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Source: *Signs*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (Winter 2008), pp. 255-282

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/521055>

Accessed: 08-12-2017 22:43 UTC

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## Lesbian Nationalism

### Winner of the 2007 Catharine Stimpson Prize

**O**n the Web site of Labrisz, the only registered lesbian organization in Hungary, there is a report on the sixteenth Cineffable Lesbian Film Festival, held each year in Paris. Two core members of the small filmmaking-activist collective that calls itself the Budapest Lesbian Film Committee attended the 2004 festival, where they showcased their own short film, *Pusztai Cowboy*. Katrin Kremmler, the director of the film, shares their inspiring festival experiences in the report. She writes, “I think we represented Labrisz/Hungary well. . . . At times we tend to think here that we are behind, that nothing happens in Hungary. . . . But at events like Cineffable one can see that this is not exactly true. People are interested in what we create here; they just know very little about it. We should try and organize a small, one-day lesbian festival, or ‘film day,’ to start with. They also started out small sixteen years ago!” (Kremmler 2004).

I would like to address the strange echo to the national *we* that one hears in this festival report. The echo is caused by the uneasy fit between the collective voice of nationalism and that of lesbian feminist activism. It has been well established that the *we* of nationalism implies a homosocial form of male bonding that includes women only symbolically, most prominently in the trope of the mother (Parker et al. 1992, 6). In times of national instability, nationalist discourses are especially eager to reassert the “natural” division of labor between the sexes and to relegate women to traditional reproductive roles. The postcommunist transitions have involved the often violent realigning of national borders; shifting conceptualizations of ethnic and racial identities in the course of migration and

My thanks to Karen Alexander, Mary Hawkesworth, and the anonymous *Signs* reviewers for their suggestions; Kasia Marciniak and Áine O’Healy for their feedback on earlier versions of the essay; Margie Waller for calling my attention to Kareta; Andrea P. Balogh for valuable ideas and contacts; and, most of all, Katrin Kremmler, Mária Takács, and the Budapest Lesbian Film Collective for sharing with me their films, thoughts, images, and suggestions.

[*Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 2008, vol. 33, no. 2]

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ethnic warfare; the thorough transformation of political regimes; a large-scale opening toward the global market of commerce, ideas, and images; and the staggered process of accession to the European Union. Such changes have put great pressure on the patriarchal scaffolding of nationalism, invariably resulting in a sense of the nation's emasculation, anxieties about the disappearance of "real" men and women, and widespread antifeminist backlash across the region (see Eisenstein 1993; Occhipinti 1996; Graff 2005).

In the small posttotalitarian countries of Eastern and Southern Europe, the response to the embattled nations' perceived emasculation has been the defensive "normalization" of gender relations. Right-leaning moral and political coalitions have been trying to rebuild the eroding narrative fortress of nationalism under the triple umbrella of God, nation, and family and to pin their nations' futures on the increasing production of wholesome new citizens. Besides conjuring up the fearful image of a monstrous alien nation overpopulated by the Roma and immigrants from undesirable places, mainstream media and the policies of nation-states are particularly intolerant toward sexualities perceived as nonreproductive.

All this makes it curious indeed that the representatives of the Budapest Lesbian Film Committee identify with the national *we*, in which the lesbian collective Labrisz and the Hungarian nation are somehow continuous. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the two women who represented Hungary at Cineffable are citizens of Germany and Switzerland, respectively, speak Hungarian as a second (or third) language, and consider Budapest their home of choice rather than birth. Are they naive or ignorant as to how the nation's moral majority feels about their kind? Or do their comments imply an elitist or idealistic transcendence of the walls of nationalism by those who possess the luxury of European mobility? As I will show, neither is the case. The committee's work testifies to the fact that these women's relationship to the Hungarian nation-state and its moral majority lacks all illusions; it is one of daily negotiation and sober resistance.

Then in what sense can a pair of oppositional, excluded, accented lesbian feminists embrace a "normal" phobic nation and its nationalism? Does one as a feminist, let alone a lesbian feminist, not need to choose between a commitment to the flexibility of gender roles and the dubious pleasures of nationalist affiliation, which is a false consciousness whereby one embraces what one is structurally excluded by? Transnational feminists have been trying to find a way around this shared dilemma and have demonstrated a complex awareness of the power of the nation in its diverse local manifestations (Burton et al. 2002, 23). Inderpal Grewal and Caren

Kaplan argue that feminists should find paradigms that can provide alternatives to nationalism and that examine and critique the ways in which crucial terms become circulated and co-opted by national culture in the course of intercultural translations (Grewal and Kaplan 1994, 2). Such work involves both an ongoing critique of the nation and democracy as the primary categories of analysis and the recognition that these concepts may be mobilized as a means of resisting an equally or even more powerful global capital (Burton et al. 2002, 31).

However, Labrisz's and the Budapest Lesbian Film Committee's political orientation cannot simply be labeled transnationalist. Rather, their identification as lesbians who represent Hungary reveals a paradigmatic and, I believe, productive ambivalence toward nationalism and the nation-state that characterizes the work of emerging Eastern European lesbian and feminist groups. Analyzing this ambivalence will be useful in order to answer increasingly crucial questions about the place of nationalism in relation to feminist, lesbian, and queer identities and theories. Is nationalism not what it seems? Can it be constructed, adopted contingently and selectively, and negotiated so that it becomes not only enjoyable for women but also salvageable for feminism? Are feminism and nationalism somehow compatible, able to share an affective and political space within subjectivities, a space that is not simply born out of the poststructuralist necessity to go through power structures that one cannot escape? How is such an ambivalence represented and sustained by lesbians in Eastern Europe today?

Such questions are at once specific to lesbian representation and visual activism in Eastern Europe, further embedded in the context of a rapidly transforming Europe, and have wider implications for thinking about the relationship between feminist theory and activism on a transnational scale. What does nationalism mean in the creative, theoretically informed activism of a group of lesbian feminist filmmakers who are still largely unrepresentable in Hungary? And what does this paradoxical but symbiotic relationship mean for feminist, lesbian, and queer theories, which have paid little attention to the ambivalences of nationalist affiliation?

While I only have room to work through a single case study here, the complexity of post-Soviet lesbian feminist representation compels the observer to allow different strands of feminist thought to bear upon one another. Particularly important for understanding the situation are poststructuralist theories of the performative aspect of gendered identity as they cross studies of nationalism and postcoloniality. These two directions are often seen as in conflict or in a power struggle within feminism: poststructuralist theories are considered more relevant for the Western

world, as evolving in a semiorganic manner from previous waves of Western feminist movements. Studies of nationalism and postcoloniality are seen as more relevant for third world and other non-Western cultures, where theories of gender are secondary to the real-life issues of survival and political equality that women still face today.

