



# Writing Queer Eastern European Worlds: Queer-feminist Literary and Activist Practices in Romania

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I analyse the practices and writings of the queer-feminist literary circle *Cenaclul X* from Romania, arguing that they enact imaginations of possible transformative queer Eastern European worlds. In order to analyze these, I look at how hegemonic ideas of Eastern Europe were constructed by West(ern Europe) and trace possible directions to unsettle these imaginaries in literary-activist practices. I borrow the idea 'queer as corrupt' to present an Eastern European corrupt a/temporality that disturbs the hegemony of modern-colonial Time on imaginaries of Eastern Europe, and to present a corrupted version of Eastern European queerness, one that is not feeding into liberal respectability politics. To exemplify these, the paper engages in theory driven close reading on several fragments from the first two literary anthologies published by *Cenaclul X*: *Adăposturi. Antologie queer* [Shelters. Queer anthology, 2021] and *Luminișuri. Antologie de literatură queer ecologică* [Meadows/Clearings. Queer ecological anthology, 2022].

**Keywords:** Eastern Europe, queer-feminist activism, decolonial thought, post-socialism, queer literature, feminist literature

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*Lumile noastre posibile* [Our possible worlds]<sup>1</sup> (2020), is the title Carolina Vozian, a queer-feminist writer and activist based in Romania, and a member of the *Cenaclul X* literary circle, gave to a speculative fiction anthology she coordinated. This title inspires me to wonder what makes 'our' current worlds possible? What other worlds can be made possible, and how, when, and by whom? Moreover, how is writing made possible, and whose writing is it? For years I haven't written one verse of poetry and then, in one summer, I wrote the first draft of a manuscript that is now published as my debut volume in Romanian. If someone had asked me a few months before the writing process began, I wouldn't have guessed that I was going to write several poems, let alone a whole book. (I had to Google how to say "let alone". "Let alone"—what an interesting and perfectly imperfect wording for what I was going to say next.) I believe my book would not have been written, were it not for the existence of *Cenaclul X* as a flourishing space encouraging each of us to write and create.

### Introduction

This article tackles the queer-feminist literary circle or *cenaclu* [from the French *cénacle littéraire*] as we say in Romanian, *Cenaclul X*, which was founded in May 2021, during the still in effect Covid-19 restrictions and distancing. It was a time of great collective despair for so many who felt abandoned and alone. And yet we found a way not to be alone, at least in some aspects of our creative lives. Now, *Cenaclul X* has more than 60 members (both published and unpublished authors) from seven cities and towns in Romania, as well as some living abroad. This paper is written from my perspective as a queer-feminist and anarchist activist and writer, who is part of *Cenaclul X* and other initiatives, based in Cluj, but sometimes active in Bucharest too, while doing a PhD in Turku, Finland. I added this lyrical autoethnographic introduction to situate myself, my words and worlds, and

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1. All translations from Romanian to English, including excerpts from poetry and short prose, are done by the author of this article. All links have been accessed March 20, 2025.

also to let the artistic practice guide my research which contains lyrical reflections as well. Piro Rexhepi to the introduction of his book *White Enclosure: Racial Capitalism and Coloniality Along the Balkan Route* beautifully noted that “[t]he goal here however is not to ‘study or report about social movements, actors, and thinkers,’ as Catherine Walsh points out, but ‘to think with, and, at the same time, to theorize from the ‘political moments’ in which I am also engaged’.”<sup>2</sup> Here I intend to do similarly. In this paper, I analyse the practices and writings of the queer-feminist literary circle Cenaclul X arguing that they enact imaginations of possible transformative<sup>3</sup> queer Eastern European worlds. To exemplify these, in the second part of the article I will engage in theory-driven close reading of several fragments from the first two literary anthologies published by the group: *Adăposturi. Antologie queer* [Shelters. Queer anthology, 2021] and *Luminișuri. Antologie de literatură queer ecologică* [Meadows. Queer ecological anthology, 2022].<sup>4</sup> I look at how hegemonic ideas of Eastern Europe have been constructed by West(ern Europe)<sup>5</sup> and trace possible directions to unsettle these imaginaries in literary-activist practice. I borrow the idea of “queer as corrupt”<sup>6</sup> from Veda Popovici to present an Eastern European corrupt a/temporality, which disturbs the hegemony of modern-colonial Time<sup>7</sup> in imaginaries of Eastern Europe, and to present a corrupted version of Eastern European queerness, one that does not feed into liberal respectability politics.<sup>8</sup>

### Corrupting Terminology and Perspective

As Chandra Talpade Mohanty observes while talking about Western feminism, “it is possible to trace a coherence of effects resulting from the implicit assumption of ‘the West’ (in all its complexities and contradictions) as the primary referent in theory and praxis.”<sup>9</sup> Similarly, I don’t want to state that “the West” is homogenous and fixed, or that it represents just one kind of entity,

2. Piro Rexhepi, *White Enclosure: Racial Capitalism and Coloniality along the Balkan Route* (Duke University Press, 2023), 10.

3. According to the Cambridge online dictionary, *transformative* means “causing a major change to something or someone, especially in a way that makes it or them better”. I use the word in this sense, but also inspired by the North-American transformative justice movement, which is, according to organizer Ejeris Dixon, a term, “that describe[s] ways to address violence without relying on police or prisons. These approaches often work to prevent violence, to intervene when harm is occurring, to hold people accountable, and to transform individuals and society to build safer communities. These strategies are some of the only options that marginalized communities have to address harm.” Ejeris Dixon, “Building Community Safety. Practical Steps toward Liberatory Transformation.” In *Beyond Survival. Strategies and Stories from the Transformative Justice Movement*, eds. Ejeris Dixon and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (AK Press, 2020), 16. Achieving social transformation to build safer communities for the marginalized is also one of the goals of the radical, anti-capitalist, queer-feminist and anti-racist activism in Romania that I am coming from. Personally, in all my work, I struggle for the liberation of all peoples, human and non-human, to live in decolonized communities without borders and without racial-colonial-patriarchal capitalism. The transformative imaginaries I look for, are prefigurations that open doors towards arriving to this place, slowly, possibly, sometime.

4. About feminist literature and activist knowledge production see Sanna Karkulehto et al., “Planetary Activism at the End of the World: Feminist and Posthumanist Imaginaries Beyond Man,” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 29, no. 4 (2022): 577–592; adrienne-maree brown and Walidah Imarisha, eds., *Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction from Social Justice Movements* (AK Press, 2015); for Romanian feminist contemporary poetry see Teona Farmatu, “The Double Marginality of Romanian Feminist Poetry. Edginess, Theoretical Gap, and Neoliberal Absorption,” *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory* 9, no. 1 (2023): 122–143; Teona Farmatu, “Radicalizarea postmileniilor: direcția queer-feministă în poezia contemporană românească și ethosul său de diferențiere,” *Transilvania*, no. 7 (2023): 26–35; Medeea Iancu, ed., *Arta revendicării. Antologie de poezie feministă* (frACTalia, 2020); Iulia Militaru, “O reconsiderare a femininului în poezia contemporană. Direcții și tendințe,” *Vatra*, no. 9. (2022): 34–41; Laura Sandu, *Scrieri feministe* (frACTalia, 2022); Andrada Yunusoğlu, “Manifeste feministe în literatura română contemporană” (PhD diss., Universitatea din București, 2024).

5. Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford University Press, 1994); Veda Popovici and Ovidiu Pop, “De aici, de la margine. Pentru o metodă decolonială în discursurile culturale din România,” *Gazeta de Artă Politică*, no. 12 (2015): 5–6; Ovidiu Țichindeleanu, “NU Tranziției 2.0 Recompoziția socială, decolonizarea și transautonomismul,” *Gazeta de Artă Politică*, no. 12 (2015): 3–4; Madina Tlostanova, “Can the Post-Soviet Think? On Coloniality of Knowledge, External Imperial and Double Colonial Difference,” *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics* 1, no. 2 (2015): 38–58; Madina Tlostanova, *Postcolonialism and Postsocialism in Fiction and Art* (Springer International Publishing, 2017).

6. Veda Popovici, “Solidarity in Illegality: How the Corrupt East Is Already a Queer East,” in *Queering Paradigms VIII: Queer-Feminist Solidarity and the East/West Divide*, eds., Katharina Wiedlack et al. (Peter Lang UK, 2020).

7. Cf. Madina Tlostanova and Walter Mignolo, *Learning to Unlearn Decolonial Reflections from Eurasia and the Americas* (Ohio State University Press, 2012); Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” *Cultural Studies (London, England)* 21, no. 2-3 (2007): 168–178.

8. In what follows I think with the writings of a few members of Cenaclul X from the first two book-length anthologies published by them, however, while writing this article a third anthology under publication with the title *Tranziții. Antologie queer est-europeană de Cenaclul X* [Transitions. Queer Eastern European Anthology by Cenaclul X] critically examining what the never-ending neoliberal transition means from different types of localities and subjectivities in Romania. The texts presented here are premonitions of the new book, thinking with which could be the topic of further research.

9. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Duke University Press, 2003), 17–18.



but it's this assumed primary referent of social movements and Western historical narratives that I am scrutinizing when I refer to the West. 'Eastern Europe' and the 'Balkans' are difficult to define: what would be the criteria - geography, history, politics; and who defines them, why, how? As my example is Romania, I choose to engage with a post-socialist part of these hard-to-define regions, thus avoiding discussion of post-Soviet places. I choose to critically examine post-socialism, as the "transition" period to neoliberalism that it entails is significant for my analysis. At present, it is this seemingly never-ending transition<sup>10</sup> where "the West" as a hegemonic primary referent keeps re-emerging in both Western and local imaginaries of Romania.<sup>11</sup>

I was educated in Western literary theory, philosophy, gender studies and feminist theory. Moreover, as a queer person in a globalized world who consumes English-speaking social media and popular culture originating from the West, I am constantly growing into my queerness just as I grow into my praxis as an engaged theorist, existing in a tensed relation to, partly inside and partly outside of Western traditions. I am of it and not of it. I see my role as an engaged theorist and queer-feminist poet from Romania as one who seeks to corrupt the language of the implicit Western referent. Mohanty foregrounds "Third World women" "as an analytical and political category" in order to "recognize and analytically explore the links among the histories and struggles of Third World women against racism, sexism, colonialism, imperialism, and monopoly capital". She is suggesting "an 'imagined community' of Third World oppositional struggles - 'imagined' not because it is not 'real' but because it suggests potential alliances and collaborations across divisive boundaries, and 'community' because in spite of internal hierarchies within Third World contexts, it nevertheless suggests a significant deep commitment to what Benedict Anderson, in referring to the idea of the nation, calls 'horizontal comradeship.'"<sup>12</sup> Similarly, my intent in this paper is to use Eastern European<sup>13</sup> and queer as analytical and political categories. Mohanty argues that the idea of imagined community is important, because it goes away from essentialist categories and puts into the forefront "the political links we choose to make among and between struggles."<sup>14</sup>

#### "Queer as Corrupt"

As historian Larry Wolff puts it, the conceptual and economic division of Europe into Southern "centers of culture" and the "barbaric" North began shifting starting with the Renaissance, and it was in the Enlightenment that Europe was reconceptualized into the "civilized" Western Europe and its oppositional complementary "backward" Eastern Europe.<sup>15</sup> Madina Tlostanova observes, not just that Eastern Europe was already understood as backward in Western imaginaries, but socialist modernity was perceived as the wrong kind of modernity. With the end of the Cold War,

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10. Igor Štik and Srećko Horvat, *Welcome to the Desert of Post-Socialism* (Verso, 2015), 1–20; Uroš Čvoro, *Transitional Aesthetics. Contemporary Art at the Edge of Europe* (Bloomsbury, 2018), 1–2. Ewa Majewska, *Feminist Antifascism* (London: Verso, 2021), 2.

11. In the second part of the paper I talk about "nesting orientalism", typical of the Balkans and Eastern Europe: see Milica Bakić-Hayden, "Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia," *Slavic Review* 54, no. 4 (1995): 917–931. However, I am not engaging with concepts of "balkanism" due to lack of space in this research: see Maria Todorova, "The Balkans: From Discovery to Invention," *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (1994): 453–482; Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford University Press, 1997). Similarly, I am not discussing the idea of "Mitteleuropa" or "Central Europe:" see Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*; Bakić-Hayden, "Nesting Orientalisms"; Tlostanova, *Postcolonialism and Postsocialism*.

12. Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders*, 46.

13. In an essay titled "Eastern Europe as Method", Anca Parvulescu invites other thinkers from the region to creatively re-imagine "what it might mean to be an East European" (479) avoiding and rewriting the negative uses of the term, a task I also see as mine in this research. However, I want to strongly position my research and artistic, activist practice outside of the attempt that Parvulescu names as some kind of goal for the re-imagining of Eastern Europe: she claims that "to study Eastern Europe is (...) to attempt to write the phrase out of existence, to work towards its erasure" (473). I see this erasure as exactly what it says to be, an erasure, and put it this way, it would not mean just an erasure of a certain use of a term, but an erasure of the possibility to use Eastern Europe as an analytical and political category done in a similar manner to the usage of "Third World women" in Mohanty's work.

14. Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders*, 46.

15. "It was Western Europe that invented Eastern Europe as its complementary other half in the eighteenth century, the age of Enlightenment. It was also the Enlightenment, with its intellectual centers in Western Europe, that cultivated and appropriated to itself the new notion of 'civilization,' an eighteenth-century neologism, and civilization discovered its complement, within the same continent, in shadowed lands of backwardness, even barbarism. Such was the invention of Eastern Europe." Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, 4. Respectively: "In the Renaissance the fundamental conceptual division of Europe was between the South and the North. [...] The polarization of Europe between Italy and the northern barbarians, so obvious to the ancient Romans, so convenient to the Renaissance Italians, survived into the eighteenth century as a rhetorical form. William Coxe, publishing in 1785 his *Travels into Poland, Russia, Sweden, and Denmark*, could still sum them up as 'my travels through the Northern kingdoms of Europe.' Yet this geographical perspective had begun to appear seriously anachronistic, and it was the intellectual work of the Enlightenment to bring about that modern reorientation of the continent which produced Western Europe and Eastern Europe. Poland and Russia would be mentally detached from Sweden and Denmark, and associated instead with Hungary and Bohemia, the Balkan lands of Ottoman Europe, and even the Crimea on the Black Sea. From the age of the Renaissance to the age of the Enlightenment, Europe's centers of culture and finance had shifted from the treasures of Rome, Florence, and Venice to the now more dynamically important cities of Paris, London, and Amsterdam." Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, 4–5.

post-socialist and post-Soviet subjects could return to the “normal” way of being, to the only modernity understood as correct: Western modernity.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, as Romanian engaged theorist and activist and a member of Cenuclul X Veda Popovici concludes, “the post-socialist subject and, implicitly, post-socialist social movements are confronted with the imperative of amnesia of socialist time so that they may become visible to or begin to exist for the Western gaze.”<sup>17</sup> In a mainstream West-centred view of queer and feminist activism, the point of departure against which activist practice and knowledge is often mapped out globally is a Western liberal or solely Anglo-American model of “waves” and “progress”. Eastern European queer-feminist initiatives exist for the Western gaze insofar as they fit the taxonomy of the hegemonic model or in terms of “lagging behind” it.<sup>18</sup> In Romania, the Western gaze is also locally reproduced, in that one of the main modes through which coloniality<sup>19</sup> operates in activist circles in Romania is applying on local groups a canon with objectives and practices idealized from the West.<sup>20</sup>

Joanna Mizielińska and Robert Kulpa attempt to give space for a different kind of trajectory than the Anglo-American progressive model of queer activism.<sup>21</sup> Thus, they come up with the concept of a “temporal disjuncture” in which “Western” and Eastern European LGBT<sup>22</sup> activism can be understood as following different time trajectories. They identify the “Western time of sequence” which correlates with the different linearly progressing historical phases of queer activism from homophile to LGBT then to queer in the US, and the “Eastern time of coincidence”, in which all of these phases happen coincidentally after 1990.<sup>23</sup> Both Rasa Navickaitė and Popovici argue that this reproduces the hegemonic backdrop of Euro- and US-centered perspectives by taking the ‘Western’ linearity of progress for granted, exoticizing post-socialist Eastern European movements, and maintaining the US-based

16. Tlostanova, “Can the Post-Soviet”; Tlostanova, *Postcolonialism and Postsocialism*.

17. Popovici, “Solidarity in Illegality”, 64; cf. Tlostanova, *Postcolonialism and Postsocialism*.

18. Cf. Joanna Mizielińska and Robert Kulpa, “Contemporary Peripheries: Queer Studies, Circulation of Knowledge and East/West Divide,” in *De-Centring Western Sexualities*, eds., Joanna Mizielińska and Robert Kulpa (Ashgate, 2011); Rasa Navickaitė, “Sexuality in Eastern European Scholarship. Thinking Backwardness and Difference through the Lens of Postcolonial Theory” (RMA thesis, University of Utrecht, 2013); Bogdan Popa and Hakan Sandal, “Decolonial Queer Politics and LGBTI+ Activism in Romania and Turkey,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, 2019; Popovici, “Solidarity in Illegality.”

19. The term *coloniality* introduced by Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano in 1992 refers to a global power mastering the whole planet that is a direct and ongoing consequence of Eurocentered colonialism started with the political colonization of what is today known as Latin America. Even when the actual colonial administration has ended in most parts of the world, the global coloniality of power, and tied to this, of being, of knowledge and of gender, persist, even in places that were not colonized per se. Coloniality is the dominant order arranging our relations both locally-interpersonally and globally-geopolitically. Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality.”

