

Opacity Minority Improvisation

An Exploration of the Closet
Through Queer Slangs
and Postcolonial Theory

From:

Anna T.

Opacity – Minority – Improvisation

An Exploration of the Closet Through Queer Slangs and Postcolonial Theory

April 2020, 230 p., pb., Dispersionsbindung

39,00 € (DE), 978-3-8376-5133-1

E-Book:

PDF: 39,99 € (DE), ISBN 978-3-8394-5133-5

The expression »to come out of the closet« calls for an analysis of how language and notional as well as social spaces interact and intersect to constitute »queer«. This performative book, a product of artistic research, is an exploration of the proverbial closet through linguistics, queer, and postcolonial theory. It is a project in which opacity, minority, and improvisation happen on the levels of content, analysis, and typography. Eleven queer slangs from around the world become part of an exploration of queerness and knowledge from the Periphery through autoethnography, Édouard Glissant's concept of opacity, José Muñoz's disidentifications, and Gloria Anzaldúa's performative writing. Theory, personal accounts, and art are interwoven to offer an interdisciplinary reading of the slangs as queer methods of survival and resistance.

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For further information:

www.transcript-verlag.de/en/978-3-8376-5133-1

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Introduction

This book was mainly produced in the framework of my doctoral studies in the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna in tandem with other aspects of my artistic practice. My time in the PhD course was one of intense work habits, existential crises, and life-changing events. What I very naively began as a delving deeper into the ways concealment and queerness inform my work turned out to be a thorough exploration of neoliberalism, unpaid labour, the academia in several lingual and cultural contexts, and an embracing of failure as the most productive and positive thing I could have done. My arms failed me, my mind failed me, I failed my expectations, and most of all, an open and transparent dealing with queerness failed my need for opacity. The PhD in Practice being a group programme offered many opportunities to think about belonging, collective work, antagonism, ambitions, and sharing, as did the fact that for most of my time in the programme I lived with several other people in homes shaped by politics of sharing. It has also been a tough time in terms of finances, employability, and maintaining this work pace for several years while trying to make ends meet, heal the repetitive strain syndrome on both arms, and thinking on the politics of the country that allowed me to work on something I am passionate about without having to pay tuition fees in the neoliberal times since the socioeconomic crisis of '08. Re-working this book for a publication that would allow it to reach more people has allowed me to rethink parts of it and re-examine certain positions, incorporate thoughts derived from conversations with friends and colleagues I have had the honour to be part of, as well as include reflections on events that have happened more recently and which added to the emotional tension of some of the content. Over the past years, I have been teaching on an academic level, an experience which has been inspiring and fruitful and which has helped me re-frame certain things as well. Over the time it

took to put together this book, other aspects of my ‘artistic practice’ begun to fade. I mean the aspects that are readily accepted as such: photography, video, installations, street art, which are usually exhibited in relevant spaces. Instead, what became more and more important to me was group settings of sharing such as seminars, workshops, the *production* of exhibitions or publications. Teaching, I learnt, is quite creative and includes the elements of care work, collective working and thinking, and sharing that are so valuable for me. Thus, I have now started seeing these aspects of teaching (ones that are collective, participatory, processual and don’t necessarily lead to a gallery or museum) as part of my practice, or a practice which I am a part of.

Situated in the intersection of queer, postcolonial and decolonial studies, (lavender) linguistics, and artistic research, this project employed the artistic methods of video, video installation, performance, the familial method of storytelling, and the scholarly formats of the lecture and (performative) writing to investigate the proverbial closet and its creations. To do so, I rely on opacity, a postcolonial concept, in order to open up queer to *periférica* knowledge (Γνώσεις της Περιφέρειας / των Περιφερειακών) and non-Western methodological paradigms. Opacity is a concept borrowed from Édouard Glissant to refer to the tactic employed by native and enslaved peoples in the Caribbean to escape the demand for transparency and understandability by the colonisers. Those indigenous populations would manipulate language so that meaning would escape oppressors, and thusly both communicate more safely and flip the exclusionary paradigm.¹ ‘Creole’, writes Britton with regards to Glissant’s work, was ‘a subversive language whose purpose from the start was not simply to communicate but also to conceal its meanings, thereby turning the master’s language against him. In this sense, it is a typical form of opacity’.²