Such a hierarchical duality is clearly untenable in a post-Cold War, post-September 11 world. “Second-world” feminisms are equally informed by both the essentialist, allegorizing force of postcolonial nationalisms, which freeze differences among and within nationalized subjects into the homogeneity of the national collective, and the political need to conceive of identities as fluid, process oriented, and performative. This need to work out a compromise among different models of identity plays a significant role in the ambivalence that Labriz and other lesbian and feminist groups maintain toward the nation and nationalism.

Ultimately, I would like to contribute to the ongoing work of rethinking lesbian representation, queer theory, and theories of visibility and gender as they cross studies of nationalism, postcoloniality, and globalization.<sup>1</sup> As Judith Butler puts it, sexual difference *within* homosexuality has yet to be theorized in its complexity, as the vocabulary of describing play, crossing, and the destabilization of masculine and feminine identifications within homosexuality has only begun to emerge (Butler 1993, 240). “The inquiry into both homosexuality and gender will need to cede the priority of both terms in the service of a more complex mapping of power that interrogates the formation of each in specified racial regimes and geopolitical spatializations” (Butler 1993, 241).

### **Lesbian play and poststructuralist theories**

I will begin by situating emerging patterns of feminist theory and activism in postcommunist Europe in relation to the playful visual features that have characterized Western queer activism over the past two decades. The latter evolved in intimate connection with poststructuralist feminist theorizing, which has centered on concepts of performativity and play closely identified with Butler’s influential paradigm.

Since the late 1980s queer theorizing and lesbian political activism have been injecting new energy into an increasingly fragmented feminist movement by mobilizing a set of concepts clustered around play: performance, theatricality, humor, and excess. This productive convergence between

<sup>1</sup> I am thinking, in particular, of such work as Gayatri Gopinath’s book *Impossible Desires* (2005) and Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Martin Manalansan’s *Queer Globalizations* (2002).

queer theory and lesbian activism has been informed by feminism's ongoing concern with the visual and the visible, particularly in psychoanalytic models of identity formation and spectatorship, which are tied to discussions about pleasure, pornography, and representation. As Ann Cvetkovich explains, feminist artist-activists such as Barbara Kruger and Cindy Sherman revalued popular media, fashion, and consumer culture as political and theoretical resources (Cvetkovich 2001, 283–86). Following the initiative of the group ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), which consciously employed style as a tool of queer activism, the first manifesto of the collective Lesbian Avengers identified activism as fun and drew on mainstream media tactics to make lesbian identities visible by organizing demonstrations, parties, and “dyke marches” in large U.S. cities (Cvetkovich 2001, 290–91). In a similar vein, visual art collectives such as Dyke Action Machine! began to use conventions of corporate advertising during the “gay nineties” to install images of lesbians within the public sphere, reminding consumers that political and visual power are interconnected and that advertising is grounded in the fiction of diversity and inclusion while harnessing fantasy for political goals (Cvetkovich 2001, 297).

However, despite a shared global media culture in which images and fantasies travel at digital speed, queer and feminist studies continue to conceive of the playful turn in lesbian visual activism, celebrity culture, and films as specific to first-world metropolitan and academic centers. Notwithstanding the occasional interpretive queering of postcolonial national or regional cinemas or of particular films from third-world contexts, the kinds of performativity that have bridged mainstream consumer culture and lesbian activism to create some of the most fruitful examples of feminist intervention have been understood as Western phenomena.

This situation conjures up an uneven global map, with a few bright spots of ludic lesbian visibility and the rest shrouded in oppression. In particular, it seems that the implicit hierarchy between activism (as primary, more effective, and more important) and studies of representation (as derivative, secondary, even parasitic), which had been historically important for feminism but became ultimately problematic by the 1990s, survives on a spatial scale. While B. Ruby Rich's caution that feminist work on film is moving away from its early political commitment to issues of “life” and “the combative”—that is, to serving as an analysis of and weapon against patriarchal capitalism—and toward the “merely representational” (Rich 1985, 343) was entirely valid in 1979, it has by now become untenable as feminists have realized that the representational is an indispensable political tool.

When it comes to third-world or non-Western cultures, lesbian rep-

representation as well as feminist and queer theory in general tend to yield priority to so-called women's issues, which are seen as more urgent and legitimate within their oppressive national contexts, and to the representation of women on a strictly political basis, presupposing the primacy of an essentialist identity politics. As a result, when lesbianism is distinguished from women's problems or feminist issues in non-Western contexts at all, its activist strain is singled out, severed from representational aesthetics and popular culture as well as feminist theory. Such an approach not only overlooks the crucial role of the performative, rather than combative, creation of visibility for lesbians in these cultures but may also unwittingly collaborate with nation-states' essentialist reliance on a binary gender division.

The recent wars of Yugoslav succession reignited the conflict between feminists of a transnational orientation, who wish to construct a common ground across differences, and practitioners of a radical, activist brand of feminism, whose goal it is to liberate women from patriarchal violence. Feminist narratives of rape became instrumentalized in nationalistic constructions of Serbian or Croatian ethnic identities, preventing coalitions among feminist groups who otherwise shared an antiwar stand. What Djurdja Knezevic (1997) calls "affective nationalism" of a specifically Eastern and Southern European kind energized patriotic feminist organizations in Croatia, among them lesbian groups such as Kareta. These groups condemned the war but insisted on measuring and comparing on a national basis the victimhood assigned to women through rape, torture, and humiliation. They refused to communicate with antinationalist feminists in Serbia and elsewhere. The activism of Croatian patriotic feminists is an extreme expression of the ambivalence that characterizes postcommunist feminist and lesbian emergence. Importantly, it converged with the activism of Western liberal feminists who, headed by Catharine MacKinnon, saw the solution in giving voice and legal protection to women regarded as voiceless, passive victims (Batinic 2001).

*Performativity* implies the productive acknowledgment of one's implication in what one opposes. It is the turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power in order "to establish a kind of political contestation that is not a 'pure' opposition, a 'transcendence' of contemporary relations of power, but a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure" (Butler 1993, 241). I want to suggest that the performativity and play of identity constitution, which lesbian representation inevitably foregrounds, may create a common ground for theorizing the geographic and cultural multiplicity of lesbian representations. In cultures and regions where lesbianism has limited or no visi-

bility, it is not necessarily true that serious political activism and essentialist identity politics are more effective than forms of performative activism and the playful subversion of representations sanctioned by local versions of heteronormative ideology.