20. Veda Popovici, “Civilizare vs. rezistență: Activism (și) decolonial în Europa de Est,” *Cutra*, no. 4 (2022): 36. The other main mode of how coloniality manifests itself in Romania according to Popovici is the reproduction of the Western superiority narrative by local authorities in order to get consent for various violent interventions and politics.

21. Mizielińska and Kulpa, “Contemporary Peripheries.”

22. Maria Mayerchuk and Olga Plakhotnik, in a chapter about queer-feminist organizing in Ukraine, write that: “We use the abbreviation LGBT as a conventional term and self-designation in reference to the majority of corresponding organisations. We refuse to add other letters or “+” because of our critical perspective on identity politics which underpin the acronym and the neoliberal idea of inclusivity. Along with this, Ukrainian intersex activists fight against folding inclusion into the acronym and queer feminist groups (which are the focus of this chapter) develop their naming in opposition to identity-based LGBT politics.” Maria Mayerchuk and Olga Plakhotnik, “Uneventful Feminist Protest in Post-Maidan Ukraine. Nation and Colonialism Revisited,” in *Postcolonial and Postsocialist Dialogues. Intersections, Opacities, Challenges in Feminist Theorizing and Practice*, eds., Redi Koobak et al. (Routledge, 2021), 135. Popovici, in a chapter about a possible queer subjectivity in Eastern Europe contrasted to mainstream LGBT activism, notes that: “The LGBT/LGBTIQ+ distinction is between a liberal, label- and coming-out-oriented approach vs. a wider commonality that also includes anticapitalist, queer-as-political tendencies.” Popovici, “Solidarity in Illegality,” 51. In accordance with them, I use LGBT to denote mainstream, identity- and mostly NGO-based and legalist approaches utilizing activism, and queer, as a political, self-determined commonality going beyond a mere identity. Queer in this sense is an analytical and political category, an “imagined community” as described by Mohanty. This understanding of queerness is also similar to how Ovidiu Anemțoaicei defines its possible multiple meanings in the context of queer theory, culture and activism in Romania: “Queer can refer either only to minority sexualities, expressions, practices and sexual identities, or to a broader way of thinking and practicing identity that goes beyond sexuality and intersectionality and very critically takes into account capitalism, racism, sexism, etc., through multiple other forms of critique and resistance to the current prevailing economic and socio-political configuration. Queer can also be a simple umbrella term as a resistance to any kind of labeling, identification or categorization as instruments of power and normativization as they are produced and reproduced in the current cultural, economic and socio-political matrix. In short, queer seems to be simultaneously identity and practice, critical thinking but also non-identity.” Ovidiu Anemțoaicei, “Queer sau despre activism în gândire,” *Transilvania*, 11-12 (2020): 44.

23. Mizielińska and Kulpa, “Contemporary Peripheries,” 14–19.



modes and historical phases of queer activism as the main points of reference to which Eastern European activism<sup>24</sup> is compared.<sup>25</sup> Thus, by maintaining a Western model as a referent, a “Western gaze” still prevails in the idea of the “temporal disjuncture”. “Our time: always lagging behind” is how Popovici and Ovidiu Pop summarize it in their Romanian-language essay.<sup>26</sup> According to them, Time has been one of the most efficient ways in which the epistemic domination of the Westernizing narrative operates in Eastern Europe. The hegemonic, modern-colonial idea of “civilization” with a referent in the Western World creates Time as a measure of value<sup>27</sup> through which the “progress” or “backwardness” of cultures and places deemed non-Western is measured. Furthermore, Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano notes that in modernity, “history was conceived as an evolutionary continuum from the primitive to the civilized, from the traditional to the modern, from the savage to the rational, from pro-capitalism to capitalism, etc.”<sup>28</sup> If the preoccupation with Time and solely with a linear version of progressive Time defines Western hegemonic colonial-modernity and Time in this sense distributes “value” as in “civilized/backward”, what are the possibilities for unsettling the colonial, civilizing ethos of Time in Eastern Europe? Popovici proposes “queer as corrupt” as a radical category of subjectivation anchored in a rejection of the “neoliberal time of Western becoming”, while reclaiming illegality to unsettle the dominance of a legalist perspective both in mainstream LGBT-activism in Romania and in mainstream post-socialist public discourse—both framed around “civic concern, citizenship, and the logic of state-associated respectability politics.”<sup>29</sup>

In order to develop “queer as corrupt”, Popovici critically examines legalist, respectability-based strategies of NGO-based mainstream LGBT-activism in post-socialist Romania, as well as the rise of the new far-right. These two even though opposing each other, both became involved in the 2010s anti-corruption movement in Romania, which called for more state-control, policing and surveillance in order to eliminate ‘corruption’. Corruption was described in orientalist terms and framed as the only problem that blocks society from catching up to the West.<sup>30</sup> “The postsocialist backward subject, once cured from corruption, can be put back on the modernizing Western track of progressivist development. The ‘haunting’ communist past is exorcized and the unbearable present is saved through pursuing a secondhand future, a future past that has already happened in the Western world.”<sup>31</sup> I analyze Popovici’s concept of “queer as corrupt,”<sup>32</sup> which I see as in itself transformative, as having two pillars:

24. For queer and LGBT activism and culture in Romania and/or Eastern Europe see also: Anemțoaicei, “Queer sau despre activism”; Bojan Bilić, “Europeanization, LGBT Activism, and Non-Heteronormativity in the Post-Yugoslav Space: An Introduction,” *Southeastern Europe* 40 (2016): 1–12; Radzhana Buyantueva and Maryna Shevtsova, eds., *LGBTQ+ Activism in Central and Eastern Europe* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Ramona Dima, “Screening Queerness: Moral Agency and Representation in Two Romanian Movies,” *Revista Română de Jurnalism și Comunicare-Romanian Journal of Journalism and Communication*, no. 2-3 (2016): 46–52; Ramona Dima, “Queer Romanian Literature: A Selection of Gay and Lesbian Characters from the 20th Century to the Present,” *Lambda Nordica* 23, no. 1-2 (2018): 139–164; Ramona Dima, *Queer Culture in Romania, 1920–2018* (Springer Nature, 2023); Lucie Fremlova, *Queer Roma* (Taylor & Francis, 2022); Valentina Iancu and Ovidiu Anemțoaicei, eds., *Queer. Gândire critică, conștiință politică și practici culturale în România* (Editura Hecate, 2020); Adina Marincea, “This is NOT a Love Story! LoveKills, Punk and the First 20 Years of Anarcha-Feminism in Romania,” *Pagini libere*, March 1, 2021, <https://pagini-libere.ro/en/brosuri/this-is-not-a-love-story-lovekills-punk-and-the-first-20-years-of-anarcha-feminism-in-romania-adina-marincea/>; Adina Marincea, “Asta (nu) e o poveste de dragoste! LoveKills, punk și primii 20 de ani de anarcha-feminism în România,” *Pagini libere*, March 2, 2021, <https://pagini-libere.ro/brosuri/asta-nu-e-o-poveste-de-dragoste-adina-marincea/>; Mayerchik and Plakhotnik, “Uneventful Feminist Protest”; Mizelińska and Kulpa, “Contemporary Peripheries”; Navickaitė, “Sexuality in Eastern European Scholarship”; Codruța Pohrib, “Queer/est: timp și spațiu queer în România,” *Cutra*, n. d., 2019, <https://cutra.ro/queer-est-timp-si-spatiu-queer-in-romania/>; Codruța Pohrib, “Cum arhivăm/activăm istoria queer locală?” *Cutra*, n. d., 2020, <https://cutra.ro/cum-arhivam-activam-istoria-queer-locala/>; Bogdan Popa, *De-Centering Queer Theory: Communist Sexuality in the Flow During and after the Cold War* (Manchester University Press, 2021); Popa and Sandal, “Decolonial Queer Politics”; Popovici, “Solidarity in Illegality”; Wiedlack et al., eds., *Queering Paradigms VIII: Queer-Feminist Solidarity and the East/West Divide* (Peter Lang UK, 2020); Shannon Woodcock, “Gay Pride as Violent Containment in Romania: A Brave New Europe,” *Sextures* 1, no. 1 (2009): 1–17; Shannon Woodcock, “A Short History of the Queer Time of ‘Post-Socialist’ Romania, or Are We There Yet? Let’s Ask Madonna!” In *De-Centring Western Sexualities*, eds., Joanna Mizelińska and Robert Kulpa (Ashgate, 2011).

25. Navickaitė, “Sexuality in Eastern European Scholarship,” 84–116; cf. Popovici, “Solidarity in Illegality,” 65–66.

26. Popovici and Pop, “De aici, de la margine,” 5.

27. Popovici and Pop, “De aici, de la margine,” 5.

28. Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” 176.

