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Struggles over Europe: Postcolonial East/West Dynamics
of Race, Sexuality, and Gender

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Following postcolonial and race-critical perspectives, a wealth of literature has emerged in recent years in reference to post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe, particularly applying critical whiteness studies and discussing the different shades of whiteness of Europeans who come from this region of the continent (Böröcz and Sarkar, 2017; Szillasy et al., 2014; Smoczyński et al., 2017; Krivonos, 2019; 2020). There is also growing interest in notions of gender and sexuality and their role in Europeanization processes and in the expansion of the EU to countries of Central and Eastern Europe (Ayoub and Patternotte, 2014; Bilić, 2018; Husakouskaya, 2019; Keinz, 2010; Ramme, 2019; Slootenmaekers et al., 2016). However, there is little literature on racist and racializing processes of Europeanization that includes the implicit or explicit (self)hierarchizations and essentializations of the East, let alone the intersecting processes that involve gender, sexuality, and race in entangled and reciprocal productions of East and West.¹ While we can observe various trajectories of the concept of sexual democracy (Fassin, 2010) in the West, and terms such as homonationalism (Puar, 2007) shed light on new (racist) discourses about modern sexualities and gender, similar critical analyses focusing on European East–West relations are still scarce. The sexuality and gender politics that enflame public debates in the East of the continent are most often framed within a catching-up narrative, without problematizing civilizing discourses about tolerance and the instrumentalization of sexual rights in processes of democratization-cum-civilization. There have been some attempts to deconstruct these perspectives (see e.g. Kulpa, 2011), and these critics indeed recognize different temporalities and more complex power relations between East and West. But there is still a tendency to approach counter-liberal and nationalist discourses in the *new Europe* from the perspective of sexual freedoms and gender expressions that have their point of reference in the West, thereby reproducing the center-periphery divide in which anything other than the West and its *modernity* is deemed an imitation or catching-up (see, for example, Graff and Korolczuk, 2016).

Given such scholarly developments, this special issue is informed by postcolonial and decolonial scholarship, and interrogates the different ways in which East and West are reciprocally co-constituted within the frames of European modernity, with a special focus on race, gender, and sexuality. The civilizational hierarchizations that come with modern discourses are often hidden and/or detached from Europeanness, but become more visible when attending

¹ I would like to thank Randi Gressgård and Rafał Smoczyński for their precious comments on this text and for the joint effort in bringing out this special issue of *Intersections.EEJSP*.

theoretically and empirically to notions of race, gender, and sexuality within these East/West dynamics.

Postcolonial scholarship emerged from reflection on the art of the *white* European governance of colonized lands and people. It has revealed how Europe and its modernity belabored their cultural superiority in a reciprocal relationship between metropole and colony (Cooper and Stoler, 1997; McClintock, 1995; Randeria et al., 2019). Since the end of the Cold War, there has been growing interest in postcolonial scholarship among researchers in Central and Eastern Europe – aimed at understanding the conditions of (post)imperial rule and process of democratization and Europeanization in this part of the world (Chari and Verdery 2009). Among other things, such research has called into question the modernist notion of linear development towards *real* democracy, capitalism, and Europe – notions that are often implied in what is called democratization and Europeanization processes (Buchowski, 2001; Gille 2010). Still, claims to *proper* whiteness understood as a structural hegemonic position tied to the notion of Europeanness and involving only a seemingly renounced racism are prevalent. They are often occluded in academic and popular understandings of Europeanization, except for in racist far-right discourses targeting various minority populations with essentializations and hierarchizations, both in the East and in the West. Scholars as well as politicians tend to outsource racism and racialized notions of sexuality and gender to *not-quite-Europe* (see Renkin, 2016, Fassin 2010), or to what Pobłocki calls ‘the Orient of the Occident’ (Pobłocki, 2009). Alternatively, they often conceal the spread of racial colonial epistemology in Europe in what has been called trajectorism (Appadurai, 2012) or transitology (Buchowski, 2001). Nevertheless, racialization works less explicitly to mark the position of people and cultures within the dominant system of dignity, civilizational and moral values. The various contributions in this special issue show that racialized markings and/or claims to whiteness have different articulations depending on the social and historical context (Dzenovska, 2013; see also Stoler, 2008). Moreover, these markings are also applied by self-orientalized people, thereby contributing to divisions within the societies widely perceived as outside the *core* of Europe (Buchowski, 2006; 2017; Herzfeld, 2002; 2004; Tlostanova, 2010). Thus, in the East as well as in the West, struggles over Europe entail the hierarchization and essentialization of populations on various scales. The many converging and interrelated tendencies notwithstanding, they do not constitute unified and unequivocal phenomena.