Within the field of lavender linguistics—a field that examines the language LGBTQ+ people use—there have been similar creations. Lexicography has been slow to document these slangs, and most linguistics’ journal articles explore one or two at a time. In my research, I focus on eleven such slangs namely Kiliarnta (Greece), Polari (UK), Pajubá (Brazil), Swardspeak (Philippines), Bahasa Binan (Indonesia), IsiNgqumo and Gayl (South Africa), Hijra Farsi (India), Ókhchit (עִיִּרָא) (Israel), Gayspeak (English-speaking world), and Lubunca (Turkey). I use Kiliarnta and Polari and further look into the neologisms and semantic alterations that form them (which indicate not only strong counter-cultural elements but the construction of parallel worlds in

which deviance is celebrated, and normative mores are questioned) to create my own words and use them in my lectures and performances. In this project, I synthesise lavender linguistics, queer theory, postcoloniality / decoloniality and artistic research to investigate how 'queer' can be practised as a methodology through a non-Western epistemological framework and how my subjectivities are both shaping it and being shaped by it. Throughout this book, both lavender linguistics—introduced and researched by William Leap—and queer linguistics are discussed. The former is the field that examines the language LGBTQ+ people use (ranging from dialects to mannerisms, pronunciation, and coded language). The latter is a subfield of the former where people try to create inclusive and respectful language and mores and which has become more and more visible lately. This field includes discussions on gender-neutral pronouns, establishing (preferred) pronouns in group settings (and the pros and cons of that), as well as terminology that more accurately describes identification subjectivities, orientations (or lack thereof), and affinities. While both provide a framework through which cisheteronormativity is often mocked, they do so from distinct positions. Their differences have to do with how the users position themselves within the social, their status, education, and intentions. Of course temporalities here are an essential factor too; while the slangs have been mostly in use in centuries and decades past, having lost their life-line attributes with the dawn of the internet, queer linguistics seems to have taken off precisely in the internet era, though in several cases the two have overlapped and to some extent still do.

This is a project created as artistic practice, as a research method, as a dissemination method, as a 'scientific' elaboration on the 'artistic' methods and tools employed parallel to it. Doing academic research and obtaining a doctorate is something I have wanted for several years, and had I known earlier it was available to me, I believe I would have pursued it earlier. It was really crucial for me to continue my artistic work while supporting it theoretically and eventually working on theory as much as practice in an academic institution. It has also been a way for me to legitimise my work as an artist, work that is often overlooked, snubbed, and is, of course, majorly underpaid. It has been a way for me to try to prove that I am not many of the things that are projected / interpellated on me due to my background. Given the field I work in (queer theory), I think it has also been my way of legitimising myself. I have often found myself struggling with what I call precarity syndrome; the need to continually prove oneself and find odd jobs, create connections, leave

no stone unturned in the search for making ends meet, be recognised, and be heard, always be working, always be productive / producing.³ Working in the intersection of artistic practice and theory and trying to introduce myself through my work in various social occasions familiarised me with the scorn many have towards the arts and their suspiciousness towards any attempt to bridge it with anything academic. These comments and behaviours often came as much from people not involved in the academia, as well as academics, and I would eventually become very well acquainted with comments on ‘the meaninglessness’ of my work as opposed to theirs, and the selfishness of people like me ‘who don’t contribute anything’. Furthermore, from people within the humanities, I would hear things like ‘I wish I did an easy PhD like yours just to get the title’, among other antagonistic and derisive utterances. I often go back to re-watching Gómez-Peña’s performance playing with the word and notion of the ‘academia’.⁴ I can’t stop myself from doing something lesser while risking sounding like Gus Portokalos: ‘Academia’ from the Greek *Ακαδημία* from *ἐκάς* (= μακριά) και το *δᾶμος* ή *δήμος* (= λαός). So ‘academia’ literally meant that which is far away from the people. Upon a first reading, one thinks of ivory towers, but it could also be that the academia is pushed or pushes one to the outskirts, to the margins of ‘normal’ life. While balancing being in (as a researcher) and out (as an artist) of the academia and confronted with the above comments, performance, and thoughts I was frequently reminded of Tom Holert’s text ‘Artistic Research: Anatomy Of An Ascent’ and the tension between attitudes such as Gruppe Spur’s and Asger Jorn’s, that is the attempt to distance art from scientific knowledge and ultimately stupidity by insisting art is premised on instinct more than anything else vs. demanding the same possibilities that scientific researchers have at their disposal, that is demanding entrance into a productive economy often in Fordist terms.

While the academia is undoubtedly an antagonistic environment, there is a special kind of contempt for those working towards a practice-based doctorate. While the initial reaction is often to justify one’s work and the merit of it, ultimately it might be doubling down that gets the point across better. And so in this project, I move in and out of academic jargon, linguistics, and theory, as I do with references to artworks (those of others and those I created), expressing feelings and thoughts, admitting to uncertainty, employing humour, and often self-deprecation. Most importantly, I include filtering through knowledge from the Periphery combined with

Anglo/Euro/US-centric thinkers and concepts in order to insist that multiple voices are necessary in an ongoing conversation. Epistemologies that are unconventional (even if they have been institutionalised in some ways over the past decades) and critical political prisms are perfectly legitimate partners and contributors in a conversation whether that conversation takes place in a classroom, a bench, an auditorium, a beach, on chairs or on the floor, wearing ties, leather chaps, or feather boas.