29. Popovici, “Solidarity in Illegality,” 51, 59.

30. Popovici, “Solidarity in Illegality,” 58–66.

31. Popovici, “Solidarity in Illegality,” 65.

32. While “queer as corrupt” breaks the liberal tradition of idealizing the Western World, it does forge complicities with radical anti-hegemonic practices of the West, such as the *Be Gay, Do Crime* slogan and movements like *Queers Against Israeli Apartheid* or *Gay Shame*. Popovici, “Solidarity in Illegality,” 70–71.

corrupting hegemonic temporality and corrupting respectability, citizenship-culture and legality. In what follows I will structure my analysis of the literature of Cenaclul X around these two pillars. I wonder what concrete ways might be found in queer-feminist literary production to go beyond the hegemonic imperative of Time, in order to corrupt and queer time? Moreover, I wonder what possibilities lie in the effort to corrupt the respectability imposed on Eastern European queerness by the imperative of Western becoming? I turn to some textual examples from *Adăposturi* and *Luminișuri* to think with, in regard to these questions and examine how the entanglements of time, queerness and Eastern European space manifest in literature from Cenaclul X. Before going on this endeavour, I take a brief detour to other queer and/or feminist initiatives from Romania, to see a corrupted genealogy of movements, one that is not assuming a Western referent, and to honor other queer and/or feminist organizing in Romania that has come before Cenaclul X appeared.

### Corrupted Genealogies

Romanian socialist feminist writer Laura Sandu notes that feminism had a bad connotation in most major cultural spheres in Romania 20 years ago, and only a few liberal feminist public intellectuals and anarchist grassroots initiatives identified as feminists.<sup>33</sup> Over the last decade, however, there has emerged a complex, varied and quite active field of radical queer-feminist activism in the context of the Romanian speaking left. Engaged scholar and anti-fascist activist Adina Marincea analyzes the last twenty years of anarcho-feminist organizing, focusing especially on the activity of the first anarcho-feminist collective, LoveKills, active in the anarcho-punk scene in several cities, especially Craiova, Timișoara and Bucharest, between 2003-2009.<sup>34</sup> LoveKills' legacy, however, is not a well known history among activists in the present, and Marincea's documentation was filling the gap by describing their work and re-evaluating its importance. Marincea published another, expanded version of her text in Romanian, which contains a further genealogy of leftist feminist movements, tracing dis/continuities between the old and new groups.<sup>35</sup> Here she describes initiatives in the 2010s both from Bucharest and Cluj-Napoca, for example Biblioteca Alternativă, F.I.A., Centru Feminist Sofia Nădejde, CLACA, Rhythms of Resistance (RoR), *Gazeta de Artă Politică*, *Dysnomia*, *Macaz - bar, teatru, coop, zine fem*, *Cutra, Corp.*, *Literatură și feminism*, etc., that are organizing around anti-capitalist, radical leftist ideas as well as queer and/or feminist perspectives. A further continuation of this research would be to trace how queer-feminist ideas were traveling and transforming across initiatives and cities, as well as how the current discourses present in Cenaclul X's publications and events relate to other past and present initiatives. Sandu argues that "a basic principle of feminist writing, that one doesn't only need a room of her/their own, but most importantly also contexts for collective work."<sup>36</sup> And in this spirit, I also understand that the possibility for Cenaclul X appeared in the already existing contexts of collective queer and/or feminist work in Romania. However mapping out this genealogy in detail is beyond the aims of this paper.

What is important to note about this genealogy is, however, that another radical genealogy is possible in Eastern Europe, more concretely that in post-socialist Romania there are radical queer and feminist initiatives that are not necessarily visible from the "Western gaze" nor do they define their activity solely in its terms. Moreover, this genealogy is different and separate from local mainstream liberal NGO-based queer and feminist practices which mostly operate within the Westernising and legalist narrative. A further reconstruction of this genealogy would be a decolonial attempt to unsettle the coloniality of knowledge and being.<sup>37</sup> By this I don't mean a total abandonment of ideas, practices and concepts born geographically in the Western part of the world nor an essentialist, romanticized and nationalist turning towards patriotic non-Western locality which would only enforce the already existing nationalist or even fascist seemingly "anticolonial" trend.<sup>38</sup> It means a shift in perspective from where the examination is happening as well as the obstruction of the colonial Westernizing discourse that presents itself as the only possible genealogy of The World. In practice it would mean a critical examination of what makes networks of initiatives flourish, how and which transformative ideas travel both locally and globally, while refraining from comparing one historical and geopolitical context to another.<sup>39</sup> I see local radical queer

33. Sandu, *Scrieri feministe*, 20-21.

34. Marincea, "This is NOT a Love Story!"

35. Marincea, "Asta (nu) e o poveste de dragoste!"

36. Sandu, *Scrieri feministe*, 18.

37. Cf. Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument," *The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337; Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, "Unparalleled Catastrophe for our Species? Or, To Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations," in *Sylvia Wynter: On being human as praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Duke University Press, 2015).

38. Cf. Céline Cantat, "Citizenship and Exclusion in Contemporary Hungary," *Lefteast*, January 24, 2023, <https://lefteast.org/citizenship-and-exclusion-in-contemporary-hungary/>; Veda Popovici, "Civilizare vs. rezistență," 33.

39. Cf. Tlostanova and Mignolo, "Learning to Unlearn."



and feminist initiatives as starting points to tell a possible story of building social movements from the “East” of Europe while taking stock of translocal nodes of connection and resisting hegemonic ways of oppression. One such starting point in this research is Cenaclul X and the literary imaginaries emerging around their anthologies.

Literary scholar from Romania, Teona Farmatu argues that “in the local literary field, the queer-feminist direction, even though newly coagulated, is, in a prolific mode, the most antisystemic and disruptive movement of contemporary literature.”<sup>40</sup> She extensively analyzes the second anthology of Cenaclul X, *Lumișuri. Antologie de literatură queer ecologică* [Meadows. Queer ecological anthology, 2022], with regard to ecological topics and more-than-human relations. Here, I am not going to revolve around these topics, even though present in the analyzed materials, instead I will focus on the transformative imaginaries regarding queerness and/in Eastern Europe. Farmatu argues that one of the major distinctive features of queer-feminist postmillennial poetry is a “militant radicalism” with feminist basis,<sup>41</sup> a claim with which I agree. My analysis that follows I believe also demonstrates this radicalism, even though it does so from a different topical angle.

### Corrupting Time

*Lamp light, atemporal atmosphere.*<sup>42</sup>

This is the first verse of “Ecologie 3” [Ecology 3], a poem from a series of four written by a queer poet based in Cluj Napoca, Ceza Bularca, “Ecologii queer” [Queer ecologies].<sup>43</sup> The verse sets “Ecologie 3” probably at night, in winter or during a dark time, as there’s lamp light inside, but most importantly this artificially illuminated time is atemporal. From the perspective of how important Time has been for both Western and state-socialist modernity,<sup>44</sup> setting the poem in an atemporal condition from the beginning positions the text somewhere and somewhen ambiguous—outside of the linear timeline we have been familiarized with. Atemporal time corrupts linear and progressive Time. Atemporal time dilates the space between the forward-running stepping stones of concrete. Atemporal time might also be queer time, a transformative space where anything can flourish within the cracks of concrete. All four poems are anchored in a Romanian post-socialist contemporary setting: urban neighbourhoods with apartment blocks appear several times, in “Ecologie 4” there are huge Coca-Cola advertising banners hanging from them; in “Ecologie 1” there is a war in neighbouring Ukraine; the lyrical subject and their lover anxiously follow “Digi 20-something”<sup>45</sup> news, a reference to Digi24, one of the biggest mainstream news channels in Romania; there’s a Megalmage supermarket five minutes away from their apartment with linoleum floor. A local critical reader knows how Megalmage markets belonging to the Belgian Delhaize group have been opening up everywhere, causing small, local shops to close down, raising the prices and gentrifying neighbourhoods, while the linoleum floor might be a common memory or still existing working-class reality of Romanian apartment kitchens.

