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INTRODUCTION

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Abstract: This introduction aims to frame the texts it predates, to highlight their common theoretical and thematic concerns, and to set them against what we envision as a relevant common backdrop for the issues they raise. To this end, we begin from how insufficient acknowledgement of the current genocidal violence carried out against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank by Western feminism is symptomatic of its enmeshment with colonial rationales and imperialist violence. We question the extent of its liberating and emancipatory politics, reading them against the semiperipheral iterations of what Adam Tooze describes as the “polycrisis.” Focused on the gendered aspects of democratic backsliding - broadly understood as a weakening of faith in liberal democracy and the electoral invigoration of the far-right -, the articles included here trace cultural negotiations of gender justice, as it wanes or strengthens across the region. Various located within broader networks of transnational transfers and global concerns, the articles included here complement relevant work conducted outside the bounds of academic writing. We gesture towards such feminist, anticolonial and antiracist movements which have emerged in Romania, specifically in the literary

field, and to their contestation of the patriarchal and deeply unequal national cultural system.

Keywords: East-Central Europe, Western feminism, democratic backsliding, gender justice, feminist literature.

In his 1986 *After the Last Sky*, Edward Said writes on “the crucial absence of women. With few exceptions, women seem to have played little more than the role of hyphen, connective, transition, mere incident. Unless we are able to perceive at the interior of our life the statements women make — concrete, watchful, compassionate, immensely poignant, strangely invulnerable — we will never fully understand our experience of dispossession” (Said 120). Read against the continued settler colonial status of Palestine,¹ the unfolding of genocidal violence in the region following the October 7 Hamas attacks, and the disquieting silence of Western feminism in its wake, the fragment retains its acuteness. Not least of all because, in the face of its complex relationship with imperialism and neoliberal exploitation,² the feminism of the center does not seem to hold.³

Within the current global conjecture – operatively described by Adam Tooze’s terminology of “polycrisis”⁴ – feminism is called to reconsider its agendas and modus operandi, as it attempts to think through the climate crisis and the increased fragility of Western liberal democracy as such. The repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic, the

¹ For coverage of the current situation in Gaza through a feminist lens, see Maryam Al Tibi, “Why Palestine’s Ongoing Genocide is a Feminist Issue”, ESCR-net, March 11, 2024, <https://www.escr-net.org/news/2024/why-palestines-ongoing-genocide-feminist-issue>.

² For more on the gendered impact of the military activity in Gaza, as well as the broader issue of Palestinian feminism, see Eman Alasah, “The Palestinian Feminist Movement and the Settler Colonial Ordeal: An Intersectional and Interdependent Framework”, *Meridians* 1 April 2024; 23 (1): 110–132. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1215/15366936-10926920>, <https://read.dukeupress.edu/meridians/article-abstract/23/1/110/386321/The-Palestinian-Feminist-Movement-and-the-Settler?redirectedFrom=fulltext>.

³ Various stances against a globalised, white supremacist feminism have taken shape by non-Western feminists. Relatively recent projects such as *Against White Feminism* (2021) by Rafia Zakiria, *A Decolonial Feminism* (2021) and *A Feminist Theory of Violence: A Decolonial Perspective* (2022) by Françoise Vergès, *Feminist International: How to Change Everything* (2020) by Verónica Gago, *A Decolonial Black Feminist Theory of Reading and Shade. Feeling the University* (2023) by Andrea N. Baldwin are rooted in the robust and groundbreaking contributions of, among others, Angela Davis, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Adrienne Rich.

⁴ For a nuanced analysis of polycrisis as concept and its historiographical implications, see Mark Penner, “The Paradox of Polycrisis: Capitalism, History, and the Present”, *Journal of History*, Volume 58, Issue 2-3, December 2023, pp. 152-166.

precarious political context of the United States ahead of the 2024 presidential race, mirrored by the strengthening of electoral support for far-right political factions in the 2024 European Parliament elections, the still ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the polarized reaction of the Global North to unrelenting military aggression in Gaza and the West Bank are all traces of this weakening of faith in the liberal model. The most visible of the symptoms registered at the core of the world-system, they are refracted by the material and historical realities of its margins. It is the gendered component of these intersecting global crises, as they are localised, theorised, and represented in the post-socialist space that shaped the central concerns of this issue.