My interest in language peeked when coming across Kalliarnta and then consequently the terrain of lavender linguistics. However, sub-cultural communication codes were always something I have engaged with. In particular, slangs, which focus on not only who understands—but more importantly—who does not. This interest speaks to my idiosyncrasy and my need for opacity and hiding. It further evokes playfulness and childishness, making a ‘mess’ of language, being inappropriate, and upsetting hierarchies. I had focused on space and queerness during my master’s, and later I wanted to further explore those realms in connection to temporality through language. My research objectives revolve around locating linguistically constructed queer spaces and queer temporalities, the ways in which language forms ephemeral spaces of safety and connecting, and how (much like the pleasures and desires that have prompted it), language itself generates pleasures.

The closet for me has been a shelter, a refuge, a home, a friend. It has been my happy place for decades. I’m not arguing here for a *μουσειακή* preservation of the closet filled with nostalgia, but for allowing it to exist and be relevant as a potentiality for those who want it, for those who need it, and for those who can’t afford to be left without it. However, for the most part, I am not referring to the closet as the secret space one hides in, but rather a complex spatiotemporal event all of us are forced to come out of, thus activating or affirming its existence in the first place. I’m also interested in the set of attributes assigned to operating within a particular social sphere, one which no matter how loosely conceptualised it may be, it is always connected to the (false) dichotomy of in / out. I understand the closet as an example of minority, showcasing how heterocissexist privilege works, most visibly around issues of who speaks out without fear of repercussions, who can touch whom, and who is allowed to connect with whom. The closet and the above concerns have over the years shaped my politics and helped me filter things better and listen more. I’m writing this with Pulse, Άρωμα, Paris is Burning, Τρολ, Στέκι, Stonewall, Istanbul Onur Yürüyüşü, Gaycation S1 E3 on my mind ...

My work (I refer here to all aspects of my work as I do not wish to separate 'written' and 'practical' work) is an assemblage of different languages, and slangs, lowbrow pop cultural references, and 'highbrow' theory, misunderstandings, pretentiousness, and insecurities. I owe a lot to Gloria Anzaldúa and her generous way of expressing herself, which helps me express mine by overcoming shame and feelings of inadequacy. I try to own up to the fact that what I did / do is research while also struggling to recognise the ills of such a term and its history. Aspects of exploring (as a term featured in this book's title) are mostly related to queer understandings of knowledge-acquisition and child-like curiosity. I further try to be honest about the contradictory elements my work entails, some of which I see as failures to be consistent, others I embrace matter-of-factly. In the following chapters, I employ an academic style, diaristic entries, excerpts from performances, and artist statements. Sometimes they fuse together, others they stick out like sore thumbs. Όλα καλά είναι. I chiefly use British English orthography because it feels more familiar to me. I do not italicise 'foreign' words, as in this work I did not use any such words. English is not my first language, though it has become my primary one, and I don't consider my made-up words much different than the corruptions, fusions, neologisms, observed in the slangs. I knew from the beginning that there would be moments that a native English-speaking reader / participant would find annoying or confusing, and I don't see that as a bad thing for my work overall. I can, however, see how these are uncomfortable feelings to have and understand the need to address them. I make words up, I try to sound 'academic' and allow my work to show merit and originality, and I also use slangs, talk to myself, and write of my blushing when I go into something way over my head. I translate selectively and inconsistently because this works for me.

I want to connect queerness with opacity, minority, and alternative ways of relating (through language) and ultimately make a claim for the closet, as a space of resistance, self-care, community-forming, as a heterotopic and heterochronic space of creativity, as a potentiality. Not as a demand, but as a possibility. I want to offer a reparative reading of, or listening to, the closet. A reparative reading based on a paranoid reading, in that I deal with the aspects of the closet that are deemed problematic and those views that demand the closet to only be a space of oppression and shame that one should come out of. Instead, through a reparative reading of that paranoid reading of the closet, I see a closet that opens up potentialities. Given the

closet's heterosynchronicity, or alternative temporality, I would not want to say that it is a 'looking backwards', or even a 'feeling backwards', but neither is it a looking forward. It is instead a looking and feeling connected to being, resisting, making up shit on the fly, enjoying oneself, enjoying (with) others. It is a potential for the moments of tiredness, happiness, sadness, illness, affirmation, depression, affective bondings, anxiety, rejection, organising, why not even navel-gazing, pausing, breathing, withstanding, and standing with.