In “Ecologie 2” there is also a hot train cabin with “coughs and a lot of dust.”<sup>46</sup> The associations of heat, dust and coughing bring old and dusty Romanian trains to the reader’s mind: the CFR state transport company is one of the state companies with the greatest losses and underfunding since 1990, new locomotives have not been bought since then, nor new train cars for decades, until recently in 2023. The average age of the trains owned by CFR is 50 years, according to its director.<sup>47</sup> Underfunding came with the neoliberalization of former state companies such as CFR, which is important to note for understanding that the post-socialist decay (of the trains) in Romania is a transitional neoliberal decay. While with these references the setting of the “Ecologii queer” poems is localized in post-socialist Romania, there is also a dreamy atmosphere reigning over these spaces: in “Ecologie 1” the lyrical subject and their lover wake up sweating from nightmares, and “[i]t’s evening, and over the city the dark hothouse is descending like a glass dome on a crystallized blue rose” (LU, 35), and later “[t]he room is a hothouse, the world is a hothouse.”<sup>48</sup> In “Ecologie 2” the lyrical subject is traveling by train with a loved one and staring out of the moving train’s window dreaming about communal, anarcho-communist worlds, about “*fairytale*s in which

40. Farmatu, “Radicalizarea postmilenialilor,” 32.

41. Farmatu, “Radicalizarea postmilenialilor,” 26-27.

42. LU, 41.

43. LU, 35-45.

44. Cf. Tlostanova, *Postcolonialism and Postsocialism*; Popovici and Pop, “De aici, de la margine.”

45. LU, 36.

46. LU, 38.

47. Răzvan Mihalășcu. “Zeci de trenuri noi, cumpărate de CFR Călători. Sorin Grindeanu anunță modernizări de locomotive și vagoane cu bani din PNRR,” *Euronews*, March 27, 2023, <https://www.euronews.ro/articole/zeci-de-trenuri-noi-cumparate-de-cfr-calatori-sorin-grindeanu-anunta-modernizari>; “CFR Călători, trenuri vechi de peste 60 de ani. Traian Preoteasa: ‘O locomotivă nouă nu s-a mai cumpărat din 1990,’” *Euronews*, March 28, 2023, <https://www.euronews.ro/articole/cfr-calatori-trenuri-vechi-de-peste-60-de-ani-traian-preoteasa-o-locomotiva-noua>.

48. LU, 37.

we are free.”<sup>49</sup> In “Ecologie 3”, the lyrical subject is dancing with others in an apartment and, in “Ecologie 4”, they are roaming, running, stumbling and floating on the streets of a foggy city. In all four poems there is either night, evening, twilight or fog, or a combination of all of them, and it is extremely hot like in a hothouse, a sign of climate change. The perspective of the lyrical subject and their conversation partners shifts from the safe inside of apartments and trains toward the dark, foggy and boiling outside. There are a lot of mentions of artificial lightning: lamps, neon lights, fireworks and flickering billboards. Dreamy atemporality corrupts the everydayness of the settings and places the objects and people as if on a Brechtian stage or in front of a camera that allows us to see them with critical eyes. Or does dreaminess, fog, night and artificial light relate to queerness and a queer atemporality, a queer playful transformative time that is both blurry and lit?

In other poems post-socialist Romanian reality not only provides the setting of the text, but also sets the emotional tone. The post-socialist urban metropolis from Ceza Bularca’s “Ecologii queer” series contrasts with corin’s, Cluj Napoca-based non-binary poet’s “(care e) starea ținutului” [(what is) the state of the county],<sup>50</sup> where the post-socialist urban town opens up to the reader: “my town is beautiful / as are beautiful the stone stairs / that were immaculate in the old days / now grass has grown and moss has got into the cracks / and all sorts of insects walk around.”<sup>51</sup> Corin’s poem describes a rural town and an old spa resort still working since state socialist times at the edge of this town in Romania. The lyrical subject affirms that their town is beautiful, then spends the next four verses describing what type of beauty we witness. Decay is not romanticized as exotic, instead beauty is reclaimed for what is usually deemed ugly in Romanian public opinion. Moreover, differing from the Westernized and anti-communist sentiment, which depicts “post-socialist” decay as the inability of Romania to “catch up to” Western neoliberalism, this poem, just as Ceza Bularca’s series scrutinizes neoliberal capitalism as the source of decay and poverty. This is visible in the following fragment from corin’s poem. There are billboards, just as in Bularca’s poem, and corporations, which first appear with the shiny promise of hope, then fail to provide decent or lasting working conditions – capitalism corrupted is on play:

“in the busy intersection there were billboards with white people with shiny teeth / when the first corporation arrived / it was an Italian corporation / and I was thinking of the skyscrapers in the movies and straight offices / they came with jobs / my cousin who had been unemployed for many months got a job / my grandmother was happy / and I was less afraid of the future / about 2 years later their office building was for rent again”<sup>52</sup>

One could say that atemporality reigns also over corin’s poem even though here time flows and brings danger: the danger of disappearing because of climate change – the lake at the edge of the town is drying up yearly – as well as the danger of disappearing because of abandonment and poverty: “the heaviest of all is the summer / and the feeling that I will leave here and this place will disappear / when I see the dust floating over the house / in danger of collapse // it’s breathing heavily / and it’s a bit like an end of the world.”<sup>53</sup> The old abandoned hotels and the unrenovated buildings signal an end of one world indeed—the end of the state socialist period. Moreover, they signal a possible next end of a world, if they are left to further decay and if the never-ending “transition” period to neoliberal capitalism fails to magically transform everything anew. The lyrical subject is clearly attached to the place of their childhood and sees beauty in it, but this resignation is not nostalgic of an unknown and idealised past either. Reckoning with the state of decay creates the sentiment of atemporality, as the lyrical subject neither desires a mythicized past nor is excited about an imagined future. It seems as if there is no way forward. Forward, as in linear time, as in catching up and progressing. But this does not unfold as something inherently bad or as a naturalized state of Romanian towns, as often depicted in the mainstream discourse of a “backward” Eastern Europe.

in moments of silence I remember that time escapes me / for example / sparrows sing and an ant walks on my hand / and I find it hard to believe that there are other rhythms in the world / but soon I will be standing in the big square of the civilized and free place / determined people with very important things to do will pass by me / somewhere new neighborhoods will rise and new investments will be announced / for me it’s hard to

49. LU, 39.

50. LU, 155-159. In *Luminișuri*, corin originally published under the name of Corina Preda, but since then has been using corin. Here I honor their choice and use their current name instead of the one under which this poem was originally published.

51. LU, 156.

52. LU, 156.

53. LU, 157.



interact with such facts / somewhere a lake is drying up / somewhere people are stumbling on the pavement /  
and with these facts it's hard for me to interact / I've left and the town hasn't disappeared / but I can't imagine  
/ in what rhythm they are moving there<sup>54</sup>

"Time escapes" the lyrical subject, colonial-capitalist Time of 9-to-5 jobs, real estate investments, of "progress"; the same colonial-capitalist Time of climate change—but also the time of not-moving-forward, of stumbling, maybe even a time of everyday life. After all, what is everyday life if not another materialization of the normalized order of things. The "*civilized and free place*" reminds the Romanian reader of Cluj-Napoca, the "Silicon Valley of Eastern Europe,"<sup>55</sup> one of the most important university cities, just as the foggy city with billboards from Bularca's poem. Both poets were students there and active in housing justice organizing. Corin here captures a dichotomy between developing urban cities and abandoned rural towns. From the "center" one cannot imagine the rhythm of the "margin". Popovici and Pop in their essay "De aici, de la margine" [From here, from the margins] argue that "reclaiming marginality will help us lose the perfumed dream of Europe" and instead create opportunities for new solidarities and forming communities.<sup>56</sup> Both Bularca's and Corin's poetry work toward this direction. Both poems unsettle linear modern-colonial Time by creating an a/temporal atmosphere that obstructs the temporal imperative of 'catching up' to the West. A/temporality is interwoven with spaciality, post-socialist or, better said, neoliberal decay, violent neoliberal transformations, as well as heat, fogginess and uncertainty. Dreamy and crumbling a/temporality does not mean being stuck as in not being able to go somewhere desired. It is more of a grounding transformative present moment, observing from the room, the kitchen floor, the train car, or from the middle of busy intersections, where all these different temporalities exist simultaneously: the coming back from the socialist future to the post-socialist present that lags behind the Western past/present/future.<sup>57</sup> Observing the intersections of all these impossibilities, exploitations and extractions. Reckoning with the possibility to reject all these Times. It's indeed hard to interact with all these realities. What now?

A queer Eastern European corrupted time might be a present that yearns for neither the past nor the present of other Times, but one that altogether becomes preoccupied with things other than Time itself or "catching up". A queer Eastern European time reclaims the margins, and from there, it dreams up fairytales where each of us can be free. Transformative fairytales that are not teleological projections, but which are emerging from the here and now. One such fairytale is found in how *Luminișuri* ends with "Povestea calului și a frâielor noastre" [The story of the horse and our reins] by Maria Martelli, in which a human narrator recounts a story learned from a blue horse who managed to escape captivity. Horse carriages are still an everyday reality of (rural) Romania and in this short speculative fiction, the liberation of human and nonhuman is tied together: the narrator escapes the binaries "that draw lines between us,"<sup>58</sup> so the gender binary, the human/animal and rational/irrational binary, and the horse escapes exploitation.

