

In Bed with the West? Central Eastern European Queerness and Western Theory

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Bodies of Theory, Bodies as Theory

The categories of “Central Eastern European” (CEE) and “queer” are infinitely and continuously pliable in encounters with each other. An invitation to the editorial board of this US-based journal, along with a request to reflect on CEE queerness for its inaugural issue, prompted me to investigate my attachments to and negotiations of these categories, which I embody as a Polish lesbian art historian working in the European – and often American – West. This essay is an ongoing theorization of how CEE bodies of thought on gender and sexualities interact with, draw upon, and illuminate limitations of their Western, predominantly Anglophone, discursive counterparts, and what this might propose for articulations of Polish—or CEE— lesbians. The body, as it recurs throughout my work, becomes central here to my consideration of how these disparate discourses may brush against each other. I propose a consideration of these encounters of CEE and Western queer bodies of thought, their entanglements, incompatibilities, and finally a desiring, affective way in which I bring them together to present no easy answers or neat solutions, but a shifting dynamic of dismantling the preconceived East/West power imbalance.

I wrote the first draft of this text in New York in February 2025, never more attuned to the entanglements of bodies, affect, politics, and my CEE positionality alongside them. I had come to New York to attend the annual College Art Association conference, where I struggled to articulate my disciplinary loyalties in my choice of panels: between CEE and queer/trans-focused sessions on offer, I prioritized the latter as a matter of (disciplinary) urgency and solidarity. (I prioritized attending a protest—an immediate response to the erasure of trans and queer histories of the Stonewall Riot—over the conference altogether.) I felt less affinity with the geographically motivated inquiries of CEE-themed panels, even though in my own work geopolitical positionalities vis-à-vis Western, Anglophone theory matter a great deal. I ask myself at this point whether the often exoticizing treatment of CEE in the context of the West and Western queerness might in fact be, perversely, a turn-on for me—but I seem rather to follow my desire and question my modes of belonging in such encounters; I want for my CEE positionality to find critical affinities, despite its illegibilities, across contexts, across especially the seemingly ossified East/West axis.

Bodies emerge as central to these investigations for their ability to capture, disturb, and articulate the political delineations to which they are subject. Joan Nestle’s words, as she reflects on writing and feeling lesbian histories, are “born in passionate places,” are

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“dreams of the body made from real moments. They are intimacies made public because the fragility of touch and the weight of history haunt” her (Nestle 1987, xi). Mere days after the US Park Service had removed the letters “T” and “Q” from the National Park Service website for the Stonewall National Monument, I held a new lover’s trans body in my arms—the warmth of his lived-in skin against the discursive coldness of yet another very real attack on trans lives. I often think of theory in bed, and how theory happens in bed: how an American trans body and a Polish lesbian body in contact might generate thoughts that expand, that must expand, onto our political lives and geographies intimate and transatlantic. My Polish experience of reading US lesbian theory, separated geographically, historically, and temporally, often produces a frustration of an unbreachable distance. A lover’s body grounds my understanding of theory in the here and now, allows me to touch what I had read, and articulate the difference I perceive between us in my Polishness, in how sexuality and the body have been shaped by distinctive narratives in CEE, which had themselves been meaningfully shaped by the West (see, e.g., Wolff 1994; Murawska-Muthesius 2021). This is my starting point for theoretical elucidations of a CEE, often Polish, lesbian.

That I feel emboldened to do so I owe to the fearlessness of writers like Nestle and the need to reach the wisdom already gained by someone else. I learn from Nestle’s body as she offers it to lovers and to the reader. In a more visceral way than a conference participation, my own memory of the warmth of a lover’s skin always leads me back to my theoretical lesbian. I cannot seem to unpeel the theory from the body, so instead I become curious about what it means to experience theory through a body, in this case—my Polish lesbian body moulded into shape and its otherness by Western theory.

