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Ol'ga Zhuk's *Strogaia Devushka*: An Uncomfortable Narrative of the Queer post-Soviet Diaspora

This article analyses Ol'ga Zhuk's 2013 novel *Strogaia devushka* from the perspective of queer feminist diaspora studies. The novel stands out as an example of life-writing depicting a woman who migrated from the post-Soviet region to Germany in non-heterosexual relationships. This article analyses its intersectional thematic scope, its complex non-linear migration narrative, its critique of the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia, as well as Western feminism. The novel depicts a relationship between a Jewish woman of Russian origin with a Dutch woman residing in Germany, exploring topics of violence, drug use, poverty, mental health and art. The article seeks to understand why *Strogaia devushka* has not become a 'cult novel' in its multiple contexts and why it resists classification as a queer feminist diaspora text, even though it fits each of these categories separately. I conclude by suggesting that Zhuk's *Strogaia devushka* is best understood as an uncomfortable narrative of queer post-Soviet diaspora, and suggest ways, in which this 'discomfort' might contribute to self-reflection for multiply positioned readers.

Introduction: In search of queer-feminist post-Soviet diasporic voices.

During my current research for my PhD thesis on queer post-Soviet diaspora in Germany, I encountered the writings of Ol'ga Zhuk, an author who at first sight appeared to be an ideal fit for my research question.[1] Zhuk, born 1960 in Leningrad, is a lesbian activist and author who migrated from Russia to Germany. She is author of the novel *Severe Maiden: A Journey from St Petersburg to Berlin* [Strogaia devushka. Puteshestvie iz Peterburga v Berlin, 2013], discussed at length in this article. Zhuk also authored *Russian Amazons: A History of Russia's Lesbian Subculture in the Twentieth Century* [Russkie amazonki. Istoriia

[1] I would like to thank my supervisor Professor Susanne Frank, the special issue editor Connor Doak, as well as Teo Schlögl, Elena Loevskaya, Dario, Marina Mayevskaya, Ksenia Meshkova, Saltanat Shoshanova, and Franziska Hille for fruitful discussions about the novel. I am grateful to the organizers and participants at the conference 'Post-Soviet Cosmopolis' (2021), and the PostPost Studies Network for the possibility to discuss the paper. I would like to thank the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation for the doctoral scholarship that allowed me to conduct the underpinning research for this article.

DOI: 10.25430/2281-6992/v11-007

lesbiiskoi subkult'uri v Rossii, XX vek, 1998] and several short stories and articles.[2] She was editor-in-chief of the journal *Gei, slaviane!* and co-founder of the Tchaikovskii-Fund (Essig 1999: 61). Zhuk can be considered one of the most important early feminist lesbian activists in Russia (Essig 1999; Kon 1998). In my research for my PhD project, I was especially pleased to find a writer who represented the queer post-Soviet diasporic literature and (sub)culture of the 1990s. Indeed, there exist very few (self-)documents of post-Soviet queer diaspora in Germany despite the presence of a substantial queer diasporic community and rich subculture.

My research of the media representations of queer migrants in the German mainstream and LGBTQIA+ media and literature revealed that the narratives of what I tried to subsume under the common denominator of the 'queer post-Soviet diaspora', were dominated by cis-male voices.[3] Researchers of queer diaspora and queer asylum have highlighted that gay, cis male perspectives dominate the discourse of queer asylum and migration, while there is a lack of other marginalized voices (Kashafutdinova 2021, Shevtsova 2019). Gender inequalities, (cis)sexism and lesbophobia are also affecting LGBTQIA+ communities and their self-representations. In my research I was led by the necessity to highlight the voices of lesbian, bisexual, queer women and trans and nonbinary migrants from Eastern European and Central Asian countries to Germany.

It was the brochure *Russian lesbians in Europe* [Saadat et al. 2004], published by a Berlin organization 'Lesbenberatung/LesMigraS', to which Zhuk is a contributor, that led me to her 2013 novel *Severe Maiden*. The novel was apparently written (mostly) out of the diasporic/(e)migrant context in Germany, as Zhuk herself has been living abroad since the 1990s (Essig 1999). After reading

[2] All translations are my own unless specified.

[3] Richard Mole (Mole 2018) uses 'Russian-speaking' when referring to the diaspora. My use of 'queer post-Soviet diaspora' is intended to decentre the Russian language and be inclusive, as not every post-Soviet migrant identifies with the Russian language, even if many can speak it (Panagiotidis 2021). I recognize that the term post-Soviet is a contested and problematized one, but for the German context it is important to have both these terms in mind while speaking of diaspora and use them rather as a heuristic device indicating the Eastern European and Central Asian countries of origin and the specifical (post-)colonial situation of this region (Klingenberg 2022).

the first chapters, I felt sure that I had encountered a 'hidden gem', a very *intersectional*, probably *queer-feminist* novel, which was at the same time *post-Soviet* and *diasporic*. *Severe Maiden* depicts not only migration, but also transnational relations between non-heteronormative persons in post-Soviet Russia and in Germany and beyond. Zhuk belongs to the same generation as Masha Gessen and Ol'ga Krauze, the LGBT leaders who emerged in the late Soviet and early post-Soviet period. It seemed unbelievably valuable to have found an autobiographical novel by an early post-Soviet lesbian activist, which could reveal so much about the struggles and resistances of queer diaspora from a self-reflective activist standpoint. The positionality of the author (and the narrator) is not only that of a Russian, migrating to Germany, but also of a (secular) Jewish woman: she is a non-heteronormative (lesbian or bisexual) woman who migrated in the 1990s from Russia to Germany. Many of the other characters are also non-heteronormative women and men, and the novel also includes trans or gender-nonconforming characters.

This combination of topics seemed to be promising, and I started to analyse the novel for my PhD thesis. However, my close reading of the novel soon confronted me with several challenges, which prevented me from making a straightforward claim that this was a queer feminist work, or to praise it as a (forgotten) prime example of post-Soviet queer diasporic literature, which is how I initially wanted to see the novel.

Severe Maiden: a forgotten novel?

Severe Maiden was first published in 2013 in a small run of 500 copies. Parts of the novel also appear on the publicly open blog of the author (zhuki06 n.d.), and in the form of short stories in compilations of lesbian and queer prose prior to the publication of the novel (Zhuk 2008; Zhuk 2010). There are only two online reviews of the book (Kontury 2013 and Rezunkov 2013), and very little information about its reception is available. The novel seems to have been almost ignored by literary criticism. There is little evidence of distribution apart from a few documented readings: three in Berlin and one in St

Petersburg.[4] My archival and internet research showed that there were no academic reviews of the novel and it did not get shortlisted for any literary prizes. I set out to discover why was *Severe Maiden* by Ol'ga Zhuk not a widely celebrated novel, unlike Oksana Vasiakina's *The Wound* [Rana, 2021], which received the literary prize 'NOS' (Gor'kii 2021) and which has been called the first lesbian novel in Russian, although it came seven years after *Severe Maiden* (xgay.ru 2022)? And why was Zhuk's novel not co-opted by the German literary market, which seems to be hungry for 'exotic' combinations of queerness and migration? At least two other German writers with post-Soviet migration experiences, Ol'ga Grjasnowa and Sasha Marianna Salzmann, have received widespread recognition among queer German-speaking subculture, including literary prizes (Suhrkamp 2022). What distinguished Zhuk's *Severe Maiden* from Grjasnowa's well-known *The Legal Haziness of a Marriage* [Die juristische Unschärfe einer Ehe, 2014], which dealt with similar topics? Where were the Instagram posts celebrating Zhuk as an *intersectional icon*? Why did Russian, post-Soviet and diasporic queers, so much in need of a 'queer history', not seek to find it in Zhuk's novel? Why was such a unique literary text avoided by German, and post-Soviet or Russian mainstream literary and queer activist contexts?