### Corrupting Queer

#### *Corrupting queer and dancing to manele*

"Lamp light, atemporal atmosphere. / How does one write queer? / We ask ourselves if dancing to manele in an Eastern European block, we can be and can write queer."<sup>59</sup>

In the first few verses of "Ecologie 3" by Ceza Bularca the setting of the poem is localized in an Eastern European block. The context is also set by dancing to *manele* which can be seen as an attempt to unsettle the anti-Roma racist mainstream reality of Romania and mainstream cultural production which sees *manele* as "non-culture" or "bad culture." *Lăutărească* music, another Roma music genre from Romania, also appears in "(care e) starea ținutului" by Corin, where it is played at the socialist spa resort in childhood memories.<sup>60</sup> Both of these instances represent reclaiming what is deemed as "other" and "not belonging" in order to aspire to belong to the class of "civilized" white respectable Western citizens. Miilca Bakić-Hayden identifies "nesting orientalism" as a typical phenomenon of Eastern Europe and the Balkans. According to Bakić-Hayden

54. LU, 157.

55. George Zamfir, "Countering housing dispossession in Cluj, the Silicon Valley of Eastern Europe," *LeftEast*, June 20, 2022, <https://lefteast.org/countering-housing-dispossession-in-cluj-the-silicon-valley-of-eastern-europe/>; Erin McElroy, *Silicon Valley Imperialism. Techno Fantasies and Frictions in Postsocialist Times* (Duke University Press, 2024).

56. Popovici and Pop, "De aici, de la margine," 6.

57. Cf. Boris Groys 2008, 154–155, cited in Tlostanova, *Postcolonialism and Postsocialism*, 5.

58. LU, 196.

59. LU, 41.

60. LU, 155.

the nesting version of orientalism is a gradation of perceived "Orients" which becomes "a pattern of reproduction of the original dichotomy upon which Orientalism is premised. In this pattern, Asia is more 'East' or 'other' than eastern Europe; within eastern Europe itself this gradation is reproduced with the Balkans perceived as most "eastern"; within the Balkans there are similarly constructed hierarchies."<sup>61</sup> Due to nesting orientalism, *manele* and other Roma culture in Romania end up being deemed "more Eastern" thus "other" or "bad culture". In this mindset, in order to aspire to become "less Eastern" and "more Western", "more civilized" and "more white", *manele* needs to be hidden or purged. Rexhepi calls "white enclosure" the integration of post-socialist territories into the EU in order to reinforce racial oppression of immigrants alongside the borders as well as the exclusion of local Roma and Muslim communities.<sup>62</sup> "Acknowledged or not, postsocialist subjects understand that joining the enclosure comes with the mandate of supporting and sustaining white supremacy and defending its borders at its edges, its rhetoric of rights, its politics of racelessness, and especially its 'fantasy of whiteness,' which 'draws part of its self-assurance from structural violence and the ways in which it contributes on a planetary scale to the profoundly unequal redistribution of the resources of life and the privileges of citizenship."<sup>63</sup> Thus, we can see that anti-Roma racism is fed and multiplied by the aspirational discourse of Westernisation, "white enclosure" and of "nesting orientalism". However in Romania its roots are much older, starting with the 500 years slavery of Roma in Romania until 1856.<sup>64</sup>

Roma ethnomusicologist Ioanida Costache observes that the "Roma are an interior orient in opposition to which a eurocentric identity has formed" in Romania (2020). Roma often end up being blamed for the "bad reputation" of Romanians, but also Eastern Europeans in general in the West, which is an attempt to establish a closer proximity to whiteness and Westernness of non-Roma Romanians/Eastern Europeans, an attempt to prove the belonging to the "white enclosure".<sup>65</sup> As social scientist and Roma rights advocate Margareta Matache describes: "In the case of the Roma, the construction of the racecraft of 'g\*psy criminality', an idea made-up during slavery, has constituted a central justification for anti-Roma racism. More so, progressive politicians, bureaucrats and scholars have long focused the public discourse on what they see as Roma 'backwardness'" (Matache 2020b). A cultural aspect of anti-Roma racism coupled with "nesting orientalism" and aspirational Western becoming is that the contemporary pop folk music of Romanian Roma, *manele*, with Turkish origins, just as *chalga* in Bulgaria and other similar genres in the Balkans, are labeled by the mainstream public discourse as "bad culture" or "not culture", something that needs to be purged, even though or especially because, *manele* is probably the most popular musical genre in current Romania (cf. Dumitrescu 2016).

The act of dancing to *manele* in "Ecologie 3" is not mere words, but it is actually anchored in the practices of radical left, especially anti-racist, anarchist and queer-feminist activism in Romania. Not to suggest that the political context in which dancing to *manele* in these circles happen would be in any case superior to simply enjoying music elsewhere, quite the opposite, these practices bring into the forefront the joys of enjoying music as an act of togetherness with political relevance in itself. Radical autonomous social centers, like Macaz – bar, teatru, coop<sup>66</sup> in Bucharest have been

61. Bakić-Hayden, "Nesting orientalisms," 918.

62. Rexhepi, *White Enclosures*.

63. Mbembe 2017, 45, cited in Rexhepi, *White Enclosures*, 9.

64. About Roma slavery in Romania see the "Obiceul pământului/The Way of the Land" series curated by Margareta Matache for *DoR Magazine*, in English: <https://www.dor.ro/arhiva/the-way-of-the-land/> and in Romanian: <https://www.dor.ro/obiceulpamantului/>, see also: Adrian-Nicolae Furtună, "O ISTORIE A RUȘINII. Discurs ideologizant între robia țiganilor în Moldova și Țara Românească și SCLAVIA ROMILOR ÎN SPAȚIUL ROMÂNESC," in *Problema românească: o analiză a rasismului românesc*, eds. Oana Dorobanțu and Carmen Gheorghe (Editura Hecate, 2019); Adrian-Nicolae Furtună, "Les Lieux de Memoire and the Legacies of Roma Slavery in the Collective Memory. Case Study in Tismana, Gorj County, Romania." *Sociologie Românească* 20, no. 2 (2023): 168-196; Margareta Matache, "Roma Slavery: History, Legacy, Reparations, by Dr. Margareta Matache," online lecture, posted September 22, 2020, by European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture, YouTube, 40:23, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ubb7dohTISA>; Margareta Matache, "It is time reparations are paid for Roma slavery," *Al Jazeera*, October 5, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/10/5/it-is-time-reparations-are-paid-for-roma-slavery>.

65. For a comparative analysis of queer politics and LGBTI+ activism in Romania and Turkey, as well as oppression on a "nesting orientalist" axis, see Popa and Sandal, "Decolonial Queer Politics," 2: "In expanding on the notion of imperial difference, this article theorizes migratory ethnic identities such as Kurdish and Romanian as marginal categories of difference within a larger imperial production of racialization. In light of the new scholarship of the coloniality of power, Romanian and Roma Romanian migrants in relation to the European (given that Roma and Romanian also presuppose different and unequal positions of racialization and power; see Tudor (2017)) are positioned historically on an axis of modernity that is not dissimilar from the position of Kurds in relation to Turkish or European. Analyzing the historicity of such positions, one should also bear in mind that a Kurdish identity, associated with 'tribalism' and 'backwardness,' has been a reference point for Turkey in justifying its modernization agenda and the assimilation and civic exclusion of the Kurds (Yegen, 2009)."

66. Macaz – bar, teatru, coop was a radical left cooperative bar, community center and political theatre, founded in 2016. One of the first places to organize drag shows and queer and feminist *manele* parties, Macaz unfortunately closed in 2019 due to a racist homophobic landlord. For more on Macaz, see Marincea, "Asta (nu) e o poveste de dragoste!" Popa and Sandal, "Decolonial Queer Politics;" Popovici, "Solidarity in Illegality."



organizing *manele* parties for years, and now there are other commercial bars that invite feminist Roma DJs who put/play *manele* and are part of the queer and feminist activist scene, for example Dj Mitroi, who is also a member of Cenaclul X as well as Mad Pride Romania, but there is also actor Dj AndreiX and Dj Aldessa, a Roma feminist queer activist, the co-founder of the Romnja Feminist Library who launched the “manele feministe” [feminist *manele*] party concept in 2017 as a political reaction to the anti-Roma racism and the cultural appropriation of Roma music and culture.<sup>67</sup> All of them are part of different local social and political art movements. Popovici and Pop claim that the only part of popular culture in Romania that embodies a disenchantment with the West is *manele* culture. *Manele* expresses the experiences of dislocation, migration and exploitation of the Romanian working class.<sup>68</sup> In “Ecologie 3” and in anti-racist and queer *manele* parties, the disenchantment of the working class meets the disenchantment of radical queer organizing to unsettle the Westernising imperative that prevails in the mainstream.