In a well-known recent feminist debate, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak rejects Martha Nussbaum's "matronizing reference" to poor rural Indian women who, according to Nussbaum, have no use for the kind of "symbolic" feminism espoused by Butler and her followers (Spivak 1999).<sup>2</sup> On the contrary, Spivak writes, "gender practice in the rural poor is quite often in the performative mode, carving out power within a more general scene of pleasure in subjection" (1999, 43). In a similar vein, in post-Soviet Eastern Europe lesbian theorizing and activism do not follow the evolutionary path that Western sisters have tread since the 1970s. Rather, local theorists and activists pick and choose from the entire set of coexisting theoretical models produced over decades elsewhere and employ performative modes of activism to bring gender and lesbianism into visibility (Kalocsai 1998; Gyöngyi 2001; Graff 2003).

Beáta Sándor, Hungarian lesbian activist and Labrizs's legal representative, asks, "Why is it not enough for minorities to have equal rights?" (1999, 4). Poststructuralist feminist theories constitute Sándor's starting point: "How is it possible to create new subject positions so that not only recognizing but also creating strategies for transforming existing institutions and practices can be a project? Feminist politics are crucial in determining which existing theories might be useful in the effort for such a change" (Sándor 1999, 4). Her goal, shared with many Eastern European feminists, is to challenge the language of biological femaleness: to question naturalizing expressions that efface language as a site of political struggle, expressions that are often legitimized with reference to social scientific, empirical data. Sándor explains that, as a particular effect of the belated emergence of feminism in the region, Eastern European feminists have simultaneous access to all "waves" of feminism. As a result, theoretical discourses seem to initiate, rather than follow, political organizing: "We need theoretical discussions of the relation between language, subjectivity, social organization and power to understand the primary questions why women tolerate social relations which subordinate their interests to those of men, what makes it particularly difficult for women to organize and structure their identities outside the constraints of heterosexuality, and by

<sup>2</sup> Nussbaum's article, "The Professor of Parody," was originally published in the February 22 issue of *The New Republic* in 1999. See [http://www.ebim.ucl.ac.be/scientif/Recherche/GenreBioethique/Nussbaum\\_NRO.htm](http://www.ebim.ucl.ac.be/scientif/Recherche/GenreBioethique/Nussbaum_NRO.htm).

what mechanisms women and men adopt particular discursive positions as representative of their interests” (Sándor 1999, 7).

In a similar vein, Romanian feminist anthropologist and activist Enikő Magyari-Vincze compares the state of the Romanian feminist movement to a growing island that is formed by different waves of feminism that originated elsewhere but that is evolving into something yet unpredictable (Gyöngyi 2001). Polish feminist academic and activist Agnieszka Graff uses a strikingly similar metaphor to describe the postcommunist development of Polish feminism. In her article “Lost Between the Waves?” she argues that Polish feminism employs tools favored by third-wave feminism—irony, camp, play, cross-dressing, carnival, poststructuralist theory, and a concern with images and representation—to achieve goals typical of the second wave, such as reproductive rights, equal pay, and political representation. She also proposes that such a refusal of the chronology of waves may lead to something unfamiliar in Polish gender politics and the feminist movement in general (Graff 2003).

However, it is noticeable that all these feminist activist-intellectuals theorize conspicuously similar patterns of emergence, primarily with reference to their own national contexts. To me this signals less a limitation of vision than a recognition on their part of the continuing power of the nation-state and of nationalist discourses to filter and transform globally circulating ideas and provide an affective ground that cannot simply be replaced by the transnational. In other words, I argue that even for feminists who are critical of gendered and sexualized discourses in the national media and in the practices of national governments, the identification with nationalism remains a force that cannot be ignored. While nationalism is something to be discursively and continually performed, it also provides a culturally specific blueprint for gender identification itself. This affective force of the national can best be understood in relation to a wider post-colonial pattern of allegorical representation.

### **National allegory and lesbian representation**

As Rey Chow writes, women “have all along been objectified as the very devices of representation, as the signs that bear specific moral or artistic significance in a world created by men,” that is, as functions of exchange that establish relations among men (2001, 40). The more insecure a nation-state or other perceived basis for nationalist affiliation, the more forcefully gender and sexuality are called upon to justify and naturalize the hierarchical ethical divide implied in the binary structure of representation, “a moral opposition between implicit notions of absence and pres-

ence, primariness and secondariness, originality and derivation, authenticity and fakeness, and so forth, that are attributed respectively to the two parts involved” (Chow 2001, 38).

The allegorical tendency of nationalistic discourse continues to be an especially strong force within postcolonial nationalisms. Inherent in politics, education, literature, film, and other practices that make up national culture, national allegory subordinates differences among national subjects to a supposedly uniting and equalizing national bond and makes many women prioritize their national identities above all other affiliations. National allegory has been amply discussed by postcolonial theorists in an ongoing debate I will not rehearse here (see Jameson 1986; Slemmon 1987; Bensmaïa 1999). What has been less adequately addressed is the way in which representations of lesbianism necessarily foreground the self-deconstructive aspect of national allegorization. As I will explain with reference to Homi Bhabha’s work on nationalism, because of its dual character—pedagogical and performative, simultaneously lending itself to essentialist and poststructuralist conceptions of identity and nation—the concept of allegory itself provides a link between postcolonial and feminist theories’ concerns with binary discursive mechanisms. In both areas, allegory has been deployed to establish a connection between essentialist and poststructuralist models of identity and representation.

The work of the Budapest Lesbian Film Committee represents the vanguard of feminist theorizing and activism in Hungary and provides a paradigmatic regional pattern of ambivalence with regard to nationalism. On the one hand, their films and activism maintain a critical distance from the homophobic institutions and practices of the nation-state and media discourses, which tend to portray lesbians as exotic animals reduced to their queer sexuality and to eroticize lesbian sex in heterosexual porn.<sup>3</sup> There is also obvious enjoyment in hiding, in the intimate transgressions of the boundaries of the nation-state and national language. On the other hand, there is a marked effort to construct lesbian identity that is by definition Hungarian or that could be established as part of a national cultural tradition. The latter is manifest in gestures small and large, from adopting the national *we* in the festival report with which I began this essay to an effort to create a decidedly Hungarian lesbian literary and artistic tradition and way of communication. By necessity, such a tradition has to be retroactively constructed from literary and filmic representations

<sup>3</sup> This inherently essentialist exoticization of lesbian sex is precisely the reason why visual and other texts by lesbians avoid representing lesbian sex at all—much as Erzsébet Galgóczi and Károly Makk did in the film *Another Way* (1982).

in which lesbianism is implicit at best, reduced to an allegorical expression of the nation's plight. The construction of such a national lesbian tradition, an apparent contradiction in terms, is bound to productively mobilize the paradoxical, self-deconstructive aspect of allegory.