I further wanted to bring together the various slangs I had come across—as most publications had dealt with them in-depth from within the field of linguistics and rarely viewed them in conjunction to one another—under the scope of postcolonial theory, tactics of resistance, and the right to opacity. My work draws heavily on linguistics, and queer and postcolonial theory and intends to offer an exploration of the closet as a producer of language, not merely as a linguistic product itself. Additionally, I wanted to do so by employing art as a performative research tool and performative aesthetics as an expressive means.

My aim throughout this project has been to produce a well-rounded theorisation of the closet by way of linguistics and a bridge it with postcolonialism and decoloniality. The questions that shaped my research had to do with the function of the slangs and an overview of the social ontologies that the speakers represent and perform. Next, I wanted to address questions on tactics of concealment for reasons of survival and resistance. To paraphrase Nicholas De Villiers, what would a non-revelatory speech sound like? Which tactics of survival and resistance are employed through the slangs? I further aimed at tracing how oral tradition (in the case of the slangs) relates to other linguistic productions (i.e. literature) and how the notion of 'minor literature' can help deepen the understanding of the tactics mentioned above. Finally, noticing a pattern in the frequent use of familial terminology (and their semantic alterations) through the improvisation of the slangs, I ask: 'How does familial terminology contour the social milieu of the speakers?' And 'what would an improvised queer home sound like?'

To this aim, I have laid out this book as follows; In chapter one, I lay the groundwork on the formation of the proverbial closet. I briefly refer to its history, the way metaphors—in particular, spatial metaphors—function, and then move on to theorise the closet drawing from Sara Ahmed, Judith Butler, Nicholas De Villiers, Édouard Glissant, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.

Then I go on to introduce the slangs which I see as cultural productions of the closet and the broader fields of lavender and queer linguistics. Finally, I analyse the performativity of the slangs in connection to camp and drag performances and connect it with my own attempt at performing the closet. This proved a much more arduous than initially imagined task, as the relationships between words, inhabitants, ontologies, and observational methods became murkier. As Stuart Hall wrote, 'as the relationship between the sign and its referent becomes less clear-cut, the meaning begins to slip and slide away from us into uncertainty. Meaning is no longer transparently passing from one person to another'.⁵ And it was this opacity that both confused me and allowed me to move more freely.

In the second chapter, I posit the closet as a place surrounded by opacity and further delve into the slangs, the social critiques, and political stances they convey. I am referring to the sense of humour and creativity they entail, and I then examine their opacity as a tactic of survival and resistance.⁶ I thus attempt to give a reading of queer theory and postcolonial theory that brings them together through similar tactics of resistance and survival beyond opacity and talk about silence, passivity, and detour. The visual politics that opacity activates, the aural politics of silence, the spatial references of detour, and the gender politics of passivity are all brought together with a variety of examples from artists, activists, cultural producers, affective and sexual workers from different times and places. Muñoz's disidentifications lays the groundwork for these performative tactics.

Chapter three is dedicated to the notion of minor literature and becoming-minor, two concepts developed by Deleuze and Guattari. I create parallels between what they call 'minor literature' and the slangs, and by so doing I undertake a reading of the slangs as innately revolutionary, merging boundaries, borders, and minorities, and ultimately I assert that the slangs are a case of minor literature. Relatedly I write about orality concerning other literary formats of cultural production and use Simon O'Sullivan's application of the deleuzoguattarian notion of minor literature on artistic practice to introduce the street art component of my project. Throughout my work I use the terms 'minority' and 'minoritarian' much like Muñoz does, to refer to queers and other subjects who 'due to antagonisms within the social such as race, class, and sex, are debased within the majoritarian public sphere'⁷ and not in numerical or sociologically statistical terms.

In the final chapter, I theorise the closet as a potentially improvisational room of one's own, and use linguistics to frame it as such. I understand the closet as a potentiality, especially for those who can't afford a home, or a 'home', a family whether it be a family of origin or a family of choice, or a community. I read through familial terms in particular from Kaliarnta and Polari and while steering clear of theorisations on 'alternative families', 'rainbow families', 'gay marriage', and such, I try to trace an understanding of homeliness and belonging that is not toxic or bound to capitalist, repronormative, generational, chronopolitical notions of relating. In this chapter, my contradictions become more apparent as I attempt to incorporate elements from the negativist turn of queer theory while allowing for a futurity and a potentiality of comfort, safety, and self-care that take into consideration dis_abilities, racial politics, class, age, and pleasures. It is here that Muñoz's work guides me as I focus on the 'on and against' nature of the slangs (particularly in their capacity to reformulate kinship) and how they erode the dominant regime from the inside while simultaneously working towards a queer counterpublics. This chapter has always taken a path different to the other three. Some pointed out its failure. I have reworked it many times, and I understand their critique. However, I want it to stay. Even if it hasn't quite come together yet, I still think there is space for it.

