Queer Political Imaginings: Narratives of Queer Life from the Post-Yugoslav Context

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Abstract

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This project draws on the memories and life stories of six post-Yugoslav queer migrants - Nika, Senka, Leon, Bojan, Mato, and Željko - to offer insight into the interplay between the affective legacies of the Yugoslav socialist project, their sexual and gender identities, and their political imagination. I investigate how the migration trajectories of my research participants intersect with Western neoliberal ideologies and global constructions of sexual and gender identities, such as being "out" or celebrating pride. Using oral history as a method, I draw on their life stories to map the dissonances between their discursive and embodied experiences that were prompted by their movements across nation-state borders and communities. In doing so, I interrogate the linearity of developmental queer narratives of progress and homonormativity. Examining political imagination and sexual politics across various geopolitical-temporal and historical contexts, my research contests representations of the West as a place of progress and liberation.

Exploring themes of nostalgia, disillusionment, belonging, identity formation, and political visions of the world, I offer an interpretative analysis of the life stories and reflections shared by my interlocutors. Through this project, I formed a set of relationships of transnational queer diaspora that complicates and challenges both the memory of Yugoslavia and the image of the West as a place of progress and refuge for minoritarian subjects and I investigate whether reclaimed or shared memories resist official national histories to highlight how the nation-state framework constricts and regulates political imaginaries.

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As I wrap up this final phase of my graduate journey, I carry immense gratitude for the people who have attended to it with their caring presence.

Professor Natalie Kouri-Towe has provided me with vital concepts and frameworks that have anchored my life and thinking, deepening my understanding of the affective forces that shape our lives and the structures that govern them. She has shown me how this understanding can be harnessed as a lifeline in troubled times. This is a gift that goes beyond gratitude—it is a lifelong source and force of inquiry that I am both excited and scared to carry forward into the world, where I will no longer be her student.

I rarely refer to myself as a graduate student; I will always be a Simone de Beauvoir student of interdisciplinary studies in sexuality. This hub of thinkers, mentors, organizers, advocates, and peers is a transformative place where intellectual and political life are deeply entangled with queerness—not just as an object of study but as a way of being, relating, and reimagining the world.

As much as queer theory readings have provided me with vital frameworks and concepts, oral history felt like homecoming. Professor Anna Sheftel was as close to home as I could have gotten in this journey. Her intimate knowledge of the troubled region I come from and her guidance through the most profound relational and difficult aspects of research methodology allowed me to navigate this work with care and courage. She has taught me that research, at its best, is an act of embodied listening and accountability.

Professor Warren Linds has given me space in his courses to be creative and encouraged every outburst of emotional and imaginative writing in this project. It was a pure joy to be part of his playful and chaotic classroom, where thinking was not confined to the rigid structures of academia but allowed to be embodied, affective, and experimental.

Dedication

To Pavle, Anton and Anouk—for knowing who they are despite what the world tells them.

To Jamie, and the unwavering labour and joy of queer worldmaking.

To Alex, and to how we once belonged.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Yugoslavia is the only way I refer to the place I'm originally from, where I grew up, but also to the place(s) where most of my friends and family live at the moment. I do realize that it may seem as if I'm trying to recreate or call into existence something that is long gone but for me Yugoslavia is right now and right there. It is not an internationally recognized state, nor is it a state that I need to see restored, it is simply the best name I have for all the things I feel to be familiar and intelligible – the music, the dishes, the ideologies, the cities, the patriarchy, the policies, the words, the concepts, and the people.

Simonović, n.d., as cited in Petrovic, 2016, p.515

To be deprived of a voice means to be deprived of agency over our own lives. It also means to slowly but systematically become alienated from our own journeys, struggles and inner transformations, and begin to view even our most subjective experiences as though through someone else's eyes, and external gaze.

Shafak, 2020, p.8

…for some nostalgia was taboo: it was the predicament of Lot's wife, a fear that looking back might paralyze you forever, turning you into a pilar of salt, a pitiful monument to your own grief, and the futility of departure.

Boym, 2008, p.xv

At this moment, Serbia is witnessing the largest student movement in the region since 1968. In mid-December 2024, students began occupying universities, and since then, they have taken over 62 of the country's 80 institutions. These are not just demonstrations. Classes have been shut down and university buildings transformed into self-organized hubs of resistance. Inside these spaces, students organize through plenums and working groups, halting university operations and putting forward clear, focused demands. Considering that collective action of such scale has been barely mentioned in Western media - let alone placed in the longer history of civil resistance movements in Yugoslavia and its post-Yugoslav spaces, this project fills a gap in

historical understandings of the legacy of political mobilizing and political imaginaries in the region and its diaspora.

Twenty-five years ago, I took part in a student resistance movement that brought the country to a halt and played a major role in overthrowing one of the region's totalitarian regimes. Now, I watch a similar student movement emerge from afar. From my diasporic location in North America, I scroll through social media reels, witnessing the resurgence of a people-led movement in Serbia while, in the universities around me, student protests against genocide and imperialism are met with administrative repression and police intervention. In Serbia, students claim their universities as spaces of radical possibility, while in North America, universities suppress, silence, and co-opt similar emergences.

In response to mounting pressure in Serbia—amplified by workers, farmers, and hundreds of thousands of citizens who joined the students—government officials began resigning, including the prime minister. Yet, the protests continued to grow each day, showing no signs of slowing down, as people collectively demanded accountability and profound systemic change. One of their slogans, "We are staying here," conveys a desire shared by this generation of students who plan to remain in the country after graduation, rather than imagining a different future abroad. This is a new generation's political imagining of Serbia.

After immigrating to Canada a few of years after graduating from the University of Philology in Belgrade in 2007, I found myself searching for radical spaces of possibility. After a few years of survival and settlement in Montreal, I enrolled in a university program that significantly impacted my own sense of transformation, but it was a lonely and self-reliant process, and reminded me of the kinds of Western individualistic trajectories that have always felt foreign to me.

I undertook this project to better understand the trajectories of what Cindy Patton and Benigno Sánchez-Eppler (2000) describe as "queer escape and reconstitution" (p.3) and in search of ways of living, thinking, and organizing that sustain the radical possibilities of queer life in the diaspora. In this thesis, I claim queer identity and anchor myself in the lived experience of leaving post-Yugoslav spaces and immigrating to Canada in my early 30s to escape gender and sexuality-based violence. I interpret this experience outside of, and in between, Western dominant frameworks—frameworks that notably dismiss and render illegible such experiences. In pursuit of making my own experience legible, I sought out others who share a similar positionality, who identify as queer, and who remember Yugoslavia.

This project is an attempt to look back without turning into a pillar of salt. To grapple with the futility of departure. It emerged once I let the affective and creative potentiality of queerness and nostalgia in. On the most personal level, it is about my own attempt to belong to queerness as I have always longed to, and then to articulate my own diasporic reconstitution and expression of it. It is about asking whether that expression has a place in the diaspora, whether it can exist here, and if so, how.

In this research, I examine how the memory of Yugoslavia is mobilized in post-Yugoslav queer migrants' political imagination and how these narratives challenge and reconfigure mainstream understandings of contemporary nation-states and neoliberal regimes in the post-socialist context. While the memory of Yugoslavia informs queer migrants' political imagination, there is no singular or distinctly Yugoslav diasporic queerness that exists outside of broader conceptual and regional frameworks. In this study, I mobilize the concept of queerness from Western discourse, which challenges identity-based, non-intersectional, and non-coalitional approaches in mainstream gay rights movements (Conrad, 2017, p.1). In post-Yugoslav spaces,

"queer" has largely functioned as an empty signifier, briefly appropriated before some attempts were made to replace it with *kvar*, a Serbo-Croatian word meaning "malfunction," which carries its own political and affective weight. In this study, I use the term "queer" in its broader contemporary sense of non-normative sexualities and an umbrella identity for an array of sexual orientations, as both these understandings of queerness align with how my interlocutors self-identify, regardless of the terms or identities they may have used in the past or in other contexts.

Using oral history as a method, I draw on their life stories to map the dissonances between their discursive and embodied experiences that were prompted by their movements across nation-state borders and communities. In doing so, I interrogate the linearity of developmental queer narratives of progress and homonormativity. My project insists on the importance of the localization of sexual politics through a critical examination of why certain models of sexuality are considered universal. Following Kulpa and Mizielińska's work (2016) on decentering Western sexualities, this study seeks to further challenge the dichotomy of Western and non-Western sexualities by providing insight into the lived knowledge and experiences of post-Yugoslav queer migrants in the diaspora. My interlocutors complicate the assumption of continuity and progress in queer subject formation and demonstrate how temporality of life cycles unfolds differently in Western and Eastern contexts.

This study draws on Kulpa and Mizielińska's (2016) concept of knotted times (p.15), which they propose as a way of understanding how stories are spun in alternate temporalities, as opposed to the concept of time in the West, which is rooted in the classical liberal ideology that emphasizes the individual's role in a forward-moving, future-oriented society. The concept of knotted time captures the temporal disjunction that characterizes post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Unlike the Western narrative of historical progression where political and social

movements unfold in a linear, sequential manner, the collapse of communism in CEE was experienced as an abrupt rupture, throwing the region into a simultaneous engagement with multiple, overlapping, and often contradictory temporalities. This transition was not a smooth incorporation into a "universal" capitalist time but a chaotic entanglement of past, present, and future, where different historical moments, communist past, Western neoliberal present, and various activist traditions became layered upon one another.

Kulpa and Mizielińska argue that the knotted quality of time in CEE is not just political but also affective and erotic (p.16). Much like queer identity, time is shaped by desires, interruptions, and contradictions. Just as queerness disrupts normative understandings of gender and sexuality, queer time in CEE disrupts Western expectations of historical progress.

Using the concept of knotted times, I argue that my interlocutors' memories and life stories reveal affective layers woven through the threads and fragments of both sexual subjectivity and national political imaginaries. In tracing these threads, my narrators and I collaborate in making sense of "how one negotiates new queer positions in a so-called post-queer North-Western European society, and how we should relate to the work and struggles back home, when home itself is a territory of doubt" (Kulpa & Mizielińska, 2016, p.15).

When the Cold War ended in 1989 and liberalism replaced communism as both a political ideology and economic system, Western liberal democracy slowly dismantled and rendered insignificant socialist forms of life, organizing, and governance in Yugoslavia, the Balkans, the rest of the Eastern Europe, and in other post-Soviet contexts in Central Asia. Focusing on the post-Yugoslav project, my research builds out of the legacy of the national imaginary of Yugoslavia that was followed by the rising nationalism and ethnic conflicts that resulted in war and fragmentation of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Despite the façade of freedom

and justice promised in the establishment of liberalism in Eastern Europe and the Balkans in the post-Soviet era, we have witnessed the emergence of autocratic regimes, right-wing populism, ongoing refugee crises, persistent nationalist tensions in the Eastern Europe, the war in Ukraine, the genocide in Gaza, and border fences. In this context, I interrogate whether memories and narratives of the socialist and non-aligned Yugoslav legacy are mobilized in transnational collaborations, solidarities, and imaginaries. I ask, what can the affective attachments, lived experiences, and embodied knowledge of queer migrants from the former Yugoslavia—a national context that violently disintegrated—reveal about contemporary understandings of queer life in the diaspora? Drawing on the memoirs and life stories of six post-Yugoslav queer migrants - Nika, Senka, Leon, Bojan, Mato, and Željko – my research offers insight into the interplay between the affective legacies of the Yugoslav socialist project, their sexual and gender identities, and their political imagination.

Thinking alongside and in collaboration with my interlocutors, I argue that the socialist pasts of sexual minorities challenge homonationalism and foreground socialist forms of solidarity. Because the socialist pasts of non-Western LGBTIQ+ communities can be difficult to access, I argue that the process of self-historicization offers a means of telling counter-histories against those of global empire and neoliberalism. The histories from the post-Yugoslav context not only enrich contemporary understandings of queer lives but also reveal the enduring creative and affective potential of Yugoslavia's historical legacy in shaping contemporary queer politics.

By centering queer histories from the post-Yugoslav context, my research disrupts the Western self-image as enlightened and progressive, exposing how this depends on rendering other regions—such as Yugoslavia—through reductive frames of war and underdevelopment. This erasure obscures Yugoslavia's history as a leader in the Non-Aligned Movement and an

architect of a distinct socialist project. In doing so, it affirms the extent to which Western queer politics remain deeply entangled with neoliberalism, imperialism, and exclusionary frameworks of citizenship.

In the narratives shared by my interlocutors through our oral history sessions, the conditions shaping Eastern Europe after 1989 serve as a backdrop for their reflections on their life stories that invoke the failed narrative of progress and linearity that is at the center of Western versus non-Western concepts of sexuality. The region's unsuccessful transition into liberalism, modernity, and the promise of neoliberal prosperity led to widespread disillusionment, significant emigration out of Eastern Europe, and the rise of nationalist and authoritarian regimes within post-Yugoslav countries. Migration to Western countries in Europe and North America intensified after countries such as Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic joined the European Union in 2004. Combined with population decline since 1989, where some countries lost significant portions of their national population.[1] the demographic changes to Eastern European countries in part fueled disillusionment and fears of continued large-scale emigration, which in turn contributed to the rise of political parties advocating for ethnic belonging and identity.

Research on post-socialist Europe, as a site of society in transition, has examined the role of emotion (Svašek, 2008), the interplay of rupture and continuity (Hofman et al., 2023), and demonstrated that the fall of socialism and the breakup of Yugoslavia involved complex unpredictable social dynamics that cannot be simplified into a story of old ways being replaced with new ones (Baker, 2015). Yugoslavia's many lives and afterlives do not neatly align with the

[1] Latvia has seen a 27% population loss and Bulgaria nearly 21%. Poland also experienced the departure of over two million people (Van Mol & de Valk, 2015).

Western-liberal paradigm of a transition from authoritarianism to democracy, which has dominated scholarship on the region. This project thus foregrounds life stories that disrupt linear progress narratives to understand the affective attachments to the Yugoslav past that inform and inspire my interlocutors' speculations and yearnings of the present. For some of my interlocutors, like Bojan and Nika, affective attachments manifest in the ways socialist Yugoslavia stood for international solidarity, political and economic alternatives, and formed alliances outside of colonial power relations . For others, like Leon, Yugoslavia stands as an embodiment of grey, patriarchal totalitarian socialism.

I follow the work of other post-Yugoslav scholars in their approach to research that begins from a framework of authorship that stems from personal and lived experience. The work of Videkanić (2023), Vukov (2003), Subotić (2016; 2019), and Vučetić (2020) has informed my interest in looking at the structural inequalities that Yugoslavia has produced throughout its many afterlives in the everyday lives of people. I join this area of scholarship, which aims to explain Yugoslavia to the world and ourselves by acknowledging that such sense-making has both transformative and alienating resonances for post-Yugoslav subjects. For Vučetić (2020), this research entails understanding "our lived political experience elsewhere and to reclaim the narrative of our own lives rather than be made subject to outsiders' accounts." This is work Vučetić explains does not simply "explain what Yugoslavia was, what it meant to whom, who it included or excluded, or how it came apart or why. It was, instead, designed to explain our current moment—that world split open through the experience of our past" (ibid).

Unlike Western narratives of queer life that center on the role of sexual identity and sexual subjugation, my research contends with the role of the Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav political contexts as central to expressions of queer subjectivity for my research participants.

Indeed, Yugoslavia's violent breakup permeates the life stories shared by my interlocutors. For instance, Senka grew up playing in abandoned factories and their baptism was broadcasted by the Serbian nationalist regime' media as a message of hope and renewal during the NATO bombings. Bojan was imprisoned and tortured by the Serbian Sate Security Forces for his anti-war activism. Leon's family ruptured under ethno-nationalist tensions long before the country itself violently broke apart. My interlocutors' life stories are thus profoundly shaped by their experiences of violence in the transition period.

The Yugoslav wars of the 1990s were not only shaped by ethnic divisions but also by broader global frameworks and embedded in global networks of power, including post-Cold War politics, media representations, and the cultural construction of identities (Baker, 2015). Dominant narratives about the wars have been influenced by Western perceptions, which foregrounded ethnic conflict, presenting the region as trapped in age-old hatreds that inevitably led to violence. This framing reinforced the idea that post-Yugoslav states within the Balkans were an inherently unstable and backward space, incapable of modern governance without Western intervention. As Baker argues, these narratives often relied on Orientalist constructions, depicting the region as Europe's internal other, a liminal space between civilization and savagery. By emphasizing ethnic division and portraying the wars as a result of deep-seated animosities, Western discourse obscured the political and economic factors that shaped the conflicts, including the role of international institutions, economic restructuring, and the collapse of socialist federalism.

Furthermore, Western media and political rhetoric during and after the wars positioned the West as the necessary arbiter of peace, reinforcing its own moral and political superiority. While interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo were framed—and in some ways undertaken—as

humanitarian efforts, this framing often obscured the geopolitical interests at play and the selective nature of Western engagement. The intersection of humanitarianism and self-interest shaped not only military and diplomatic responses but also the dominant narratives about the region, determining whose suffering was recognized and whose was ignored.

Conversely, the narratives shared in my research illustrate how the wars touched those who survived in diverse ways, including how the memory of war continues to shape the political narratives and identities of the former Yugoslav nations. For instance, the war and genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina remains an open wound for many in the region (Selmić, 2016) alongside competing nationalist narratives over victimhood (Baker, 2015).

Despite what a group of writers, artists, and scholars from the former Yugoslavia have termed "Yugosplaining the World" (Vučetić, 2020), a tendency among some post-Yugoslav scholars to universalize the Yugoslav experience as a lens for interpreting global political phenomena, my positionality within a network of queer diasporic post-Yugoslav migrants illustrates a unique perspective on both post-Yugoslav nationalism and queer identities and subjectivities. Thinking alongside these writers, artists, and scholars, who have all lived through the disintegration of Yugoslavia and pursued academic and creative work in the West, my research shares in their positionality of critique across the legacy of Yugoslavia and the impact of Western epistemologies on research about and within our communities, while also speaking back to the West by developing non-Western narratives of queer life.