The Hungarian *Another Way* (1982) is the only film made in the Soviet-controlled region during communism that openly depicts lesbianism. It is thus a crucial point of reference for post-Soviet lesbian self-representations. At the center of the film is young journalist Éva Szalánczky. Shortly after she begins her job on the staff of the Budapest daily newspaper, *Igazság* [Truth], in 1958, she falls in love with a married colleague, Lívía, a markedly feminine blonde (Polish actress Grazyna Szapolowska). Lívía seeks an outlet from her eventless and emotionally deprived life at the side of her military officer husband and finds it in the new erotic energy that Éva radiates. After several dates and much emotional agony, she yields to the sexual temptation. Following their single sexual encounter, however, everything comes crashing down on the lovers: Lívía's jealous husband shoots her so that she remains wheelchair-bound and bitter toward Éva, a living memorial of regret and punishment, whose greatest fear is that nobody will want to make her pregnant. Éva, whose reporting about communist atrocities has made her situation impossible at the newspaper, gives in to despair. The scene that opens and closes the film (whose plot is told in retrospective narration) finds her at the Austro-Hungarian border, hinting at the possibility that she may have intended to emigrate illegally. But she does not hide from the border guards when they try to stop her and is shot dead.

The camera refuses to eroticize contact between the women, including the sex scene, and medicalizes the crippled, naked, infertile body of Lívía in the narrative introduction, which warns us of the consequences of "perversion" before the story begins. The film starts out with Éva's removal from the plot and ends the same way, teaching a lesson to those who diverge from the correct path of livable choices. A sigh of relief accompanies her exit, as she is not a point of identification to begin with. She is useful only to the extent that her sacrifice can posthumously be converted into political capital.

The film's own discursive strategies, the creators themselves, and the critical community all converged in interpreting the lesbian protagonists as mere allegories of larger national and universal issues. Felice Newman, one of the English translators of the 1980 novel *Törvényen belül* (literally, within the law; distributed in English with the title *Another Love*), from which novelist Erzsébet Galgóczi and director Károly Makk developed the film, writes: "In how many novels written in the 'free' and 'liberated'

West does a lesbian character represent the soul of the nation? . . . In Galgóczi's view, Hungary is a nation caught in an Orwellian squeeze. And Éva is Hungary's national spirit. *Another Love* is Erzsébet Galgóczi's State of the Union address, and she has chosen a fiercely independent (albeit emotionally battered) lesbian to carry the message. . . . Such guts, Galgóczi!" (Newman 1991, 17).

The misunderstanding here is profound. No Eastern European writer can "choose" a lesbian character within cultures where there is no such thing as a lesbian. Galgóczi, who was a closeted lesbian until the untimely end of her troubled life, struck out in this one novel to bring her own unrepresentable subjectivity into representation. But the only way she could do so was by putting the smoke screen of national allegory in front of the highly autobiographical story of the tragic lesbian. This strategy worked for the film version, too. At the 1982 Cannes Festival, Polish actress Jadwiga Jankowska-Cieslak, who played the role of Éva—in the absence of Hungarian actresses, none of whom would have taken on such a role—won the award for best actress. The film received the International Federation of Film Critics Award "for its clarity," for the "originality of its libertarian message," and for its struggle for "individual freedom" (Zsugán 1982, 16). European reviews praised it for the "extraordinary richness with which Makk and Galgóczi linked two disparate themes: the human right to another kind of love . . . and the search for political freedom" (Zsugán 1982, 16). American film critics and academics have been just as uncritically thrilled, ignoring the contradiction that a lesbian should allegorically stand for the cause of the nation, in whose official discourses lesbianism is inconceivable.<sup>4</sup>

What makes this contradiction possible to miss is precisely that the film's aesthetic successfully sublimates the lesbian theme in the realm of political allegory and suppresses a potentially lesbian look. Éva, the Eastern European "lesbian," is still without a name, but with a certain harassed lesbian self-awareness. "She is that way," declares a male character in the

<sup>4</sup> David W. Paul writes, "At first glance the issues of lesbianism and censorship may strike one as unlikely twins, but a brilliant idea links them in this story. For Éva, sexual and political nonconformity are of one piece. Since she cannot accept the Party line on matters of sexual preference . . . she can equally well reject the Party line on journalistic scandals" (1989, 192). Kevin Moss similarly accepts the filmmaker's explicit allegorical intentions without examining the discursive violence committed against the lesbian character: "In *Another Way*, then, Makk takes advantage of the similarities between political and sexual dissidence and constructs his film around the intersections of the two. Éva is both politically and sexually dissident, and the film shows how similar the devices used to conceal and reveal such dissidence are" (1995, 246).

film, indicating that her sexuality does not fall within the normative categories of language. She “suffers from two perversions,” as the director puts it in an interview: she “loves her own sex” and is “unable to lie” (Szilágyi 1982, 12). Her sexual “perversion” is never directly identified in the film, yet the circumscriptions, empty pronouns, and pronominal adjectives that refer to lesbianism point to a collective understanding of the secret (Moss 1995, 245). This understanding crystallizes in the stereotype of the male-identified and mannish lesbian who cannot resist the seductions of traditional femininity and who competes with men for women. Tragic lesbian love is a feasible allegory for signifying the failure of heroism in the face of oppression and complicity because Éva, an Eastern European lesbian, is constructed as an anomaly, a contradiction in terms, as someone not viable other than as a trope from the start.

Despite Makk’s and Galgóczi’s efforts to allegorize lesbianism, the pressure put on national allegory’s apparently self-contained referential system by the representation of lesbian desire releases allegory’s ghostly, inherently self-reflective side. Éva’s refusal to choose between available feminine and masculine identities opens up the performative dimension of national allegory. The retroactive engagement with national allegory in the novel and the film has proven to be a crucial identificatory resource for Hungarian lesbians, who have gradually appeared from the closet since the official end of communism. Éva’s plight has become the most important historical and discursive record of lesbian visibility, on which lesbian activists have drawn to construct their own very different kind of emergence into postcommunist representation.<sup>5</sup>

The first postcommunist novel written about lesbianism, *Goat Lipstick* (1997), by a lesbian writer who uses the pseudonym Agáta Gordon, engages in conversation with its single predecessor to stake out a different kind of lesbian subjectivity within but also outside the law, one no longer constituted in isolation. There is a conscious effort in *Goat Lipstick* to create a literary tradition, a minor literature in the Deleuzian sense, that deterritorializes language and connects the individual to political immediacy. The novel produces a collective assemblage of enunciation, turning a most personal story political (Sándor 1999). But this kind of allegorization is deployed for the purposes of lesbian identification, resisting incorporation by the national body.