The working title of this project (The Chronicles of the Closet: Opacity, Minority, Improvisation) was a direct reference to *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* the first film based on the Narnia book series that were adapted for TV, stage, and film. Besides the apparent pop-cultural nature of the proverbial closet and the slangs and the series of high-fantasy novels by C. S. Lewis, it was the existence of a magical closet that I found particularly fitting. In the novels, the closet leads to an alternative parallel cosmos where time and space are skewed in a universe populated by all sorts of creatures. There, the children protagonists find themselves helping them fight oppression, acquiring different subjectivities and social ontologies while doing so. The elements that composed the title (and which remain) are a bit different though. Opacity not only describes aspects of the closet's function but, more importantly, is a postcolonial loan. Minority is a term that addresses asymmetrical power dynamics but primarily connotes linguistics and addresses literature and orality. Improvisation refers to the creative tactics of survival and resistance and those aspects of queerness that make do with what they have.

Methodology, Methods, Aesthetics

I situate my research among poststructuralist, queer, and postcolonial theories, while allowing for room that enables the necessary fluidity, instability, and always-becoming nature of the term ‘queer’ even if that might at times work at odds with queer theory. In order to build on that framing, I must mention the importance of lavender linguistics in this project, even if structuralist notions often penetrate linguistics of all kinds. I see parts of my work as autoethnographic, and I draw from feminisms in order to—together with queer theory—challenge normative understandings and oppressive regimes (the closet being often seen exclusively as one, but also the innate ambivalence of the notions of home, belonging, or familiarity) often incorporating personal experiences, and interweaving the social with the personal between the various components of my work. As such, it is precisely this upsetting of the distinction between the insider’s and the outsider’s point of view that ‘allows for the emergence of theory from both “within” and “without”.’⁸

By default, since there is a discussion of non-normativity or anti-normativity and non-normative sexualities, orientations, and genders, together with the social constructions behind them, the work of Michel Foucault acts as groundwork. Similarly, Foucault is a guiding force behind ideas of truth. It might seem inconsistent with current times to embrace opacity and challenge the value of truth. In an era of post-truth politics and right-wing populism rising partly because of such tactics weaponised by bad actors, it might even seem dangerous. The truth which I mention throughout this project is a philosophical, Modernist idea of an axiomatic, single, transcendent truth. And it is challenged by a constructivist, Foucauldian understanding of truth that leans heavily on postcolonialism to make sense of the world. As such, I use opacity as a method deriving directly from Glissant’s postcolonial analysis on creolised languages and the right not to be understood, and apply it to my findings on the slangs, listening to them like another minor literature. In Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of ‘minor literature’ and ‘becoming minor’ I see parallels with the background, function, and collectivity of queer slangs. Furthermore, I use Sara Ahmed’s theories on happiness to analyse moments of rejoice, safety, connection, belonging, and ultimately happiness, that derive from the production of oral/aural safer spaces and a restructuring of social hierarchies that shake kyriarchy, and view the speakers as willful subjects, whose willfulness opens up potentialities.

While working on this project, I was incredibly concerned with working with opacity, respecting cultures I do not belong in, or practices I do not participate in. This preoccupation resulted in an almost a priori apologetic stance and a penetration of my own opacity in many respects. This project thus turned out to be a diary of sorts in which I step out of my comfort zone several times. Perhaps this was my way of feeling out opacity, tracing it, and recognising it at the moments when it was disrupted.

I wish in this work to embrace a 'queer' that is inconsistent, that may—and perhaps, must—elude me, that is plural, and opaque. My methods include textual analysis, archival research, interviews, and audiovisual materials. Whether these practices are in some way themselves queer, I am not sure, and I am even less sure if they would have to abide by a certain understanding of queerness to be legitimised as methods of (artistic) research on these topics. That is not to say that this project will use this positioning as an alibi to any epistemological 'failures' claiming them as intentional, instead it simply means that I want to face my contradictions and question my methods, feeling it is not unscientific, anti-academic, or poorly theorised research, if a research allows for failure (especially as Jack Halberstam proposes it). A failure that opens up alternatives, that questions normative understandings of success, linear ideas of temporality, possession or the self and includes textual analysis on popular/lowbrow culture, and perhaps even touches upon Elspeth Probyn's *Outside Belongings* and Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*. I use Kath Browne and Catherine J. Nash's *Queer Methods and Methodologies* as a guide to many of the questions I encountered during every stage of this process, and I choose to adopt their openness in defining terms, and admitting to not having answers, even when that is what may be expected. I try to embrace their openness and generosity in framing research, queerness, and academic writing, as they suggest 'despite being able to recite a somewhat cogent and coherent pedigree for "queer" scholarship, what we mean by queer, we argue, is and should remain unclear, fluid and multiple.'⁹