It is always difficult to explain why certain literary texts gain widespread attention while others remain forgotten. It would be too simplistic to assume an absolute correlation between the quality of a text and its reception. It is not the goal of this article to determine whether *Severe Maiden* should be considered a 'literary' text at all or discuss whether it qualifies as 'good literature'. *Severe Maiden* is declared by its author and the two prefaces to be a novel. However, the work's thematic scope, as well as the narrative and moral decisions in the novel itself, as well as around it, may offer us the key to the question as to why different cultural and subcultural fields have avoided this text. Moreover, this omission can reveal much about cultural and subcultural

[4] The readings in Berlin were held at Moabit (Presentation n.d.), 48 Stunden Neukölln (Ol'ga Zhuk n.d.), and Nimmersatt (Prezentatsiia knigi n.d.). The reading in St Petersburg was at the Bukvoed bookshop (Bukvoed n.d.).

norms and discourses in the context of queer diasporic writing.
This article is an attempt to understand why *Severe Maiden* by Ol'ga Zhuk has not gained wide popularity. In what follows, I explore this question with reference to different sets of actors, whom I have categorized in five different groups. Such a division inevitably involves a simplification of what is the broad field of literary perception, but it can help us understand the subversive character of the novel, which seems not to fit in the expectations of any of the groups and reveal their limitations. It is important to recognize the significance of language borders and national borders in the context of queer literature, and not to interpret a queer Russophone text with the same scale and optics as, for example, a German or French queer novel. The post-Soviet context adds another dimension to the analysis with several specific facets.

The five different groups are:

A) The mainstream/official literary scene in Russia: publishers, book prize committees and literary scholars in Russia;
B) Assimilationist LGBT Russophone activist contexts;
C) Queer-feminist Russophone activist contexts;
D) The mainstream literary scene in Germany;
E) Queer diaspora literature.

Zhuk's *Severe Maiden* challenges societal norms and expectations at multiple levels. At the same time, this novel situates itself within and criticizes the very subcultures and groups that are challenging those norms in the broader cultural contexts. The novel crosses and subverts multiple discourses, including migration discourse, lesbian, and feminist subcultures, drug users' subculture and the literary-artistic milieu. In all of them, the narrator is both 'at home' and an 'outsider' at the same time. This in-betweenness could be interpreted as an *uncomfortable narrative* of queer post-Soviet diaspora. The novel did not fit the 'mainstream' assimilationist LGBT narratives, where lesbians and gays sought full acceptance in society, displaying a willingness to marry and procreate. Yet nor did it fit the queer-feminist narratives, which aimed to criticize all violence and power relations. The novel eluded unambiguous interpretations and challenged my own methodology. I realized that my difficulties and confusions with the novel

might prove vehicles for the analysis, and help me understand why others might have preferred to avoid this text.

Severe Maiden: The novel's thematic scope and narrative structure

Severe Maiden can be understood as a meta-novel and as a piece of autofiction. In Aleksandr Vinogradov's foreword, he describes the novel as 'in many aspects autobiographical and not overloaded with fiction' (Vinogradov, in Zhuk 2013: 3). The author herself characterizes the text as a 'roman à clef, a text of fiction with documentary basis' (Kontury 2013). This article considers the novel as an example of autofiction, where the narrator Ol'ga is not identical with the author Ol'ga Zhuk. Even given some matching facts about Zhuk as an activist, from Igor' Kon's and Laurie Essig's research, which are echoed in the novel, it remains necessary to respect the novel as a work of fiction. The present article does not aim to investigate the boundary between autobiography and fiction in the novel and did not involve interviewing the author.

The titular word 'strogaia' [severe, stern] is thematized in multiple ways in the novel. The narrator tries to explain exactly which facet of the term 'strictness' is important to her: is it the connotation of being a 'dominant', or an euphemism for a lesbian, or the literal meaning of the word ('strict') in the meaning of being strict in the lifestyle and communication? This last sense can also be understood ironically, as the novel depicts excess and debauchery on multiple levels. 'I was at that time strict and earnest, a real severe maiden' (Zhuk 2013: 11).

There is also a significant intertextual reference to *A Severe Young Man* [Strogii iunosha, 1935], a film directed by Abram Room. The film caught Zhuk's attention: she described it as a 'daring, bold, and innovative' film (Zhuk 2012: 136). This admiration, as well as the mimicking name, where a strict young man 'undergoes a gender transition', shows that Zhuk is trying not only to find a title with a complex meaning, but also referring to the reception story of *Strogii iunosha*, which has been perceived as a movie with homoerotic symbolism.

The second part of Zhuk's title, *Puteshestvie is Peterburga v Berlin,* can be translated as 'Journey from St Petersburg to Berlin'. Here is a clear intertextual reference to Aleksandr Radishchev's *Journey from St Petersburg to Moscow* [Puteshestvie iz

Peterburga v Moskvu, 1790]. With this allusion, Zhuk ironically and daringly puts herself in a certain Russian literary tradition of system criticism and travelogue.

Zhuk's novel has three narrative layers. The main narrative unfolds in contemporary Berlin, where the narrator is living at the time of writing, but there are two other distinct layers: (1) the narrator in late Soviet Leningrad / early post-Soviet St Petersburg; (2) a love story and a narrative of the narrator's migration from Petersburg to Berlin. Furthermore, beyond the narrator Ol'ga's own storyline, she introduces us to a multiplicity of secondary characters (e.g. Zhuk 2013: 10, 11, 24, 25). Their short stories are often unconnected to each other and play little substantive role in the main storyline, but rather can be considered as memory flashbacks. In places, the narrator's memoirs come to resemble a series of necrologies, describing multiple incidents and encounters with the narrators' friends and acquaintances. These stories are connected by the topics of art, the dissident mindset, drug use and chemical addiction. The primary *siuzhet* of *Severe Maiden* takes place in the 1990s: this includes the love story and migration story of the narrator to Berlin, including a difficult emigration process that requires multiple steps. This main plotline is interspersed by several side-stories, where Ol'ga recalls her youth and growing up in Leningrad's underground scene. Both these narrative layers are described from the temporality of 'the present' (probably the 2010s). This threefold frame allows Zhuk to contrast different understandings of marginalization in three different time-spaces (Leningrad in the 1970s and 1980s, St. Petersburg in the 1990s and Berlin in the 2000s and 2010s) and to connect them through her sarcastic narrator. This complex narrative device does not distract from the smoothness of narration, which seems partially simplistic, parodying socialist realism, especially on the level of language, despite the novel's strong anti-Soviet stance.