Categories of both queerness and CEE always seem to signify some kind of otherness or difference, but to agree on the outlines of either appears hardly possible. Much like queerness has been deliberately a category in flux, and a critical one, CEE became a shifting, unstable landscape of discontent, politically, geographically, and conceptually. Even in the discussion surrounding the shape of the inaugural issue of this journal, questions appeared as to what “Slavic” means or should entail: is the boundary language, history, degree of separation from—belonging to—Soviet history? Yet, we were asked to write on Central Eastern European queerness—the two terms applied interchangeably yet not meaning the same. What kinds of queerness does this designate or elucidate? Finally, what does it mean that we had no similar discussion surrounding queerness and its ontologies? In search of meaning, I offer here a consideration of how bodies of theories have interacted between CEE and Western queer and lesbian cultures.

Encounters

The tension of encounters between CEE and Western queer and lesbian writings, often generative but equally often reductive, challenges the perceived universality, centrality, and neutrality of Western theoretical approaches. While in New York, I visited the Lesbian Herstory Archives, by all means an emotional pilgrimage. Among other materials, I pulled the very thin folder marked “Poland” from a packed filing cabinet. It

included two pieces of writing about two Americans' impressions of Poland in September 1977 and August 1981. The former was a letter sent to the January 1981 issue of the lesbian magazine *On Our Backs* by reader Arlene Zarembaska of St. Louis, and the latter—an article by gay playwright and community organiser Abe Rybeck in a June 1982 issue of *Gay Community News*.

Rybeck's piece reflected, from a self-admittedly outsider perspective, on the role of the Catholic Church in Poland. Prompted by the sighting of the pink triangle patches worn by homosexual prisoners at Auschwitz, it traced Solidarity's position on "the subject of homosexuals" (Rybeck 1982). Rybeck expressed puzzlement over the apparent total absence of gay or lesbian people in Poland ("We don't have that problem here," he had heard from one Solidarity foreign press official), until spotting some on his own: "But what about those men in drag? And what about the two women I saw sitting on a park bench, laughing, kissing and sharing an ice cream cone? (Lesbians? The Poles I asked usually thought that lesbians were just a Greek myth.)" Eventually, upon his return to the US, Rybeck found out more about (mainly) gay locales in Warsaw, naming two coffee houses, "Pioprus and Janeczka," presumably meaning "Piotruś" and "Janeczka," which translate as "Little Pete" and "Little Janey." Notably, he pointed out the strong current of the developing feminist movement in Poland, albeit ascribing its birth solely to "basic feminist theory" sent to Polish women by friends from France. Conversely, Zarembaska's letter to *On Our Backs* laments the futility of trying to "explain" to Polish women what feminism is: "Everywhere I went, I tried to talk to women about feminism. Women did not even know what the word meant, so I tried using other phrases instead of 'feminism'—the emancipation of women, the women's movement, women's liberation, etc. All drew blanks. ... I concluded that a feminist would quickly go crazy in Poland" (Zarembaska 1981). Even for the time, the arrogance of this statement is staggering, and begs the question of where the writer had looked for feminism in Poland, having reportedly asked in bookshops and spoken to women "everywhere I went." Zarembaska also makes a broad statement about the "infrequency" of rape in Poland, and concludes: "I could not figure out the basis for this difference between the US and Poland in this regard, for Poland still is a patriarchal society" (implicitly, as opposed to the US?). She makes a brief note of the coffee houses frequented by gay men and lesbians but rushes to add that the prevailing attitude towards homosexuality is, "of course," that it is perverse. It is striking to note that the much more attentive, nuanced account of homosexuality, but also feminism, came from a gay man—there too, however, the West appears as the main source of information and discourse formation. And so, the two pieces found in the same tiny archival file (and replicated ad infinitum elsewhere) present a clear case: in all matters CEE, notably queer-feminist, notably on questions of gender and sexuality, the West is an unreliable narrator.