In my work I was often oriented towards how the concept of opacity and its decolonial connotations encourage moments of queerness in artistic practice as well as the ways an epistemological framework that does not only revolve around the Western canon contribute to a re-reading of queerness and what this has to offer as a tool for research. In this project, I want to fight against my own and academia's need for consistency, reaffirmation of positions, and 'sound' επιχειρηματολογία. I want instead to allow

for thoughts that have not (and may never) reach(ed) conclusion, trains of thoughts that have derailed, and an overall openness to what Halberstam calls ‘the queer art of failure’, thus exploring territories that are forbidden, stupid, wrong, bad, or simply not academic (enough). I want to share ideas that I realised were contradictory, but still feel they have something to offer if shared, and I want to open myself up to perhaps even harsher criticism for admitting I do not have the answers but have more questions. I guess that could place my work within Halberstam’s ‘scavenger methodology’ of picking up different pieces and putting them together. Even though this is not a hard sciences’ research aiming to provide definitive answers and conclusive replicable results, there is still the need to make some sense, which I hope I will do in the majority of this body of work, while allowing for creative failure. Ann Cvetkovich quotes Lynda Barry (whose work is a messy bricolage of texts, images, comics, and biographical notes), when she asks: ‘Is this good? Does this suck? I’m not sure when these two questions became the only two questions I had about my work, or when making pictures and stories turned into something I called ‘my work’—I just know I’d stopped enjoying it and instead began to dread it.’¹⁰ Ultimately this is a project of and on vulnerability. I explore topics that range from pleasure to trauma, from desire to survival, and I do so by exposing a lot of myself, which I am incredibly uncomfortable with, but I see as important. Especially in order to allow for points of entry for the reader / participant.

As mentioned, performativity and performance are essential components of this project, both in its content and its format. Apart from performances, ‘stage instructions’ or recollections, other elements such as different scripts appear, words or entire sentences disappear, and the project gradually becomes undone.

I position myself and this project, by extension, in what I would call a queer off-centre critique / position. Not ‘queer-of-centre’, meaning in the margins of the centre but ‘off-centre’, as in external to the centre, of the periphery. Είμαι μια ανώμαλη εκλεπτισμένη βάρβαρη ρε παιδί μου. I adopt a certain queer, but, at the same time, I stand opposite it viewing it as too ‘modern’. There’s the Anglo / Western / European part of me that feels at home with it, and then the Balkan part of me that retreats to more locally relevant terms and taxonomies such as τζίβα ή πλακομουνού. There’s the Anglo part that wants to get to the bottom of things and present a respectable (by whom?) literary project and then there’s the Balkan έλα μωρέ τώρα μη

ψάχνεσαι/τρώγεσαι, όλα καλά είναι. Even these antitheses have a place here even though it might make me seem as undecided, trying to please everyone, or prove that I have thought of everything that could be thrown at me.

In this book, I refer to several projects of various formats and media, (a five minute video titled *Lipstick*, 2013), and the video installation this resulted in (*Closet Case Studies #1*, 2013), a re-formatting of the video installation shown during a one-day event in Vienna's MUMOK that was part of Springerin's 'Chronic Times' issue (Winter 2014). The projects mentioned above dealt with the links between the physical and the proverbial closet, zooming in on objects and materialities they both contain as a connecting thread. These objects relate to desires and play with the opacity and /or visibility of the closets they are placed in. Later on, my preoccupation with text and textual analysis led me to produce a performed speech piece (*Closet Case Studies #2*, 2014). Behind a closed door for the duration of a three-hour-plus event, I spoke to one person at a time about my closet(s), isolation, abuse, creativity, and oppression. Wanting to work with archival materials relating to the slangs, I used bits of *Round the Horne*, a BBC radio show that aired in the late '60s and featured a comical flamboyant duo of out-of-work actors speaking Polari.¹¹ The initial idea was to present it as a black video employing visuality to accent the opacity of the original format, but given that many people had a hard time understanding their (British) accents, I decided to subtitle it. Not wanting to flatten out the effect of not fully understanding the accents nor some Polari instances myself, I opted for not forcing a clear and accurate subtitling, but include blanks where I could not understand what they said. My research continued and included a series of stencils /unsolicited public art interventions and finally a performance, an oral history of the projects and ideas that would lead to the production of this book and which accompanies or introduces each chapter. A discussion /picnic followed the performance which was another way to disrupt the formality of the Q&A format and instead propose a setting where we are all seated, *οκλαδόν*, in a loose circle on blankets, sharing and passing food around.