A wide postcolonial scholarship shows how gender and sexuality was mobilized by racist politics in the colonies and what repercussions it had in the metropole on gender relations and cultural codes governing sex and gender in Western empires (Stoler, 2002; McClintock, 1995). Feminist and queer perspectives informed by Foucault’s approach have also contributed to critical discussions of how gender and sexuality are shaped to govern societies. Feminists of color have pointed out how the concept of gender is based on norms of whiteness and how it has been colonized by western feminist scholars, as well as how it perpetuates middle-class norms (Mohanty, 2003). This universalization of particular notions of gender and sexuality has been problematized by queer studies as well (Morgensen,

2016). They have both criticized the reproduction of binaries, fixed constellations of gender and sexuality, and the political application of these categories.

As a consequence of these perspectives, it is not our aim to search for or claim an allegedly *proper place* for Central and Eastern Europe in global knowledge production (Bartha and Eröss, 2015; Buchowski, 2012), or in studies on sexualities (Kościańska and Renkin, 2016). Rather, our ambition is to push further discussions on gender, sexuality, and race beyond the center-periphery axis and considerations of Central and Eastern Europe as a ‘referential coeval’ (Petrovici, 2016). Breaking with the more or less implicit dichotomous categorizations of tradition/modernity, global/local, center/periphery, capitalism/(post)socialism and their projection onto the geopolitical divisions in Europe (Baer, 2014) brings the East back into focus as an indispensable element of Europeanization and modernization discourses, and not merely as a *victim* of racialized western knowledge production (Buchowski, 2012; Bartha and Eröss, 2015; Renkin, 2016), or as a colonizer of adjacent eastern lands – as discussions guided by postcolonial theory in the region often have it (Zarycki, 2014; Drażkiewicz, 2020). Our contributions variously draw on women of color perspectives, queer perspectives, and post- and decolonial perspectives in gender and sexuality studies (Tlostanova, 2015; Suchland, 2019). In this way, the special issue lends nuance to discussions on Europe and Europeanization that consider production of Europeanness to involve mutual entanglements between East and West (Gille, 2010; Dzenovska, 2018; Adam et al., 2019), thus pointing to the unstable character of Europe’s meaning (Loftsdóttir et al., 2018; Adam et al. 2019; Keinz and Lewicki, 2019; Dzenovska, 2018). Such a take inevitably presumes more unstable notions of sexuality and gender, simultaneously paying due attention to particular postsocialist understandings of these concepts – postsocialist legacies that include racialized understandings of the nation and ‘the people.’

Most of the authors in this special issue bring to light often still unconsidered racialized histories and ontologies of *Eastern* (less often *Western*) Others in the struggles over the dominant meaning of Europe – whether this involves a postsocialist past (Hall, this issue) and ostensibly peripheral and irrational position in gender and sexual politics (Husakouskaya and Gressgård, this issue; Gressgård and Smoczyński, this issue), or *backward* sexual and gender performances (Diatlova and Krivons, this issue) that recurrently reinstate the *real Europe* in a position of cultural superiority (see also Tolstanova, 2015). In the East, these histories and ontologies are visible in the form of ‘gender-ideology’ that comes from a ‘morally rotten West’ and which both threatens *our children* and undermines the *normal* and *natural* positions associated with the original or the *real Christian roots* of Europe. It is on these reciprocal dynamics between East and West in gender, sexuality, and race that we want to shed light in this special issue. Our aim is to highlight research on processes of Europeanization focused on both local genealogies and histories and on broader East/West dynamic with a particular focus on gender, sexuality, and race, and their various articulations and entanglements in Europe.

The special issue begins with a contribution by Randi Gressgård and Rafał Smoczyński, in which they capture the instrumentalization of gender and sexuality

in struggles over notions of civic responsibility, good citizenship, and Europeanness in Poland. They show how gender and sexuality and Europeanness work as empty signifiers that serve to establish moral frontiers. More specifically, they show how LGBT rights and sexual education are instrumentalized by both self-declared liberals and nationalists to defend and guarantee the moral integrity of the nation. In this way, gender and sexual politics functions as a tool for negotiating formal and informal hierarchies of citizenship and Europeanness.