The narrator, Ol'ga, grows up among the Leningrad intelligentsia and becomes involved in the Leningrad underground art scene in her early teens. She is introduced as a 'lesbian, junkie and bastard' [lesbiianka, narkomanka i svoloch'] (Zhuk 2013: 8.) Ol'ga is called so by her own mother, and she reclaims these terms, originally intended as insults. Such reappropriation recalls the transformation of the term 'queer' in the US-American context, which originally had pejorative

connotations. Subsequently the term was re-claimed by queer movements as a positive political self-identification, as in the 1990 Queer Nation Manifesto (Queer Nation n.d.).[5] Significantly, Zhuk chooses not to use the word 'квир' (kvir) in Russian, although around 2013 it was already in use among activists, artists, and some scholars in Russia and in other post-Soviet countries and would likely have been known to Zhuk, who was already based in Germany.

In short, descriptive chapters that are rich in sarcasm, the narrator offers flashback-like memory sequences, recalling dissident conversations and relationships. These sequences often allude to the tragic fates of the those involved in Leningrad's underground scene. For example, the narrator remarks, 'While we were walking with Maik […] I was recalling other victims of the scary potion' (Zhuk 2013: 25). The narrator's involvement in the Leningrad's artistic dissident community seems to constitute an important part of her identity. Parallel to this, the reader becomes familiar with the chronological story of a complicated, passionate, and violent relationship between the narrator and her girlfriend, a Dutch woman, Maik, described by the narrator as an 'obsession' and 'delusion' (Zhuk 2013: 13). This relationship initiates the narrator's multi-stage process of moving from Russia to Germany, firstly as an artist and researcher. Later, after the separation from Maik, she returns to St Petersburg, but then comes back to Germany again, this time as a Jewish so-called 'quota refugee'.

The topic of sexual and romantic relationships between two women: the narrator, Ol'ga and her fierce girlfriend, Maik, is told through their cultural differences, conflicts, and their surroundings such as feminist groups and the sex-worker milieu in Berlin in the 1990s. Secondary female characters, such as Barbara, the best friend of Maik, Magida and others are often homosexual as well, and often involved in commercial sex. The narrator's sexual and social identity is described as follows:

> I simply loved, and have not asked myself questions, do I love a lesbian or not. I did not ask myself, if I was a lesbian. I loved and was loved. But, of course, lesbian friends, same as

[5] The Queer Nation Manifesto was originally distributed by ACT UP marchers in the New York Gay Pride Parade, 1990 (Queer Nation n.d.)

> me, with the same aesthetical and sexual preferences, were lacking, as they are lacking now in Berlin among the Russophone community. I was always open and have spoken without any shyness, that loved Olya H-va, for example, or someone else (Zhuk 2013: 147).

Yet at the same time, however, the narrator does not construct lesbian sexuality as something innate: 'I thought I was bisexual and felt afraid of lesbians' (Zhuk 2013: 147).

Gender and sexuality are thematized continuously in the novel. Issues include the negotiation of identity, self-identification, identifying others, community building and exclusion. There is a significant intersection between non-normative sexuality and the late Soviet/post-Soviet gender regime. During the first meeting between between Ol'ga and her soon-to-be girlfriend Maik, Maik says that Ol'ga's behaviour reminds her of the 'Soviet perestroika party ruler popular in the West, Gorby [Mikhail Gorbachev]' (Zhuk 2013: 11). This unusually gendered 'compliment' can be considered as a soft and jocular (de-)construction of gender. The narrator seems to enjoy being compared to a male politician: 'I lead the gathering like a real partapparatchik, other role-models of societal leaders we did not know' (Zhuk 2013: 11).

As the novel continues, there are many depictions of intersections, often involving multiple marginalisations simultaneously. There are detailed descriptions of drug use, including intravenous injections, and chemical addiction. Given that Zhuk, the author, was herself involved in the anti-prohibitionist movement, it seems important not to pathologize her characters' drug use and consider it as a part of free choice made by adults. Indeed, this is how the narrator frames the experiments with psychoactive substances in the novel. An anonymous online review includes a quotation from Zhuk describing the novel as 'certainly anti-prohibitionist' (Kontury 2013). So what did the author intend to achieve by including highly detailed insights into everyday lives and feelings, daily practices, health difficulties and societal stigma of drug users? This novel by no means sanitizes the detrimental health effects of the use or abuse of psychoactive substances, especially those of low quality. Instead, the narrator offers naturalistic and unembellished depictions of the stigma that drug users experience in various societies, including self-stigma. Yet Zhuk's drug-

using protagonists are self-determined subjects, not subhumans. The descriptions of drug-taking, and the depiction of the bodily changes associated with drugs, and their emotional and intellectual effects are likely to elicit the attention of readers who have no experience of drugs, and to provoke, shock, and challenge them. The ambivalent narrative constantly alternates. On the one hand, the narrator provides self-legitimizing ironic assurances that she is 'normal' and highly educated, making with condescending remarks about other characters' lack of education (Zhuk 2013: 17, 24, 37, 120). On the other hand, the narrative frequently breaks taboos and challenges the very categories of normalcy. At certain points of the novel, both the narrator and her girlfriend become involved in commercial sex, and these scenes are described in a similar way to the drug excesses in a confident, self-assured tone. The reader is entrusted with the intimate details of the lives of those on the societal margins: sex workers, homeless persons, and drug users. At the same time, the assumption that poverty is linked to low education is challenged in the novel: artists and thinkers are homeless, addicted and involved in sex work, and precarity can target anyone. The social and cultural capital in the Soviet Union enjoyed by dissidents does not translate into the German context. In the USSR, artists could look down on 'proletarians' (Zhuk 2013: 212), even if the artist is a 'junkie', as the narrator describes herself. The narrator herself is elitist and judgmental, but she finds that her Soviet dissident credentials carry little weight in Germany, where poverty is typically accompanied by low social status and perhaps anti-migrant attitudes.

Zhuk thematizes intimate-partner violence in a lesbian relationship, which remains a tabooed and understudied topic, while gender violence is still often thought through a heteronormative and gender binary frame (Ohms 2020). The intimate-partner violence in the novel is depicted firstly from the victim perspective. Ol'ga is repeatedly beaten, humiliated, and harmed by her partner Maik, from whom she is emotionally, and partly socially (as a non-Western migrant) dependent. The reader is placed in the painful position of a bystander. The reader who approaches the novel from a queer feminist perspective will find it painful to read lengthy vindications of intimate-partner violence as manifestations of a great love and a unique passion, which is how the narrator often depicts

them. Elsewhere, the narrator portrays this violence as an element of sado-masochistic games that have no rules. The author introduces other characters, including the narrator's friends and psychologists, who deem the relationship unhealthy, but Ol'ga seems unaware, at least initially, and continues to insist that humiliation and beating are signs of an extraordinary love. However, toward the last third of the novel, power relations are overturned. Ol'ga turns out to be a stalker, who violates the privacy of her former partner, and eventually perpetrates physical violence, not only beating her ex-girlfriend Maik, but also stabbing her with a knife. Ol'ga is reported by the police and stands trial for this episode, but she avoids punishment due to her psychiatric diagnosis. The majority of her friends and contacts in the German feminist-lesbian community turn against her after these actions. Ol'ga fails to admit responsibility for her actions, and, until the last pages, tries to justify herself and to explain the implicit and hidden power hierarchies and inequalities as well as hypocrisy of the Berlin feminist lesbian scene.