As such, in the development of this project I have contended with the way my own social location has shaped the focus of my research, and thus, although I have built connections within queer academic and activist networks across former Yugoslavia and engaged with people from various former states, my project focuses on those who share part of my own positionality, as all

but one interlocutor, Nika, who is of Slovenian origin, grew up in Serbia. This means that my study is largely shaped by the political, social, and historical conditions specific to Serbia, rather than offering a broader account of queer migration across the entire post-Yugoslav space. While this focus allows for more insight into Serbia's post-socialist and nationalist transformations, it also carries the perils of centering a perspective shaped by Serbia's dominant role within Yugoslavia and during the wars of the 1990s. Serbia's position within Yugoslavia was marked by both structural privilege and internal colonial dynamics, particularly in relation to Kosovo and other republics. During the wars, Serbia's control over the Yugoslav National Army (YNA) further reinforced its political and military dominance, shaping the trajectories of conflict, displacement, and nation-building across the region. While my research foregrounds queer narratives emerging from this context, perspectives from other former Yugoslav republics—especially those that experienced YNA's military aggression and occupation—are not captured within the scope of this project.

I turn next to an overview of the remaining parts of the introduction and breakdown the thematic chapters of my thesis project.

Project Overview

In this project, I aim to understand the legacies of Yugoslav's past on queer migrants' political imagination and whether migration and mobility have affected their understandings and experiences of sexuality and gender. Through this study I ask, how do queer migrants remember Yugoslavia, and in what ways does Yugoslavia's affective and political legacy intersect with their understandings of gender, sexuality, and their political imagination within the diaspora, particularly in the context of neoliberal capitalist regimes in their host countries? Because memory is key to the formation of identities, including national and sexual identities, I am

interested in whether diasporic attachments to the Yugoslav socialist project can also function as a site of formation of anti-nationalist, politicized queer identities.

To answer the above question, I interrogate how global sexual identities circulate across the West/East divide in ways that reinforce Western hegemonic and neoliberal progress narratives that are emblematic of homonormativity (Duggan, 2002). In tension with these hegemonic narratives, I am interested in how queer migrants' experiences shape their views of Western neoliberal ideologies, including developmental narratives of LGBTQ+ identities and global sexual identity politics. In doing so, I consider how aspirations for Western modernity are situated in relation to coloniality and racialization within the diasporic and post-Yugoslav contexts. Lastly, I am interested in whether collective counter-memory can function as a site of resistance, and in what ways affects might contribute to political shifts in how queer migrants understand their own political imaginaries.

Chapter 1 begins with a discussion of my theoretical frameworks, which I draw on from affect theory, transnational feminism and queer migration studies. Transnational feminism, which understands gendered experiences as enmeshed in the legacy of colonialism, imperialism, and globalization, provides insight into migrant queer justice activism that reimagines identity and belonging beyond nation-state framework and citizenship, while queer migration studies demonstrate how immigration regimes serve the normalizing logics of citizenship, homonormativity, and gender and sexuality binaries (Chávez, 2013; White, 2014). Following the transformative and critical approaches to migration justice that are anchored in this area of scholarship, I draw on approaches that work against border systems and contribute to a deeper understanding of how the regulation of mobility and identity functions in the service of state power and control (White, 2014).

Next, I discuss my research method of queer oral history, which enabled me to engage with complex memories across gender, sexuality, and national identities, offering deeper insights into the interplay between identity formation and the historical and cultural contexts that shape an individual. This method also provides a framework for exploring how counter-memory is formed and how personal narratives can challenge dominant historical accounts and contribute to alternative understandings of the past. Lastly, I discuss my recruitment and positionality within the research before moving on to my discussion and analysis of the oral history interviews that I conducted with my research participants.

In Chapter 2, I move on to develop my analysis and discussion, through which I develop my interpretive analysis of conversations and life stories with my interlocutors by providing an overview of Yugoslav non-aligned and socialist legacies and trace how global ideas of Western modernity and democracy are manifested in European peripheries. I look at how this political legacy affects the local contexts and patriarchal regimes in the post-Yugoslav and Balkan contexts in ways that shape the experiences of queer diasporic subjects. Following Kulpa and Mizielińska's (2016) work, I explore "what is left of queer" (p.2) in the local contexts and how queerness is encountered through migration and queer diasporas (Luibhéid, 2008; Patton & Sánchez-Eppler, 2000). I then foreground my interlocutors' accounts of their life stories and identities to interpret how these challenge dominant and hegemonic narratives that have overshadowed the narratives of minoritized groups, particularly in the post-Yugoslav context. Speaking alongside my interlocutors, we approach this process as truth of the telling, rather than telling of the truth (Abrams, 2016a), while acknowledging both the influence of culture and society on individual voices and agency, as the self is constantly shaped by storytelling and revising and revisiting one's own narratives.

Chapter 3 examines how memories and experiences of queerness in both Yugoslavia and its successor states challenge dominant narratives of migration as a linear journey from repression to liberation. Rather than granting greater freedoms, migration introduces new forms of alienation and negotiation. While Western discourses often frame migration as an escape from oppression, my interlocutors' stories reveal a more ambivalent reality in which queer identity is shaped through shifting relationships to home, displacement, and new social contexts. This chapter also explores how globalization influences queer imaginaries and identities, shaping the possibilities and limitations of belonging across borders. Here, I examine what enables assimilation, questioning who becomes legible as a desirable and acceptable subject within national and transnational frameworks of inclusion.

Chapter 4 examines how my interlocutors engage with nostalgia and memory in relation to the Yugoslav past as diasporic subjects. While migration has shaped their identities in profound ways, their connections to Yugoslavia—whether through longing, ambivalence, or rejection—continue to shape their understanding of self, history, and belonging. This chapter offers a textured and restorative reading of nostalgia, not only as a longing for the past but as a lens through which to explore what is missing in the present. Here, remembering Yugoslavia not only foregrounds anti-nationalism, a time of possibilities, and political alternatives but also confronts my interlocutors with distressing realizations about the incommensurability of Yugoslav ideals and lived realities. This chapter highlights the racial and class inequalities that the Yugoslav state often denied, exposing how violence, racism, and class hierarchies were entangled within its leftist utopian project. This chapter ultimately argues that there are no singular truths about Yugoslavia and affirms that Yugonostalgia remains a politically productive affect.

In the final chapter, I examine how queer migrants envision alternatives to both the nation-state and homonormative models of belonging. This chapter delves deeper into how belonging is tied to political imagination, exploring how diasporic home becomes a place of relative safety rather than one of spiritual or relational belonging. My interlocutors' experiences range from struggling with complacency and conformity in their host countries to finding spaces where, at the very least, they did not feel entirely out of place. For many, political imagination is grounded in solidarity and collective potential, shaped by Yugoslav ideals and sharpened by a critical awareness of the co-optation of Western visibility politics.

Here, I explore how the Yugoslav socialist project, despite its failures, continues to inform radical imaginaries of belonging. My interlocutors refuse national sexual discourses, embracing an anti-nationalist stance that transcends sexuality. Rather than accepting dominant Western narratives of individual liberation and LGBTQ rights, they draw on the ideals of solidarity and collectivism that Yugoslavia once represented, using them as a framework to think beyond neoliberal models of queer identity. This chapter critically engages with neoliberalism and the impossibility of true liberation within neoliberal ideologies, drawing from Yugoslavia's political legacy to challenge Western narratives of queer liberation. In doing so, it affirms a firmly anti-nationalist and anti-imperialist position, rejecting the constraints of state-driven identity formations in favor of more transformative, coalitional possibilities.

The storytelling in this study offers more questions than conclusions. I end the project by revisiting the importance of storytelling as agentic practice of creating queer counter publics that resist the hold of dominant narratives over "constructions of individual and collective identities, on whose identities are deemed comprehensible and are thus (in)validated, who gets to be a subject, how people position themselves in the world, and how they recover untold pasts, call

attention to marginalized presents, and imagine possible futures for themselves" (Aresin et al., 2022, p.14).

Through the life stories of my research participants and my own autoethnographic dialogues with their stories, my study foregrounds how the circulation of narratives shapes our imaginaries in ways that compel us to desire place and time that both aligns and resists nationalist and queer progress narratives. As such, my work contends with how movements across nation-state borders transform both the places we leave and those we arrive at. In doing so, I follow Patton & Sánchez-Eppler's (2000) work on the intersections of identity, narratives, and movement, particularly in contexts where bodies and voices disrupt dominant norms of belonging and coherence. Their work emphasizes the transformative potential of self-narration as a form of resistance and reclamation, allowing us to understand the intricate "frictional relation between geopolitics and embodied desires" (p.3). In line with their work, through this project, I aspire to offer a platform that expands the capacity for self-narration and amplify the range of voices speaking about queer post-Yugoslav life to make sense of how our fragmented lives disrupt and challenge the norms of belonging.

Chapter 1: Transnational Queer Oral History Theories and Methodology

The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia violently disintegrated over 30 years ago. Since then, there has been a growing interest in examining the socialist and post-socialist worlds through the lens of global power dynamics and the "global formation of race" (Baker, 2018). Social, political, and cultural structures, as well as inequalities in the region, have increasingly been analyzed within global frameworks, using approaches that universalize the varied local and regional contexts across different historical periods. New scholarship on the post-Yugoslav

context, however, has connected the political analysis of race and racialization with state formation, such as Hofman and Petrovic (2023), who argue that post-Yugoslav spaces complicate the colonizer-colonized binary due to the region's semi-peripheral position in relation to Europe and the West, while remaining implicitly linked to European whiteness. Drawing on new theoretical frameworks, such as affect theory, they argue against the binary between culturally specific and universalizing approaches and instead advocate for recognizing an "escaping autonomy" (10) rooted in the concrete historical, cultural, social, and political contexts. Hofman and Petrovic highlight the illustrative power of affects, considering its historically and contextually specific manifestations across different periods, from pre-World War II Yugoslavia to post-Yugoslav societies.

Theoretical Frameworks

Taking cue from the above scholarship, I draw on queer migration studies and affect theory as my two primary theoretical frameworks to investigate how Western ideas and imaginaries of modernity and democracy are spread through the post-Yugoslav spaces, and how movement across nation-state borders is mediated and regulated in the stories queer migrants tell about their lives. These frameworks provide insight into how the global production of sexuality and neoliberal imaginaries, disseminated through the legacies of colonialism, imperialism, and neoliberal globalization, position the West as progressive while obscuring its violence against the non-Western world (Grewal & Kaplan, 2001). This area of scholarship highlights how imperialist structures are upheld through global institutions, warfare, and carceral systems, which have impacted post-socialist and post-conflict regions of Europe, including the post-Yugoslav context.

I draw on queer migration scholarship to disrupt the linear progress and dehistoricized narrative of "oppression to liberation" that underpins Western discourses of queer migration trajectories that are used to explain immigration to the West and demonstrate how colonialism, globalization and warfare generate continuous migrations and produce (il)legal migrants, and sexual identities in both sending and receiving countries (Luibhéid, 2008; Jordan, 2009). As frameworks that foreground how global identities are produced through legacies of power in the movement and circulation of humans and goods in a global context, transnational feminism and queer migration studies provide key insights into experiences of both diasporic and transitional national contexts. This area of scholarship illustrates how hegemonic Western sexual identities shape lives everywhere, while also contending with how queer migrants constitute subjectivities that exceed, dismantle and reinforce existing categories (Luibhéid, 2008, p.171; Lee & Brotman, 2011; Jordan, 2009), Following the work of queer migration scholars, I understand queer migrant subjectivities as highly contingent on their legibility and conformity as they navigate their settlement within Western neoliberal contexts . I draw on this understanding of migration to examine how queer migrants contend with affective ties to Yugoslavia, including histories of trauma and oppression, which involve performing or resisting allegiance to the host countries that reinforces colonial rescue discourses and reify Western sexual identities (Jordan, 2009, p.179).

Luibhéid (2008) argues that immigration regimes are grounded in heteronormativity and racism, which regulates the lives of all migrants and produces legality and illegality as identities through the border regimes determined by nation states and enforced by the carceral logics of border security (p.306). Precarious legal citizenship status is awarded to those who can demonstrate their deservingness by mapping desire and kinship ties onto hetero and

homonormative criteria (Luibhéid, 2008, pp. 305-307), by proving they possess the economic means, willingness, and capacity to participate in neoliberal economic relations that come to define narratives of the good citizen or the good immigrant. Meanwhile, Western nation states remain entrenched in homophobic and racist national narratives around national security, anchored on the image of the illegal immigrant and the terrorist, which allows some sexual minorities and migrants entry into the national fold in a way that guards the nation state's heteronormativity (Puar, 2007).

I draw on these theoretical insights to explore how queer migrants from post-Yugoslav contexts see themselves in relation to other marginalized groups by developing a sense of their own historicization. The concept of political queer subjectivity involves challenging established frameworks and assumptions about sexuality and identity (Sabsay, 2013) and questions the legitimacy of political claims made in the name of LGBTQ+ rights, particularly those that frame non-heteronormative identities within the confines of human rights discourse. Global sexual politics, often under the guise of tolerance and human rights are entangled with colonial logics of racial and civilizational divides in ways that use sexuality as leverage for national exceptionalism, and where sexual tolerance is used to measure a society's democratic progress (Massad, 2007; Puar, 2002, 2007). This process of sexual nationalism (Puar, 2007) shapes who is recognized as a legitimate sexual and political subject, and positions non-Western nation states as "backward" through the logics of Western sexual norms. The critique of what Puar has termed homonationalism requires a de-centring of Western perspectives of sexuality to understand how global discourses are reshaping sexual subjectivity and queer political imagination in ways that do not simply produce hegemonic sexual identities among diasporic subjects.

Political queer identities require critical engagement with coloniality and the ways in which settler colonialism and immigration continues to displace, destroy, and erase Indigenous people (Kouri-Towe & Mahrouse, 2023; Morgensen, 2011). Within the context of nation-state frameworks that foreclose the possibilities of solidarity with Indigenous scholars and activists who call for decolonization and dismantling of border regimes (Kouri-Towe & Mahrouse, p.1144), political queer identity is shaped by both the normalization of sexuality in the homonormative and homonational narratives of sexual subjects, and in the regulation and criminalization of migrants and queer subjects who are posited as outside "national imaginaries of belonging" (Chávez, 2013, p.10). Chávez argues that queer migrants become inherently coalitional subjects "whose identities and relationships to power mandate managing multiplicity while sexuality structures every aspect of immigrant experience. Coalitional thinking accounts for the complexity of people's lived experiences" (9). Following Chávez and other migrant justice scholars and activists (Bassichis et al., 2011; White, 2014), I am interested in exploring how the political imaginaries of queer post-Yugoslav migrants connect to the kinds of coalitional ties and solidarity tactics (Kouri-Towe, 2015) that resist assimilationist politics, such as those that reinforce and legitimize the authority of the state and imperialist projects.

Migrant justice scholarship and activism rethink identity and belonging beyond the nation-state and citizenship and foreground how immigration regimes reinforce normative ideas of citizenship, gender, and urbanity by interrogating how borders, mobility, and identity regulation are central to capitalist sovereignty (Chávez, 2013; White, 2014). These frameworks allow me to critically rethink the Balkans and Yugoslavia and challenge simplistic readings of the history and culture of this region as homogenous, including some of the biggest empires and political blocks, clashes, and borders from the Romans and the Byzantines, to the Habsburgs and

the Ottomans, and the Eastern and Western Block during the Cold War, which resulted in the centuries-long encounter between Christian (Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant), Jewish, and Islamic traditions. The various legacies of these political histories in the region can still be traced in the demographic composition, institutions, and cultural fabric of post-Yugoslav nation states, as well as through the political ideologies that have shaped recent wartime violence, ethnic nationalism, post-Cold War global reshuffling, and current migration movements.

In this project, I position Yugoslavia and post-Yugoslav nation states as belonging both geographically and imaginatively to the broader region that has been ambiguously defined as the Balkans, a region marked by spatial, historical, political, and affective in-betweenness. Rather than treating Yugoslavia as a fixed historic entity, I engage with it as a shifting and contested site of meaning and political orientation, shaped through memory in diaspora by competing narratives of belonging, loss, and migration. The Balkans, as a geopolitical and symbolic space, has long been depicted by the West through images of backwardness and disorder; instead, I draw on an understanding of the Balkans through its own internal contradictions and histories of resistance. I situate Yugoslavia's historical trajectory, its socialist and non-aligned experiment, its dissolution, and its contested legacy within the Balkans as a way to understand the role of in-betweenness in how post-Yugoslav queer migrants come to understand themselves.

At the same time, the post-Yugoslav context is not simply a chronological aftermath but an ongoing process of negotiation with what Yugoslavia was, what it could have been, and how it continues to haunt contemporary political and cultural imaginaries. Throughout this project, I use "post-Yugoslav" to refer to both the material realities of the successor states and the affective, diasporic, and political engagements with Yugoslav history that persist beyond its territorial dissolution. By foregrounding this entangled relationship between Yugoslavia, the Balkans, and

post-Yugoslav spaces, I aim to highlight how queer memory and subjectivity emerge within and against these overlapping temporalities and geopolitical constructs

Memories and discussions of Yugoslavia still hold profound emotional weight. Remembering Yugoslavia evokes a wide range of emotions, from passion and anger to nostalgia and sentimentality (Hofman et al., 2023). I turn to affect theory to explore how moods and feelings of post-socialist life shape queer political imagination and identity. Affect theory provides a framework for understanding how unconscious dynamics shape political imaginaries by examining how power, transformation, and encounters—both positive and alienating (Hemmings, 2005; Hofman et al., 2023)—impact individual and collective experiences of marginalized groups in response to shared histories, joys, traumas, and other collective emotional experiences that can emerge from contexts of war and displacement. Affect theory is a useful theoretical tool for my examination of the political mechanisms present in the mundane stories told by my interlocutors that illustrate the tensions between queer political imaginaries and the seductiveness of complicity in global empire (Agathangelou et al., 2008).

Thinking across the affective dimensions national and diasporic contexts, affect theory can also help me better understand how memories, trauma, attachments, and belonging play a part of queer post-Yugoslav diasporic life stories. Following Cvetkovich (2003), who argues that we must unpack “the affective vocabulary of migration” and critiques the violence of citizenship perpetuated by neoliberal assimilation (p.119), I propose that affects are an important framework for analysis in the post-socialist European context. Hope, joy, and fear following socialism's collapse quickly transitioned into fear, sorrow, and nostalgia (Svašek, 2008). Yet memories and the political imaginations of queer post-Yugoslav migrants disrupt the normative trajectory of

affects offered by liberal progress narratives that view political transitions from socialism into capitalism as one directional.