Around that time, I started writing and shaping the backbone of the dissertation-turned-book where I would tackle the closet in an all-around manner. No, I would only focus on linguistics. But what about capitalism? Back and forth. And sideways. Mainly sideways. What I thought would be the more linear part of the projects proved to be the messiest and most chaotic. And worst of all, I loved it! I was once again reminded that 'Writing is

a corporeal activity. We work ideas through our bodies; we write through our bodies, hoping to get into the bodies of our readers. We study and write about society not as an abstraction but as composed of actual bodies in proximity to other bodies.¹² Not in the least because of the many physical strains, injuries, migraines that did not allow me to write whenever I wanted, but also because trying to bypass them (by experimenting with speech recognition software and failing), once again highlighted the manual labour of the task.

Soon after I became aware of my need to express myself in whatever way available without taking into consideration each interlocutor's knowledge. I started producing brief texts, sentences, phrases expressing my feelings and thoughts related to various parts of my personal / professional life.

There is a discrepancy between an always becoming / improvisational production of the self and the repeated moments in which I speak from the 'I' position. This discrepancy is often articulated through voicing the shift in opinions, the change in foci, and the critique of past moments or decisions. I don't use the first-person narrative to establish a continuous and consistent self; rather I do it to allow for a vulnerable, work-in-progress, opinionated, and undecided self to appear. By using autoethnography I go through my insecurities, decision-making process, and unveil my doubts. I see this book as one of my research methods, as part of the artistic research process itself and not merely as a dissemination tool for results and answers. Throughout my work I 'position autoethnography as a queer research method, one that works against canonical methodological traditions and "disciplining, normalizing, social forces"¹³ as Stacy Holman Jones and Tony E. Adams state in their inspiring essay, arguing that autoethnography is a queer method by virtue of allowing:

a person to document perpetual journeys of self-understanding, allows her or him to produce queer texts. A queer autoethnography also encourages us to think through and out of our categories for interaction and to take advantage of language's failure to capture or contain 'selves', ways of relating and subjugated knowledges.¹⁴

My methodological position being situated in the intersection of queer and postcolonial theory examined through linguistics, results in the use of methods that foreground the personal, the affective, the ever-changing, and the

fluid. This is reflected in the tools themselves, which include non-traditional scholarly methods of research or result dissemination, and in the conceptual and purposeful project design. I use storytelling, interviews, conferences, textual analysis, lexicography, personal experience, sketches, assemblages, mappings, photos, videos, installations, and public interventions. In line with working methodologically with ‘queer’ and *periférica* knowledge, I found what Craig Gingrich-Philbrook calls ‘lost arts, hidden experiences’ an interesting reading on how autoethnography can be read as queer in a way that emphasises decoloniality. He suggests that telling stories of subjugated knowledges—stories of pleasure, gratification and intimacy—offers one possibility for writing against and out of the bind of sacrificing multitudinous artistry for clear, unequivocal knowledge.¹⁵ I would further like to mention the parallels that Holman Jones and Adams create between the shared affinities of autoethnography and queer theory by quoting them directly:

Autoethnography and queer theory are both also often criticized for being too much and too little – too much personal mess, too much theoretical jargon, too elitist, too sentimental, too removed, too difficult, too easy, too white, too Western, too colonialist, too indigenous. Yet at the same time, too little artistry, too little theorizing, too little connection between the personal and political, too impractical, too little fieldwork, too few real-world applications.¹⁶

It is precisely in this reading of queerness and autoethnography where a paranoid reading and a reparative reading converge and the ethics of a queer project are unravelled; I am too much and too little, and I attempt a reading towards a metaphorical structure of oppression that is both paranoid and reparative, expressing myself through means that are too artistic and not creative enough, and from positions that are simultaneously too Central and too provincial, too Anglo *αλλά και με μπόλικά Βαλκάνια*.