The continuities between the two novels, landmarks in the constitution

<sup>5</sup> For this information, I am grateful to Kremmler, Magdi Timár, and Eszter Muszter, members of the Budapest Lesbian Film Committee, whom I interviewed at the Lesbian Film Festival in Budapest on July 4, 2004.

of a lesbian community, are numerous and intentional, going far beyond the overt references in *Goat Lipstick* to passages in Galgóczi's novel. Both texts are caught in an ambivalence between capitulation to and a critique of nationalistic ideologies of gender and sexuality. But Galgóczi's tragic, isolated lesbian commits suicide—importantly, on the border of the nation, by border guards' guns. Gordon's protagonist, even though she sinks into paranoia and depression and ends up in the psychiatric institution where she writes her autobiographical text, nevertheless belongs to a secret collectivity and is able to inhabit a lesbian space built from a collection of found images and texts. Where Galgóczi's lesbians inevitably and tragically come up against borders and binaries determined by the allegorizing logic of nationalism, Gordon's heroines hide among texts, quotations, and images that represent these borders as malleable. Even more important, Gordon's lesbians take pleasure in this textual hiding: "Hiding, the incorporation of a role and the incorporation of a self is almost luxurious in this novel, an enjoyed and excessive game" (Sándor 1999, 9).

*Goat Lipstick* is a paradigmatic text of postcommunist Eastern European lesbian feminist emergence in that it both identifies with the earlier, allegorical text and transforms it in the course of a collective, critical process of reinterpretation. While *Another Love* was swallowed up almost completely by the heteronormative categories of the national and removed from literary circulation after the end of communism, Gordon and her interpretive community take a critical, poststructuralist stand toward the same categories. Éva identifies as her role model the rebellious spirit of Sándor Petöfi, a revered Romantic male poet and patriotic revolutionary. Her search for what she calls lesbian nature was bound to fail within the parameters imposed by the search itself. Gordon, by contrast, foregrounds the way her heroine constructs lesbian subjectivity as a patchwork of allegories of reading (Balogh 2003). While Éva's story is retrospectively constructed in a realistic manner by a fascinated male police officer, the embodiment of state power, in Gordon's text the hiding protagonist's self-fashioning is communicated in a fragmented way through found poetry and punctuation-free, floating sentences without clear boundaries, evoking a "playfully dislocated, placeless subject" (Sándor 1999, 11). In the closing passage of the book, Gordon writes:

now the hunt was only a flash the greyhounds were not even roused really so late it was when they noticed the squirrel which was planting nuts among the rustling leaves on the ground and it pricked up its ears only when it heard my steps and frightened me escaping toward the dogs in a confusion but only until the next tree it managed to

climb on at the last moment leaving a small bunch of red tail-hair  
in the snout of the faster hound

it had a rest in the safety of height panting and scaling the trunk  
of the wild cherry above the snarling dogs and then it disappeared  
among the leaves and then it was that I relaxed too

it survived—I thought but I already knew that I was the puppet  
of the dogs in this game a scarecrow which makes the tactically and  
probably successfully escaping prey panic and then it recklessly  
chooses the known danger instead of the alien one

I began to feel hopeful from this or rather trust that the rumpled  
can become a re-dressed destiny and the hurting and shattered out-  
sider a destined carnivore. (Gordon 1997, 110; English translation  
in Sándor 1999, 14)

Sándor characterizes this discursive, repetitive self-creation as playful, rendering borders and limits much less permanent than they are in Galgóczi's novel and Makk's film. Even being "in" and "out" are just subtle distinctions: "Small signs gain their meaning gradually and playfully, and through spatialized performances: they make a certain sense in one space and at a certain time and are without 'meaning' at another" (Sándor 1999, 12). Even the body of the lesbian is malleable, androgynous, metaphorically mixing with animals such as centaurs and goats. This self-creation corresponds to the poststructuralist notion of the subject as something precarious, formed in a process of repetitive contradiction, "irreducible to the humanist essence of subjectivity" that characterizes the male subject of modernism (Sándor 1999, 12). Gordon, like Butler, leaves the sign *lesbian* permanently unclear.

Both attitudes are evident in the video documentary made by the Budapest Lesbian Film Committee subsequent to *Goat Lipstick*'s publication, *Pilgrimage to the Land of Goat Lipstick* (2005). The documentary follows a group of lesbians, including Gordon herself, as they revisit the places and events depicted in the novel. The narrative goes back and forth between events of the day, including a bus ride from Budapest and a hike up to the cottage that saw the secret beginning of a lesbian community, and events of the night, as the group sits around the campfire. During the night scenes, Gordon and her former lover, the two main protagonists of the novel, take turns recollecting how lesbians from Budapest gradually and secretly inhabited the area. The storytelling is pleasurable and witty, interrupted by frequent and intimate laughter. The stories conjure up lesbian identities in a discursive process that refers not only to the actual events but also to their mythical legitimation in Gordon's book. Lesbian

storytelling functions as a complex game of recognition, in which participants turn the mainstream national community's fear of naming lesbianism into a pleasurable hide-and-seek: the first couple "lived here in a way that no one knows about them and still doesn't," as Gordon introduces the tale in the film.

As the story around the campfire unfolds, the observer also becomes aware that an indispensable source of the intimacy and recognizability within this lesbian community is its shared attachment to a particular cultural and historical register of Hungarianness. Lesbians recognize each other and bond over the literature they read, the music they listen to, and the Budapest museums and bookstores they frequent—the very emblems of culture from which Hungarian nationalism forges its alleged immanence, eternity, and superiority. In other words, the critical distance from nation and nationalism, which often manifests itself in subversive transgressions and eroticized prohibitions, coexists with a desire to be seen, to be placed within, a specific national history and culture.

This ambivalence toward national culture can be better understood with reference to Bhabha's account of the ambivalence of nationalism, manifest in the divide between its performative and pedagogical functions. He explains, "In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative. It is through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of modern society becomes the site of *writing the nation*" (Bhabha 1994, 145). Rather than the homogeneous and horizontal view proposed by nationalist historiography, whose reference point is an unchanging people, "the people" is a complex rhetorical strategy of social reference repetitively produced and confirmed within a set of discourses: "We then have a contested conceptual territory where the nation's people must be thought in double-time; the people are the historical 'objects' of a nationalist pedagogy, giving the discourse an authority that is based on the pre-given or constituted historical origin *in the past*; the people are also the 'subjects' of a process of signification that must erase any prior or originary presence of the nation-people to demonstrate the prodigious, living principles of the people as contemporaneity: as a sign of the *present* through which national life is redeemed and iterated as a reproductive process" (Bhabha 1994, 145).