Yet, its relevance remains. I think with American lesbian studies texts regularly, and they have elucidated to me both my desires and theoretical elocutions of lesbians and lesbianism. Other lesbian scholars from Poland think with them, too (see, e.g., Mizielińska 1997, Olasik 2017). It seems inevitable, given the scant amount of theorising

on the local ground, to anchor what we know elsewhere, in the wisdom already earned by others. This is not to say that there is no lesbian scholarship in the region—it is, rather, that its preoccupations are different, often focused on activism, nationhood, family, and visibility (see, e.g., Wielogłaska and Rak 2018; Mizielińska 2022; Weseli 2009; Kowalska 2011; Struzik 2012; Małgowska 2020). I long for the theoretical and conceptual considerations of lesbians in the Polish and CEE contexts that attend to theories of desire, theories of sex and sexuality, of who or what a lesbian *is*—and these concerns are available to me in Anglophone lesbian studies. What still needs to be largely written is the specific positionality of a CEE lesbian as particularly gendered and sexed, a site of desiring decolonial possibility to theorize CEE gender and sexualities outside of their otherness conceived in opposition to the West.

Joanna Mizielińska, one of the first scholars to write about lesbianism in the Polish context, contemplated the question of the Polish lesbian in an essay titled “Lesbianism in Poland between consciousness and its lack” in the inaugural issue of the lesbian magazine *Furia Pierwsza* (First Fury) (Mizielińska 1997, 29). She proposed reading the situation of Polish lesbians in relation to Western feminist lesbian discourse, mainly Adrienne Rich’s seminal “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” (1980), and assessed the significance of Western theoretical discourse for the conditions of 1990s Poland. She noted that lesbians she had interviewed in Poland “understood their existence as individual, unaware of shared lived experience, on which to build common political objectives. Often, they described their own case as a private struggle of an individual for acceptance of others” (Mizielińska 1997, 29). One of her respondents commented: “There exists a model of lesbian culture in Western Europe and the US. In Poland it is possible for such culture to be conceived if women identify consciously as lesbians and are willing to talk, debate, and build common values, e.g., Lesbian Studies” (Mizielińska, “Lesbianism in Poland” 29). Such attempts, if undertaken, have been short-lived and did not systemically challenge the individualistic feeling many Polish lesbians had declared to Mizielińska. It seems as though the feeling of disconnectedness from a community or a common political goal had not changed between the years of state socialism and the 1990s, even with the influx of Western lesbian discourses, which often seem ill-fitting or even incomprehensible to Polish lesbians. Mizielińska’s questionnaire revealed, for example, that her respondents were puzzled by or frequently skipped the questions about roles, behaviour codes, or clothing in the Polish context. One commented: “I don’t know what it’s like in Poland. In Berlin—the weirder, the better. In USA (California), maybe short hair and jeans (butch), and more feminine outfits. Maybe piercings everywhere? Difficult to tell since these trends are immediately appropriated by heteros who want to be cool” (Mizielińska 1997, 45).

While visibility is one of the central tenets of *Furia*’s mission statement, it appears that it refers mainly to lesbians’ visibility to themselves and to one another, as it calls for “not silencing *one’s own* existence” (*Furia* editorial collective 1997, 3; emphasis added). This stance is more akin to what I call legibility—indeed, *Furia* did not have a large national readership, but in its short-lived existence (1997–2000, later re-published as *Furia* [Fury],

2009-2012), it continued to address lesbians and women interested in issues of feminism, women's rights, politics, and queer and gender studies. The aesthetic of *Furia* is striking in its ability, across its two renditions, to connect the intellectual, the academic, the desiring, the literary, the pop-cultural, and the art-historical contexts of Polish lesbianism's thinking, relating it to its international, mainly Western, counterparts, notably Judith Butler, Adrienne Rich, Simone de Beauvoir, and Monique Wittig, among others.¹ Its covers have reproductions of, for instance, Claude Cahun's *Untitled (Self-Portrait)* (1928; 2/1997) and Frances B. Johnston's photograph *Self-Portrait (As New Woman)* (1896; 4-5/1999-2000). The second issue in 2010 included an article titled "Who Killed Jennifer Schecter: Would You Have Killed Her, Had You Known Her?" referring to the death of Jenny, a much-reviled character in the breakthrough US lesbian TV drama *The L Word*.