Moreover, the novel includes various representations of poverty, unemployment, and precarity. There are representations of Soviet and post-Soviet life stories that are non-linear: a university degree or good informal education do not necessarily lead to financial security. The human body provides a common denominator that unites all these issues. Zhuk's novel is particularly alive to biopolitics and body politics, the ways in which state powers, borders, policies and societal norms regulate human bodies.

Severe Maiden can be considered as an auto-ethnographical writing, which alternates highly personal, naturalistic passages with analytical distant sequences, which reveal the author's academic training, or at least reveal the intention to treat the issues on a meta level. The novel's language is remarkable for its combination of 'high culture' and 'underground culture' with slurs and slang. The frivolity and vulgarity of the language in *Severe Maiden* corresponds with the content of the work, which depicts the often violent reality of marginalized milieus. Zhuk's other works reveal her ability to write in literary Russian (e.g. Zhuk 1998), so her use of colloquial, offensive language, *mat*, and subcultural slang must be understood as a rhetorical device and as a conscious narrative choice. Such mixture of linguistic registers, narrative layers and thematic facets creates an ambivalent

impression: who did Zhuk seek to address, provoke, and thrill in *Severe Maiden*? The next sections examine the novel's possible readership.

Too lesbian for a Russophone text?

As already mentioned, *Severe Maiden* was published in a small run by an unknown publisher and has not been reprinted. The novel has received only a handful of reviews, mostly amateur, and has received little attention in the literary world. An exception is Viktor Rezunkov's short review in *Russkii zhurnal*, in which he claims that the novel will be certainly forbidden in Russia because it breaks too many propaganda laws (Rezunkov 2013). Here, Rezunkov alludes not only to the laws regulating the dissemination of information about non-normative sexualities in the presence of minors (the so-called 'anti-gay laws') but also the law against the 'propaganda of drugs'. At least until 2022, there were ways to get round the 'anti-gay' laws, and texts were published depicting LGBTQIA+ characters, even by Russian publishers, or by the queer authors themselves in print or online. Zhuk's *Severe Maiden*, despite its unapologetic confessional narratives of lesbian love and sex and excessive drug use, was published in 500 copies by a small St Petersburg publisher and online on Google Books. However, as far as my research showed, it was never published again.

The novel challenges typical constructions of femininity in the Russian intelligentsia in multiple ways, as well as familiar narratives about post-Soviet (e)migration. Emigration or travelling to Western Europe constitutes a key topos of the Russophone literary canon. Adjusting to or negotiating Western modernity and conflicting self-narration in search of an own place between Westernisers and Slavophiles, between admiration and homesickness of all kinds is a key motif in the corpus of Soviet and post-Soviet literature. However, the voices of non-heteronormative women are remaining mostly silenced and excluded from the literature. Those who have challenged the phallocentric Russian canon have been met by anti-LGBTQIA+ and anti-feminist attacks.

Zhuk's *Severe Maiden* does not conform to mainstream ideologies of gender and sexuality either. The paratext reveals a lot about how the novel transgresses gender norms. The book's illustrations by A. Neliubina depict an androgynous figure with wide shoulders and long hair. This

figure is most probably Ol'ga, a non-heteronormative woman. Ol'ga's lesbianism is couched not in apologetic terms of a 'closet' or 'coming-out' narrative, but as a natural, liveable story. A post-Soviet woman who is telling her broken story, which transcends the normative expectations of femininity among the artistic intelligentsia, seems extraordinary on both the levels of form and content. The narrator uses a variety of terms such as 'butch' (Zhuk 2013: 150) in transliteration, 'kobel' (Zhuk 2013: 148 et al.) and 'kobelikha' (Zhuk 2013: 148 et al.), both terms for a masculine or active lesbian, roughly equivalent to 'butch', and 'goluboi', literally 'blue' but used in slang as 'gay' (Zhuk 2013: 209 et al.). These terms were used by non-heteronormative subculture in Russian at that time. Such reflections on language are especially valuable for researchers seeking to document the non-Western queer slang that existed in the Russian language prior to the internet era.

At the same time, the narrator expresses also opinions that could be read from a trans*feminist point of view as trans-discriminatory, or at least operating within the rigid gender binary: 'I was afraid of *koblov* [butch lesbians]. And am afraid until now, even in their Western variant – butches!!! I do love women who look like women, not like men. At the same time, I love that they have something strict and androgynous in them, narrow hips, waistline, and beautiful breasts' (Zhuk 2013: 150). This term, 'kobel', stems from Russia's prison subculture and includes a variety of meanings from 'masculine woman' to 'active lesbian' (Vikislovar' 2021). Ol'ga is also herself a variant of it: 'toy soft baby *kobel*' (Zhuk 2013: 212), according to her girlfriend Maik. Here, it can be seen how certain kinds of gender transgressions are presented as loveable and acceptable, while others are constructed as going 'too far' and even arousing fear in a lesbian character.

The passage where Berlin is described as inhabited by 'gays, lesbians and further transsexuals' (Zhuk 2013: 10) may be read in different ways: as a trans-inclusive statement that includes trans people within gay and lesbian movements and subcultures, or as a trans-discriminatory silencing, or even as mocking-repeating the outer narrative, which does not differentiate between different identities that transcend cis-heteronormativity. Long descriptions of passion, difficulties of living together, sexual practices between Ol'ga and her girlfriend Maik, and their dramatic breakup give the

readership an insight into a life of a lesbian couple, which is not really contrasted to heteronormative surroundings, or meant to be representative, but just given. The narrator writes: 'After the first separation, which looked like "forever", we decided to be more clever, precisely more reasonable, telling each other about our dissatisfactions, articulating, or – as it has become fashionable to say in Russia – to "voice" the pain and bitterness' (Zhuk 2013: 29). Many of the women around the narrator are non-heteronormative. 'I realized that all of them, Barbara and those like her, are such radical feminists, open lesbians and sex workers only because they are far away from their parents. If their parents lived in Berlin, would they be talking on TV, giving interviews in magazines and newspapers, and behaving so openly? Fuck no!' (Zhuk 2013: 35).

The novel's linguistic and thematical snapshot of non-heteronormative underground subculture in Russian seems unique not only for 2013, but also in our own time. Moreover, the list of the multiple friends of the narrator, who died, or whose destinies were heavily impacted by AIDS, drugs and legal persecution resembles a kind of queer obituary, an attempt to commemorate the multiplicity of Leningrad's underground *tusovka* of the 1980s in a queer archive. Although it is difficult to tell which characters are fictional and which drawn directly from real life, such a queer necrology leaves a strong impression of a marginalized milieu, shaped by systemic oppressions, and evokes the idea that such remembrance goes far beyond the narrator's own circle of personal friends. Arguably, the necrology offers an alternative queer archive of those individuals who are unlikely to be remembered in the mainstream discourses. In that sense, *Severe Maiden* can be considered a queer novel not only in its depictions of lesbians and lesbian sex, but also other societal marginalizations. The novel may be considered politically queer as well as sexually queer, questioning multiple systems of oppression.