This work proceeds by exploring spaces "outside of a teleological understanding of history" (Petrović, 2023, p.182) within a post-socialist context, where the collapse of communism has been framed as validation of the Western-liberal transitional paradigm where failed post-socialist societies embrace Western models of democracy, modernity, and progress. I follow Petrović in arguing that such views deny "the post-socialist subjects the power to be affected and empowered, by their own socialist past, and more specifically by the most politically relevant aspects of that past, such as modernization, vertical mobility, the available education, healthcare, and social security" (p.184) and I argue against views of nostalgia as politically unproductive, revisionist, and non-agentic. Joining Petrović (2023), I am interested in exploring how nostalgia and affective engagement with the past does "not result from post-socialist subjects' naivety, ideological blindness, or inability to separate the truth from the fake" (p.184), rather the past can help us understand what we desire and imagine possible in the present. In exploring affect and political imagination in the diaspora, I ask whether the feelings and shared cultural memories among queer migrants serve to resist official national histories.

Combining queer migration studies and affect theory, my work seeks to interrogate how Western homonormative (Duggan, 2003) frameworks co-opt queer desire, privilege normative intimacy and consumerism, and strengthens state regulatory control over alternative forms of sexuality and kinship (Agathangelou et al., 2008; Puar, 2017). The stories that follow challenge narratives of migration as a linear journey from repression to liberation. My interlocutors' experiences illustrate the frictional relationship between sexuality and diasporic citizenship. Their narratives complicate the assumption that migration to the West inherently enables greater

freedom of self-expression, revealing instead how global structures shape queer subjectivities in ways that are both enabling and constraining. Rather than treating queerness as a radical identity, I analyze how my interlocutors navigate gender and sexual identity with varying mobility. By situating their reflections within the broader geopolitical conditions of Yugoslavia's dissolution and the West's neoliberal sexual identities, I foreground how queerness operates both as a site of political orientation and assimilation. What follows is an engagement with these themes through the oral histories of my interlocutors as I investigate the interplays between memory, affect, and identity and how post-Yugoslav queer migrants remember and interpret the socialist legacy of Yugoslavia in contrast to the capitalist state frameworks and ideologies they encountered through migration.

Methodology

I have selected to use oral history as a method for this research in order to highlight the relational, self-reflective, and interpretative analysis that I use to discuss the memories and stories shared with me in conversations that I held with six post-Yugoslav queer migrants, which I conducted between June and November 2024. Oral history provides insight into alternative narratives that challenge and deepen the understating of mainstream history and knowledge production. This approach addresses the failures of traditional historical methods and dominant scholarship, which often overlook critical questions of race, class, and gender. As a result of increased critical consideration of these categories, oral history has developed into a discipline particularly suited to provide deeper and more meaningful interpretation and analysis and gain scholarly momentum in proximity to mainstream history (Frisch, 1990b). Oral history as a research method allows me to trace how migration and the memory of Yugoslavia and its

affective dimensions and resonances in diaspora intersect with dominant political and economic systems in the context of the contemporary post-Yugoslav states.

The essence of oral history stems from its capacity to dismantle epistemic power structures and redefine and share intellectual and interpretative authority. Unlike dominant scholarship that is concerned with the extraction and distribution of knowledge, oral history engages more fully and dynamically with knowledge by recognizing that memory is alive, changing, and culturally mediated. The process of trying to understand the past by talking to people about their memories foregrounds how history is not simply objective or linear, but inherently subjective. As such, oral history aims to capture emotional responses, political views, and the subjectivity of being human with the aim of counteracting hegemonic narratives of history. The unique value of oral history interviews stems from self-reflection and intersubjectivity that accompanies the collaborative process of remembering past events. Oral history embraces and celebrates the bias and elusiveness of remembering, and is concerned with what influences and shapes memories and collective and personal identities (Abrams, 2016a).

Emotions, affects, and the capacity to be vulnerable are central to working with memories and storytelling (Benmayor, 2018). This project follows scholars and artists such as Benmayor (2018), Anzalduá (2021) and Moraga (2019) who wrote and theorized on colonialism, racism, sexuality, and migration through embodied personal experience, emotional memory, and affects. This work takes as its starting point the presumption that personal accounts engage listeners empathetically, build solidarity, prompt political action, and that emotions are catalysts for social consciousness and essential for critical reflection. Gloria Anzaldúa's concepts of borderlands consciousness seeks to understand, name and mobilize ambiguous and hybrid personal experiences as we come to a sense of self. Yugoslavia as an in-between space and queer

migrants' heightened awareness of oppression and privilege as they inhabit different and conflicting worlds mirrors Anzaldúa's *borderlands consciousness*, as queer migrants from Yugoslavia navigate the complexities of multiple identities, cultural legacies, and national disidentifications. This heightened awareness shapes their understanding of self, as they think through and narrate the contradictions between their queer identities and the fragmented political and social landscapes they traverse. My research, foregrounds alternative narratives that come through the feelings of tension, discomposure and contradiction, as global sexual identities manifest as ontological intrusions, disrupting the coherence of life narratives and self-identification.

Because I sought out research participants for whom 'queer' resonates as an identifier, my research engages with what some scholars have called queer oral history as a specific methodological framework distinct from oral history. Queer oral history considers the unique experiences and identities of sexual minorities through an embodied practice where narrator and researcher come together as sexual and gendered embodied subjects (Murphy et al., 2022). Drawing out sexual and gendered embodied memories and forms of knowledge this methodological approach mobilizes dominant identitarian discourses around queer identity while also engaging with culturally illegible and often unspeakable sexual identities and feelings (Boyd & Roque Ramírez, 2012). Queer oral histories explore the politics of identity formation and seek to understand how power relations inform and permeate this process not only in the stories narrators tell, but in how knowledge is produced through the intersubjectivity of narrator and researcher. Intersubjectivity in queer oral history can only be authentic if there is a shared identity between the narrator and researcher (Murphy et al., 2022).

Intersubjectivity is a concept central to oral history, as each interview is inherently distinct and influenced by the dynamic interaction between the interviewer and narrator (Abrams, 2016b). Intersubjectivity relates to the mutual construction of identities engaged in a conversation. The researcher cannot gain insight into narrator's fixed identity, only to a narrative adjusted to a specific context, assumptions, and expectations (Borland, 2018). Borland pushes back against the understanding of the interview process as an opportunity for narrators to coherently reflect on the past from agentic and mature standpoints, or to be disrupted and dissected by researchers' questions and agendas. Instead, Borland argues that points of dissonances and interpretative departures present themselves as learning opportunities in oral history narration. The meaning is always co-created between a listener and a speaker through dialogic stores that do not always resonate with the listener. Focusing on the intersubjective power of oral history, and the embodied approach of queer oral history more specifically, I draw on these methods to build my research out of an approach that centers on collective sense-making with my narrators.

In designing my research methods, I used an approach that was intentionally broad, without specific ties to a particular time or place in order to disrupt the linearity of both heteronormative and liberal progress narratives that shape queer life. I chose not to set an age range or limit the location of my research participants to remain open to the unexpected resonances across the stories shared by my interlocutors. My aim was to blur the concept of diaspora within a neoliberal landscape that afforded my interlocutors a degree of mobility.

In self-reflecting on my interest in researching queer post-Yugoslav migrants, I came to acknowledge that I was in part motivated by my own desire to foster the co-creation of queer lineages and solidarities. Far from building a community of queer migrants, my interviews

revealed my own uncertainty over whether my narrators would even like each other. “Queer” as an umbrella term can be a reference to a community, to an identity, or to an orientation, but it also carries academic undertones, which I sensed could alienate or amalgamate diverse identities and non-identities. In the case of my research participants, the negotiation between the historical significance of stable identity categories and more contemporary fluid aspects of queerness and emergent terminologies is illustrated by the wide array of terms they used to describe themselves. For instance, Bojan and Leon primarily referred to themselves as gay, while Željko, Senka, and Nika explicitly identified as queer. Others responded to my call for participants, expressing curiosity and encouragement about my project, but ultimately decided not to be interviewed—some questioning the identifier I used, or noting that the available terms felt empty or unrecognizable to them. Nonetheless, for the purposes of this research I chose to an anchor my oral history research on stories of shared struggle and experience as they related to queerness as a non-normative relationship to sexual and gendered embodiment. As such, I use the identifier 'queer' to contextualize both ideological positions and shared desires, and to honor the legacy of lives that have been othered, opaque, invisible, hidden, or illegible when we think of post-Yugoslav subjectivity.

Anderson (2012) argues that the practice of queer oral history is as much about discovering evidence of resistance, creativity, and resilience of queer lives as it is about finding strategies for survival. As I reflected with my narrators on how they navigated different environments, I was struck by their resilience and the capacity to maintain a stable sense of self. Leon’s migration was straightforward, he left Serbia immediately after graduation with careful planning and without hesitation. Unlike some of my other interlocutors, he does not express nostalgia or attachment to Yugoslavia. Instead, he recalls it as a drab, oppressive, and patriarchal

environment, marked by violence and economic stagnation. His departure was not just a search for better opportunities but a deliberate severing of ties with a place he found insufferable. His trajectory appears the most linear among my narrators - he knew he did not belong, he left, and he does not seem to want to look back.

Mato appears to navigate both local and diasporic environments with ease, confidence, and fluidity, choosing when to blend in and when to stand out. Nika allows her sexuality and sense of self to unfold organically and even though it changes and evolves as she moves, it remains a process that unfolds within herself, rather than influenced by the places she arrived at. Željko and Bojan are harder to connect to. They speak as activists and theorists; they do not let me in easily on personal stories. I gather that Željko finds his queer people wherever he goes. Bojan had to flee for safety from state violence but his experience of queerness and activism in Serbia is formative, meaningful and connected, his experience in diaspora, not as much.

I asked my interlocutors to talk about their memories of sexual difference. Unlike mainstream oral histories, sexual identity and practices are central to queer oral history research. As no queer life is untouched by shame and trauma, trust, reciprocity, and self-disclosure are foundational to this method. Sharing lived experiences of remembering Yugoslavia, along with fragments of our sexual identities, created an interview environment that fostered honest and open exchanges in our interviews, creating a sense of resonance across our own life stories. This sense of resonance was also sustained when reflecting on the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s.

Sheftel (2018) considers the challenges and tensions interviewers face when talking to survivors of violence about their life stories. Rather than focusing on impacts of violence and trauma, a life stories approach centers the narrators' humanity and is concerned with the narrators' entire life trajectories. My intention for this project was not to find out more about my

interlocutors' experiences of war and trauma, yet it inevitably had to be addressed and spoken of because of the political context that shaped our shared diasporic origins. Our political identities are interconnected with the trauma stemming from being queer as well as having been impacted by civil war, and while these traumatic stories were discussed, they did not guide our conversations away from the life stories my interlocutors shared about themselves. As such, every story shared with me during this research remains partial and incomplete. I found myself wanting to return to the conversations repeatedly. With some, I did; with others, I couldn't—whether because I worried about the extractive nature of all research, or because of time constraints and the feeling that we were stepping beyond the scope of this project, following too many threads. Although I was able to come back to some participants, these stories do not provide a full picture of their lives.

All the interviews were conducted on Zoom, preceded by email exchanges detailing the scope and purpose of the project. Zeljko and Leon opted for voice-only interviews, while the others used video. With all of them, there was an immediate recognition, a familiarity and resonance, an ease that I am not capable of feeling in Western queer spaces. Humor, sarcasm, the capacity to bypass small talk in seconds and dive deep into "life's unbearable shades of gray," (Boym, 2008, p.xv), honesty and rawness—these elements were present from the moment I hit "admit" into the virtual meeting space. This digital environment, though impersonal in theory, became a space of shared affects and connection, a room where we recognized one another before we even spoke.

Other than Senka, none of the participants engaged in follow-up interviews. My approach was marked by hesitancy, I was apologetic and aware of the time commitments I had outlined in the ethics form. I tried to read the tone of our conversations, to sense whether returning would be

welcome or whether I was imposing, overstepping. The interviews and transcriptions themselves were exhausting, not because of their length or complexity, but because I was listening to people make sense of themselves as gendered and sexual beings through coherent self-narration, while my own capacity to reflect remained suspended. At times, their stories would bring forth my own memories, and I would share in return, but always in a dissociative way, as if recalling someone else's past rather than my own. The feelings I left unattended, the memories of violence and the absence of bodily sovereignty, lingered at the edges of these conversations, and I hesitated to return to them.

Had it not been for my exchange with Senka, I have serious doubts about whether this project would have reached completion. I delayed transcribing the interviews until I spoke with them. Only in that conversation was I able to move beyond the framework of the project and into a heartfelt dialogue rather than an interview. The youngest narrator, born after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, Senka articulated an experience of the Western world in which I exist with a profound sense of unbelonging, while capturing the ties to post-Yugoslav spaces that are a source of pain and harm, but also where we draw resilience and vitality. These spaces orient us toward the legacy of socialism and non-alignment, a position that resists the assimilationist and homonationalist pulls of Western hegemony and becomes an enduring force that sustains the refusal to disappear, to assimilate, and to align with capitalist neoliberal hegemonic attitudes.

We continued talking beyond the formal scope of the research, exchanging articles, thoughts, checking in on one another. This made me reconsider how much richer this project could have been had I pushed past my fears, had I reached out to the other participants without hesitation, asking to go deeper, to make sense of more.

Intersubjectivity in oral history sets the stage for interviews infused with intimacy and mutual recognition. In my case, my own assumptions as a researcher, my hesitations and fears, shaped the encounters, limiting the moments where deeper connection might have emerged. Murphy et al. (2022) argue that intersubjectivity can only be authentic if there is a shared identity between the narrator and researcher, and that queer methodology has the potential to forge deep, affirming connections that resist heteronormative systems of power. Yet, I cannot fully assess the extent to which my interlocutors and I shared, beyond certain orientations. The most generative moments arose not when we mobilized dominant identitarian discourses around queer identity, but when we engaged with culturally illegible, often unspeakable sexual identities and affective experiences. Even though I, as a queer researcher, and my narrators, as queer subjects, engaged from different positionalities shaped by our emancipatory locations, we merely occupied a shared space of sexual objectification, where injustice and violence inherent to queer life trajectories became visible, and where traumas were, at times, reenacted (Boyd & Roque Ramírez, 2012)

Recruitment

Finding research participants for this project was a slow process even though there has been an increased interest in the Yugoslav social project as a source of knowledge and transnational solidarity in both activist and academic circles. Using both professional and personal networks, I shared the call for participants for this project through scholarly networks, including: the New Yugoslav Studies Association (NYSA), which focuses on examining the Yugoslav political project, culture, and society through a transnational lens; the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES), a non-profit academic society committed to enhancing understanding of Central Asia, the Caucasus, Russia, and Eastern Europe within both regional and global frameworks; the Queer and Feminist Yugoslav Diaspora

network that brings together Yugoslav refugees and immigrants, a group that supports the outsider status of migrants in their new host countries as well as within the post-Yugoslav region. I also shared the call for participants across public and private social media platforms, including Lex, Discord, Signal, several Queer Google Groups, Facebook and Instagram. In the week after I first circulated the call my first two participants, Nika and Mato, reached out. The other participants joined the study slowly, after months of sharing, reposting, and reaching out to existing contacts to ask them to share info about my research with their networks.

The difficulties I faced in recruiting participants left me unsettled and reinforced my own insecurities around my epistemic authority and positionality and academic credibility, which was highlighted by what felt like a lack of social and kinship networks. Although I had immigrated to Canada 15 years prior, I felt particularly uprooted while conducting this research because the recruitment process illustrated how I was looking to make sense of my own unbelonging. However, two things helped me feel more grounded in this research after I began recruitment. First, after I had conducted a few of the interviews, I began to develop more confidence in myself as a researcher. Second, I participated in a summer institute in Slovenia in August, 2025, which exposed me to a wider academic network of scholars thinking about the post-Yugoslav context.

The challenge of recruiting participants and conducting research on post-Yugoslav queerness and diasporic contexts lies in the way that within the diaspora, migrants tend to center national belonging and attachment to countries of origin, which, in the case of Yugoslavia, often means its successor states. By contrast, Yugoslavia stands as the antithesis of such diasporic experiences, as an inherently anti-nationalist project. As such, diasporic notions of home and belonging for post-Yugoslav migrants are driven ideologically and affectively in the tension

between nationalism and regionalism. Added to this dynamic is the role of ethno-religious identifications and belongings that shape these diasporic relationships. For instance, it is almost unthinkable to try and recruit participants for my study through the Serbian church, despite the role of the church in anchoring many post-Yugoslav communities within the diaspora. Outside of academic circles,[2] I struggled to find spaces or communities that embraced identities that overlapped across the categories of queer, Yugoslav, and migrant.

Oral History Interviews and Scavenger Methodology

I set out to conduct the interviews with an expectation that I would be able to uncover the layers of identity in my interlocutors' stories. During my first interviews with Mato and Nika, I relied heavily on the interview guide that I created, whereas once I felt more confident, I opened up during the other four interviews in a way that allowed more flow and spontaneity in the discussions. Because my research participants were in cities outside of where I lived, and because I did not have a budget to travel to conduct my interviews, I conducted all interviews over Zoom. From the outset, I became acutely aware of how conducting interviews remotely introduced limitations to my ability to fully capture the expressive elements of oral history narration. Two of my research participants, Leon and Željko, opted to conduct the interviews over audio only. Looking at faces on screens, or listening voices, as my interlocutors shared in their self-narrations felt flat at times. Something was lost in using remote interviewing for my

[2] For examples of queer Yugoslav diasporic communities, see Tumbas, J. (2022, November 18). *Queer and Feminist Yugoslav Diaspora* [Symposium]. https://arts-sciences.buffalo.edu/global-gender-sexuality/news-events.host.html/content/shared/arts-sciences/global-gender-sexuality/department-news/symposium--queer-and-feminist-yugoslav-diaspora--art--film--and-.detail.html
or the podcast *Izokvireni* (n.d.) Spotify. https://open.spotify.com/show/11H5G0gtcQtaquanWFYseS

research, particularly in the way in-person interviews allow for intersubjective encounters that extend the interview and narration beyond the content of what is said alone.