The dual time of nationalism allows nationalism's pedagogical mission repetitively and performatively to reinscribe what is otherwise represented as horizontal, homogeneous, and unchanging, while surmounting the traces of such continual construction. The paradox is inherent in the very notion of national allegory, as postcolonial critics such as Réda Bensmaïa

point out, precisely with reference to Bhabha's work (Bensmaïa 1999). *Pilgrimage's* mythical, semireligious travel to and repetitive resettling of the land discursively identified in the novel *Goat Lipstick* performs and foregrounds the very process Bhabha describes: the nation's people is continually recreated in a process of dissemination rather than originating as such at a specific point in time. The people who are being created in the film, however, are united in a critical consciousness of heterosexual norms and assumptions, in an intentional effort to conjure up a retrospective tradition that begins with *Another Love* and *Another Way* and continues with *Goat Lipstick* and *Pilgrimage*.

*Pusztá Cowboy*, a parodic short made by the Budapest Lesbian Film Committee and presented at the 2004 Cineffable in Paris, offers another example of the way in which nationalism is revealed to be a patchwork of the "arbitrary signs and symbols that signify the affective life of the national culture," in Ernest Gellner's definition (as paraphrased in Bhabha 1994, 142). While nationalism is in no way contingent or accidental, Gellner argues, it is made up of cultural shreds and patches that are often arbitrary historical inventions (Bhabha 1994, 142). *Pusztá Cowboy* opens by citing one such precious cultural shred, the epic poem *Miklós Toldi*, written by eminent Hungarian Romantic poet János Arany (legendary friend of Petöfi, Éva's role model) in 1846. The poem itself recasts the adventures of the eponymous folk hero to create an inspiring allegorical narrative and enduring role model for the nation seen as in perpetual need of defense from more powerful enemies. In the poem, Toldi, a peasant boy of extraordinary strength and impeccable moral fortitude, rises from his humble surroundings on the Hungarian plains (the *pusztá*) to become one of the king's most loyal soldiers in the fight against foreign intruders. The poem has become a fixture of the national literary pantheon and school curriculum. It also lent itself well to the communist state's folk mythology, which was instrumental in the nation-state's pedagogical mission to create a unified people.

In *Pusztá Cowboy*, a voice-over recites the memorable beginning stanza, which describes the lonesome but powerful figure of Toldi standing tall in the hot, dry landscape. However, what we see is a transgendered Toldi on horseback, wearing a cowboy outfit, in a landscape identified as the Wild West (see fig. 1). The poem is immediately thrown outside the "continuist, accumulative temporality" of the pedagogical (Bhabha 1994, 145). After the initial gesture to *Miklós Toldi*, the film deviates from the poem and employs the generic markers of the Western to tell the story of the hero's quest for his lover, who has been kidnapped by her former lover. After an Indian leads Cowboy-Toldi to his adversary's hideout, a



**Figure 1** Still from *Puszta Cowboy* (2004). © Katrin Kremmler and the Budapest Lesbian Film Collective. Reprinted with permission. Color version available as an online enhancement.

shoot-out occurs, represented as alternating shots of the actual actors and shadow cartoon figures that further reduce the Western to core elements of recognizability and simultaneously render Toldi's narrative a didactic allegorical tool (see fig. 2). All the roles, which in actual Westerns act as codes that glue together the gendering, racializing, and nationalizing of the spectating subject in a seamless process, are played by lesbians.

What we end up with is a deliciously disorienting carnival with multiple crossings: those of genres, national cultural traditions, cinematic conventions, and gender roles. By projecting the Western's desert scenery onto the backdrop of the Hungarian *puszta*, and the cowboy—the problematically sexualized embodiment of American manliness—onto the mythical embodiment of Hungarian heroism, the film reverses the process whereby “the scraps, patches and rags of daily life [are] repeatedly turned into the signs of a coherent national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of national subjects” (Bhabha 1994, 145). The rags and patches of the cultural fabric are revealed to be substitutable—by those of other nationalisms as well as by those taken from global popular culture. The transgendered American cowboy/Hungarian folk hero thus becomes the double, the figure of the nation's repressed, who emerges from nationalism's effort to maintain the illusion of the nation's eternal present through “a consistent process of surmounting the ghostly time of repetition” (Bhabha 1994, 145). Such ludic



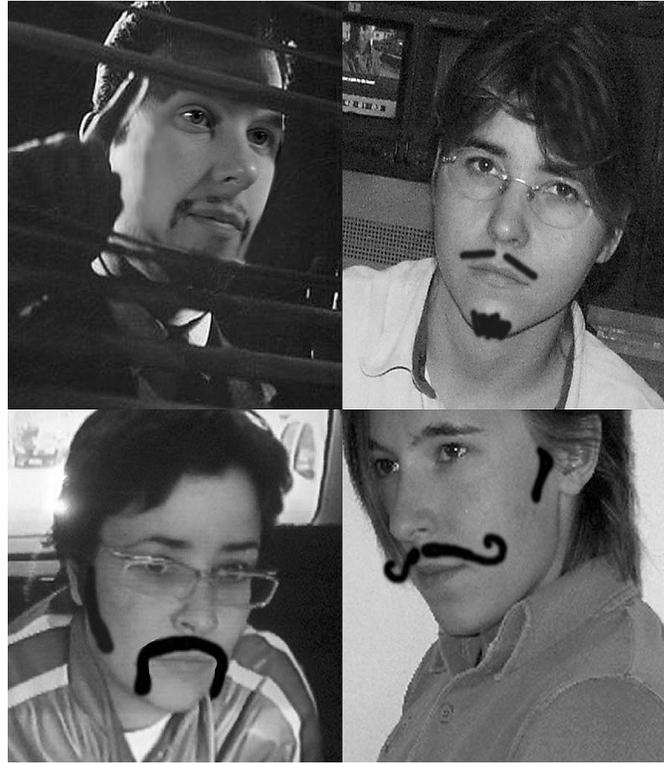
**Figure 2** Duel. Still from *Pusztá Cowboy* (2004). © Katrin Kremmler and the Budapest Lesbian Film Collective. Reprinted with permission. Color version available as an online enhancement.

strategies of subversion recall the performative activism of ACT UP and other Western queer groups. However, national allegory looms here as a much more powerful target of subversion and appropriation than mainstream popular media.

The filmmakers thus foreground how nationalism as a narrative strategy repetitively recreates its people in a continual performance of narrative coherence. Their transnational orientation has inspired the collective to adopt feminist third-wave models of carnival and a playful, camp aesthetic of activism, both in the form of live events (in their annual gay pride and queer film festival, drag balls, and parties) and through the media (a strong Web presence, a lesbian radio show). They have also translated, disseminated, and adapted queer and poststructuralist feminist theories and fiction over the past decade.<sup>6</sup>

Staking out identities within and across national borders through a playful and performative aesthetic reaches its epitome in the group's most recent, forty-five-minute documentary about an international drag king workshop organized by Labrisz in Budapest. Narrator-codirector-partic-

<sup>6</sup> This, again, is very similar to the activities of Polish feminists, who have a hip-hop group and demonstrate against the ban on abortion and other neoconservative measures through campy street demonstrations and music (see Graff 2003).