Given the truly intersectional combination of all the topics mentioned above, it can be argued that *Severe Maiden* is a 'queer Russophone text', because this novel can be described as a refusal to conform to normalcy. Here I quote the Belarusian queer activist and writer Toni Lashden: 'Queer is a refusal to join any group, it is about unwillingness to participate in an initially unfair process, it is about separation and exit from the

system' (Lashden 2021). The sparse reception and discussion of this text reveal how powerful heteronormativity in combination with sexism continue to affect the Russophone literary discourses. At least since the 1990s, there has been queer literature in Russian, including authors like Slava Mogutin, Nikolai Koliada, Dmitrii Kuz'min and others. However, only a few female queer voices have emerged, including the poet and novelist Liia Kirgetova, the musician Ol'ga Krauze, and of course, Ol'ga Zhuk. The dominance of cis-male authors can be traced as a manifestation of structural sexism and lesbophobia, inherent even in the realm of Russophone 'queer literature'.

Too addicted and too criminal for the 'mainstream' Russophone LGBT discourses?

Severe Maiden was never published in full in Germany, although one chapter did appear in German translation by Andreas Strohfeldt and was presented at a literary reading at 48 Stunden Neukölln (Ol'ga Zhuk n.d.). There are no traces of broad public discussion, even though readings were held in Berlin, probably in Russian.

Zhuk herself has highlighted how an anonymous LGBT person accused her of worsening the image of LGBT people: 'I woke up and discovered that I had sullied the image of a Soviet and post-Soviet lesbian. […] [A]nd post-Soviet lesbians cannot wash themselves clean. […] I created a prison aura for the lesbian through my research.' (Zhuk n.d.) Here, Zhuk is criticizing an anonymous contributor to a lesbian internet forum who accused her of being 'too open' and too provocative, which can be interpreted as too rebellious. 'You are not working in a plant or in an office or in state-sponsored business. […] Many employers agree to tolerate LGBT-employees until they "don't stick out". You don't have children, as far as I know' (Quoted in Zhuk n.d.). The anonymous contributor points out that, for some LGBT people in Russia, discretion and adjustment were important strategies of survival. In the same post, Zhuk highlights that this detractor also criticized her for her descriptions of drug use. Interestingly, Zhuk compares her detractor's logic to 'GULAG' and 'cop' thinking in her post. According to Zhuk, the anonymous detractor has internalized the logics of power, which Zhuk is trying to challenge. This episode is likely illustrative of the broader reception of Zhuk's novel in the LGBT subcultures.

The violent, drug-addicted, cursing narrator of *Severe Maiden* is anything but 'nice' and 'hard-working', defying the stereotypes against which 'assimilationist' Russophone LGB(T) communities and activists were fighting. Ol'ga is not the kind of lesbian who simply wants the same rights to marriage and raise kids as heterosexual women enjoy, and she hardly claims that she is no different from any other women. Ol'ga hates the police, takes various illegal drugs, engages in sex work, indulges in sadomasochism and appears to be proud of it. Such a figure is hardly comfortable or representative for those Russophone activists or non-activist LGBT persons seeking acceptance and 'tolerance' from the mainstream society. The narrator uses many slang words such as the anglicism 'junkie' (Zhuk 2013: 8, 13, 24, among others) for drug users, and introduces the reader to the precise description of drug use and subcultural codes, as well as the names of substances and their effects, as if it is the most common and 'normal' thing: 'Heroin' (Zhuk 2013: 22); 'Koknar' (Zhuk 2013: 22); 'And we vomited in a night pot, which I had set out in anticipation before bed, so as not to wake up the mother and the dog, Nicodemus, who was sleeping in a separate room near the toilet' (Zhuk 2013: 22).

The opposition between 'clean' and 'neat' queer people, on the other hand, and their promiscuous, 'perverse' and provocative counterparts, on the other, has been discussed a lot in Western (mostly US-centred) literature, especially in the context of 'homonormativity' (Duggan 2003; Connell 2014). However, in post-Soviet discourses, where gender regimes operate differently, with different forms and levels of oppression and daily structural violence, the distinction between 'assimilationist' and 'anti-assimilationist' activists has not been so clear-cut, at least until 2013, nor has it been documented so well. In this light, Zhuk's writing enters an important debate that has been avoided by broad part of LGBTQIA+ communities, or proved discursively impossible for them to join. Galina Zelenina concludes her article on lesbian subculture in the Russia of early 2000s with definition of this subculture as a 'discreet', 'mimicking' and 'escapist' one, organized around certain musicians or artists (Zelenina 2007). *Severe Maiden* challenges the respectability narrative of the LGBTQIA+ community and does not fit in the playful self-narrations of being a lesbian.

The presence of violence in the text is at odds with the urge to decriminalize homosexuality in Russia, which has again become criminalized following 2013. Ol'ga attacks her ex-girlfriend Maik, and Maik has been repeatedly physically abusing her. One can imagine that quite a few activists or non-activist LGBTQIA+ Russophone persons did not want to see themselves in the company of 'kings and queens and criminal queers' portrayed by Zhuk.[6]

The narrator Ol'ga stands out with her ironical, edgy tone of narration, which inclines at times towards expressions of superiority over others. She relates to her encounters in a cynical, embittered way. Indeed, her tone even creates the impression that the reader is unwelcome in the world of *Severe Maiden*. The novel does not seek to educate, avoids leading the reader pedagogically towards a position of greater tolerance, and refuses any role of teaching the reader about who gays and lesbians 'really are'. Instead, the text evokes an insider-impression of a diary, or intimate letter, a confessional prose, where the experience of marginalization is the only possible reality. One can say that the narrator provides no explanations or justifications for her behaviour and has no pretensions to reveal herself as a 'good citizen' in the eyes of the reader. Rather, Zhuk has created a work in which the target audience appears to be herself, or perhaps a subset of close friends who are familiar with the subcultural slang, and who would not be shocked by the naturalistic descriptions, which are contrary to the liberal agenda of many contemporary assimilationist Russophone gay rights advocates.

It is precisely this ambiguity that makes *Severe Maiden* an exception in comparison to those queer literary texts with a clear, palatable identity politics that appear to target a much more obvious normative reader and to educate and correct readers. *Severe Maiden* appears, on the contrary, to be quite disinterested in educating the straight reader from a position of ignorance or discrimination into one of 'tolerance'.

Too immoral and violent to become a queer feminist icon?

[6] This quotation is from the band CocoRosie and Anohni, and their song 'Beautiful boys' (Nafoute 2014).

It would be wrong to assume that the whole bright spectre of non-heteronormative positionalities in post-Soviet Russia was represented by 2013 only by 'closeted' discreet or assimilationist LGBT subjects and all activism was represented only by cis-gay led Gay Prides. At the same time, queer feminist, intersectional and radical LGBTQIA+ movements were evolving in Russia and other post-Soviet contexts. Why, then, did *Severe Maiden* not become a queer feminist icon for activists fighting against the violence of sexism, homo- and trans-discrimination, antisemitism, racism, and capitalism? Can Zhuk's *Severe Maiden* be considered a *post-Soviet queer feminist* text? By 'queer feminism', I refer here not only to non-heteronormative sexualities and/or expressions of gender, but being 'politically queer': consciously challenging societies' expectations, and forging solidarity between various discriminated subjects. Perhaps the specific language of Zhuk's novel and its handling of violence can offer an answer.