Furia was also one of the first outlets in Poland to publish, in 2000, a selection of Adrienne Rich's poems, in Mizielińska's translation (Koronkiewicz 2019, 202). In the same year, Rich's *Of Woman Born. Motherhood as Experience and Institution* appeared in Poland (also in Mizielińska's translation), as well as her seminal essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (translated by Agnieszka Grzybek, likewise published in *Furia*). Marta Koronkiewicz wrote about the mixed reception of Rich's oeuvre in Poland, especially considering its anachronistic appearance: the 1976 *Of Woman Born*, while an important feminist text of its time, seemed simply outdated in 2000s Poland (Koronkiewicz 2019, 204). Yet, when in 2016 Jakub Głuszak published his Polish translation of Rich's *21 Love Poems* (1974-6), critics pointed out the vacuum and the absence of a tradition on local ground for his translated volume, as well as "the lack of developed language [and] the immaturity of Polish literature in the sphere of lesbian eroticism" (Koronkiewicz 2019, 211). In her "Rich's Pink Panther" D. Muszyńska observes, "[Rich] wrote of herself from the perspective of time: 'The suppressed lesbian I had been carrying in me since adolescence began to stretch her [bones].' Stretching the American's bones could become a spine for lesbian culture in Poland" (Muszyńska 2017, 158). Though concurring that such models are needed, Koronkiewicz pointed out some difficulties inherent in translations (Koronkiewicz 2019, 211). The unpreparedness of the Polish context that had not shaped its own language of lesbian eroticism meant that Polish translations of such works from English were necessarily lacking, both in expression and the ability to ground lesbian eroticism in the language that *was* available. These anachronisms point to temporal tensions in Polish and American, or Eastern and Western, discourses. Several contexts intersect here: it becomes clear that CEE does not simply look to the West for discursive leadership. The 2000 translation of Rich's 1976 text turned out to be outdated, not conducive to the strong feminist history of twentieth century Poland. At the same time, the lack of and need for lesbian writings, including on lesbian eroticism, remained palpable in 2016. Although welcome, these narratives and translations have not seamlessly integrated into the Polish language and therefore into

¹ See issues 4-6 (1999-2000).

the Polish context. While considered necessary and discourse-making, they remained at times cumbersome.

A New Lesbian Body?

What especially strikes me in Muszyńska's phrasing is the use of the embodied metaphor as a proposition for how these two distinct bodies of thought might, if not integrate, then interact. Considering the immaturity of the Polish language to handle the complex sphere of lesbian erotics, it is clear that it is the lesbian body—discursive and real—that has not been evoked. Thus, an American lesbian's bones may necessarily become a Polish lesbian's spine, a vital supportive frame of an independent organism. Muszyńska's yearning for this body taps into a central lack of embodiment in Polish lesbian theorizing, and suggests a profound consideration of the ways in which bodies and theory, Polish and American, may come together in an almost cannibalistic dance yet not become one. I consider how the separateness of an American lover's body becomes my Polish lesbian articulation of the self. Here, difference precedes sameness: my tender curiosity about my lover's body guides my touch, marking the difference between us, my fingers tracing the permeable limits of another's skin. We intersect, overlap, his head brushes against my breasts, we are legible to each other but not the same. I take him in but I do not disappear, my boundaries permeated yet intact. This is where theory appears, and where it is negotiated. I brush against American lesbian theory texts, ready to negotiate our boundaries, soft and malleable against each other.