**Figure 3** Still from *Bandage, Socks, and Facial Hair* (2004). © Maria Takács and the Budapest Lesbian Film Collective. Reprinted with permission. Color version available as an online enhancement.

ipant Dédé introduces and comments on the events. Two German drag king workshop coordinators from Berlin have been invited to temporarily transform a group of Hungarian and other European lesbians into heterosexual men—a fascinating experiment that is supposed to provide one with an embodied experience of the workings of gender. Something important transpires in the course of the day as the women learn how to use space, talk, and eat like men, decking themselves out with facial hair, men’s clothing, and a sock in a strategic position to lend them more authentic manpower: the different ways of being men translate into recognizable national stereotypes, even if these stereotypes do not necessarily correspond to the performers’ actual national origins (see fig. 3). A German woman dons a turtleneck and black-rimmed glasses to become the type of German intellectual most familiar to Americans from Mike Myers’s *Saturday Night Live* “Sprockets” skit. A woman from Bulgaria

becomes a long-haired Latin heartthrob in a flowing, flower-patterned shirt. One Hungarian participant chooses to be a Robin Hood-type outlaw, a mythical folk hero from the past. Dédé herself identifies her male persona as an “intellectual.”

What is striking about Dédé’s performance of the intellectual is that her appearance changes very little in the transformation. The ease with which her body shifts from lesbian to a type of supposedly straight man provides important insight into the question of how and why Eastern European lesbian-feminists can sustain such a marked ambivalence toward nationalism. The intellectual performed by the “kinging” Hungarian lesbian brings together a particular register of Hungarian culture and the most playful, theoretically informed register of transnational queer culture. Dédé is able to inhabit the intellectual, a central figure of national allegory as well as a recognizable emblem of masculinity across the Eastern European region, because the intellectual stands for an inherently androgynous type of masculinity, whose boundaries of performance are already fluid.

#### **The national artist as a queer character**

The Eastern European intellectual or, by an almost coterminous name, the artist, is a hybrid and culturally variable category that is nevertheless a recognizable type across the region. Maciek Tomczyk, the rebellious Polish protagonist of the 1981 film *Man of Iron*; Louka, the Czech musician in the 1996 Oscar-winner *Kolya*; or Hendrik Höfgen, from the similarly Oscar-decorated *Mephisto* (1980), are all artist brothers. They possess similar features: their bodies lack hard muscles, but they are abundant in verbal expression. They are self-conscious, narcissistic, masochistic, often tragic and self-destructive, prophetic, and, above all, extremely vulnerable. The director András Jeles describes the artist in his ironic typology of Eastern European characters: he “mesmerizes the audience. He is often a furious, conceited, hostile character, who is accompanied by a group of fine ladies following him everywhere with teary eyes” (Jeles 1999, 9).

The artist is a Romantic type, whose persona has profound roots in Eastern and Central European nationalisms. In the absence of the enduring institutions of the nation-state that characterized the European nationalisms on which Eastern European counterparts are modeled, the latter are especially firmly grounded in a cultural—literary, artistic, symbolic—identification with the European nation (Csepeli 1991; Hutchinson 1994). These nationalisms are inherently belated and contingent,

perpetually engaged in a voluntary but unacknowledged colonial mimicry of Europe.

Such cultural nationalisms are so evidently based on the discursive scraps and affective rags of nationalism that they are in constant danger of being exposed as such. The Romantic self-image of these nationalisms, the longing for perfect Europeanness, is both expressed and compensated for in an assumption of cultural and intellectual equality with, or even superiority to, Europe. Stanislaw Baranczak repeats a widespread Eastern European cliché when he calls Eastern and Central Europe “the kingdom of the intellect” (quoted in Nowicki 1995, 22). The allegorical embodiment, high priest, and prophet of this kingdom is the Eastern European artist. His extraordinary talent for poetic abstraction is supposed to bridge the gap between the particular (by definition national) and the universal (by definition European). His purest manifestation is the Romantic national poet. Petöfi, or Arany, the author of *Miklós Toldi*, are poets in whose figures nation and poetry mutually reinforce each other in the affective appeal they issue to citizens. Poetry, the putatively purest expression of national culture, and nation are inseparably united, making nations poetic, poetry inherently national, and the poet the emblem of cultural nationalisms (Imre 2003).

The erosion of communism, which accelerated after the collapse of the Iron Curtain, has also exposed the colonial dynamic that has always haunted the precariously sexualized image of the poetic intellectual. In Hungary, this process began in the 1980s with the reinvigoration of poetic forms of expression, an emphasis on individuality—in the face of forced collectivism—and the development of a peculiarly post-Romantic variety of postmodern culture. This postmodern culture produced rather ambivalent representations that expressed the impending crisis of nationalism and the collapse of the naturalized boundaries of masculinity. I would briefly like to point to two trends that signaled this dual crisis in postmodern Hungarian culture: male figures who walk and eroticize the no-man’s-land between homo- and heterosexuality, and feminized or female artist alter egos.

Perhaps the best-known instances of male artist characters whose appearance and subjectivities “open in a variety of ways onto the domain of femininity” and foreground “castration, alterity and specularity,” as Kaja Silverman characterizes the process in a different context (1992, 3), are the protagonists of István Szabó’s Central European cinematic trilogy (Paul 1994), each of whom is played by Klaus Maria Brandauer. The first such persona, Hendrik, whose homosexuality in the Klaus Mann novel

that serves as the basis for the film *Mephisto* (1980) is excised by the director, is effeminate but engages in sexual relationships with women. Importantly, he is an actor, who already enjoys a wider range of legitimate gender performances within heterosexuality than ordinary men do. But his identity becomes increasingly compromised by his collaboration with Nazi leaders and is in need of repeated specular reconstitution in front of mirrors and on stage. By the end of the film he is reduced to a castrated, powerless figure. The eponymous protagonist of *Colonel Redl* (1984) is a closet homosexual, living his life as a military officer in fear of being found out. When he finally is, he is forced to kill himself. Klaus Schneider, the protagonist of the third film in the trilogy, *Hanussen* (1988), is a soldier-turned-prophet whose superhuman telepathic ability to connect with people and see the nation's collective future lends him a broader, polymorphous range of sexualities, which makes him irresistible to women and men alike.