With each new interview, my capacity to embrace the inherent subjectivity of oral history as a method grew. I let go of the expectation that I would uncover specific identities and resonances that I initially thought my narrators and I would share, and instead I held onto the emotional responses, political and personal reflections, and poignant moments of self-reflections that emerged through the act of remembering. Memory is always elusive, as is the attempt to trace what shapes personal and collective identities. The most generative moments arose when my questions prompted the dynamic and active quality of memories, and the feeling that they are being recreated between the narrators and myself. In these moments, remembering became an intersubjective process: my questions, shaped by the framework of my research and my own positionality summoned memories and influenced how they took shape in the narrators' recollections. We engaged in an exchange of remembering, recalling things that may have been elusive before the question was posed. This process often led us beyond the interview guide, allowing us to follow unexpected, generative, and inspiring threads of memory.

Once all the interviews were concluded, I was left grappling with a paradox: while my research aimed to foreground relationality and solidarity in the stories told by queer post-Yugoslav migrants, I struggled to find these concepts coherently identifiable through the oral history interviews. This left me with a lingering sense that my process resembled what Halberstam describes as a "scavenger methodology" (2018, p.13), a framework that emerges from the inadequacies of disciplinary approaches to understanding queer lives. Niang (2024), building on Ahmed (2017), develops this concept further, framing scavenging as an "open-ended orientation to research" (p.56).

Oral history as a method provided relational tools that satisfied my impulse to understand my interlocutors holistically, contextualizing their life stories and following the threads they articulated to make sense of the world. At times, this sense-making felt like a collaborative process, shaped by the interplay of their reflections and my inquiries. At other times, it was a more individual effort, where I attempted to interpret and draw meaning from their responses. Sense-making occurred in scattered and unexpected ways, marked by surprises and ruptures. Insights emerged when I least anticipated them, while moments I had expected would bring clarity sometimes left me searching in vain. I felt like a scavenger, seeking out what I thought I needed from my interviews, only to uncover unexpected meaning while transcribing interviews I had initially considered failures; not finding what I was looking for any while annotating transcripts I believed were aligned perfectly with my research topic.

As Niang notes, the process of scavenger methodology is rife with "unopened doors and sticky feelings," (2024, p.56). As such, the concept of scavenging offered me reassurance, as my research seemed to find unopened doors more often than it opened them. Midway through the process, I found myself increasingly preoccupied with the methodology itself rather than the topic I was studying. Niang notes,

> Scavenging is processual; therefore, it is concerned with methodology, with how things come together. Scavenging brings us in and out of academia, with the respect demanded by each location in which we end up finding ourselves, and across disciplines. By untethering ourselves from disciplines (and attaching ourselves to method-making instead), we can actually commit to the feminist, anti-racist, decolonial and queer projects that fundamentally want their destruction (2024, p.59).

Niang emphasizes rigor, attention, and desire as integral to scavenging as an anti-disciplinary method-making practice. At times, my narrators' words unsettled or profoundly moved me, leaving me wanting to dive deeper, understand better for my own sake. These were the moments when the research itself would dissolve into pure desire and curiosity, infused with an anti-disciplinary quality. Rather than adhering to a predefined framework, I followed unexpected threads, letting the narrators' reflections guide the process. The boundaries between researcher and subject, method and experience, would blur, revealing the potential of scavenging as a practice that resists containment, embraces uncertainty, and remains open to the unpredictable textures of memory and storytelling.

Anti-disciplinarity, curiosity, and desire are concepts that deeply resonate with my research. My method was imbued with sticky affects and a genuine desire to understand migrant queer lives, including my own. In the following sections, I begin by introducing my research participants, narrators whose stories provide the foundation for the themes that I subsequently discuss in the remaining parts of this thesis. Rather than a neatly mapped and coherent set of stories, these themes resemble a patchwork made of fragments, where their life stories and experiences vary, sometimes contradicting one another in certain aspects and resonating in others. Attending closely to what I encountered, I group the narratives that emerged in my interviews into four themes: the interrogation of sexuality on the move, the integration of nostalgia and Yugoslav legacy, interrogation of belonging, and the interrogation of political imagination. These reflections are then related to and interpreted through the lens of existing literature and my own insights.

Chapter 2: The Narrators

This chapter outlines each narrator, whose lifestory shared with me through our oral history interviews depicts a complex array of identities, subjectivities, experiences, and positionalities. In the following sections, I discuss each narrator through their own words and my impressions of them from our interviews.

Mato

Mato was born in Belgrade, Serbia just before the fall of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). His parents spent most of their lives in Belgrade, though neither was born there. His father, from a Montenegrin family, was born in Rijeka, Croatia, due to their grandfather's military service. His mother grew up in a village near Grocka, outside of Belgrade. Mato learned in his early 20s that his maternal grandmother was Jewish, but this ancestry was not openly discussed due to trauma stemming from the Holocaust and the legacy of political violence in Europe in the 1940s.

Mato recalls that much of his early memories are connected to Montenegro, despite only spending about a month and a half there each year. His grandparents owned a house in a village, and the family, along with other families, would gather there, and this was a source of fond memories for him. He also remembers Belgrade in the early 1990s, walking into a grocery store and seeing empty shelves during the sanctions and inflation caused by the Yugoslav Wars.

Mato's early years in Belgrade were marked by an enriching and unconventional educational experience. He attended an alternative kindergarten promoting exploration through art and play. This experience instilled in Mato a love for interdisciplinary learning, blending natural sciences

and art. These years laid the foundation for Mato's intellectual curiosity and creativity. Mato's primary school years coincided with the disintegration of Yugoslavia, bringing stark economic challenges and societal tensions. Despite the turmoil, Mato remembers an overall sense of community and equality that defined his childhood. High school in Belgrade introduced Mato to competitive debate, an activity that expanded his intellectual horizons. It was also during these years that he briefly encountered U.S. sponsored leadership programs, offering a glimpse into Western cultural and political paradigms.

Mato's migration was primarily driven by educational aspirations. At 17, he left Serbia to complete high school in the UK on a scholarship. The transition exposed him to socioeconomic disparities, particularly among peers from affluent and powerful families. This period deepened Mato's understanding of privilege and power dynamics, themes that would become central to his worldview. His academic journey continued at Harvard, where he pursued his undergraduate studies. Here, he encountered a microcosm of global elites and their structures of privilege. Harvard offered opportunities to navigate these worlds while fostering critical reflections on wealth, access, and institutional power. Subsequent postdoctoral research that he conducted in the West and employment in an academic position further solidified his place in academia, where he continues to engage with questions of science but also inequality, education, and societal transformation.

Mato describes his sexual awakening as late, starting in his early teens. While he recognized his attraction to men early on, he engaged in prolonged denial, rationalizing as a way to dismiss his feelings. Mato recalls a long-term relationship with a woman, acknowledging that his fear of disappointing others kept him in it longer than he should have. He reflects on the impact of

traditional values, particularly in a Serbian context where heterosexual relationships and family-building are seen as central to happiness and success.

Mato's move to the UK and later the US provided a space to explore his sexuality more freely. Still, this new context also brought its own challenges. He encountered Western identitarian politics and activism that often felt alien or overly prescriptive, and he grappled with the ways sexual identities and struggles are framed differently in the West compared to his home context in Serbia. While Mato embraced his sexuality through his experiences of migration, he expresses a nuanced relationship with LGBTQ+ culture. He does not see himself as aligned with the cultural markers often associated with queerness in the West, especially attachment to mainstream gay culture.

Mato articulates a profound sense of privilege in his ability to navigate life on his own terms. He frames this as a kind of self-confidence and clarity in identifying and pursuing his goals, regardless of societal or familial expectations. This resilience enabled him to be pragmatic about his identity, choosing when and how to disclose his sexuality based on the context. For Mato, being queer is a part of his identity but not its entirety, allowing him to avoid the need for external validation and visibility.

Senka

Senka was born in Belgrade in 1999 or as they frame it "born at the ending phase of it, the Milošević Yugoslavia, that terrifying kind of version of it." They grew up in the periphery region of Rakovica, which they describe as a post-industrial area marked by abandoned factories and machinery. The post-war atmosphere strongly influenced Senka's childhood. They grew up hearing about economic transition and the attempts to move toward capitalism. Even as a child

they were aware of political issues, like Kosovo's status. The aftermath of war permeated daily life, and political discussions were present even among schoolchildren.

Rakovica, a region that was heavily affected by the 1999 NATO bombing, provided a unique environment where nature reclaimed industrial spaces and contributed to an atmosphere of disillusionment during Senka's childhood. Marked by a general feeling of hopelessness, residents of the area during this time had no clear future or opportunities, especially in terms of jobs prospects or long-term economic stability. Despite this bleak atmosphere, Senka remembers how they explored and reclaimed the abandoned factories in Rakovica as their playground, even celebrating birthdays in these half-built or abandoned structures. The ruins became a part of their childhood adventures, offering a sense of freedom and escape. Industrial and economic abandonment was a result of the collapse of socialist Yugoslavia and the 1999 bombing, although Senka was not fully aware of the extent of these geopolitical contexts, nor the specifics histories of the abandoned factories, as a child. Only later did they learn that some of these factories had been targeted by NATO or were part of Yugoslavia's industrial sector.

Senka recalls how their generation, born after the war, lived with a constant awareness of its consequences. Although this generation had not experienced the conflict directly, Senka describes their childhood as living in a world where there is smoke everywhere, but you never saw the fire. From an early age, Senka exhibited a deep awareness of their gender non-conformity and the constraints placed upon them. As a child, they often crossed the imaginary borders of gender norms, playing with boys and dressing in what others considered to be boys' clothes. Their family, particularly their father, embraced Senka's fluid gender expression, avoiding gendered pronouns and allowing space for Senka's self-expression. This acceptance at home contrasted sharply with the rigid binaries they encountered outside.

As a teenager, Senka began contemplating leaving the country. Struggling with illness, a hostile medical system, and the gradual realization of their queerness and gender non-conformity compounded their sense of alienation. The social landscape offered few representations of queer or non-normative identities, leaving Senka to piece together fragmented models of non-normative gender expression through Eurovision, anime, and glimpses of androgyny in popular media.

During this time, Senka found community in the school of art and design. Here, they began forming connections with peers who, like them, would later reveal themselves to be part of the queer community. This network of support was crucial, even if the language they used to describe their identity was not yet fully formed. Senka moved to the Netherlands for higher education. Upon arrival, they felt an initial relief: a sense of anonymity and the freedom to live free from societal pressures. In this new context, they began exploring facets of their identity that had been suppressed or constrained back home. One of their first acts of transformation was letting go of old expectations, including the attachment to traditional markers of femininity.

The queer community in the West, while visible and organized, felt alien to Senka. The cultural norms, the language, and even the ways queerness was expressed were unfamiliar. They lacked the shared context of struggle and resilience that had bonded them to their queer friends in Serbia. Senka found themself navigating a space where queerness was often intellectualized and politicized in ways that felt distant from their lived experience. Senka's interactions with the Western queer community also highlighted a cultural divide and xenophobia. They were often met with misconceptions about their background, where people conflated their experiences with other marginalized narratives.

Senka soon realized that the idea of progress they had imagined through migration was a myth. Despite legal protections and public displays of acceptance, they encountered ignorance and hostility in the West in ways they hadn't expected. In Serbia, their queerness had often gone unnoticed or was dismissed due to cultural unfamiliarity with gender nonconformity. In the West, however, their gender non-conformity became a a focal point in new experiences of gender-based harassment and violence.

Nika

Born in Slovenia during the Yugoslav era, Nika's heritage is a tapestry of Yugoslav identities, encompassing Slovenian, Serbian, Bosnian, and Croatian roots. This diverse cultural lineage shaped her early experiences, and she shared childhood memories of summers on the Croatian coast and visits to Bosnia. However, the onset of the Yugoslav Wars marked a shift in her life, especially as anti-Bosnian sentiment intensified in Slovenia. At the age of nine, Nika witnessed her family's business deteriorate due to societal discrimination, particularly aimed at her mother, whose Bosnian heritage and name became a source of stigma in their community. This hostile climate challenged her family's sense of identity, which thrust upon them an evolving national landscape that increasingly demanded allegiance to the emerging Slovenian nation-state.

Nika's childhood and adolescence reflect an initial disconnect between societal norms and her sense of self. From being labeled as "boyish" to grappling with her interests being considered atypical for girls, Nika experienced early moments of alienation tied to societal gender expectations. While Nika grew up assuming she was straight, her teenage years featured crushes on boys that lacked emotional connection. Growing up in Slovenia, Nika encountered few public representations of LGBTQ+ identities. She recalls being exposed to an LGBTQ+ magazine during high school, initially engaging with it without fully understanding its

significance. Queer experimentation among peers in her boarding school was framed as "trying out" rather than being tied to lasting identities.

Nika's first romantic and emotional connection with a woman at 18 marked a shift from rational and detached feelings about queerness to a deeper personal and emotional engagement. Despite being in a same-sex relationship, Nika felt increasingly constrained due to her partner's discomfort with being open about their relationship, while rumors and speculation about her sexuality in her small hometown further isolated her. When she moved to London, Nika cautiously began attending gay bars and connecting with queer communities. These environments normalized queerness and helped her make sense of her own identity, and by her late 20s Nika fully embraced her sexuality as a part of her identity. However, after later relocating to Canada, Nika felt an uneasiness around her sense of identity and belonging. Despite having some familiarity with Toronto from previous visits, she experienced social isolation upon moving to the city, finding it difficult to form connections within what she describes as a more conservative and conformist Canadian context compared to the one she was accustomed to in Europe. Her sense of belonging in Canada remains ambivalent, characterized by complex ties to her home country, which she continues to visit annually.

Leon

Born in Belgrade, Leon grew up across multiple locations, including Pancevo and Split. His childhood was steeped in a patchwork of influences that both unified and divided his family. His father's family was Croatian and active in partisan resistance movements and subsequent communist rule, while his mother was Serbian from a royalist family background. This family dynamic imparted contrasting perspectives on Leon's early years, which created a "cultural vacuum" devoid of overt nationalist or cultural identification. These early experiences shaped his

worldview and influenced his parents hope for him to leave the country. Leon realized at an early age that he didn't want to remain in Yugoslavia, a feeling that was solidified through his family's trips abroad. Leon recalls Yugoslavia as drab compared to the vibrant and colorful environments he observed in places like Greece. He was struck by the bustling nature of life abroad, contrasting with the austerity and grayness of Yugoslavia.

Even though he found the educational system in Serbia uninspiring and non-engaging, Leon enjoyed linguistics and English language courses. He taught English courses as a lecturer after graduation while he awaited a response from his application to immigrate to Canada, which he had meticulously prepared and submitted the day after his receiving his diploma. Leon pursued a master's degree in Toronto two years after immigrating, followed by a PhD two years later.

Leon recognized his attraction to boys as early as six years old, though he didn't have the language to define it at the time. Growing up in Serbia, Leon was exposed to pervasive homophobic messaging and physical bullying. Gay men were vilified and labeled as dangerous, even by his own parents. Insults and slurs were commonly directed at him, increasing his struggles with societal pressures and internalized homophobia. Early on, he vocalized a desire to be a girl, because he believed life would be easier. He tried to convince himself he was bisexual during his teens. His first exposure to gay communities in Belgrade came through anonymous ads posted in the local paper, before he had access to the internet. Later, he connected with the scene through public parks, cruising in spaces gay men used to find one another. These public spaces became central to his social life, where he met friends, mentors, and partners. However, despite the vital role these spaces played as hubs for connection, they also carried risks due to societal stigma.

Leon’s move to Canada was a transformative experience and provided him with a space where he could openly express his sexuality without fear. He embraced everyday freedoms, which felt revolutionary compared to his life in Serbia. Lenon experienced the cultural shift from Serbia to Canada profoundly: queerness in Canada was normalized to the point of being unremarkable, a stark contrast to his experiences in Yugoslavia. Leon described his immigration date as a “second birthday, a beginning of a life of authenticity and liberation.”

Bojan

Born and raised in Belgrade, then Yugoslavia, in the 1970s, Bojan came from an academic family, with his father working as a professor at Belgrade University. Bojan grew up in what he describes as modest financial circumstances but with a strong emphasis on education and intellectual curiosity. His family environment was supportive of his artistic and intellectual pursuits, which led him to develop a deep interest in theater from an early age. His parents encouraged his interests, sending him to Paris in his teenage years and enabling him to complete his senior year of high school in the United States, an opportunity that was surprisingly available even in socialist Yugoslavia through academic exchanges.

Bojan aspired to study theater professionally and was able to immerse himself in Belgrade's dynamic art and cultural scene during the 1980s, a time when Yugoslavia was experiencing some openness to Western cultural influences. Although he ultimately did not pursue a formal education in drama, his aspirations and identity were profoundly shaped by the culturally rich and artistically vibrant environment of Belgrade, which sheltered him but stood in sharp contrast to the patriarchal and traditionalist attitudes prevailing in broader Yugoslav society. Bojan was always aware of his homosexuality and he initially associated queerness with

art, creativity, and intellectual circles, believing all gay people were artists, like those he met in the cultural sector in Belgrade.

Compulsory military service during the early 1990s war in Yugoslavia was a defining experience for Bojan, where he observed homoeroticism and homosexual practices among soldiers. Although he interpreted these forms of same-sex acts as a result of isolation and deprivation during military service, this experience shattered his previous notions of queerness as tied exclusively to intellectual or artistic expression. While in the army, Bojan experienced his first romantic and emotional connection with another man, which he distinguished from the purely physical relationships he observed among soldiers. After leaving the army in 1991, Bojan joined the anti-war movement in Belgrade, initially through the Centre for Anti-War Actions and later with Women in Black. Women in Black's radical feminist and anti-war stance resonated with Bojan and the group's critique of violence and war deeply influenced his understanding of gender and activism.

