.

¹⁵ “Toți trei sunt deja distribuiți în niște locuri clare, de care ar necesita un supra efort și de multe ori niște pierderi ca să se rupă, să-și rescrie propriile destinații” (My translation).

entitlement with an obscure genesis. This complex machinery is skillfully exemplified in the novel: years later, Răzvan writes a novel about Saşa's influence on his relationship with Alice, in which Saşa is reified into a grotesque image, stripped of human dignity (Zare 387-388).

If Butler's theory of gender performativity serves as a tool for deconstructing the phallogocentric system that Saşa must navigate, the perspective of posthumanist feminism is especially visible in the novel's frequent resemanticisations. By positioning the female subject, the author also considers the broader position of a living being in relation to the human. The category of the human is recognized as a social construct, with boundaries discursively established through a series of exclusions. The author's posthumanist gesture reframes the pejorative term "creature" to imbue it with generative power, challenging its regulatory meanings. Language and writing are ultimately understood as potentiality and virtuality that can unfold anytime and anywhere, in a constant re-territorialization.

Conclusions

The prose texts analysed in this paper present different perspectives on subjects whose gender identities do not fit within the limits prescribed by the matrix of social intelligibility. Each character confronts, in specific ways, the norms posited by the phallogocentric system as natural causes and expressions of bodily morphology. Under pressure to enact their assigned gender roles, these characters' identities register varying degrees of instability. The texts also inventory a multitude of reactions to this system: resistance, subversion, incorporation, failure, deconstruction, and projection.

The stance on homosexuality proves ambivalent. In Ion Negoïtescu's memoirs, the distinction between the "I" and the Other remains emblematic, as it is not sexual orientation *per se* that draws boundaries but rather acts of performance and public expressions of identity. Attraction to the same gender does not destabilise the position of the male subject, as it is both embodied and adored. Although the gay sexual orientation is socially unintelligible, they remain embedded in the larger structures of heteronormativity, ensuring the coherence of the subject. In contrast, Alina Nelega's novel shows how the assiduous attempt to incorporate the ideal of female identity has a deeply destabilising effect on Cristina. Trapped in a socially and politically oppressive matrix, Cristina's identity disintegrates between the impractical poles of mimesis and transgression. Escape from this dichotomy, embodied in Nana's

character, proves to be closely tied to chance and not always effective. For Alberto, the character portrayed by Adrian Schiop, the identity assemblage systematically hides its genesis, a process favoured by his marginal social condition. Schiop's novel illustrates the mechanisms by which certain subjects are excluded from the category of the human, placed discursively and materially at the intersection of discriminated categories: race, class, and sexual orientation. Alberto's gender identity is dismantled in the prison environment before it can form, leaving him to stylize expressions of gender that quickly reveal themselves as empty. Saşa Zare is the only character who manages to reconstruct her position as a subject, fluid yet anchored in the "I." This reconstruction is the result of a guided, lengthy process that involves deconstructing everything that provides artificial coherence to the self.

Another observation emerges from the play of mirrors between these texts: the gender identities of female subjects (and Alberto) are almost inevitably formed in close connection with gender violence, particularly through encounters with sexual abuse. Far from insinuating the homophobic prejudice that queer identity results from abuse, my observation highlights how the category "Female" is juxtaposed with that of the Other, positioned at the edge of or outside the human. Female characters are often transformed into sexual objects for public and discretionary use, causing their identities to be shaped around feelings of guilt and inadequacy. Their victimisation as women also acts disruptively, widening the divide between real experience and the gender ideal enforced by the heteronormative matrix.

What are the alternatives in this context? Some characters illustrate ways of transgressing heteronormativity, sharing the nomadism of subject position and the capacity for re-territorialization and continuous regeneration. For Ion Negoïtescu, this comes from the stability of identity; for Alina Nelega's characters, from the chance to leave geopolitical contexts; and for Saşa Zare, from extensive deconstruction and resemanticisation of naturalised effects. The subversive subject's position in relation to the matrix of intelligibility is constructed progressively and consciously, through a continuous effort to assert agency in the interstices between hegemonic binary categories. The heteronormative system remains solid, with disruptive effects on queer identities. However, as new modes of expression and performance emerge, the edges of this phallogocentric system become fluid, allowing multiplicity, fragmentarity, and specificity to assume their agentive force in turn.

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