The cultural meaning and productivity of silence is addressed by Dorota Hall in her article on non-heteronormative sexualities and Catholicism in Poland. Based on biographical interviews, she shows how silencing discourses on homosexuality during the communist era were replaced by silenced gay identities among Catholics in twenty-first-century Poland. Rather than adhering to the dominant narrative divide between homosexuality and religion played out as an opposition between a secular-liberal EU (supported by gays) and Polishness, her contribution provides a more nuanced story of gays and lesbians in Poland, thus also challenging the discursive division between an ostensibly restrictive communist past and a liberated, democratic present that guarantees sexual freedoms.

Monika Baer's contribution sheds light on developments of European sexual citizenship in the city of Wrocław. In her ethnographic research among LGBTIQ activists, she shows how abstract notions of Europe and Europeanness no longer form a significant point of reference in struggles for rights and recognition. The notion of European sexual citizenship remains cloudy or dormant for the activist in Wrocław. However, in the face of growing homophobia and the EU being an enemy to homophobic right-wing nationalists, the article highlights local shifts in the notion of homonationalism. The analysis provides a critical understanding of citizenship, and shows new paths in activism. Baer also argues that Europeanization should be conceived not in a teleological way, but as an image that fuels variously conceived social change.

Another article, by Nadzeya Husakouskaya and Randi Gressgård, highlights the boundaries between Europeanness and whiteness in post-Maidan Ukraine that is bringing about unmarked civilizational divisions between the East and West. With an empirical emphasis on gender and sexuality politics, their article shows how racial whiteness is at once marked and unmarked in Europeanization processes – through a mechanism of racial displacement.

Postcolonial and decolonial scholarship points to the powerful symbolic and yet often less visible presence of 'the Other' in the mutual production of East and West. Highlighting these mutual presences of 'the Other' enables us to understand the ongoing and reciprocal post-imperial claims to cultural superiority and the production of gendered, sexed, and racial Western and Eastern norms. Two contributions depict the ways in which these norms are materialized in bodies in relation to all those forms of life marked as not-yet-Western, not-really-white (Lapina, this issue; Krivonos and Diatlova, this issue; see also Lewicki, 2020).

In Linda Lapina's article, empirical insights are provided by her autoethnographical material and memory work in which she gives an account of her two meetings, almost 10 years apart, with two Danish men. While the first

meeting took place shortly after her moving to Denmark from Latvia, the other encounter happened ten years later, when she conducted fieldwork for her doctoral thesis in a district of Copenhagen. Analytically, her article is based on the concept of affordance, which enables her to present 'how possibilities for action emerge in interaction with our environments, constrained by embodied knowledge and experience.' She shows how dominant whiteness is accumulated over time and emerges in situated, affective encounters. Affordance both enables and constrains the possibilities of interaction, movement, and becoming of bodies.

Similar to Linda Lapina, Daria Krivonos and Anastasia Diatlova focus on bodies moving from the East to the West. By giving an account of experiences of Russian-speaking women and their navigating of whore stigma in Finland, they analyze how Eastern European femininity is positioned in relation to European whiteness in general, and white femininity in particular, arguing that it is constituted through ostensibly emancipated sexuality and the exclusion of non-Western *Others* as sexually repressed. The authors show how *proper* whiteness requires liberation from a stereotypically perceived patriarchal Russian culture: from tradition, eroticization, and oversexualization. Krivonos and Diatlova aptly describe how Russian-speaking women learn how to avoid being associated with stereotypically conceived Russianness and how the racializing gaze of Finnish people defines the gendered and sexual embodiment of Russian-speaking women in the context of migration. Their 'liberation' consists of a 'toning down' of their bodies and gender performances.

Both these articles clearly demonstrate how a focus on mobile or migrating bodies escapes methodological nationalism. Critical and entangled approaches to the embodiment of *proper* European whiteness within a broader dynamics of coloniality of power permit us to see the hierarchizations attached to emanations of the East and the West, beyond geographically contained or fixed understandings of these notions, but in situated and embodied performances of intersecting categories of race, gender, and sexuality and various other categories of differentiation (Keinz and Lewicki, 2019; Lewicki, 2020; Lapina this issue). Together with the other contributions to the special issue, these ethnographic accounts provide a more nuanced perspective about ongoing changes in modes of governance that are engaged with the emergence of bodies, which in turn gives detailed insight into ongoing struggles over dominant notions of Europe.

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