Severe Maiden cannot be considered a typical feminist piece of literature by the lights of, say, the French *écriture féminine* tradition (Cixous, Kristeva, Irigaray) that centres emotional or bodily experiences in the way that, for example, Vasiakina's *The Wound* does. Indeed, the language of Zhuk's novel is arguably closer to the phallocentric Soviet Russian language, which can be found in writings of canonical male Soviet authors or, for example, Eduard Limonov, who offered an unorthodox gay male perspective in his *It's Me, Eddie!* [Eto ia, Edichka, 1979]. This seeming contradiction can lead a curious reader to the specificity of the Soviet- and post-Soviet coloniality of language and gender (Tlostanova 2015). *Severe Maiden* reveals how even a very resistant counter-narrative can perpetuate the structure of the Soviet Russian patriarchal language, for example through the linguistic violence of *mat*. Consider, for example, how Ol'ga uses the terms *pizda* [cunt]:

> In English, 'vagina', like all inanimate objects, is neuter, an 'it' [ono]. But in Russian, it is 'she' [ona]. Maik really liked this distinction. And of course, *pizda* is a she. *PIZDA* is an animate object. Maik breathed life into the lifeless, Anglophone cunt, just as God did to the first man (Zhuk 2013: 41).

On the one hand, appropriating *mat* and offensive slurs in this way might be considered a

linguistic means of self-empowerment and/or transgressing gender binaries. On the other hand, it arguably creates a partially objectifying 'lesbian gaze', mimicking the 'male gaze' in bodily descriptions of binary female bodies. For example:

> She was built like an eighteenth-year old maiden: long body; long legs with well-developed calves, like in a Greek sculpture, but in moderation; a long neck; a waist; a tummy without a single wrinkle, even when she was sitting down. Maik was built remarkably, her figure has not changed since she had been sixteen or eighteen until now, when she had reached the age of sixty. Girls are not born nowadays with such bodies (Zhuk 2013: 17).

Severe Maiden fails to deconstruct gender to that utopian extent that queer-feminist activists often expect. Instead, the novel operates in the Soviet gender regime, while being without doubt a lesbian and a feminist novel at the same time.

Exploring the topic of violence can help shed more light on the text's ambivalent relationship to queer feminism. How does Zhuk deal with violence and what do her representations of violence reveal about post-Soviet queerness? Her feminist and non-heteronormative female characters act violently in their relationships and friendships, and even toward themselves. Their violence is described with ethnographic precision and a strange indifference. It seems surprising that Zhuk, a famous early Soviet lesbian activist, could write this way, knowing that her narrative could feed anti-feminism and lesbophobia. What does this say about Zhuk? Can a novel that downplays or normalizes violence still be read a queer feminist text?

The blurred line between non-normative sexual practices such as sadomasochism, on the one hand, and physical and psychological violence in a relationship, on the other, is a recurring issue in the novel. Written a few years prior to the broad #metoo movement, this text raises the taboo topic of intimate-partner violence in a lesbian relationship not only from a perspective of a victim, but within the frame of a mutual violent relationship, and even from a perspective of a perpetrator within the same text. This moment puts the reader in a kind of moral dilemma. Do we believe the narrator that her own violence was an act of 'violent resistance' (Johnson 2008, cited in

Meshkova 2020) after years of being violated, or do we question the whole narration and do not know who to believe? Is Ol'ga an 'unreliable narrator' who justifies her own violent behaviour and leaves the reader with the intellectual work of asking where to attribute blame? Or is *Severe Maiden* a novel that advocates physical violence as a form of vengeance? The peculiar way in which Ol'ga explains her violent actions – e.g. the knife attack on Maik – pose a challenge to queer feminist readers, who stand against any kind of violence. Ol'ga does not take responsibility for the physical harm done to her ex-partner; indeed, her regrets seem more focused on the fact that the relationship has ended. This constellation places the reader in a role of a 'rescuer' in terms of Karpman's drama triangle, charged with finding out who is the 'victim' and who the 'persecutor'. At the same time, the ambiguous narration style makes it difficult to form clear narrative conclusions about what exactly happened to the unreliable narrator and her girlfriend. Such reading might be quite unpleasant and disturbing, if a reader is expecting a novel that takes a clear moral stance against violence. The text's narrative structure is unusual in that it alternates between an omnipresent and omniscient third-person narrator and Ol'ga as a first-person narrator, even within a single passage. Ol'ga can be considered a fictionalized unreliable narrator, whose confessional stems partly from an experience of a mental health crisis, partly as a result of drug-induced 'psychosis' (Zhuk's own wording: see Zhuk 2013: 255 and 258), and then again from a very distant ethnographical analytical point of view.[7]

A peer reviewer of this manuscript suggested that the connection between drug use and violence constitutes the main theme of the novel. While it does play a major role, it is important to note that the risky use of psychoactive substances in the novel can be interpreted in various ways: as an escape from the multiple structural layers of state violence, as a free choice or a spiritual search

[7] My intention in this article is to avoid pathologizing psychiatric diagnoses. Rather than engage in simplifying discourse on mental health, I aim to discuss it in a multifactorial bio-socio-psychological model, and to use the terms used in the novel as they are self-descriptions of the characters. In *Severe Maiden*, the psychological state of Ol'ga is described as 'an illness, severe depression' (Zhuk 2013: 241), as drug-induced 'madness' (Zhuk 2013: 133), and as a 'manic-depressive' psychosis (Zhuk 2013: 255 and 258), an outdated term for 'bipolar disorder'.

(how the narrator frames it, Zhuk 2013: 139), or indeed as a manifestation of self-harm and 'disease'. All of these interpretations grant a degree of agency to Ol'ga, who engages in activities that risk harming both others and herself. Ultimately, *Severe Maiden* cannot be considered a queer feminist novel because it does not take a queer feminist moral stance. Key components of queer feminism are missing: praising community and solidarity; advocating the rights of those who are multiply marginalized; drawing attention to structural inequalities. Instead, Ol'ga places the blame on her fellow feminists and destroys herself without taking responsibility for her violent behaviour. The reader is left with a challenging confessional narrative that questions their own understanding of 'good' and 'evil' but offers no clear answers. You cannot tell whether Ol'ga (or Maik) is a 'good' or 'bad' character. This ambiguity poses a challenge for queer feminists seeking a moral compass in literary texts. At least one strand of recent queer feminist literary texts is seeking this kind of didacticism. Despite offering a very judgmental and critical narrative, *Severe Maiden* refuses to adopt a pedagogical stance, and rather mirrors life's misery instead of offering a utopia or a manifesto for a queer feminist future.

Incomprehensible to German publishers? Discredited in the eyes of German feminists?

Zhuk's status as a writer in the Post-Soviet/Russophone diaspora in Berlin means that we can approach her work not only through a Post-Soviet/Russophone or diaspora lens, but also investigate her reception in the German context. According to one source, one chapter of *Severe Maiden* was translated into German, and has been discussed in a local bilingual literary club (Presentation n.d.).