A regular site of contestation for right-leaning political actors, the issue of gender justice has gained acute relevance in the late 2010s and the early 2020s, under the concurring pressures of rising illiberalism and the socially altering experience of the pandemic. Increasingly articulate forms of anti-feminist mobilisation have thus gained mainstream exposure (Goetz and Mayer 2023, Krizsan and Roggeband 2019), prompting a form of political regression which, if read against the enmeshed emancipatory projects of western liberal democracy and transnational feminism, might lead one to proclaim, much like Claire Hemmings does in the title of her 2022 essay: “But I thought we’d already won that argument!” Regionally, examples of anti-feminist fervor and feminist pushback have been manifold – from the pronatalist rhetoric of Hungarian president Katalin Novák or the Romanian 2018 constitutional referendum, to the restriction of reproductive rights in Poland and the impressive mobilisation of civil society in the ensuing protests. Documented as “gendered processes of de-democratization” (Krizsan, 2019), the regional intersections of democratic backsliding and eroding gender justice reflect the wider networks of conservatism and “anti-gender” discourse that is transnationally employed and commodified by right-wing actors. Specifically across Eastern Europe, where transition from state socialism to neoliberalism has engendered an elitist, anti-communist and conservative narrative, gender and class issues have been more taboo subjects than real concerns addressed through effective and functional public policies. In the last decade, left-wing feminist movements, with roots in socialism, communism and anarchism, have assumed a socio-cultural role which, on the one hand, makes up for the lack of certain practices at state level (such as the right to abortion or the right of queer people to marry) and, on the

other hand, produces disruptive and emancipatory discourse and know-how, which imposes itself through a different rising up ethos and artistic practices that unseat a cultural (literary) system based on masculine, heteronormative domination (Bourdieu, 1998).

It is precisely this locally manifested but globally constituted character of feminist appraisal and anti-feminist contestation that underlines the texts included here. To this end, the Romanian transition to neoliberalism and its robust effects on women's work, their bodies and self-representation, features strongly in articles authored by Iulia Vîrban, Mihai Dragolea, Andreea Mîrţ and Mihnea Bâlici. They look to contemporary Romanian and Polish novels or documentary films in their analyses of precarious emancipation and paradoxical "soft backsliding", conceiving it against the economic maelstrom of the transition and the socio-political deficiencies of post-socialist democracy. In a similar vein, Gitanjali Singh writes about feminist contestation in contemporary Indian literature, showcasing the subversion of national mythology against the patterns of gendered violence it represents and enables. A second thematic concern emerges across texts authored by Ioana Moroşan and Mihai Țapu, who reflect, from radically distinct positions, on the institutionalization patterns of feminist thought – whereas Moroşan's article looks into how feminism, as academic discipline, was incorporated in the institutional landscape of Romanian academia, Țapu discusses Helen Hester's transition from xenofeminism to domestic realism, offering a relevant overview of a branch of feminist theorising which remains locally marginal. Similarly building on insights regarding the epistemic and material restrictions imposed on certain strands of theoretical discourse, texts authored by Anastasia Fuiuogă, Diana Huţanu and Alisa Tite explore how theories of gender performativity are locally refracted, reproduced and annotated in the production of queer and feminist contemporary Romanian literature. Embedded in the very early precedents of these discursive practices, texts by Miruna Runcan and Gabriela Glăvan observe the relationship between feminism and archival work, deconstructing or reassembling the legacies of unfairly obscure female writing and scholarship.

Despite its breadth and density, we find it important to acknowledge that the scope of this special issue remains narrow, due to its thematic concern with regional, and predominantly national, social realities. Moreover, we reflect on the epistemic

boundaries imposed on academic writing, the spaces it may travel to beyond its canonical receptacles, and its limitations in doing so. Therefore, we commend the work carried out by researchers, writers and artists, in Romania and elsewhere, through initiatives such as frACTalia Publishing and its editorial board, Pagini Libere Publishing, *Literature and Feminism* [Literatură și Feminism] e-platform and festival, Ecaterina Arbore (Research and Political Action Cooperative), *Cutra* magazine, E-Romnja (Roma Feminist NGO), Possible Worlds [Lumi posibile] speculative fiction platform, and *Post/h/um Journal*. These are not isolated enclaves, but comprise a network that highlights the arduous work of Romanian socialist, communist, and anarchist feminists thorough pieces of militant literature and theoretical texts aiming to raise awareness of oppressive capitalist and patriarchal systems, criticise conservative areas of the local cultural system, and, perhaps most relevantly, to provide a bridge between Romanian left-wing feminist movements and radical and liberating movements elsewhere.

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