The intense political climate and his experiences with Women in Black profoundly shaped Bojan's intellectual and emotional engagement with gender, sexuality, and anti-nationalism. He was ultimately arrested and tortured by the state police and security services for his activism, which led him to migrate. In the West, Bojan encountered diverse expressions of gay identity, which differed significantly from the intellectual and artistic associations he had formed in Yugoslavia. He observed a commercialized, reductionist gay culture, which he found alienating and struggled to find resonance with the superficial aspects of mainstream gay culture.

Željko

Born in Yugoslavia to Serbian and Montenegrin parents, Željko's childhood and adolescence were marked by exposure to both conservative and progressive influences. While his family adhered to some traditional Orthodox customs, Željko found himself questioning these norms early on, particularly the patriarchal and nationalist values that were reinforced by retraditionalization and ultra-nationalism in post-war Serbia. Growing up amid the turbulence of the Yugoslav wars, he saw these conservative values being reasserted, which pushed him to identify more strongly with Yugoslav's anti-fascist ideals and socialist principles. This sense of ideological dissonance fueled his connection to anarchist and leftist ideas and led him to the punk scene, a space that embraced non-conformity and opposition to mainstream societal norms.

Željko's understanding of sexuality began early and was shaped by playful and curious interactions with neighborhood kids. In his youth, Željko entered a relationship with a male neighbor that spanned over a decade. Though it remained hidden due to societal taboos, the relationship was significant, teaching him about intimacy and his desires. Željko's sexuality was never confined to strict labels. Later he formed romantic relationships with women, while his relationships with men were primarily sexual. He recalls that these experiences were an extension of his own natural exploration, disconnected from societal framings of sexual identity. Željko was aware of the societal rejection of homosexuality present in the everyday derogatory language and culture around him, though he did not let this stand in a way of his personal trajectory.

Through punk culture, Željko discovered the term "queer" and embraced its radical, anti-assimilationist ethos. To him, queerness was about rejecting societal norms and asserting an unapologetic identity rather than seeking mainstream acceptance. The oppressive homophobia

and nationalism he encountered during his time in the army solidified Željko's desire to leave. A connection with a friend facilitated his migration to Montreal, a city he sees as a hub for progressive radical communities. Željko quickly connected with Montreal's radical queer networks, including groups like "Queer Montreal" and events like "Radical Queer Week." These spaces aligned with his values, providing a home among people who challenged mainstream LGBTQ+ narratives. Although his professional life was a priority, Željko contributed to activist events, supporting causes like queer visibility and anti-colonial movements. His involvement often included logistical roles, from managing event entries to creating promotional materials.

Drawing on his creative background, Željko reinvented himself as a video editor in Canada. His early successes, such as a short film that earned a CBC award and a feature film tour across Canada, helped him establish himself professionally and personally in his new environment. Unlike many immigrants, Željko experienced little discrimination upon arrival in Canada. Surrounded by a welcoming community of artists, academics, and activists, he found immediate belonging and support. Željko describes himself as a nomad, feeling at ease wherever he finds community and connection.

Ana

Born in Macedonia to Serbian parents who were university students at the time, I spent my childhood in a small rural town in central Serbia, mostly left in my grandparents' care on their farm. My parents, both literature teachers, were deeply engaged in grassroots activism, including organizing theatre clubs and publishing local opposition newspapers. In 1990, during my youth, I found myself drawn into clandestine activist gatherings orchestrated by my parents. In those moments, I became an inadvertent eavesdropper, soaking in political ideas along with the thick cloud of cigarette smoke. Not long after, I was handing out flyers with my friends,

attending rallies, and watching my hometown transform into a revolutionary hub that no longer supported the totalitarian regime.

Witnessing Yugoslavia fall apart and the accompanying horror of ethnic cleansing and genocide across the region, my adolescence was shaped by the impact of the thousands of refugees who were housed in gyms, schools, and our homes, alongide the embargo, power and water outages, and food scarcity. These experiences of witnessing violence, displacement, and socio-economic depression marked my most formative years. Later, as I was finishing my undergraduate degree in Belgrade, despair and discontent with Milošević's regime gained enough momentum to bring together artists, students, academics, and opposition leaders. In Belgrade, I joined *Otpor,* a youth-led resistance movement that played a key role in Milošević's downfall. Resistance, for me, was an escape from the constraints of gender and sexuality in a society steeped in nationalist and patriarchal violence. When I eventually left Serbia, I found an opportunity to break away from nationalism and patriarchy again, though this escape came with its own ruptures in identity and belonging. My mobility allowed me to articulate myself for the first time through queerness, not just as a quality of my gender and sexuality that had always been there, but as something that emerged through movement, loss, and my experiences of dismantling the inherited fantasies of belonging and the search for a better life that came with emigration. I came to see queerness as more than about personal relationships, and instead saw it as a pursuit for a diffused sense of safety and self, untethered from normative structures that serve a pro-natalist form of nationalism.

Chapter 3: Interrogating Sexuality and Gender on the Move

Through their stories of childhood memories in both Yugoslavia and former-Yugoslav nation states, the narrators shared an array of identities and sense of belonging that disrupt stable notions of gender and sexual identity that view migration as a path from repression to liberation. I begin my discussion of my oral history interviews with the role of gender and sexuality as mobile features of the life experiences of queer post-Yugoslav migrants.

> Just making connections with people wasn't as easy as I thought it was going to be or that it was going to fall into place suddenly. Like the cultural differences and stuff like that and context and understanding of queerness. Also I understood suddenly that, like all these people like in faculty, had this, they they've read the literature, they knew, they thought that, you know, you couldn't say this and that there are specific ways that you talked about things and I just try to kind of explain to them that I come from a very different context and that queerness there is so different and I don't know the things they're talking about and I'm here to learn. But also, I'm not. Like no one gave me the memo when I moved into the country, of what this means. And that was like, it still is sometimes, like a very difficult experience because I feel it felt like a lot of white queer people had this kind of, either misunderstanding of what peripheral Europe means or what kind of treatment that is. But then also kind of reciprocating this mode of communication where you're seen like ohh you're the poor person. I got questions like oh, do you even have WIFI? Stuff like where are you from. Siberia? Like knowing geography and then kind of seeing me as the poor queer refugee and I'm like "that's not it either." But thank you for recognizing there's been some struggle there, but I would much rather not take that name as there are people who really are that and it's like a difficult experience. So, it's just a lot of misunderstanding I would say and a lot of kind of feelings, I guess of, like, otherness and like a level of just how different queer communities, cultures, discourses, all these things are.
>
> Senka

> …we start from the beginning, yes. We start from the beginning and language, my language of trauma, is Serbian. So yeah, I might occasionally reach for a term in Serbian because, yeah... The homophobia completely traumatized me for my whole life, so all the issues that I have, today's psychological issues that require therapy are because I lived in

a homophobic society. I was exposed to violence from very early on until the day I left. It was systematic. It was built into the society there. And that's why I mean this is part of me, why I actively, really hate Serbia. Like I don't…when I say hate, of course I don't wish for anything bad to happen to it. I just, I hate everything. I hate being associated with it. I don't like being there. I just don't enjoy anything related to there and that's because of the extensive trauma that I have from the earliest childhood to like 26 when I left, right. 26 years of being told that you were a subhuman, essentially. That… that was not OK.

Leon

…looking back, obviously a bunch of us were gay. But even that, and I think that's maybe a part of why it worked, like well, I shouldn't say gay, queer because it was queer. It was mixed gender. I ..think maybe a part of why that felt, like, unique environment was maybe also that that it just felt like an alternative. We all liked alternatives and we listened to dark dub. I used Internet explicitly to look, like to, you know, look up photos. And I didn't try to educate myself till later. But once I moved to the UK and America, like yeah, I started having sort of the awareness around me, but even then, it took me a long time to start appreciating queer issues in a, in a way that I do right now. I mean, a very long time, I would say, towards the end of my undergrads and actually mostly into my post PhD. When I started, like, conceptualizing what issues where people faced in the world and how they differed and so on. So yeah, in the context of Serbia that still prevails. I mean I'm open and out to my parents but they, my dad in particular, really suffers from my choices. I think my mom came, came to terms with them, not so much the no children. I have no interest in having children, so that that hurts them more.

Mato

The idea of the West, a safe haven for sexual minorities fleeing oppression and violence and a place where they have the freedom of choice, produces contradictory ideas of identity and place for my interlocutors. Both visible and vulnerable within and outside Western nation-states, the three excerpts of life stories shared above reveal how globalization permeates the imaginaries and social and sexual practices of queer post-Yugoslav migrants. As my interlocutors shared their contrasting experiences of gender and sexuality identity, I found the task of mapping their life stories challenging. Each of their stories stands uniquely on its own, disrupting any attempt to fit into a linear narrative. Their stories do not fit neatly together. Even Leon, who broke ties with his

country of origin, appears to be painfully attached to it, illustrated by his return to speaking in Serbian when recounting the slurs and insults that he endured in his youth. Among all the narrators, Leon's trajectory is the most linear. People read him as gay from the early age, and his encounters with patriarchal culture in Serbia were unforgiving of his ambiguous masculinity. Leon's experience stands in contacts with others, who shared complex relationships between their early experiences of sexuality. Senka found that their gender non-conformity, which was tolerated and perceived as an anomaly in Serbia, subjected them to violence and isolation in the West. Meanwhile, Mato confidently navigated code switching, passing and adapting to different contexts, which allowed him a certain level of ease across geographic and cultural contexts. Likewise, Željko was able to find queer activist hubs wherever he lands, rendering his own life story much less fraught than some of my other interlocutors.

Leon's reflection on the intense trauma of growing up queer in a homophobic Serbian society left queerness a source of pain and estrangement when thinking about his homeland, where he never felt a sense belonging. His story highlights not only the post-Yugoslav region's ongoing struggles with LGBTQ acceptance but also ethnonationalist tensions. Leon's trauma and systematic marginalization led him to sever ties with Serbia, illustrating how the post-Yugoslav context can shape sexual identity through rejection and survival, rather than acceptance and exploration of local and hybrid forms of sexuality. Growing up, Leon felt a sense of difference early on, recognizing an attraction to other boys, though he initially framed it as an intense desire for friendship. He is not alone in sharing this pull towards male friends. Mato recalls:

> My sexuality, in the earlier stages it was just like, oh yeah, like there was a lot of these things of like, I just really want to be friends with that guy. I don't know why, but like I really want to be friends with him. Like this kind of feeling that was really naive and cute and dumb.

Similarly, Nika entered a relationship with a woman who was initially a friend, and then became her first same-sex experience. However, the relationship was marked by secrecy and internalized tension. While they slowly disclosed their relationship to friends, Nika struggled with the social implications of her identity, especially in her small town, where rumors and assumptions about her sexuality circulated. This pressure led her to withdraw from friends and feel increasingly isolated.

Although the interviews did not explicitly address coming out as an important or necessary milestone in their lives, some narrators spoke about it unprompted. Nika reflects on a moment when she articulated her identity to her ex-girlfriend:

> I think the first coming out was to my ex-girlfriend at the time. So I said, you know, I think I'm gay, and she was so upset. And yeah, it was so funny because... I understand it, like, because, you know, it was kind of like, 'Oh, this was our relationship,' but now she's upset because she wasn't the only one, you know, like she wasn't special anymore.

In Nika's story, her ex-girlfriend's reaction illustrates how their relationship served an exceptional role, rather than a reflection of sexual orientation. In the act of coming out, Nika was confronted with her ex's desire to keep their relationship separate from sexual identity—not just because of fears of homophobia—but insulated from queer identification by seeing their relationship as an exception to the heteronormative expectation. Once Nika embraced her queerness and declared it, her ex-girlfriend's response reflects a shift from a private closed experience of queerness, to one that is open and part of a larger collective identity. This friction between sexuality and sexual identity is a features of queer diaspora, where desire and identification may not be connected.

Nika's story also speaks to how queer desire, when expressed in a private, clandestine manner, can hold value for the intensely personal bonds that can hold special meaning in a

relationship; whereas in the process of coming out post-migration, which can be seen as an expression of liberation and freedom in a homonormative context, redefining a same-sex relationship as part of sexual identity can diminish the value and uniqueness of a shared experience of sexuality. Like Nika, Senka's trajectory around sexual identity and belonging deviates substantially from the mainstream expectation that migration to the West is equated with sexual liberation.

Senka found a safe space in Serbia at the art school, a place where they felt they could authentically exist and connect with a community. Despite excelling in academics and facing pressure to pursue fields like physics, Senka was drawn to art as a means of self-expression and survival, feeling that the design school offered a refuge from the oppressive norms they experienced elsewhere. They recall the slurs and stereotypes directed at art students, which paradoxically reinforced their desire to attend the program, and the feeling that the school's culture aligned with their need for a space that was open and accepting of those on the margins:

> …they were kind of like, come on, you're a straight A student. You should go and study physics. You know, why are you going to, like, study art, it's full of…And I'm going to use the slur, feel free to bleep it out. "It's all just junkies and faggots" and I kind of I remember at that time, just kind of being like "Ohh well that's kind of the reason why I'm going there. I need a safe space and I'm one of them"

In the Serbian context, Senka describes how they reclaimed slurs that were part of the community's lexicon, which reflects a familiar relationship to non-normative identities that are woven into everyday life—junkies and faggots are connected through art school. In the West, however, particularly after moving and becoming more visibly queer, Senka encountered unexpected hostility and aggression. Growing a beard and adopting a visibly nonconforming appearance triggered verbal abuse, stalking, and confrontations, which surprised them, as they had expected a more progressive attitude. This contradiction revealed to Senka that Western

notions of acceptance could be superficial and isolating, with visible signs of queerness prompting backlash in ways they hadn't anticipated. Their experience in Poland, by contrast, was marked by indifference rather than direct hostility. While they received some curious looks, they didn't face confrontations or violence, which allowed them a level of anonymity that wasn't afforded in more openly progressive Western settings. Similarly, in Belgrade, Senka found that people were generally preoccupied with their own lives and less likely to confront or question them about the gender or sexual identity. Although Senka felt a silent judgment about their appearance, as though their difference reflected an abnormality or illness rather than an identity, heir experiences suggest that, while Western societies may embrace sexual minorities on a surface level, this acceptance is limited to only those whose appearance adheres to intelligible models of gender expression and sexual identity. In contrast, Serbia and Poland, countries considered traditional and homophobic, may not actively affirm queer expressions, but their disregard for gender and sexuality identity affords a certain degree of disinterest in non-normative gender and sexuality that, paradoxically, can feel safer for queer subjects.

For Senka Western queer spaces provoked feelings of alienation and introduced implicit rules and hierarchies that highlighted cultural differences. Senka recounts an experience of attending a voguing event with their partner, which offered a glimpse into a vibrant queer culture that felt distinctly different from anything available in Belgrade. They encountered an acquaintance, a feminist who took it upon herself to guide them through the event's cultural context, explaining the history of voguing and ballroom culture in a manner that felt instructive, even patronizing. She advised them on seating etiquette and provided continuous cues on how and when to clap. This guidance soon became intrusive, culminating in a moment when she physically stopped Senka from clapping, which left them feeling uncomfortable.

> And then, as we were clapping at one point, she just kind of grabbed my hands and stopped me from clapping and I just kind of turned and said "Thank you," but felt wildly uncomfortable. It's like, why are you touching me? Like there's no need to get into my personal space. But also I think more so, there's no need to dictate to that level what I'm doing in this space. That you kind of physically have to intervene. So yeah, I think afterwards we were just talking. We're both a bit shocked. We left a bit early… It seemed as if we're these people kind of completely backwards who came to this fancy dinner and there's like 300 forks and knives, and we don't know how to use any of them. And I think to me it was kind of still surprising, that she kind of doesn't see the element of her white girl kind of teaching us these poor people from Eastern Europe how to behave… like what that means. Or like that kind of enlightenment and awareness comes only in the context of Western queer culture? Yeah, I don't know. And it was kind of funny story in in the sense that I was telling it to my roommates, a straight married couple from India. And they were shocked. They were like, what? Why would she touch you like that… I don't know, I don't know like how she saw it. I can't claim to know. But like I could imagine that a portion of it was like that she's saving me from embarrassing myself. Or like being seen in this way. Because I don't think the intention was like domineering or anything. Maybe. Who knows? I don't know. She probably thinks she's working for the common good.

While several of my interlocutors shared fraught experiences of sexual identity in their post-migration context, for others migration opened a path for more traditional sexual expression. For instance, Leon's understanding and acceptance of his sexuality shifted significantly upon moving to the UK and then Canada. In London, he encountered more openly LGBTQ+ spaces, which helped him develop a sense of connection with others in the LGBTQ community. This continued in Canada, where the freedom to be openly gay without judgment felt "revolutionary" for him. He describes his move to Canada as life-changing, where he had the opportunity to live authentically and without fear.

> For me it was just, it was. It was revolutionary that I could just say that I was gay and that people would not even bat an eyelid. They would simply just, like, say, like you're left-handed. You're gay, whatever. So just being able to be yourself fully, you know in society and to say OK, I, I'm going to bring my boyfriend to the party or whatever and it's not a gay party. It's just a party. Things like that were just absolutely revolutionary to me, to the idea that I could get married if I wanted to. You know. So anyway, I think moving to

> Canada was liberating. I actually called my immigration date sort of my second birthday. It was then when I truly was allowed to become alive, so yeah.

Unlike Nika and Senka, Leon's narrative follows a more familiar story told about queer migration, where moving to Canada opens space for his sexuality and sexual identity. Yet taken together, these narratives foreground the intricacies of sexuality on the move and the diversity of experiences that migration can bring for queer migrants. Sexual minorities from post-Yugoslav regions experience identity in ways that are both empowered and constrained by their interactions with Western queer cultures. For some, the West has provided opportunities for growth and expression, yet others face cultural and socioeconomic divides that complicate their sense of belonging. The journey to new spaces and places can offer liberation to some and reinforce marginalization for others, challenging assumptions of the West as a place of progress and liberation.

Drawing on the work of Dugan (2002) and Puar (2017), the stories in this study also highlight the link between sexuality and citizenship, pointing to how through homonormativity and neoliberalism, both private and public spheres are regulated, enabling the assimilation of legitimate and legible sexual citizens. While migration may protect some people, it can also simultaneously impose exclusions, restrictions, and expulsions on others, such as when "undesirable" queer migrants, like those who are racialized, poor, or trans, face when trying to move across borders (Chávez, 2013; Luibhéid, 2008). Thinking about the tension between stories of sexual identity and national sexual politics, what Jasbir Puar (2007) explains is a facet of homonationalism, I turn next to the role of nationalism in the nostalgic memories of my interlocutors as they navigate their relationships to the legacy of the Yugoslav project.