This erotic, desiring thinking about the body as theory-making is a direct challenge to how the CEE body has been made. One reason the body, along with Western thought on Polish and CEE lesbian scholarship, may have such resonance is that historically CEE has been largely externally defined and its local specificities often erased through its "invention" by the formation of Western European modern identities based on an established sense of difference and othering (see, e.g., Wolff 1994; Murawska-Muthesius 2021). In her important volume *Imaging and Mapping Eastern Europe: Sarmatia Europea to Post-Communist Bloc*, Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius proposes that the knowledge production and consolidation offered by mappings of CEE caused an epistemic confusion, especially in the wake of communism, and revealed the difficulty of placing the "new" CEE. Bodies and maps as bodily concepts in CEE are unmistakably volatile and continuously negotiated both through CEE's desire for self-definition and its tendency to self-orientalize. Murawska-Muthesius, after Larry Wolff, writes that "[t]he notion of rape and conquest would indeed serve as the region's master narrative, turning into a key argument in major cultural disputes on the international scene" (Murawska-Muthesius 2021, 2).

Crucially, the CEE difference and subjugation based on the body has largely referred to gender and sexuality, and their conflation with CEE racial difference.² As Hadley Z.

² This also includes imaginations of Ashkenazi Jewish identities that are tied to CEE as a historical region. See e.g. Seidman 2011.

Renkin wrote, against Western European modernity and its emerging scientific discourse, CEE has been read “as a site of psycho-sexual and civilizational immaturity, producing ... narratives that fabricated Eastern European sexuality as a biopolitical marker of European difference” (Renkin 2016, 168). Eastern Europeans were received by travelers from the West as a confirmation of the success of their own civilising efforts, appreciated against CEE “perverse geographies” (Bleys 1995, 5). Thus this context of CEE *scientia sexualis* (see also Renkin and Kościańska 2016) makes it particularly compelling to hone in on the figure of a Polish lesbian as a decolonial possibility for a self-narration from the region, following the late pre-eminent feminist Polish literature scholar Maria Janion’s considerations of decolonial rethinking of the Polish sense of rootlessness and the torpor of the theorizations of Polishness she attributed to the “inability to read and interpret Poland’s cultural past” (Janion 2006, 112).³ The long and complex histories of colonization in Poland trouble the Polish possibility of self-perception: between internal colonization of the feudal system, the subjugation of Lithuania in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1569-1795), the long period of partitions (1795-1918), the two world wars, and decades of Soviet Russia’s influence (1945-1989), present a landscape of Poland as stuck between superiority and inferiority, between the consciousness of the colonized and the colonizer. The long-lasting subjugation developed a mythology of Polish martyrdom, renewed in the twenty-first century by the far-right politics of Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (The Law and Justice Party). Janion, a profoundly influential scholar of Polish Romantic literature (which first birthed the concept of Polish martyrology in the nineteenth century), lashed out against such contemporary political far-right claims on its messianic nationalism, which proclaims that Poland, like Jesus, suffered for other nations’ sins. In *Uncanny Slavdom*, Janion famously posed questions of rethinking Polish national identity through a decolonial lens, meaning interactions with the oft-overlooked local bodies of local cultural and historical knowledge (Janion 2006, 113). This was necessary, she argued, owing to the feeling of rootlessness surrounding the formation of Polish identity untethered to its history and mythology pervasive in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, when it became again possible to self-constitute in a newly independent country.

A (cultural, linguistic) re-rooting in the local proposed by Janion, through a consideration of the Polish lesbian offers an important decolonial gesture for thinking about CEE gender and sexualities, not through the context of the Western discourse of othering, but rather through the modes of self-narration and self-theorization possible in CEE itself. In *The Feminism of Uncertainty*, the American feminist writer Ann Snitow wrote about meeting the Polish self-proclaimed lesbian-feminist Sławka Walczewska in Cracow in March 1991: “I say to myself at this point: of course feminism is indigenous; all European countries had nineteenth-century women’s movements. Sławka’s feminism comes from the soil right here beneath this house, and I am merely a visitor, without influence or interference – what a relief” (Snitow 2015, 220). The implied transhistorical

³ An English translation of Janion’s work has appeared in *PMLA* 138 (1).