While the mainstream literary world remains heteronormative, literature by and about LGBTQIA+ persons does sometimes reach the mass market, and can even gather a considerable following. Some publishers and bookshops in Germany are consciously responding to this need. In the context of queer feminist diasporic literature, we can identify two sectors: empowerment texts and (self-)exoticizing texts. By 'empowerment texts', I refer to politically engaged literature that aims to highlight certain aspects of experience and to empower, sometimes also by presenting an embellished picture of marginalized communities. The

typical traits of these texts include revolutionary pathos, exaltation of collectivism, praise of community and clear political identity categories. Positive representations of the community are encouraged (the more literary representation there is, the better social position of a certain marginalized group would be). The '(self-)exoticizing texts' in the context of queer migration might be those perpetuating the rigid 'East-West' dichotomies, framing Western Europe as 'tolerant' and contrasting it with discrimination and violence toward non-cis-heteronormative subjects in their countries of origin.

Two reasons could explain the lack of interest in *Severe Maiden* among the German literary scene. First, it is not empowering enough, and second, it is not sufficiently self-exoticizing. In terms of empowerment, Zhuk's novel does thematize multiple collectives and communities, but does not portray them as communities of solidarity and change and mutual support. Rather, they are often communities united solemnly by common misery or need. The communication in those underground intelligentsia drug users' communities in Leningrad/St. Petersburg and lesbian feminist and art scenes in Berlin is characterized by betrayal, mistrust, concurrence, and a great sense of loneliness that underlies the narrator's sarcasm and irony. Ol'ga cannot trust no one, and her caustic laughter highlights their limitations. This is certainly not the attitude or atmosphere of a 'queer-migrant utopia' or political self-consciousness that can be found in some other German literary texts, such as *Beside Myself* [Außer sich, 2017] by Sasha Marianna Salzmann.

Severe Maiden is also unusual in that it does not offer a story of queer migration with a clear improvement of the narrator's life due to migration to the West. Zhuk's novel also portrays the decrease of the social capital that a lot of post-Soviet migrants experienced after arrival in Germany (compare Panagiotidis 2021, Klingenberg 2022). Here it is instructive to compare *Severe Maiden* to Grjasnowa's *The Legal Haziness of a Marriage*, published in Germany only a year later, in 2014. *Severe Maiden* destroys completely the myth of queer migration from a 'homophobic East' to 'tolerant and accepting West', an idea that is somewhat perpetuated in Grjasnowa, where the characters escape Russian homophobia to Berlin. Instead, Zhuk depicts the self-determined migration of a highly educated lesbian woman, who follows her love. The novel

makes a striking critique of German feminist circles, and her narrator takes an ironic stance towards Western Europe, which she describes with an epigraph from Georgii Ivanov as an 'obscure European hole' (Zhuk 2013: 7). Thus, *Severe Maiden* offers a quite unusual counter-discourse to the mainstream discourse on queer migration, where Western Europe is constructed as a tolerant safe haven for non-Western queers. Instead, Zhuk portrays a rich queer life in late Soviet Union during the so-called 'stagnation' era and does not associate her narrator's migration with particular anti-gay discrimination in her homeland. It is a story of individual choice and agency in migrating because of love.

'I will always remain for the autochthonous inhabitants of this land a *schaisse Ausländerin* [shitty foreigner]' proclaims Zhuk's narrator (Zhuk 2013: 110). In another episode she describes migrants as 'strong, passionate people' (Zhuk 2013: 115). This self-narration reminds one on the critical anti-racist literature of migrants from the Global South or migrants of colour in Europe, such as Fatma Aydemir's novel *The Elbow* [Ellbogen, 2017] or the recent collection *Your Homeland is Our Nightmare* [Eure Heimat ist unser Albtraum, 2019] edited by Aydemir and Hengameh Yaghoobifarah (Aydemir et al 2019). It is a departure from the 'thankful' media narratives that can be traced in quite a few self-narrations of post-Soviet queers discussed elsewhere in my research.

The specific Russia-centeredness of the novel probably prevented it for being celebrated as a Jewish text in Germany. Although Zhuk is also Jewish, there is little content on this part of her identity in the novel, instead the narrator highlights her Russian origins especially contrasting with her Western girlfriends' and other figures in Berlin. Also Zhuk's blog is titled 'The Journal of an Amazon', with the subtitle 'A Russian Amazon' (zhuki06 n.d.). Such self-description and highlighting the 'Russianness' seems remarkable in the post-Soviet (post-)imperialistic context and in the context of (e)migration and needs further analysis that is beyond the scope of the article.

Finally, it should be pointed out that a text's success in the cultural sphere depends on the author's access to social capital and networks. If the novel's depiction of Ol'ga's exclusion from Berlin's lesbian feminist scene is biographical, then it is possible that the biographical Zhuk lost access to translators, literary agents and publishers in Berlin following her exclusion after the dramatic

separation from 'Maik' and Zhuk's violent outburst. Probably there was nobody to provide Zhuk with the kind of support that, for example, Jean Cocteau had offered Jean Genet.
But then for whom was this novel written? For the communities themselves? For the author and her close friends? Aleksandr Vinogradov's preface to the novel informs the reader that he had shared lots of adventures of Ol'ga in Leningrad/St. Petersburg. Or perhaps the novel was never intended to be liked and admired, but instead should be understood as the confessional diary that it purports to be?

Queer diaspora literature

I have argued that *Severe Maiden* by Zhuk should be considered an 'uncomfortable narrative' of queer diaspora. I discovered Zhuk's writing as part of a search for emancipatory and empowering queer-feminist self-narrations of queer post-Soviet diaspora. By comparing the rise of emancipatory writing by (queer) (post-)migrants from the Global South and people of Colour, I was trying to understand the place of post-Soviet queer diasporic literature, which seemed to take different political and rhetorical strategies.

I realized that the novel not only indeed offered rich insights into queer/lesbian lives of characters, but also was organized around the topic of violence. As a queer diasporic reader, it was hardly possible to identify with the characters or the narrator of this violent text.
Severe Maiden defied my methodological frame and prompted me to reflect on the complexities of the intersectional live realities, and the wish to advocate 'good' literary representations of the diasporic post-Soviet queers. In this novel, written by a non-heterosexual woman, there was a confusing mixture of problematic narratives, such as internalized sexism and trans-discrimination, narrative traces of elitism and classism. There appeared to be a vindication of violence, at least on first reading, as well as other challenging elements that made it impossible for me to praise the novel as an example of a marginalized voice of the queer post-Soviet diaspora in a simple, optimistic way. A queer migrant reader myself, I found myself repulsed, disappointed and shocked by the novel. I had been searching for a sympathetic 'queer ancestor', a Lesley Feinberg or Audre Lorde, and discovered a contradicting and complex figure, who did not fit the romantic narrative of a multiply

oppressed figure, and therefore deemed sympathetic and worthy of attention.[8] Ol'ga was far from the kind of figure with whom I could identify, or whom I would like to represent queer diasporic communities. In the context of my dissertation Zhuk's *Severe Maiden* seemed to fall out of the warm narrative of queer diasporic solidarity and intimacy, which I realized I was looking for. Indeed, this text in many points represents rather the attitude of 'Not Gay as in Happy, but Queer as in Fuck You', as the Swedish feminist researcher Ulrika Dahl puts it (Dahl 2014), destroying the expectation of the reader that the novel shows 'nice' lesbian migrants. This 'uncomfortable narrative' of queer diaspora can easily play into the hands of multiple problematic discourses, including anti-LGBTQIA+ discrimination, or anti-migrant, antisemitic or racist discourses. But it can also offer a self-critical platform for idealistic queer-feminists and LGBTQIA+ migrants to reflect on their own understandings of solidarity, intersectionality, and activism.