It was also important for me to locate my interest in who speaks those languages and who, or what, they are recognised as. I opted for a first-person narration to foreground my own experiences, incorporating the element of emotion against the imperative for ‘objectivity’, and scientificity. At the same time, I talk about a framing of selfhood that is fluid and shifting, as such the person writing might not be entirely the same person with the one that made the art projects mentioned. The first person voice historicises both the

moments of the creative process and the person's thoughts that went into it and indicates the moments where these diverge. The framing of who the author is focuses on subjectivities that themselves would require further framing as they too can be seen as shifting, culturally and historically specific forms of identifying such as migrant, woman, queer, artist. 'Queer theory revels in language's failure, assuming that words can never definitively represent phenomena or stand in for things themselves', write Holman Jones and Adams adding that autoethnography as a queer method takes a stand on poetics of change.¹⁷ Similarly, I chose to switch between tenses. Initially, it happened by accident / mistake; when it was pointed out to me I began to rake through trying to make the text temporally uniform. Endlich, I decided to go back and allow myself to go back and forth.¹⁸ I found this to be fairer to the closet and the conditions of its existence, fitting to the autoethnographic (mis)historisation of queer linguistics and transcending places and times where these have been practised.

I wanted to share those first-person (singular but often plural) avowals and communicate them, spread them in public and alter public space in an ephemeral way, leaving traces that others might find funny, empowering, or haunting. So I turned this idioglossic diary of sorts into stencils and spread them around different cities and towns in Europe. Anzaldúa was a valuable source of inspiration along the lines of occupying liminal spaces, thinking and expressing oneself in various codes, and producing texts that are not penetrable, accessible, or transparent to and by all.¹⁹ I leave it to each reader / participant to decide on whether to look things up, embrace them, or dismiss them altogether. I also understand how it may cause a break in reading, become frustrating, or activate feelings of hurt entitlement. All three are welcome.

This is a never-ending project, and I would like to share it with you in hopes of learning from the conversations that will follow ...

'And so the first video was shot. White frame with a tube of red lipstick standing a bit off-centre. White noise. Then suddenly a loud noise begins, and soon the lipstick's tip begins to melt. The perfect, unused lipstick becomes soft and assumes phallic / clitoric shapes. Then gradually melts away completely, leaving streams of red colour on the white surrounding. Strangely aromatic. Unusable. Messy. Phallic, blood, period, gender blah blah blah. That resulted in a series of videos based on the same premise: objects related to both the proverbial and the physical closet being deconstructed by household objects and my hands, which often remained out of frame. A bit too much on the nose. I know. Oh! By the way, prior to this, I experimented with some spatial installations with smoke (ideally in the end mist) lights and lasers, all very disappointing and failing miserably to become something I would eventually dare to share with anyone.

*The other videos depicted other items which can be found in closets or are often closeted in relation to gender identities, sexualities, sexual orientations and sub-cultures, and desires of all sorts. They were all close-ups, in white backgrounds, not revealing much about the setting. The next one was of a leather black belt being perforated into uselessness with a hole punch. I had never used the tool before, so I hadn't realised the amount of strength required for so many holes in a row. It took seventeen minutes, and by the end, one can see that my pace is slowing down and I'm using both hands to clench the plier tool. The belt was from the 'men's section', as was the next item, a flannel shirt. I wanted to have it laying down on an ironing board, place an iron on it and have it burn through, leaving a big gaping hole. Next was a whip; a cat-o-nine tails whip being chopped into bits with a butcher's cleaver. Then posters of semi-nude bodies being unstuck from my teenage closet and shred to pieces, a pair of pink suspenders (braces) cut *shows how* with a pair of scissors. Imagine all of them in close-ups, with their respective sounds playing simultaneously, once in a while one of them would fade into black and loop as their durations were different. The process of finding, purchasing and then destroying the objects was a tricky one, which caused me to consider my own gender and conditioning towards mending, maintaining, caring, rather than destroying or acting out. Giving myself license to do so, under the guise of Kunst was liberating and even somewhat therapeutic, creating new associations between closetedness, commodification, and expression. That was Closet Case Studies #1.*

long pause

*Soon we would have a public presentation, and the spatial arrangement of the works became an important component in their contextualisation. It was in Vienna's Museum of Contemporary Art. Imagine there were six of these big black old-school hentarex monitors in a line, like this *gets up and shows spatial arrangement* facing the corner, thus forcing the audience to physically corner themselves in order to see the work. Several of the monitors malfunctioned until twenty minutes prior to the opening, which was stressful since my project would go first in the sequence of 'performances' we had planned. Anyway, the audience was facing towards the entrance of the space also, which for the duration of the work (about seventeen minutes) was empty.*

The entire room had gravitated to the corner, and I was taking pictures of their glaring faces, which was really interesting along the lines of in / out and minority / majority dichotomies, but more importantly, it caused me to consider the visibility / transparency element. They were all facing me, but they were not looking at me, and so I felt a bizarre sense of hiding(?) in plain sight.'

long pause