### **Corrupting queer while caught between Westernization and local nationalisms**

Being trapped in a “catching up discourse” in relation to the West, as Tlostanova puts it, presents two options: “Orientalist annihilation or progressivist assimilation.”<sup>69</sup> Questions related to queerness in the mainstream NGO-type activism oftentimes are framed exactly with a “catch up” to Western LGBT rights legislative discourse in Romania.<sup>70</sup> However, this endeavour is doomed from the beginning, because the “West” is a relational category and it will always need the subalterns who can never catch up, in relation with whom the pinkwashed and homonationalist<sup>71</sup> West can appear to be the “civilized” West. As Mizelińska and Kulpa formulate, “the West is always already ‘post’. In this construction, whatever CEE became/is/will be, West had become/has already been/will have been.”<sup>72</sup> Similarly to Tlostanova, Popovici claims that Eastern Europe has been caught between a false binary of Westernisation and local nationalisms.<sup>73</sup> The binary is false, notes Popovici, because local conservative, nationalist and/or fascist agendas also reinforce competition with the West, as they want to be equally good alternatives to the West. Thus, they are not critical of global coloniality, even if they are disguised in seemingly anticolonial remarks, such as the political agenda of the Hungarian government.<sup>74</sup> The result either way is integrating Eastern Europe in the global neoliberal capital flow and thus further reproducing oppression, exclusion and extraction.<sup>75</sup>

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67. See an interview with Georgiana Aldessa Lincan about feminist *manele*: Georgiana Aldessa Lincan, “Rolul manelelor care vorbesc despre puterea femeilor. ‘Societatea românească rezzonează mai mult cu mesaje sexiste, uneori naționaliste,’” interview by Cristina Radu, *Libertatea*, January 1, 2023, <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/manelele-care-vorbesc-despre-puterea-femeilor-rome-de-fiecare-data-cand-o-manee-patrunde-in-spatiul-public-creste-ura-impotriva-romilor-4395148>.

68. Popovici and Pop, “De aici, de la margine,” 6.

69. Tlostanova, *Postcolonialism and Postsocialism*, 3.

70. Cf. Popovici, “Solidarity in Illegality.”

71. Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Duke University Press, 2007); cf. Popa, “De-Centering Queer Theory.” Anna Rekhviashvili points out that it is also important to examine Eastern European countries from the perspective of homonationalism as mainstream LGBTQ activism often disidentifies with local racialized or classed others: Anna Rekhviashvili, “Can We Think Homonationalism in Homophobic Eastern Europe?” *Feral Feminisms*, no. 11 (2022): 54–74. For Romania on this, see Woodcock, “A Short History.” Majewska, *Feminist Antifascism*, 2.

72. Mizelińska and Kulpa, “Contemporary Peripheries,” 18.

73. Popovici, “Civilizare vs. rezistență;” Veda Popovici, “Becoming Western: The Story Legitimising Neoliberalism, Violence and Dispossession in Central and Eastern European Cities,” *Lefteast*, June 14, 2022, <https://lefteast.org/becoming-western-the-story-legitimising-neoliberalism-violence-and-dispossession-in-central-and-eastern-european-cities/>.

74. Cf. Cantat, “Citizenship and Exclusion.”

75. Țichindeleanu, “NU Tranziției 2.0;” Popovici and Pop, “De aici, de la margine.” An important connection to India can be made in regard to the false binary of Westernisation and nationalisms. Bakić-Hayden refers to Partha Chatterjee when notes that “even when [Indian] nationalist discourse defensively reverses the hierarchy favoring the west, it nonetheless remains within the same conceptual framework designated as ‘Orientalism.’” Bakić-Hayden, “Nesting Orientalisms,” 920. For a comparative analysis of nationalisms in India and Poland, see Kasia Narkowicz and Mithilesh Kumar, “Gendered Nationalism in India and Poland. Postcolonial and Postsocialist Conditions in Times of Populism,” in *Postcolonial and Postsocialist Dialogues. Intersections, Opacities, Challenges in Feminist Theorizing and Practice*, eds. Redi Koobak et al. (Routledge, 2021), 241: “The historical experience of both Central Eastern Europe and the Indian Subcontinent point towards definite processes of colonisation, partition, war, and nation-state formation. The contemporary experiences with relation to the question of refugees, immigration, gender rights, and religious identities especially in case of religious minorities have interesting points of convergence.”

To see an Eastern European example where coloniality (both coming from the “West” and Russia) as well as local nationalisms and mainstream LGBT activism are questioned, read Mayerchuk and Plakhotnik, “Uneventful Feminist Protest,” 122: “we have identified a relatively new form of feminist activism – we call it ‘uneventful’ – which pursues both anti-nationalist and anti-colonial agendas. Analysing open-access online data and materials of participant observation, we explore this phenomenon to understand how the new activism challenges the dominant discourses, troubles mainstream forms of feminist and LGBT activism, and reshapes the entire Ukrainian activist scene. Introducing a new social phenomenon, we offer broader theorising of contemporary East European feminisms at the intersection of postsocialism, (post)colonialism, and circuits of global imperial power.”

Just as modernity and its civilizing ethos legitimize coloniality and colonial violence, Westernization and its civilizing ethos legitimize racist and classist (urban) violence. For example this takes the form of mass evictions and segregation in Romanian cities,<sup>76</sup> the berating of syndicalist organizing as something belonging to a communist past<sup>77</sup> or in mainstream LGBT activism racist discourses against Roma people to assimilate certain LGBT bodies into the idea of a respectable "citizen,"<sup>78</sup> as well as repression against any kind of unruly queerness that would endanger achieving rights for those aspiring to become respectable.<sup>79</sup> This is the result of what Quijano notices, that starting with colonialism "cultural Europeanisation was turned into an aspiration."<sup>80</sup> Thus, Europeanisation (meaning a becoming like Western Europe) or Westernisation more broadly speaking, do not solely happen forcibly by the means of actual colonial occupation, extraction and extermination, but as well it is turned into a global aspiration<sup>81</sup> to become Western. In the false binary of nationalism or Westernisation, queerness is either presented as Western, "foreign" influence that one should oppose for a preservation of the patriarchal family order as a basic unit of the "nation", or as an asset of the "civilized" West that one should endorse to catch up to more developed "nation". This false opposition invisibilizes the history of queerness in Eastern Europe, just as more broadly, as Popovici notes, the false binary of Westernisation vs. local nationalisms erases all kinds of histories of resistance that doesn't fit into either one of these aspirations. For instance, peasant revolts, Roma slave resistance against the orthodox church and boyars, anti-facist organizing, women's emancipation in socialism or the syndicalist movements of the '90s are wiped out of collective memory.<sup>82</sup> This is also coupled with a general erasure of local heritage once Eastern European countries entered the post-socialist phase.<sup>83</sup> "Veganx in 2022 in a gentrified city living / off festivals, building corporations / and dormitories / for the theological seminary over the lives of evicted people. How can we write about veganism, capitalism and eviction?"<sup>84</sup>

"Ecologie 3", while assuming a vegan perspective, also criticizes the capitalist industry which puts its market spin on everything. Thus, "vegan/green capitalism" is treated with sarcasm, and the grim reality of gentrification is signaled. Gentrification is a major problem in Cluj. Masked as necessary for Westernisation, poor and mostly Roma people are evicted from central places in the city and pushed further and further out, or even forcibly dislocated near the landfill site of Pata Rât, to which this poem makes a reference. In 2010, 350 Roma people were evicted from their central social housing units and taken to Pata Rât, which was about 1 km away from the landfills.<sup>85</sup> In Pata Rât there is currently the biggest waste related "ghetto" in Europe where about 1,500 people live, mostly Roma, and many of whom were forced there due to evictions. The intention of this type of interrogational feminist writing is, I argue, to further the liberation of all by looking for possible answers to difficult questions and always keeping the question open. This poem takes the local context seriously and attempts a transformative writing that is attentive to different oppressions and is capable of opening up possibilities for intersectional alliances and complicities, and solidarity.

### **Corrupting queer and language**

"We ask ourselves about metaphors. / But how do we write about muncitori [worker men] and muncitoare [worker women]? / We correct and write muncitoare [worker women] and muncitori [worker men]. / Or

76. Popovici, "Becoming Western."

77. Adina Marincea, "Propaganda antisindicate în România: partidele, grupurile de Facebook și media cu o agendă în demonizarea sindicatelor," *Libertatea*, January 3, 2022, <https://www.libertatea.ro/opinii/propaganda-anti-sindicate-in-romania-partidele-grupurile-de-facebook-si-media-cu-o-agenda-in-demonizarea-sindicatelor-3910332>; Popovici, "Civilizare vs. rezistență."

78. Woodcock, "A Short History."

79. Popovici, "Solidarity in Illegality."

80. Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality," 169.

81. Bulgarian cultural historian Alexander Kiossev talks about self-colonizing cultures in the case of those peoples that seemingly willingly adopt and reproduce the aspirational imperative of Western becoming. According to him, this is the case of Eastern Europe. However, it is questionable to what extent the internalized aspiration is dependent on a community's own will knowing the violent histories of post-1989 Eastern Europe, as well as to what extent is it possible to use the word self-'colonizing' when this adherence to the aspiration has still been incomparable to the violence of colonial administration. Alexander Kiossev, "Notes on Self-Colonising Cultures," in *After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe*, eds. Bojana Pejic and David Elliott (Moderna Museet, 1999).

82. Popovici, "Civilizare vs. rezistență."

83. Tlostanova, "Can the Post-Soviet;" Tlostanova, *Postcolonialism and Postsocialism*; Popovici, "Solidarity in Illegality;" Popovici, "Becoming Western;" Popovici, "Civilizare vs. rezistență."