Conclusion

Severe Maiden resists any unambiguous interpretation. The novel's polysemy makes it difficult to define an intended audience. The text oscillates between different possibilities of reading, frequently making a proclamation in one breath and then negating the very same opinion later, and offering thus a variety of ambiguous and contradicting pictures on gender, migration, drug use, poverty, sexuality, and various other topics.

At first sight, Zhuk's *Severe Maiden* appeared as a candidate for the missing queer-feminist post-Soviet author from the diasporic context in the 1990s. However, a closer gaze into Zhuk's work has provided a possible answer as to why the novel has not a 'cult' status but is still worthy of analysis.

The circumstances of queer migrants' precarity, their societal marginalization and the need to escape unbearable reality through hard drugs have changed the narrator's moral frame and led her to the decisions she has made. The novel highlights how a victim can also be a perpetrator at the same

[8] Lesley Feinberg (1949–2014) was a Jewish US-American writer who wrote on topics of multiple discriminations, gender identity, solidarity, and political resistance. Her most famous works include *Stone Butch Blues* (1996) and *Drag King Dreams* (2006). Audre Lorde (1934–1992) was an African-American author and activist who has recently been translated into Russian (Lord 2021).

time, a point that emerges particularly strongly in an intersectional reading that considers discrimination and privilege simultaneously. Thus, *Severe Maiden* offers us not only a complicated and complex protagonist, but also provides food for thought on how societal oppression can result in self-destruction and interpersonal violence.

Severe Maiden may not provide the idealism and empowerment for those multiply marginalized subjects and their advocates who seek positive representations and strive after utopian visions. However, the novel operates in a complex cultural context, and it is not easy to imagine what emancipation might look like amid the cluster of intersectional entanglements at the heart of the novel. If the novel has liberatory potential, perhaps that lies in an admission that there exist contexts in which no idealistic emancipation is possible, or that emancipation for some may come at the cost of the marginalization of others. Perhaps Zhuk uses her novel to call into question the existence of any context that would allow for 'an idealistic emancipation'. Such a pessimistic, almost nihilistic trajectory might be contrary to the recent queer and queer-diasporic projects, which aim in one or another way for a better life and increased acceptance of individuals and communities experiencing multiple marginalization. Of course, it is hard to admit that contexts of suffering and marginalization exist where it is difficult, or impossible, to imagine any such transformation. Arguably, Zhuk realized all too well that the multiple forms of marginalization and violence in her country of origin would not be resolved by migration but even intensified? In *Severe Maiden*, Zhuk creates an imaginary space that allows for the representation of such broken figures as the narrator and her friends, and this might be a necessary step for the critique of the existing societies. Moreover, continuous self-reflection is desperately needed for political and cultural movements and subcultures seeking emancipation, including migrant, lesbian and feminist groups. Read thus, the unsettling novel can offer a platform for queer grieving. And arguably, this process of queer grieving does not receive enough space in the constant rush of activism and survival.

Severe Maiden does not fit into in the optimistic progress-oriented identity politics project, which finds its place in the selective inclusions in the mainstream literary processes and assimilationist LGBTQIA+ activisms. Nor does not the novel fit easily among

those queer feminist narratives that strive for positive representations and consider multiple oppression categories together. Zhuk has produced a form of narrative subversion so profound in *Severe Maiden* that even the supposedly subversive audience who might normally embrace such a novel, refuse to do so, since they feel it risks pathologizing their communities, and hence they overlook the novel in self-defence.

Instead, this book offers a condensed literary representation for a set of existing problems, such as discrimination and violence within multiply marginalized communities. Those problems are difficult to discuss even for actors within these communities, exactly because of the high pressure of the heteronormative and anti-migrant discourse, which deny any agency or possibility of positive self-constructions for LGBTQIA+ people, migrant women, drug users, sex workers, those living with mental health issues, or otherwise othered individuals by criminalizing, pathologizing and individualizing their experiences.

Severe Maiden shamelessly unpacks the heavy and uncomfortable complexities of lives on the societal margins, which can be read in direct connection to the epistemic violence and systemic oppressions. In this respect, the novel does achieve something unique, while displaying broken and unappealing characters in all their misery and opening a discursive possibility to queerly grieve about their destinies. Perhaps such grieving may be fully experienced probably only by those whose own experiences reflect the characters'. The bitterness and sarcastic tone of the narrator can be understood as a part of such collective queer grief. I would not equate Zhuk's nihilism to the antisocial thesis in queer theory, although it might remind the reader of it, but would rather highlight that this queer grieving reflects its origins in the specific post-Soviet context and all the transgenerational traumatizing aspects inherent to this positionality.

Severe Maiden, authored by an early lesbian activist and researcher from Russia, is a valuable contribution to the non-universalist historization of non-normative sexualities, even if it narrates from a completely different point of view, as can be found in US-American queer classics such as Feinberg. Feinberg also portrays those living on society's margins, but never loses the emphasis on solidarity nor departs from the clear stance against violence. One might polemically put it thus: the

Anglophone queers have had Lesley Feinberg, and Russophone queers Zhuk's writings. However, such a juxtaposition reveals the quite important contextualization of Russophone 'queer writing' in the field of influence of a specific 'post-Soviet condition' (Tlostanova 2015: 46), which has been shaped by the Soviet modernity. In this situation possibilities of resistance were limited, and many had become disenchanted with utopianism, following the Soviet experiment. This specific cultural context offers few possibilities to decolonize oneself, to strip oneself of the internalized violence associated with the state. In this context, it must be considered that the usurpation of the emancipative leftist project by totalitarianism produced exactly such disillusioned subjects as the characters in *Severe Maiden*.

The ambivalent and provocative writing style and wording contribute to the uniqueness of *Severe Maiden*. The novel does not seek to educate the reader, and operates in a provocative frame, probably addressing the author's own friends, as well as those who might share the combination of marginalizing experiences depicted therein. Exactly this kind of a queer text can provide inspiration to reflect on the nature and the omnipresence of interpersonal, systemic, and epistemic violence and complicate the understanding of queer writing away from the straightforward homosexual identity politics towards the intersectional queer text. However, such an interpretation presupposes an active meaning-making by the reader in an act of reading queerly and questioning own prejudices and narrative pitfalls. The same text can be also harshly criticized not only by a conservative reader, who might be shocked by the text, but also by some LGBTQIA+ rights activists, who might see in too many stereotypes of their community reproduced in the novel. Despite the unique thematical scope and narrative decisions, different cultural and subcultural fields may have avoided this novel because it offers an uncomfortable narrative of post-Soviet diasporic lesbianism, or queerness more broadly. This omission is telling for how powerful the cultural norms of sexuality, ethnicity, migration, and mental health are, if even the subcultural discourses cannot allow themselves to discuss such an 'uncomfortable narrative' of queer post-Soviet diaspora.

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