Chapter 4: Interrogating Nostalgia and Yugoslav Political Legacy

I felt I had a very good childhood. I have very fond memories of my childhood even. How funny it is how nostalgia attains whatever the memories are. Because I remember when I was growing up, we were collecting empty cigarette boxes … I just remembered this. I remember this genuinely, fondly... But how unbelievably heartbreaking that must have been for my parents, who grew up in a normal world in a normal country and were then thrust into this horror. And then their child is just like, happily going collecting empty boxes of cigarettes. Yeah, it's somehow this combination of like, sad and also really happy. I mean, I really enjoyed it. Like, I remember this being like a fun thing…

Mato

And the periphery region of Rakovica is very post-industrial, full of abandoned factories. A big mix of abandoned machinery and things being reclaimed by nature and overgrown and stuff of that kind…I was kind of really consumed by the ability to explore, so like those abandoned factories for me were kind of, you know, playgrounds and, just like, places that I would go because none of them were really protected... and all these wild buildings. They start building buildings and then abandoned them because there's no money... So, we would spend, like, birthdays there. We kind of just claimed that space and that's something I really, really liked. And that something, like, yeah, that's still very much a part of the Balkans. Like everything that's ruined is available to everyone... And then of course, it's the nature. There, there was a lot of...at the time, it's no longer the case, but at the time there was a lot of stray dogs, which at times was very dangerous, but I also just had two we kind of fed and they'd just go around with me everywhere...And that kind of felt like we were of the same kind...

Senka

I remember going to Greece for the first time, and I remember asking my parents: “Zašto je sve toliko šareno? (Why is everything so colorful) And then they kind of explained to me, I mean, my dad just said like, you know, “Pričaš glupsti” (you’re talking nonsense) essentially. But my mom said because again, she was the anti-communist. She essentially said, well, that's because it's a different kind of country, right?

And I think after that first trip to Greece where we saw what a normal country looked like. I remember going back to Pancevo and just playing with my friends in this sort of backyard. It was kind of a yard. It was a playground surrounded by buildings. It was kind of very safe. That's where we played a lot and there was a jungle jam and all. Sort of like sand pit and whatever. And I remember distinctly telling a friend of mine that all this placebo, so everything is so Gray here. And she looked at me and she said, well, what do you mean? And I said, yeah, you just don't understand. But everything is very gray here. And so that, that's when I actually knew that I didn't want to live in this place anymore. I was in grade 2.

Leon

Following the wars, Yugoslavia ceased to exist, yet many people clung to what has been called Yugonostalgia, a term loaded with complexity and affects, encompassing feelings of attachment to an idealized socialist past, the romanticization of that era, or an inclination to gloss over the country's violent histories. Even though the experiences of my narrators are vastly different, and their memories are unequivocally anti-nationalist, their nostalgia, which emerges in their stories, is triggered by something that is missing in the present. Yugonostalgia is a longing that does not stem from memories of times that were prosperous, rather from times when it felt there were many possibilities amidst the difficulties of life in the Yugoslav context. Unlike other forms of communist nostalgia, which often focus on material security or state paternalism, Yugonostalgia is shaped by the distinctiveness of Yugoslavia's socialist project—its commitment to workers' self-management, its position as a leader of the Non-Aligned Movement, and its relative openness compared to other socialist states. This nostalgia is not simply a yearning for the past but a recognition of how the disintegration of Yugoslavia foreclosed a political imagination that resisted both Soviet-style socialism and Western neoliberalism, offering an alternative vision of solidarity, mobility, and social belonging that feels increasingly unattainable in the present.

Boym (2008) posits that nostalgia is both a longing for a home that no longer exists, or has never existed, but also "a yearning for a different time - the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition" (p.xv). Boym is interested in the debates over the role of

nostalgia in memory work. Nostalgia is often seen as a sentimental, simplified version of memory and often dismissed as a version of historical remembering that refuses guilt. As such, nostalgia, can be a technique of avoidance, allowing people to bypass confronting the more difficult and shameful aspects of history (xiv). In this way, nostalgia can signal a failure to take personal responsibility, offering a guilt-free trip to the past. Boym introduces a more complex understanding of nostalgia by distinguishing between restorative and reflective nostalgia (p.xviii). Restorative nostalgia foregrounds absolute truths, while reflective nostalgia allows for multiple and contradictory narratives to coexist and has the capacity to look forward (p.49). Rather than remembering how life was once better, my interlocutors share what I argue are reflective forms of Yugonostalgia, as their stories engage with unpredictable and unrealized hopes, memories, fantasies, and discomforts about the past.

Leon and Bojan, who were both severely threatened in Serbia, each express a deep critique of and disillusionment with Yugoslav ideals; whereas as Senka and Mato share fond memories from their childhood that I note is intertwined with a yeaning that is set against post-war landscapes and societal collapse. Their memories are not idealized, nor are they disconnected from the larger societal context. Senka's memories of school illustrate the interplay of fond memories and disillusionment, a relationship of nostalgia that sees the hopelessness of the past alongside positive impacts on everyday life.:

> Atmosphere growing up there was very much, ohh it doesn't matter if you're going to have good grades, it doesn't matter this, it just kind of felt like there's no future really. I think now that's kind of changed a bit, but then there was kind of this overwhelming feeling of like, oh, there's just nothing for us here and there won't be.

Growing up in the periphery of Belgrade, Senka experienced a sense of being on the margins, both geographically and socially. Traveling to the city center felt like entering a different world, and they recall passing ruins in the center of Belgrade, caused by NATO

bombing, which evoked a sense of suspense and speculation. Ruins became spaces of wonder, despite their connection to destruction and loss. As they remember and reflect, I am struck by Senka's capacity to blend their personal experiences of disillusionment in post-war Serbia with an imaginative re-engagement with the landscape.

Mato's stories are also imbued with a sense of nostalgia. Interestingly, he reflects on his own awareness of how powerful and multilayered nostalgia can be and how it can shape one's sense of self. His memories evoke a mix of fondness and sadness and point to the disconnect between his own nostalgia and the reality of his parents' experiences during a time of crisis. He also grew up aware of social inequalities. Reflecting on his youth, he recalls his early perceptions of Roma people as distinct and marginalized within a society that prided itself on socialist equality. "As a child, the only concept of inequality I really had was around Roma people," he remembers. "I knew there was a group of people who looked different, and I was aware of them being treated differently, almost as if homelessness was 'their' problem."

Years later, Mato encountered a Roma classmate from his childhood, someone he had once helped with math. Now, he saw that same classmate, standing on the side of the road, selling fruit. When the man asked Mato, "What are you up to now?" the disparity between them was jarring: Mato was studying as an undergrad at Harvard, while his former classmate struggled to make a living. It was a stark, visceral reminder of privilege—a moment that brought into focus how drastically their lives had diverged, despite once sitting side-by-side in school. This encounter stayed with Mato: "Why? Why should our lives be worlds apart simply due to circumstances outside of our control?" He began to recognize that the advantages he enjoyed were not earned; they were products of structural privilege. Reflecting on the system that shaped their lives, he thought, "I don't deserve what I have... and that kid didn't deserve the life he

ended up with. His choices were shaped by a society that failed him." In confronting these inequalities, Mato found himself questioning the very ideals of equality and justice Yugoslavia stood for.

Leon's reflections also capture the impact of persistent ideological and economic inequalities, which were glaringly evident in Yugoslav society and are often glossed over. He was particularly struck by the discrimination faced by poor and marginalized groups, such as Roma children, and the hierarchical treatment of children in schools based on class and perceived social status. As he puts it, "I saw discrimination... the teachers treated these girls differently just because they were poor... and they treated rich kids differently." His observations reveal the cracks in the socialist ideal of equality, which for him were impossible to ignore.

As he grew older, Leon's sense of disillusionment only intensified. He describes his deep discomfort with the "group think and ideology" of Yugoslavian society, especially within the education system. In one particularly striking memory, he recounts how a young girl was humiliated by her teacher for wearing cross-shaped earrings, a sign of faith that clashed with the secular values of her communist teacher. Leon found these ideological controls suffocating and hostile. His memories of the 1990s, a period marked by economic hardship, isolation from family, and the painful experience of NATO bombings, further exacerbated his disillusionment. He recalls the trauma of being unable to visit Split, his other childhood home, which was suddenly off-limits due to the Croatian War of Independence. Leon's memories of the bombings in 1999 reflect his ongoing trauma, as he describes the fear he still feels at the sound of planes. He also speaks of his intense dissatisfaction with the pervasive poverty and toxic nationalism that characterized the 1990s in Serbia: "I hated the 90s... Serbia was just such a drab, depressing place." Leon left this environment with determination and sense of purpose.

Leon and Mato, remember their childhoods in ways that are marked by profound and distressing realizations about the ideals and realities of Yugoslavia. Both recount experiences that challenged their early beliefs in their country's egalitarian image, revealing the subtle and overt inequalities that shaped their understanding of identity and privilege. Both observe class inequality and anti-Roma racism, understanding their middle-class positionalities, which enabled their mobility and exposure to Western worlds and imaginaries. Their reflections reveal the contrasting yet interconnected struggles of identity, privilege, and belonging. Leon's narrative underscores a profound disillusionment with the idea of Yugoslavia from an early age and his own sense of cultural isolation, while Mato directly questions the promise of equality, touching on themes of privilege and the ways societal structures can determine life paths in ways that feel both arbitrary and deeply unjust.

Racial and class hierarchies have long existed in Yugoslavia. Following the establishment of post-Ottoman nation-states in 1918, these hierarchies were further entrenched through the biopolitical management of populations, creating new structural socio-economic and racial categories that reinforced racial and gendered orders (Rexhepi, 2023). The rule of communism briefly masked class and gender privilege in Yugoslavia. Mato, Bojan, and Leon grew up during the socialist 1980s and nationalist 1990s in Yugoslavia and later Serbia. In their formative years, they felt the lingering influence of narratives depicting Serbia as a small yet resilient country that resisted collaboration with German, Italian, and Hungarian fascists during World War II. History books emphasized Serbia's role in establishing a multicultural Yugoslavia in 1945, while public discourse largely ignored the civil war of the 1990s that ultimately dismantled the country. These narrators observed the abandonment of socialist ideals, the rise of ultra-nationalism and

religiosity, and the systematic dismantling of efforts to promote human diversity and social change.

Although Yugoslavia's emancipatory legacy began in the 1940s, patriarchy, sexism, and racial and class inequalities remained deeply embedded in its socialist framework. Leon's and Mato's reflections embody the laterality of racism and growing up in a country that calls itself socialist and raceless. Further, the Non-Aligned Movement holds a significant position in Yugoslav historical narratives, foregrounding anti-colonial ideals and principles that resonated in the stories told by my interlocutors. In the 1960s, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia aligned with Arab nations, India, and various Asian and African countries, spearheading a global movement that opposed colonialism and the Cold War divide. (Stubbs, 2023). was Although this period is marked by a prevailing notion that racism was fundamentally incompatible with socialism, my narrators' stories point to the racist dynamics that persisted in Yugoslavia. Roma people remain peripheral to society, largely ignored or unintelligible in Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav political imaginations. My interlocutors shared the different kinds of exposure they each had to the socialist experience and their reflections demonstrate how this ideology was used to downplay and neutralize racism in the region.

The Yugoslav state positioned itself as outside of the global racial order, promoting a vision of socialist brotherhood (bratstvo i jedinstvo) and standing against colonial racial hierarchies. Yet, racial ideologies operated in subtler ways, often hidden behind the rhetoric of solidarity and internationalism. Despite the positive aspects of non-aligned movement, it coexisted with internal racial hierarchies and the rhetoric of anti-colonial solidarity masked racial inequalities within Yugoslavia itself. Yugoslavia often portrayed itself as a raceless society, where socialism had supposedly erased racial and ethnic divisions. Unlike Western and colonial

states, Yugoslavia denied the existence of racism within its borders, positioning itself as free of racial tensions because it was not a former colonizer. The state's support for African liberation movements and its welcoming of African students allowed it to portray itself as racially progressive, while avoiding discussions about its own internal racial hierarchies. The Non-Aligned Movement was crucial in creating transnational solidarities and resisting imperialist structures, but Yugoslavia's racial politics were contradictory. While the state embraced anti-colonial struggles globally, it ignored and actively erased racial discrimination at home, particularly against Roma communities, Albanians and racialized migrants (Baker, 2018; Stubbs, 2023).

Despite the role of race and racism in Yugoslavia and post-Yugoslav nationalisms, other than Senka, who while recalling the NATO bombing made the connection to racial discourses of war, none of my interlocutors explicitly describe the events in Kosovo as racism, despite the enduring reality of racism that shaped its history of ethnic cleansing. This speaks to the power of racism to remain hidden and obscured under the persistent ideals of socialist imaginaries that obscured racial and class hierarchies in the region.

Because, as Miljački (2018) asserts, "various aspects of life in socialist Yugoslavia, along with the violent nature of its dissolution, prevent this nostalgia from being restorative" (para 26), I found myself grappling with how to address the violent breakup of Yugoslavia in this research. The wars are often cited as evidence that Yugoslavia was an impossible experiment, scholars also emphasize the generative and hopeful beginnings of the Yugoslav socialist project (Petrović, 2023; Stubbs, 2023). I found it difficult to reconcile that the Yugoslav wars were so sparsely discussed in my interviews, and as such, I have had to resist the temptation to provide a chronological and factual account of them. Since no history is neutral, I chose to remain

committed to the "truth of the telling"" (Abrams, 2016a), allowing history to emerge from the research itself without imposing factual narratives alongside the Yugonostalgia shared by the narrators.

Rather than forcing the discussion of war, I have come to understand the sparseness of these discussions as meaningful in itself. Sheftel (2013) acknowledges the complex relationship between remembering and speaking in her struggles to recruit interlocutors in Bosnia and Herzegovina, noting that refusals to speak about the past, as well as silences and omissions, are themselves deeply telling. As she contextualizes refusals, I can attempt to contextualize this sparseness—not as an absence, but as an articulation of history in its own right. In this study, we chose to remember Yugoslavia's non-aligned history and the generative, creative aspects of its political project. As Sheftel notes, "history has, throughout the twentieth century, been politically instrumentalized in the region, leading both to stability and violence" (p.258), and historical revisionism still persists. My interlocutors understand that there is no single truth about Yugoslavia, and avoiding discussions of violence was something we jointly and silently opted into.

Sheftel explores how memory, silence, and omission interact, cautioning against the flattening of memory. In our interviews—and in this paper—there is a similar risk. By leaning toward Yugoslavia's generative aspects, we must be careful not to obscure its history of war and violence. As Sheftel's interlocutors repeatedly argued, "too much history" can lead to too much violence (p.260). My narrators were not suspicious of memory itself, but rather of history as an authoritative force that has often been wielded against them. They did not foreground the violence of the Yugoslav wars—not because they sought to deny or erase it, nor because they wished to delegate responsibility solely to those in power, but because discussing violence before

a Western audience risks flattening their experiences into familiar narratives of war, destruction, and victimhood.

This was not a history they needed to recount, at least not in this project. Instead, the sparseness of these discussions may reflect an understanding that such histories, when brought into new contexts, are often misread, misunderstood, or reduced to shameful and politicized fragments. The wars and the violence of Yugoslavia's dissolution were not central themes of this paper, yet they loom at its edges, reminding us that history is volatile and that refusal, silence, and sparseness are imbued with meaning (Sheftel, 2013, p.267).

Petrović's (2023) work on affect, memory, language, and social life in post-Yugoslav spaces focuses on how culture, historical narratives, and everyday experiences shape contemporary identities in the post-socialist Balkan and demonstrates how even untrue and fictional events have the capacity to produce real affects, including emotional mobilization to stir up political imaginations. Drawing on Deleuze and Hardt, Petrović contends that the power to be affected represents a strength rather than a weakness, aligning closely with the post-socialist condition. This perspective challenges the notion of Yugonostalgia "as a superficial, unreflective, and politically unproductive escape into an idealized past" (p.175). The affective capacity of remembering Yugoslavia uncovers uncontrollable aspects inherent to the act of remembering that survived global discourse of the defeat of post-socialist projects as they failed to transform into democratic and civic societies. These dominant narratives often imagine common ownership and self-management as utopian or anarchistic, overlooking the possibility that they were supported by the state regime, and as such accessible to everyone. Affective attachments to Yugoslavia do not transcend the oppressive aspects socialism or the violence of ethno-nationalism; instead, they offer a nuanced reflection of the socio-political present beyond narratives that claim to be

objective and true. As the narrators share their stories, their emotional attachments to the past are reflected in both affection for Yugoslavia and the challenges of the Yugoslav project. Taken together, these narratives resist the epistemic narrowing (Petrović, 2023, p.182) that reduces post-conflict societies to the conditions of the aftermath, limiting what is imaginable in the present. Rather than framing the breakup of Yugoslavia solely as an ethno-nationalist conflict, these accounts reveal how the neoliberal transition in the Balkans also shaped social life, labor, and public spaces. As people navigated precarious economies, nationalist politics, and the erosion of socialist-era social bonds, the affective ties to Yugoslavia act both a site of loss and a means of articulating alternative political and social imaginaries in the present.

As my interlocutors shared their memories of life in Yugoslavia and post-Yugoslav countries, their stories resonated across a precarious relationship to feelings of belonging in both the past and in the present through both their experiences of migration and their connections to ideas of home. I turn next to how ideas of belonging played out in the stories shared to understand belonging as an ongoing negotiation of affect, memory, and identity, rather than a stable category and genuine affinity. In the next section, I explore how the narrators articulate belonging as shaped by displacement and the neoliberal restructuring of identity. Following this, I turn to how these experiences of migration and memory shape the political imaginaries of post-Yugoslav queer migrants. I trace their connection to Yugoslavia's socialist values of equality, self-management, and transnational solidarity, positioning these ideals as a counterpoint to both neoliberal LGBTQ+ politics and homonationalist exclusions.