The other relevant tendency within 1980s and 1990s postmodern culture in Hungary is a striking thematic concern in literature and film with femininity and the female body. Poet Sándor Weöres's long epic poem *Psyché* (n.d.), written throughout the 1970s, provided the model for a set of literary and filmic texts in which the woman protagonist, beautiful, often racialized, ravenously sexual but at the same time submissive and nurturing, victimized and idealized, embodies the male intellectual's attempt to both represent and anchor his slipping masculine identity in the female body. The symbolic emasculation that intellectuals had suffered as a result of a long history of inferiority to the real Europe, exacerbated by Soviet colonization and co-optation by the communist state, required representation and compensation in the realm of gender. *Psyché*, a fictional nineteenth-century half-Gypsy woman and poet, "is the virtual creation of a life-style and a new possibility for life. The dream of late rococo, early Biedermeier literature in an independent and free Hungary, where poets are not burdened by the need to express the crucial problems of society and the nation but are free to devote themselves to the common manifestations of love, joy, and sorrow: this is the dream of a Hungarian literature, European in character," as a Hungarian literary critic deciphers the allegory (Vajda 1988, 19).

Such an allegory is even more pronounced in *Psyché*'s film version (*Nárcisz és Psyché* [1980]), which became a central reference point and model of Hungarian postmodern culture. Its director, Gábor Bódy, has been identified as the "archetype of the Romantic artist" (Forgách 1996, 4), whose subsequent suicide has been called on to immortalize and justify other artists' heroic "search for self-expression" (Forgách 1996, 5). *Psyché*

inspired a host of successors, most notably the novel *Seventeen Swans*, the autobiographical love story of a brilliant and beautiful young half-Gypsy poet-woman, written by a certain Lili Csokonai (1988). The male critical public reacted with anxiety to the fact that a woman would write about her own sexuality with almost pornographic openness, until it transpired that prominent postmodernist male writer Péter Esterházy was hiding behind the pseudonym. The novel was subsequently adapted into the erotica-filled film *Érzékek iskolája* (1996; *School of Sensuality*).

In a fitting instance of the confusions that characterize the shifting gender relations of Hungarian postmodern culture, the male critical establishment was similarly paralyzed by *Goat Lipstick*, which not only represents lesbian relations thematically but also self-reflectively allegorizes lesbianism as a narrative strategy and thereby exposes the gender prejudice of the aesthetic criteria that establish the national canon. Trying to find a way to assess the novel within the categories of national literature, a critic came up with a possible solution: the pseudonym Agáta Gordon may hide a male author (Györffy 1997). In this case, the novel can be dismissed as aesthetically reproachable because it elides erotically charged representations of sexual acts between women. Andrea Balogh discusses the reception of *Goat Lipstick* within an implicitly heterosexist national establishment of literary criticism: “Paradoxically, the pornographic depiction of lesbian relations would guarantee the literary value of Gordon’s novel within the boundaries of official literary criticism” (2003; my translation). She says the novel was dismissed not simply (not overtly) because of its lesbian author and address but primarily because it refused to be incorporated into the male canon by providing at least pornographic pleasures to (by definition male) readers. The poetic novels and films mentioned before (e.g., *Psyché*), in which the authors and narrators often take on cross-gendered virtual identities or depict character relations that flirt with lesbianism, always do so while catering to traditional heterosexual, male pleasures.

Within the tenuous gender relations of Eastern European cultural nationalisms, most conspicuous in the examples above, lies one likely answer to the question I raised at the beginning. The ambivalence that characterizes the work of lesbian activist-artists in particular and emerging Eastern European feminist groups in general should be interpreted in relation to the ambivalence inherent in postcolonial Eastern European nationalisms. On the one hand, these nations submit themselves to a voluntary colonization, performing Europeanness according to the logic of “almost but not quite” in the spheres of imagination and culture, rather than in those of economy or politics. The performative aspect of these nation-

alisms is thus always more apparent, always more likely to be taken up by subversion, than is the case with nations whose nationalisms are better established in the pedagogical languages of economic and political progress. The affective relations that provide the glue of nationalism are grounded in the discursive, tenuous stuff of poetry and other arts, which is significantly different from the pride that many Americans may feel about their government's military and economic might or the pride that English or Dutch people may feel about their country's past glory and democratic institutions. The shifting ground of nationalism is reflected upon and performed in a wide range of masculine performances. Lesbians, who are otherwise unrepresentable in terms of binary gender roles, inhabit the porous, liminal borders between masculinity and femininity opened up by intellectual and artistic masculinities, which remain malleable in the directions of male homosexuality and traditional femininity in postmodern Hungarian culture.

On the other hand, precisely because the narrative boundaries of nationalism are especially vulnerable to appropriation, the institutions of the nation-state—education, the media, the legal system, health care, and so on—are compelled to reinforce the pedagogical mission of nationalism in excessively rigid ways. While lesbians are able to carve out small spaces of representability in national literature and culture along the borders of binary gender roles, they find themselves facing walls of exclusion when they demand unprejudiced political representation in the areas of employment, education, domestic partnership or marriage rights, adoption, legal age of consent, and antidiscrimination laws imposed by the European Union (EU).

Furthermore, because Hungarian and other Eastern European poetic nationalisms define themselves in association with Eurocentric values that are understood as universal, lesbian activist-artists who hail from other European nations are able to identify with selected patches and rags of national culture. At the same time, while Europe is conceived of as a common home for Hungarian, German, or French lesbians within the EU, those from the core European countries are not bound by the infinitely more discriminative practices of Eastern European nation-states even if they choose to live there. This further explains the German and Swiss filmmakers' curious claim that they represented Hungary at the Paris festival.

For emerging lesbian groups in postcommunist countries, it is politically crucial that they not engage in an essentialist opposition to heterosexuality, which would support the nation-state's own divisive strategies. Rather, their activism, which brings together both high and popular reg-

isters of culture, asserts a continuity between hetero- and homosexuality, exposing the psychoanalytic insight that homosexuality is heterosexuality's very precondition in that identity is always based on exclusion; thus, homosexuality plays a role in all identity formations (Fuss 1990, 110). What follows from this discussion of postcommunist lesbian ambivalence toward the nation is that it is difficult and problematic to issue feminist judgments about Eastern European nationalisms without falling into multiple traps of ethnocentrism. It is not reliable to consider the work of Eastern European feminists either in their specific national context only, or in a regional or global brushstroke, which is typically made from a liberal feminist point of view. Only the simultaneous presence of all of these frameworks can yield enough specificity to unpeel layers of contradiction and make one understand how nationalism can prevent and enable lesbian identities at the same time.

Rosi Braidotti (2006) recently noted that feminism has been caught up in a culture of lament. This is particularly true in accounts of the situation of Eastern European women. While the pain, anger, and deprivation that such accounts emphasize is real, such depictions result in a partial picture. A more complex look at the historical, political, and theoretical environment from which the stories come may also reveal postcommunist lesbian feminist emergence to be an exciting and instructive development for feminism.

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