aspect of indigenous, local feminisms makes Snitow a self-declared outsider of Polish feminism, despite her coming with the gravitas of an American feminist and lesbian theory, which often presumes the centrality of US thought vis-à-vis other contexts. Her sigh of relief suggests the feeling of being unburdened from the weight of the perceived universality of American theory and its apparent ahistoricity (which the anachronistic Polish translations of Rich both reiterated and troubled). This is not to claim that Polish feminist and lesbian writers and scholars have not engaged with Western theoretical contexts—certainly Adrienne Rich and Monique Wittig have been influential. These, however, have been employed rather to assess the extent to which they may be useful or applicable to specifically Polish conditions (see, e.g., Mizielińska 1997). While in productive dialogue, the American (and, often, French, notably Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray's *écriture féminine* for Polish feminists—see, e.g., Chowanec 2009) contexts have remained foreign or ill-fitting. It is not that Polish or CEE feminist and lesbian discourses cannot self-define or self-theorize. It is, rather, that brushing against the existing bodies of knowledge, already written and accessible, they recognise their own shapes, feel themselves against the edges of these foreign bodies, and make themselves, in turn, foreign but real to them. It is not that Polish theory-making impulses must take and ingest what the centrality of the American discourses proposes. Yet, it can, perhaps, cannibalize and regurgitate the American contexts so that they too can see each other anew, understand their edges—much like Snitow's assessment of Polish feminism made her a self-proclaimed outsider. For all the willingness to melt into one another, these discourses remain separate, if recognizable to each other through their respective edges, more clearly outlined for and by one another, and bound by desire.

Therein I see a crucial opportunity, even while I reach for (largely) American lesbian and feminist theory and lean on its edges, to anchor the lesbian discourses in “the soil right beneath this house.” This means looking for narratives that go to the very heart of histories of women's self-constitution as a social group in nineteenth-century Poland: stories of suffrage and its inextricable connections with friendship, as well as love, desire, sex, and romantic relationships between women. Facing scattered, invisible archives of sparse records and unintelligible feelings, we must think through them beyond the institutional and patriarchal strategies of organizing, indeed through our bodies and their coming together, for, as Nestle insists, sexuality “is a whole world in itself that feeds the fires of all our other accomplishments” (1987, 108). What may just emerge is a new way of thinking a lesbian in Poland and in CEE, one anchored in a body, sometimes supported by an American lesbian's spine, at other times held by the histories of the “soil right beneath this house.” This emergent body is not the same as the CEE historical body outlined by Murawska-Muthesius: conquered, docile, abused. Instead, it is guided by pleasure and softness of touch that engender the possibility of self-constitution, self-historicization, indeed self-theorization.

I argue that not only can the figure of a lesbian move past this standstill signalled by Janion (2006, 113), but “lesbian” also functions as a critical category with which to destabilize the ways women have been committed to biopolitical sexual and gender

orders. "Polish lesbian" as a category straddles these different contexts and allows questioning the ways in which Poland has been implicated in the sexual and gendered scientific ordering of CEE desires and sex as designed by the West, at intersection with the internalized Polish homophobia as its "natural" position in CEE, as well as the inability for Poland's general public to interact critically with its own local bodies of knowledge. "Polish lesbian" challenges these orderings of knowledge in both implicitly and explicitly decolonial ways, re-centring desire that is (1) Polish: embedded in cultural, historical, linguistic, artistic, literary references and intergenerational, transhistorical desire across the archive; (2) CEE: questioning the central, presumed civilized, more sophisticated ways of delineating, theorizing, and producing desire in the West by reorienting it towards these local contexts and debunking the myths of Eastern primitivism and orientalism; and (3) Lesbian: straddling the Polish and CEE contexts, lesbian desire remains the central critical category and contributes to reclaiming the ontological instability of a lesbian, her "uselessness" (Mizielińska 2001, 283) as a woman and a mother, and establishes the ecstatic possibility of claiming this uselessness as a way of being that resists a biopolitical and, indeed, necropolitical arrangement of queer and women's lives.

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