Chapter 5: Interrogating Belonging

In their stories of life before and after migrating to the West, the narrators all expressed complex relationships to their feelings of belonging and home, which captures the layered nature of their connection to their host countries. For queer migrant subjects, belonging can take on a paradoxical lens, where Western host countries function as sites of "home," not because they fulfill a deep sense of identity and belonging, but because they offer a relative sense of comfort and security. Here, belonging is not about alignment with national identity, but about feeling less alienated than elsewhere. In this way, the West becomes a home by default, a place where queer post-Yugoslav migrants might feel the least foreign and where their differences do not isolate them in the same way they might in other settings.

> I've been thinking about community and belonging. I feel like the longer you're away from home, the more you miss it in a weird way. For me, it was always temporary. I'm leaving temporary, you know. And then all of a sudden it was like ohh. But you know, there's nothing for me to do in Slovenia. Yeah. So, I've always been very torn, very torn.
>
> Nika

> Of all the places where I don't belong, I don't belong the least in Canada and so by default Canada is my home. Because I feel the least foreign in Canada and that's a very strange thing to say, but it's absolutely true. And the place that I desire is Toronto, which is not a the perfect city… It's like it's only Canada's second-best city probably after Montreal but that's the only home that I have. If, something happens and I have to run for safety, I run to Toronto. That's where I feel safe. That's where I feel happy. That's where I know things.
>
> Leon

As they remember their first encounters in the West, my interlocutors share experiences that range across excitement and hopefulness (Leon), ambivalence (Nika), contemplative alienation (Senka), flight to safety (Bojan), personal enrichment, exploration and code switching (Mato) and sense of adventure (Željko). Nika's and Senka's stories reflect the affective quality of

how migrant lives feel, and how the new environments affected them. As Nika reflects on life in Toronto, she conveys her frustration with the city's cautious and predictable social atmosphere, which she feels lacks the vibrancy and political engagement that she associates with Europe. She shares her observation that people in Toronto often resist change, preferring to keep things as they are, which she finds stifling. This attitude, to her surprise, mirrors some of the conservatism she remembers from back home. In Slovenia, standing out and asserting individuality is often experienced as a mark of independence and resilience, whereas in Toronto, she feels that blending in is more socially rewarded. This contrast leaves Nika navigating an unfamiliar cultural terrain, where the values she associates with self-expression and nonconformity seem to be at odds with the more reserved and uniform social norms she perceives in Canada:

> I feel like everybody's so boring here. This is a very boring place. There's nothing exciting happening. Everybody is just very cautious. There's no like no extreme ups or downs. Everything is very average, that is killing me… I kind of look past it because I'm like, OK, whatever. I hate that people are not politically involved. Like, here in Toronto, everything's "Oh nooo, don't do that". You know, don't change anything. Let's just keep it the way it is. Everything's like that. In some ways, very Slovenian, like in, in this let's not change anything way. So that, that surprised me that people are kind of backwards, you know. I think Europeans are a bit more relaxed. As like in general Europe. But then I think, we're even more relaxed, you know. About certain things. So, I have a friend that I met like way back and he's from Spain. And before I moved to Canada, he lived in Canada for one year. And before I moved, he was like, oh, you're going to a country, he called it the granola bar. Everybody carries a granola bar there. The only thing that exists here is weird or normal. You know, you're either like everybody else or you're just weird. Like, oh, that's just weird. And I think he was really right about that. I feel like back home, you want to be different. That's kind of, you know, like, look, I'm just not conforming. Whereas here "I'm conforming" is like the badge of honor. And I like, I hate that.

Senka also reflected on their ambivalence and initial struggles after moving to the West from post-war, post-NATO-bombing Serbia. They recalled a childhood fascination with ruins and a deep awareness of life unfolding on the periphery, a "we are on the margin" mindset, as they

describe it. Growing up, they explored abandoned places and ruined buildings, developing a sense of belonging on the edges of society. Arriving in the Netherlands, Senka was struck by the contrast of the neat and orderly streets, sharing how this new environment initially felt disorienting and unfamiliar.:

> For me, ruins are something very oddly magical. They make me, kind of activate my speculations. But then when I moved to the Netherlands, where everything's extremely tidy, and it's so hard to find an abandoned building. It feels like they've calculated for every cobblestone, to the point where the trees are planted in a row and they're all the same height and it's orderly to a troubling degree where everything has its place and space and is accounted for. Then I kind of thought "wow, people didn't grow up like this". When I kind of started to notice these things, there was this kind of alienation with the space that's like a polar opposite. Almost. And then, yeah. So I would this because I feel while I was still living in Belgrade, the atmosphere is kind of, it's so similar with people or like the ways of thinking that this is something that is kind of taken for granted and not really talked about. But then I feel like when you move away, suddenly you're struck by the difference. You're struck by a different cultural history, a different language, a lack of understanding, a lack of trauma. And we had a different kind of trauma, that is. That you cannot relate, or the people cannot relate to the one that you have. And then this kind of really got me to ask even more questions and kind of try to understand everything.

In Senka's new setting, the neatly ordered streets and landscapes, where even trees were aligned and uniform, felt alien and unsettling. The Western landscapes provoked a sense of disconnection, and while everything had its "place and space," none of it aligned with Senka's sense of belonging. Senka's story evokes a sense of alienation, the affective contrasts between home and the West. In Belgrade, the chaotic environment fostered an unspoken understanding and a shared affective history, shaped by collective experiences of conflict and trauma that people took for granted. Migration, however, brought Senka face to face with the cultural and historical divides separating them from their new environment. The lack of shared affects heightened Senka's sense of dissonance and estrangement within this new orderly, structured society.

Nika's straightforward, at times cynical approach, to her narration embodied a post-Yugoslav manner of speaking that I associate with home. In this context, people are open and direct, unafraid of addressing issues head-on and often use humor and self-critique to navigate difficult topics. I missed this style of candid, sometimes self-critical communication, where people express themselves without necessarily worrying about causing offense and a way of speaking that captures the resilience and humor that permeates post-Yugoslav culture, creating an instant sense of familiarity and connection. This notion of familiarity is part of how ideas around belonging are navigated in the space of diasporic relationships between place of origin and place of habitation. Because Nika was the first person I interviewed, my initial anxiety led me to overprepare, clinging to the interview guide in a way that limited spontaneity and the natural emergences and insights. Reflecting on these interactions, I also question the role gender dynamics may have played in shaping the intimacy and familiarity I established in this first interview. Nika identifies as female, Senka as non-binary, while other narrators I interviewed were male. These dynamics may have influenced the comfort levels and the depth of connection I felt with each of them, highlighting how identity and relational factors shape the oral history process and forms of identification with my interlocutors that also speak to the question of belonging. In whose stories did I identify and disidentify with? Whose nostalgia and narrative experiences mirrored my own? I found myself feeling a sense of belonging while speaking with Nika and Senka.

As I explored the themes of belonging with them, I note what it is that we left behind, and what awaited us, in our overlapping experiences of migration to the West. Through our conversations, I found myself thinking alongside my interlocutors about how our personal experiences within and against the cultural and historical contexts of Yugoslav, post-Yugoslav,

diasporic and global settings, were shaped by affective layers that remained deeply entangled with our sense of self. Across physical distances, we shared a sense of resonance in our connections of belonging to an enduring past and present anchored in the legacy of the Yugoslav project and its subsequent dismantling, and our nostalgia for it from our present locations in the West.

Although I shared a common diasporic positionality with my interlocutors, how we each navigated and negotiated these positions varied significantly. Longing for a different life and a different sense of self, we each had a unique way of imagining or redefining home, which ultimately separated us. As such, belonging became more about a shared structure of past and present, rather than shared identity, sense of community, or feelings between us. Aside from Senka, who experienced gender-based violence in their move to Western Europe, most of the narrators never expressed experiences of migrant undesirability in their host countries. While Nika grappled with feelings of isolation, she did not face overt discrimination; meanwhile, Leon, Željko, Mato, and Bojan each expressed an immediate sense of belonging and acceptance in their new environments.

In the last section, I analyze the narrators' political imagination as it intersects with their sexual identities and memories of Yugoslavia. While analyzing the transcripts, I noticed that queerness was not necessarily a focal point throughout the conversations. My narrators spoke of their childhoods, memories of Yugoslavia, and migration without always directly referencing their sexual and gender identities. It was only when I introduced specific questions about queerness and related these to migration and political imagination that we began to engage with these topics as sexual and gendered beings.

Post-Yugoslav Queer Political Imagination

I always knew that I don't necessarily identify with the heteronormative world, but also didn't identify with the gay movement either. My queerness is different... for me, queer isn't about being accepted by the mainstream. It's about being on the fringe, unapologetic. For me, whoever identifies as queer has a politics that's different from mainstream gay culture. It's not about assimilation. Queerness, for me, is more about anti-normativity than sexuality...

Željko

I was born in communism. You know, like I kind of feel a little proud of that. Like, I do think… I like the way Yugoslavia was, you know, politically, the way it was. I think it wasn't Russia, you know. And it wasn't the West. And I like that we didn't conform to either side. You know, there's like a certain pride to it.

Nika

I always consider myself Yugoslavian, even till this day

Željko

I prefer to think of myself as queer, even though I struggle with that term as well, only insofar as it feels a little bit appropriative on my end because I don't appear queer in the way that many queer people choose to show them their queerness off. I don't have a problem with this, it just like feels a little bit like…. It's just that I distinguish between gay and queers and gay became in the West very mainstream thing. It is just gay men are very politically kind of dumb. It's my distinction.

Mato

I mean growing up in Serbia, absolutely. I was very acutely aware of what Western imperialism was, and I understood…I started understanding what it was. I started understanding how it worked and what power was over time. And I think that I can very definitively relate it to, to like how I experienced and what NATO bombing was.

I mean, just like stupid Republicans versus Democrats division, which is just the, you know, the biggest lie ever told as far as I can tell… that there is much difference between them. But like they are the conclusion that Americans would have… in this heated arguments would always be like, yeah, but like friendship, you know, we should be friends in respect to our political views, right. This kind of attitude. And I bought into that for a while. And then and then at some point, I was like. Wait a minute! And at some point, I was like, what the hell am I doing? What the hell am I? Yeah, I can be friends with people I disagree with, but this is not a disagreement. This is like, "murdering a million people is OK or not" disagreement. You know, this is like as dramatic as we can

possibly be, so. Yeah. So, so I kind of, yeah, most of my friends now are just people who I share political views with.

Mato

There was all these dynamic in in Yugoslavia, which was very particular. A colleague of mine described it as Coca-Cola socialism. It's somewhat more complex and richer than the experience of real socialism or capitalism in in Western Europe and more developed world.

Bojan

We were very respected internationally, even in the 80s. I kind of understood the Cold War and the sides and, you know, and that that we were not in line. We're like kind of forging that third path and respectability in the world and stuff like you know. Tito and Yugoslavia were, you know, known internationally, right? So for me that was a point of pride. You know, being part of that, that we had the strongest, strongest anti fascist movement in Europe, right? That we defeated Nazis. Yeah. And I don't know, like all of all of that is part of that Yugoslavian identity. And Yugoslavia was, you know, complex and complicated country in its own right. Like, because of the path that they've chosen. Right, and what led to this dissolution… but the all the positives around it were like just like, I don't know. I don't think many people, peoples in the world have such legacy to be proud of.

Željko

With full awareness that being a woman or being a gay does not necessarily predestine one to certain political opinion. I also came across gays that were nationalist, which I strongly opposed and somehow incorporated in my antinationalism I incorporated in my queerness, I thought, Oh my God. Of course I love all men. How can I be nationalist.

And I came across in Belgrade in 1990s gay men who were Serbian nationalists ... So it was a learning curve, yes.

Bojan

Reflecting in their ties to the political legacy of Yugoslavia and its influence on their political imaginations, Nika, Željko, Bojan, and Mato describe a profound connection to the values of Yugoslav socialism, particularly its emphasis on equality, workers' rights, and anti-capitalism. Growing up in Yugoslavia instilled in them a pride in the self-managed system of factories and unions, something that Mato sees as a missed opportunity in today’s global

economy. The principle of solidarity among workers and citizens strongly informs their critique of contemporary capitalist structures. For them, the experience of queer migration and their evolving sense of identity is inseparable from their socialist roots. Growing up in Yugoslavia made them more open to socialist ideas and attuned to the struggles of the working class, values that shape both their activism and their queerness.

Here I follow Petrović's (2016) argument that "how we represent and write about Yugoslavia is an important epistemological, but also political question, as the legacy of Yugoslavia increasingly becomes a site of inspiration for some future politics" (p.508) as my interviews are driven by the urgency to address the social tensions and contradictions that emerged in the wake of socialism's collapse. They also express frustration with the commercialization of Pride and mainstream LGBTQ+ politics, preferring grassroots events like Dyke and trans marches, which retain their original spirit of radical political activism. They are critical of how contemporary LGBTQ+ identity politics have become diluted, normalized, and restricted within homonormative frameworks. Nika and Mato's critique is particularly focused on the intersection of capitalism, the commodification of queer issues, and queer imagination. Mato's reflections on queer marginalization as a source of creativity and resistance align with Yugoslavia's vision of an alternative path amid Cold War tensions. His view that mainstream gay culture lacks the critical potential of queerness resonates with the political imagination of queer Yugoslav migrants who reclaim their Yugoslav identity as a vehicle for envisioning futures free from Western imperialist and nationalist constraints:

> In the sense that I think for me, but I, I've also seen this with a lot of other queer people I interact with there is a, there is some real potential that comes from being marginalized, and this is a bad thing to say because it's almost like it's almost fetishizing, you know, like artists must suffer … But in my opinion, sort of mainstream culture ends up being kind of like a sort of a thing that's not interesting in the sense that there's nothing to think about.

> You somehow have to face that. Ah, maybe there's like marriage thing. You can at least ask: Maybe getting married to woman thing is not the right thing to do, which I think for vast majority of people there's not even quite that that question, it never even emerges. That that's not even a topic that crosses their mind, right? There's just, you're on a highway and you're going and everything's like, there's no turning, like, you know, you're not getting off. And I think that's to me indirectly where I think my queerness is and my struggles to understand my sexuality was for me much more difficult thing than accepting my sexuality. Accepting that there are other ways to live life and be happy about it. That was a much bigger problem for me than being like, oh, I want to have sex with men. Like, it was much, much easier to make that break than to accept that I can be happy in life in a variety of ways, and I can be satisfied in a variety of ways, not only the ones that are told to me by people around me, whatever people around me are.
>
> Mato

Mato, reflecting on the lack of creativity and alternatives in mainstream culture, notes that queerness provides a means of imagining life beyond traditional paths. For him, queerness is not just about sexual identity but about a broader challenge to conformity and assimilation. His engagement with global politics reflects a commitment to peace and social justice, values he trace back to his Yugoslav roots. While activism provides Nika with a strong sense of purpose, she acknowledges that it can be disheartening, especially when she observes progress as limited. She also feels disillusioned by the co-optation of activist movements by corporations or individuals with self-serving motives:

> I don’t even care if Pride happens anymore. There’s a better event, like a day before. That’s still very political, very grassroots. It just has more weight… I feel like political changes for us weren’t made to benefit us… Speak for all of us, but it’s not for all of us.
>
> Nika

Similarly, Željko emphasizes a queer identity that resists assimilation into mainstream gay culture, instead embracing an anti-normative stance that aligns with the historical Yugoslav ethos of forging an independent "third path." Željko, expresses pride in Yugoslavia's stance of

non-alignment, which resonates with his own sense of queerness as existing outside Western mainstream norms. As such, his queerness is inseparable from his political consciousness. For him, being queer is less about fitting into a sexual orientation label and more about a radical stance against heteronormativity, patriarchy, and nationalist ideologies. He identifies queerness as a mode of being that doesn't seek approval or acceptance and exists defiantly on the fringes, resisting the pressure to conform. This approach to queer identity is deeply intertwined with his upbringing in Yugoslavia, where his exposure to both traditional customs and radical subcultures shaped his understanding of self as a political and social being.

In the above stories, queerness is not an outcome of the migration experience, but an inflection on the relationship between non-Western subjectivities and political imaginaries that emerge from the Yugoslav social project that disrupt normative life under Western capitalism. Queerness is not a Western import but a political imaginary that queer post-Yugoslav migrants navigate as part of their relationship of nostalgia, belonging, identity, and migration. For all of my interlocutors, socialism and queerness share a political imagination in their orientations towards social, political, and economic inequalities, and in contrast to hegemonic and mainstream nationalist sexual discourses in the West.

Senka, the only narrator born after Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia ceased to exist is also interested in the legacy of Yugoslavia that valued alliances and connects Yugoslavia's position in the Non-Aligned Movement to a contemporary queer political imagination that is skeptical of national borders and imperialist agendas. Senka reflects on how Slovenia and Croatia, now part of the EU, are pressured to uphold Europe's borders, contrasting sharply with Yugoslavia's previous commitment to international solidarity and non-alignment. For Senka and others, this shift towards "Fortress Europe" clashes with a legacy of Yugoslavia

that valued alliances beyond the dominant Western sphere, a critique of the West that reinforces their queer identity as one that resists exclusionary and nationalist agendas:

> For me, and actually a lot of queer friends in Serbia and some queer friends in Slovenia, we're talking a lot about it, but also trying to then understand the politics of the non-aligned movement and how those things change and how Slovenia and Croatia, are encouraged to uphold the borders of Europe, you know, and like, Fortress Europe and stuff like that. Yeah. So that goes to show, how these ideas are slowly weeded out for a different kind of agenda.

Senka's story also highlights the tension between a nationalistic Serbia and their queer identity. Their queerness emerges as the primary force that led them to question and refuse Serbian nationalist ideologies:

> My family, they didn't vote for Milošević, they were, you know, they were in some ways left-leaning, in other ways, very conservative. So, I wasn't raised in a household that was terribly nationalistic, but for instance, with the case of Kosovo, they were very much like a lot of Serbs at the time. Like Kosovo is Serbia, which is terribly problematic but very, very common. So, growing up with, like, in primary school, for me, I felt the indoctrination of history class. I was kind of eating this stuff up. I was really kind of romanticizing this idea of giving my life and being productive for the benefit of this nation, of like staying here… I remember these, like hero, Epic poems and stuff like that, that you get fed in primary school. Like this is the kind of mindset that you get in people. But I was also very, very queer, kind of visibly from an early age. And I was given a lot of very straightforward signals that that's something that is not to be tolerated by any means and I think. That marginalization kind of made me question a lot of things … with that kind of knowing that you're the public enemy kind of complicate and makes it very difficult to then uphold all of these narratives that have been said, you know, because they also include something against you, kind of. And then you you're either going to turn towards self hate and the reproduction of these or you're going to find a way to transmit love and joy and also critical questions with it. I think I at least I feel like that was for me.