84. LU, 41.

85. Zamfir, "Countering Housing Dispossession;" Enikő Vincze and Maria Stoica, "The Suspension of Human Rights During COVID-19: For Roma in Pata Rât They Have Been Suspended for a Very Long Time," *LeftEast*, April 27, 2020, <https://lefteast.org/covid-19-roma-in-pata-rat/>.



muncitoare [worker women], muncitori [worker men] and muncitor<sub>x</sub> [worker + x] / added to the masculine root], / maybe we should just put muncitor<sub>x</sub> and that's it, as a sign that we've abolished gender. [...] I give up and just write muncitor<sub>o</sub><sub>x</sub> [worker + x added to the feminine root], I give up the validation of gender for the ultimate goal of abolishing it, / and here's how politics can also be about giving up what I/we never had."<sup>86</sup>

I have not explained until now that the name *Cenaclul X*, comes from the x gender neutral signifier, similar to the one in *latinx* culture known in English speaking queer circles. With the x, queer-feminists in Romania in the last few years have started to replace the gendered feminine and masculine endings of nouns and adjectives. Before this practice, there was another feminist initiative to use both masculine and feminine forms when talking about a group of people like workers, activists, writers, and so on. This practice is still used in certain contexts. However, in the Romanian language, normally only the masculine form would be used which is called the neutral masculine.

The usage of x is a corrupting queer practice to disrupt normative language rules and language use. It's also a very ambiguous process as there are no actual rules on how to use it, where exactly to put it, how to use it in plural, and so on. Different people use the x in a very different way, which is visible in this poem. This creates chaos that can be indeed confusing, but also transformative and liberating as this ambiguity disregards language as a rigid, nationalistic, nation building oppressive tool, and puts language into the field of playfulness, exploration, interrogation and most importantly, relationality, as well as unruly revolutionary politics. I see here a possibility to explore ambiguity as affirmation, queer ambiguity as a way to unsettle strict categories and binary thinking. This unsettling is also present in the interrogational structure with which the lyrical subject tries out different possibilities to use the x. Some, including me, would argue that adding an x only to the masculine root or only following one rule, could also recreate patriarchal erasure and normative gender.<sup>87</sup> Thus, the lyrical subject explores whether to add x to both feminine and masculine roots, as well as to use these forms interchangeably.

'Ecologie 3' ends with a phrase: "let us be communism."<sup>88</sup> This is a clear stance against the anti-communist mainstream discourse in Romania, and it also makes a political claim. As it is the last word of the poem, there's no explanation added about exactly what the lyrical subject understands on communism, if it wasn't clear enough just by hearing the word. I believe the answer can be found from the entirety of the "Ecologii queer" series. It can be read as a sort of lyrical queer, eco-communist manifesto from Eastern Europe, which explores exactly the communal aspect of the idea of communism, as there is a sensitive, vulnerable and careful communal desire expressed in the interrogations of the lyrical subject that urge us to find answer for transformative, liberatory communal practices of all beings. Importantly, the possibility to think of transformation is found in an albeit atemporal, but Eastern European, Balkan space with blocks and *manele*, thus reclaiming what is tried to be purged by the Westernising norm, moreover, forging liberatory complicities and solidarities across different groups.

Another linguistic and also embodied example of "queer as corrupt" can be found in the genre transgressing lyrical-prose cycle of Maia Șerbănescu<sup>89</sup> called "Casa cu ziduri albastre" [The house with blue walls] from *Adăposturi*.<sup>90</sup> In "3. Dildo is my dead mother,"<sup>91</sup> "at the edge of the fortress", hybrid "spider children" and "lizard children" are born. "The children of eradicated worlds" from the margins. The text makes a reference to people living nearby landfill sites where "the civilized world is trying to dispose of remaining useless scraps". Outside of this "excess existence" new hybrid stories, hybrid children and hybrid worlds are born – "a story that won't be about you". We witness a healing story of love between a dildo and a body or "o dildoă și o coarpă"<sup>92</sup> in a corrupted feminine form instead of the masculine "dildo" and "corp". They and their children will choose their own names, names that cannot be pronounced "by you". By you – the norm, the capital, the modern-colonial world order. "This is the hybrid maternity of eradicated worlds."<sup>93</sup>

To disrupt the respectability politics of mainstream LGBT activism<sup>94</sup> as well as the aspirational discourse of Westernisation and anti-communism, alongside "queer as corrupt", Popovici proposes the idea of "solidarity

86. LU, 41. Highlights added.

87. Cf. Luca Istodor, "Către o limbă română mai queer? Forma neutră de gen cu terminația în 'x'," *Cutra*, n. d, 2024, <https://cutra.ro/catre-o-limba-romana-mai-queer-forma-neutra-de-gen-cu-terminatia-in-x/>.

88. LU, 42.

89. Maia Șerbănescu is the experimental alterego of queer-feminist socialist writer Iulia Militaru.

90. AD, 87-90.

91. AD, 89.

92. Highlights added.

93. AD, 89.

94. Cf. Popovici, "Solidarity in Illegality," 51, 59; Woodcock, "A Short History."

in illegality” as a possible post-socialist queer subjectivity.<sup>95</sup> They identify legality as a common focus of all these three phenomena, thus “solidarity in illegality signifies an intentional togetherness with the category of those excluded from norms of the rule of law paradigm.”<sup>96</sup> However, this must not mean an exoticization of a romanticized idea of “illegality”, but instead a form of “working-together” as in solidarity defined by queer scholars Jon Binnie and Christina Klesse,<sup>97</sup> of those who fall out of concrete legal prescriptions as well as of those who do not fit “the implicit prescriptions of the ideology of the rule of law.”<sup>98</sup> “Queer as corrupt” thus transformatively reclaims “a counterrole that positions the individual in a distance to being civilized, white, and abiding to the role that a global matrix of coloniality has distributed to our societies.”<sup>99</sup> This, I argue, is visible in the poetry and prose analyzed in this paper. Forging anti-racist queer complicities, writing with question marks, always asking, and unsettling normative language, normative embodiment, normative imaginaries and normative Time, are all possible transformative processes of “queer as corrupt” in Eastern Europe.

### Conclusion

In this article, I looked at how hegemonic ideas of Eastern Europe have been constructed by West(ern Europe)<sup>100</sup> and traced possible directions to unsettle these imaginaries in literary-activist practice. I borrowed the idea of “queer as corrupt”<sup>101</sup> to present an Eastern European corrupt a/temporality, which disturbs the hegemony of modern-colonial Time<sup>102</sup> in imaginaries of Eastern Europe, and to present a corrupted version of Eastern European queerness, one that does not feed into liberal respectability politics. I asked what concrete ways might be found in queer-feminist literary production to go beyond the hegemonic imperative of Time, in order to corrupt and queer time? Moreover, I wondered what possibilities lie in the effort to corrupt the respectability imposed on Eastern European queerness by the imperative of Western becoming? I argue that the world-building of *Cenaclul X*'s anthologies enacts possible transformative queer Eastern European worlds. “Queer as corrupt” practices such as criticizing neoliberal decay, creating an a/temporal atmosphere for reflection, dancing to *manele*, forging solidarities and using non-normative language, unsettle the respectable Westernising discourse by corrupting modern-colonial Time and the hegemonic discourse of “lagging behind/catching up to the West”, corrupting normative language and normative embodiedness. The analyzed texts from *Cenaclul X* work towards dreaming out other possible worlds.

In the analyzed material, more than just a decoupling of Eastern Europe from negative connotations, our possible hybrid queer worlds are being written into existence in queer times of dreaming, of pausing, of remembering, of running around, of reflecting, asking, creating together, in “solidarity in illegality”, at the corrupted margins. We witness a queer and liberatory transformation, “*fairytale in which we are free*”<sup>103</sup> and a “*hybrid maternity of eradicated worlds.*”<sup>104</sup>

*How else can one write queer? What other worlds are there to be made possible?*

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95. Popovici, “Solidarity in Illegality,” 70–73.

96. Popovici, “Solidarity in Illegality,” 70.

97. Cited in Katharina Wiedlack, “Fucking Solidarity: ‘Working Together’ Through (Un)pleasant Feelings,” in *Queering Paradigms VIII: Queer-Feminist Solidarity and the East/West Divide*, eds. Katharina Wiedlack et al. (Peter Lang UK, 2020), 23.

98. Popovici, “Solidarity in Illegality,” 70.

99. Popovici, “Solidarity in Illegality,” 72.

100. Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*; Popovici and Pop, “De aici, de la margine;” Țichindeleanu, “NU Tranziției 2.0;” Tlostanova, “Can the Post-Soviet;” Tlostanova, *Postcolonialism and Postsocialism*.

101. Popovici, “Solidarity in Illegality.”

102. Cf. Tlostanova and Mignolo, “Learning to Unlearn;” Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality.”

103. LU, 39.

104. AD, 89.



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