Similarly, Bojan's experience mirrors this as he engages with anti-war activism and aligns his queerness with anti-nationalism. His involvement with the Women in Black, despite being a male participant, reflects his solidarity with radical anti-war and feminist positions, intertwining his sexual identity with a broader anti-nationalist, anti-militarist stance:

> Yes, yes, but I was initially, I attempted to flee the army and I was arrested and eventually released from the army. So, I was a mix of a deserter and a madman. And back in Belgrade in 91, I first joined protest by it was called Centre for Anti War actions and then very soon I came across. I saw them on the street, Women in Black.
>
> And because I was very emotional coming back from the army and losing some of friends and lovers to what was happening at the time, I was very emotionally, intellectually, physically… It was the time of bombing of Dubrovnik, where I spent some of the nicest moments of my life. And so, then I saw the protests of women in black, and when I got to meet them in person. I basically realized that they are the most radical element of this anti-war resistance and that's how I as a man felt I belong even though the name of that group says that it's about women. And I was clearly not one of them, but because they were radical and I felt radically against the war, I joined. And because they were so radical. They were able to expand their notion of what is to be a woman in a different way than it is being now. So, it's radically opposing the war… And so alongside, I learned a lot about feminism and I, and about gender and. And so, this was another formative phase where I observed the world and what is going on in dramatic years in Belgrade at that time and in the 90s. Also, through this gender lens of what's happening to women, it adds sensitivity to how you behave as a man or how man behaves. So, and then obviously it also helped channel some of my understanding of being gay and being queer.
>
> Bojan

Both Bojan's and Željko's reflections on the myth of Yugoslavia's anti-fascist legacy reveal a sense of pride rooted in resistance to both Western and Soviet pressures. This political legacy of Yugoslavia offers a historical basis for radical queer identities that oppose both nationalism and assimilation, as seen in Bojan's rejection of nationalist gay men and his commitment to queer anti-nationalism. Their pride in the transnational alternative pathways that Yugoslavia forged further exemplifies a queer political imagination that refuses complicity in oppressive political alliances and a commitment to anti-fascism.

For Željko, queerness transcends sexuality, embodying a resistance to assimilation and a celebration of fringe identities. His participation in radical queer movements emphasized creating alternative spaces that challenge mainstream norms. Likewise, Bojan's queerness informs his anti-nationalist stance. He views love and intimacy as inherently boundary-

transcending, opposing the nationalist ideologies he encountered among some gay men in Serbia. Bojan rejects simplistic binaries that associate sexual freedom with progressive societies and homophobia with traditional ones. Instead, he emphasizes the historical and cultural complexities of queer experiences across societies. His work with Women in Black taught him to integrate gender, sexuality, and anti-violence perspectives into his activism. Over time, Bojan grew critical of reductionist approaches to identity politics, advocating for a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of human sexuality.

Central to many of the stories shared was an attention to power and hierarchies in shaping post-Yugoslav migrant political imaginations. For Mato, this is reflected in his discussion of grassroots queer activism in the West versus top-down sociopolitical changes in Yugoslavia, which are unimaginable in the West:

> Like the power here is so oppressive. And kind of dictatorial. Not that Tito wasn't like that, and certainly this asshole [referring to the current Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić] right now, like, he is very much like that, but it somehow it feels to me and I don't know, I don't have a good conceptual theoretical framework for this, but it just how it feels to me that there is like, here in America, if something good is going to happen, it has to come from the bottom, but nothing good comes from the top. And I think it's probably because Serbia, Yugoslavia was, a smaller, less relevant country but good things can also happen from the top.

Mato's understanding of state power and social justice illustrates the tension between socialist and capitalist geopolitical impacts on the everyday lives of queer subjects. The expectation that neoliberalism will bring about liberation is at odds with the already peripherals forms of subjectivity and identities formed in the legacy of socialism. The limits of neoliberal ideologies on shaping sexuality are further echoed in Nika's story, where her critique of hypervisibility is connected to the socialist values of Yugoslavia, which inform her queer identity and activism. Drawing on Yugoslav social norms, she suggests that queerness was often more

integrated into private life without the overt identity politics seen in the West. Her view aligns with theories critiquing the colonial origins of modern LGBTQ+ identities and the ways visibility exacerbates exclusion or commodification (Alexander, 2005; Puar, 2002).

The Yugoslav political legacy offered each narrator a framework for them to interrogate and critique Western narratives of queer liberation. These perspectives challenge the idea that migration to Western countries guarantees liberation, arguing that hypervisibility and commodification often impose new constraints. Further, the political imaginaries of a time when socialist Yugoslavia exemplified global solidarity and alternative political-economic possibilities creates space for approaches that favor collaborations and visions outside the mainstream systems rooted in colonial dynamics (Petrović 2020, p.103). The stories shared with me by these narrators illustrate queer political imaginations that both critique and reconfigure the Yugoslav legacy. The participants remember Yugoslavia's ideals of solidarity, anti-fascism, and non-alignment in ways that inform resistance to normative narratives of nationalism and assimilation, instead crafting a vision of queerness that aligns with anti-war and anti-imperialist legacies. This study highlights how the emotional conditions and collective moods that created the attachment to Yugoslav's past resist the demand for, and inclusion in, a neoliberal world order.

Conclusion

The fallout of Yugoslavia caused the emigration and displacement of 2.4 million of people across the globe. The reasons, circumstances, and models of those migrations were very different. Luibhéid (2008) argues that most migrants straddle choice and coercion. Some narrators in this study left due to direct experiences of violence, while others fled the growing societal tensions in

the post-Yugoslav context. Many of my interlocutors also no longer saw professional or personal prospects in the unstable post-war environment, which disrupted both intimate and social relationships. Jović (2003) identifies anther group of migrants that helps situated both myself and my research in the form of intellectual and political communities. Jović argues,

> For many of us... studying in the war years offered a new identity and meaning. A new challenge and/or consolation. Deeply pessimistic, powerless to stop the violence and chaos, many sought another identity. The academic world offered shelter, and often consolation and hope. On the other hand, that new generation of young Yugoslavs and post-Yugoslavs in principle refused to completely "drown" in the countries they came to, partly because they refused such "drowning" in the countries they left. As a general rule (at least when it comes to those who studied social sciences and humanities), their interest remained tied to Yugoslavia, its history, culture, politics, economy, identity, its people and places. (Jović, 2003, pp.25-26) [translated by the author]

This turn to migration as a pathway to leave disillusionment in the legacy of Yugoslavia's history and yet remain connected to the orientations of Yugoslav socialist ideals explains the power of the political imaginations, queer identities, and fraught negotiations of belonging that shape the lives of my interlocutors and myself.

The interviews I conducted are the result of my own search for others who refuse to drown in the alienation that can encroach on us in the diaspora by holding on to the fragments through which we tell our lives back to ourselves. Through my use of the oral history method, drawing on a scavenger methodology, I sought out those fragments to piece them together to understand the desperation and hurt that follows queer post-Yugoslav migrants in the West. Although I kept questioning the purpose of my research, my questions also helped answer what I was seeking out. Why talk about Yugoslavia with queer migrants 30 years after its violent breakup? Why Yugosplain the world?

> "Yugosplaining in our work is meant to counter forms of westernsplaining," to which we have long been subjected. The erasures were collective – denials of anything good in our past, analytical refusals to engage with complexities of Yugoslav history(ies), forgetting

> of the Yugoslav global role, simultaneous exclusions and inclusions of Yugoslavia from the rest of the post-communist world (as convenient for particular meta-narratives of liberal triumph, NATO expansion, EU integration etc.). But we have experienced them intimately … as affect aliens. (Vučetić, 2020)

Talking about and remembering Yugoslavia is a way of forewarning the Western world of what is to come. As Western democracy is eroding and rising nationalism, violence, and racism gain currency, the West is waking up to its own legacies of violence. Many years have gone by since the collapse of Yugoslavia and scholars believe our history of war, nationalism, and genocide gives us a vantage point to speak against other forms of violence. Although my study does not share such ambition, nor do I think diasporic scholarly voices can meaningfully contribute to the fields of political science or international relations as these fields predominantly mobilize nation-state logic, our voices offer alternatives to seeing the world. Rather than bolster the project of Western liberalism and capitalism, which erases the violence that Indigenous, Black and queer people have been facing all along, my research points to the importance of post-socialist queer vantage points that focus on solidarity and mistrust of nationalisms. We don't need to save Western democracy if we never believed in the fantasy of liberalism's political imaginary in the first place.

Instead, this study follows Agathangelou et al.'s (2008) argument that the neoliberal world order has been waging "global war" (p.123), maintained by forces, state agents, and institutions bestowed with the power and means to persecute and dispose of those deviating from a homonormative national imaginary. They argue that the seduction of empire is maintained by a constant investment into libidinal and affective economies that soothe the anxieties and traumas afflicted by this world through the proliferation of prisons and other spaces of confinement (p.129) where the deviants are locked up and murdered both within and outside nation-state

borders, assuring the safety of a fictional national population in need of protection from these global and local threats.

Talking about post-Yugoslav experiences and what constitutes the memory of Yugoslavia today can illustrate the power of ambivalent relationships of belonging and the importance of socialism's ideological legacy on global political imaginations. I join Yugosplainers in asserting that what happened in Yugoslavia is not idiosyncratic, nor is it confined to narratives around the violence of the Balkans. My goal is to show Yugoslavia's legacy in a way that is relevant to the formation of new coalitional political imaginations in the face of global environmental and economic collapse. Although the post-communist region has been endlessly interpreted by outside experts, while those within the region were reduced to providing empirical data, merely serving as informants, I nonetheless believe that learning about this history is best done through the life stories of those who lived through the Yugoslav project and its legacies. This study seeks to move beyond the role of native informant and instead reclaims the knowledge we hold about the region through the affective and embodied experiences that shape our perspectives on ourselves and the world.

Looking ahead, more work is needed that investigates the non-aligned legacy of Yugoslavia and its allies in the anti-imperialist and anti-colonial struggle, as well as the contradictions between the socialist vision in conjunction with coloniality and racism in the region. This is work that would best be accomplished through coalitional political approaches that transcend the nation-state framework. As such, thinking through the legacy of Yugoslavia remains a site of possibility for disturbing the geopolitical arena dominated by hegemonic powers through transnational coalitions (Piškur, 2024). My narrators and I were socialized through the legacy of Yugoslavia's political image to believe that social movements and political

projects can change hegemonic global structures to bring about a more just, equitable, and peaceful world. The vision of the world we grew up with was anti-imperialist, anti-colonial, and anti-racist, even though in practice these ideas have emerged withing the post-Yugoslav nation-state frameworks that my interlocutors and I have critiqued.

Following Piškur (2024), I believe that Yugoslavia's trajectory, despite the violence that shaped its past, was nevertheless transformative. Breaking from the Soviet Union in 1948, it developed a model of self-managed socialism and co-founded the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), symbolizing the possibility for a new equitable global order that allowed marginalized nations to come together and modernize on their own terms through political and cultural exchanges, material aid, scholarships, and solidarity actions.

Piškur highlights the profound political, economic, and cultural transformations in Eastern Europe and the Middle East after World War II. The Soviet Union's dominance shaped Eastern Europe into the Eastern bloc, while old colonial powers continued to impose control over the Middle East. Many Middle Eastern countries began decolonizing after the war, with most joining NAM by 1961. This geopolitical coalition supported national liberation movements across the world fighting for independence from colonialism and various forms of occupation, including the liberation of Palestinian.

The 1990s, the decade that shaped the formative years of all my interlocutors, brought profound upheavals through the collapse of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia's disintegration, and wars in the Middle East and Balkans. NAM lost its relevance yet persisted in people's imagination. While Eastern Europe fragmented into diverse nationalisms, coalescing across a new geographic divide of Central Europe and the Western Balkans, coloniality and racism persist everywhere. In Eastern Europe, populist leaders exploited, and continue to exploit, fears of

migration to uphold narratives of protecting white Christian values. Meanwhile, the West, often self-portrayed as a bastion of democracy, fails to conceal its double standards, its investment in and indifference to death and destruction in regions like Palestine, Syria, and Iraq.

The contradiction between the imperial projects of the West and their demands over the rights and protection of gay people is not lost on those of us working in post-Yugoslav contexts, especially as Western governments enforce global lockdown (Agathangelou et al., 2008) through carceral camps built by Balkan labor. The human rights and NGO industrial complex that offer equality and protection to sexual minorities, are contingent on producing the human "surplus" (Agathangelou 2008, p.133) that makes investment in carceral spaces profitable for Western nation states.

Queer political imaginations must closely investigate how the assimilation of sexual minorities is dependent on containing migrants and framing migration as a threat by mobilizing Western queer rights discourse to perpetuate racial and civilizational threats. To do otherwise risks making queerness complicit in the way sexual identity is used to co-opt and depoliticizes movements by separating sexuality from racism and class inequalities. In the stories shared with me, my narrators remember those who did not have the choice to leave or who choose to remain unidentifiable and invisible as a form of resistance to being absorbed by identitarian politics of visibility.

Ultimately, I share in what Conrad (2014) argues about queer activism: that queerness needs to refuse isolating the oppressions sexual minority face from the wider context in which unemployment, corruption, racism, xenophobia, and nationalism affect the lives of multiply marginalized groups. This refusal is deeply tied to the notion of political imagination and attachment to the visions of worlds recalled from past lives that people who bond over desire

might share. This project embodies my struggle between belonging and refusal to assimilate, and my assertion that queerness remains a politicized identity. It is a refusal carried across officially designated nation-state borders, one that survives and continues to resist - an affective attunement to injustice, a capacity to sense and understand shared threats. It is the refusal to be subsumed that shapes my understanding of queer migration, the enduring power of imagination and memory, and resistance within and across borders.

Many questions about the legacy of Yugoslavia remain in my mind but remain unanswered. How do we reckon with the Balkan region's role in enabling colonial EU expansion, despite the legacy of Yugoslav non-aligned socialism and Marxist praxis, whose principles of anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism nevertheless stem from European modernity? How do we confront how both left- and right-wing ideologies, past and present, capitalist and socialist projects alike, have either perpetuated or ignored the systemic racism faced by Roma communities in the region? And how is racialized labor in the region used to build the carceral spaces along the Balkan Route (Rexhepi, 2023, p.20)? Although these are questions I cannot examine in this study, they speak to the wider implications of how queer and socialist political imaginations might offer us different insights into the ongoing political challenges facing the region.

This study foregrounded the way the revolutionary and utopian project of socialist Yugoslavia shaped the imaginations of queer migrants from the region. In it, I attended to the ways that the fantasy of socialism failed its potential and engaged with the difference between "failure of a political project and the destruction of a political project," which requires "attention to both the narration of that project's past and assays of its potential futures" (Herscher 2018, p.114). In the stories shared with me, I scavenge, desperately, obsessively, for traces of affects

and memory in an attempt to piece together something that neoliberal erasure has been working hard to dissolve. My search is not just intellectual; it is affective, driven by the need to resist what Petrović describes as the "social anesthesia" that has become “a defining characteristic of post-socialism, preventing us from addressing the real social anxieties of post-socialist subjects” (p.508).

The political consequences of forgetting, numbing, or misinterpreting our socialist and post-socialist experiences, having witnessed and endured the dismantling of social solidarity are dire for our queer diasporic selves. But just as we carry the weight of these losses in varying degrees, we also carry the memory of having lived collectively, of having experienced glimpses of transnational anti-colonial political project rooted in ideals of gender equality, free housing, education, and healthcare. This is not a memory of a nation-state or national belonging, but of a political horizon that once felt exciting and tangible. The erasure of this memory is not just a loss but a violence, one that renders our longing illegitimate, as if to desire a world built on mutual care and collective well-being is to indulge in fantasy rather than to recall a lived reality. None of us wish for a country to be reconstituted, but for these ideas, actively dismantled under the new world global order, to remain, to persist, to shape the futures we still fight to imagine as queer subjects.

This erasure is particularly insidious when it is replaced with a narrow, liberal framework of queer belonging that equates safety and fulfillment with rights-based recognition in capitalist nation-states. This model, deeply embedded in mainstream gay culture, prioritizes assimilation over the radical potential of queer anti-normative ways of living. It risks pacifying collective longing by offering inclusion to some while leaving intact the very systems that produce exclusion and dispossession. The promise of legitimacy through legal and consumerist

mechanisms positions queer survival as an individualized pursuit that “reinvests in very terms that need upending” (Patton & Sánchez-Eppler, 2000, p.5). Against this, I insist on the memory shaped by interdependence, mutual care, and the refusal of capitalist neoliberal logic.

My questions and this project emerged from a sense of urgency - an urgency that queer diasporic subjects must feel, must hold onto, must refuse to let dissipate. It is the urgency of scavenging for something that has been neglected, of tracing the affective remains of a world that once insisted on collectivity, and of refusing the seduction of forgetting. Through this project, I sought to find others who share this longing and to collectively reclaim the permission to long for Yugoslavia - not as an exercise in nostalgia but as a political act and stance that acknowledges the enduring contributions, many of which remain deeply relevant in today’s global crises, such as social equality, labor rights, universal healthcare, and gender justice (Slapšak, 2011). Above all, I wanted to foreground the sense of collectivity and collective agency experienced in socialist times, which has been actively swallowed by neoliberal and homonationalist forces.

The magnitude of uprising in Serbia, emerging from a political landscape often dismissed as apathetic, demonstrates that these suppressed political possibilities continue to resurface, resisting erasure and reclaiming space in the present.This project mapped fragments and threads of strategies and imaginaries that persisted and that I argue have the capacity to enable new conditions “from which to resist” (Tuck & Yang, 2013).

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