(DE)CONSTRUCTION OF QUEER IDENTITIES BASED ON THE QUEER DISCOURSES IN KAZAKH

ДЕКОНСТРУКЦИЯ КВИР ЛИЧНОСТИ НА ОСНОВЕ КВИР ДИСКУРСОВ НА КАЗАХСКОМ ЯЗЫКЕ

ҚАЗАҚ ТІЛІНДЕГІ КВИР ДИСКУРСТАРЫ НЕГІЗІНДЕГІ КВИР ТҰЛҒА ДЕКОНСТРУКЦИЯСЫ

by

Dulat Ilyassov

A thesis submitted to the School of Sciences and Humanities of Nazarbayev University in partial

fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Eurasian Studies

NUR-SULTAN, KAZAKHSTAN

2020

THESIS APPROVAL FORM
NAZARBAYEV UNIVERISTY
SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

(DE)CONSTRUCTION OF QUEER IDENTITIES BASED ON THE QUEER DISCOURSES IN KAZAKH

ДЕКОНСТРУКЦИЯ КВИР ЛИЧНОСТИ НА ОСНОВЕ КВИР ДИСКУРСОВ НА КАЗАХСКОМ ЯЗЫКЕ

ҚАЗАҚ ТІЛІНДЕГІ КВИР ДИСКУРСТАРЫ НЕГІЗІНДЕГІ КВИР ТҰЛҒА ДЕКОНСТРУКЦИЯСЫ

by

Dulat Ilyassov

NU Student Number: 201761883

APPROVED

by

Dr. Erika Alpert

ON

August 3, 2020

Signature of Principal Thesis Adviser

(DE)CONSTRUCTION OF QUEER IDENTITIES BASED ON THE QUEER DISCOURSES IN KAZAKH

ДЕКОНСТРУКЦИЯ КВИР ЛИЧНОСТИ НА ОСНОВЕ КВИР ДИСКУРСОВ НА КАЗАХСКОМ ЯЗЫКЕ

ҚАЗАҚ ТІЛІНДЕГІ КВИР ДИСКУРСТАРЫ НЕГІЗІНДЕГІ КВИР ТҰЛҒА ДЕКОНСТРУКЦИЯСЫ

by

Dulat Ilyassov

Principal supervisor: Dr. Erika Alpert

Second adviser: Dr. Jenni Lehtinen

External reviewer: Dr. Dan Healey

Abstract

This thesis examines the construction and expression of a queer identity on the example of queer fiction written in Kazakh in modern Kazakhstan. A single work of fiction titled "Renaissance", and written by a young Kazakh man, who identifies himself as gay is analyzed in connection to the platform, on which this work is created and disseminated. The work's connection to the notions of space and time is highlighted, in order to reveal the inner complexities of the queer experience among the Kazakh speaking gay men in Kazakhstan.

The work and its sociocultural prerequisites are analyzed through the use of Foucauldian notion of *heterotopia*. The effect that heterotopias have on identity is studied through the use of Derridian grammatology and Deleuzian notion of rhizomatic connections. Reddit style forums on the VK social media written by and for gay men is studied with the purpose of isolating and examining various processes that are taking place within the Kazakhstani queer community. These forums are then connected to the page, on which the work of fiction under study is published. The thesis traces the metamorphoses of the main protagonist's identity within the story. These traces are found in the language of the text, as well as the interactions between characters and the setting of the story. This analysis resulted in the understanding of queer identity as a dynamic phenomenon.

Acknowledgements

No words can express my gratitude to my thesis advisers – Erika Alpert and Jenni Lehtinen. I thank you for your patience, empathy, and first-class mentorship, without which this thesis would not be possible. I would also like to extend my sincere gratitude to all the professors of Nazarbayev University, each of whom offered my the skills and knowledge, which made this thesis a multidisciplinary work that it is. Special thanks goes to late Dr. Sophia An for encouraging me to take up this topic. I thank Dr. Dan Healey for his indispensable feedback. A separate acknowledgement is merited by all of my research participants, interviewees, and groupmates. Their courage and insight inspired me to write this thesis, and keeps inspiring beyond. A special shout out is due to all the service workers, who provided the countless liters of coffee and beer that stimulated this work.

Table of contents

Chapter 1. Introduction

March 29, 2020, I got an unexpected text from the author of a text that I'd been analyzing for almost two years by then. Using this rare opportunity to ask him some questions directly I tried to prioritize, and ask him the most important questions. So, I asked him: "Do you identify as gay, or bisexual?" He replied: "I think I am neither. I am not interested in either sex. No entirely, but at least for a year already"[1]. At that point, I had already finished this thesis with the assumption that the author was gay, and I was flabbergasted. Then my author just said: "Ok, whatever, just write that I am gay". I opposed that vehemently, urging him not to be defined by me, but rather speak his own truth. He said: "When I wrote the story that you're talking about I was very active among the LGBT. If you asked me then if I was gay, I would say yes".

The overarching question of the entire project was how queerness is constructed and performed in Kazakhstan in general and among the Kazakh speaking, or rather Kazakh writing section of the queer community, in particular. This question informs the direction of the entire project, and the methods used for its purposes. Since language communities are a main focus of my research question, the language performance of queer individuals is justifiably the main object of my inquiry.

The topic of this project, tackling such issues as identity, queerness and liminality, exists in an interdisciplinary space between anthropology, philosophy, literary and queer studies, where each of these disciplines, coming with their own questions and answers, contest each other. However, exactly this contestation lies at the core of this thesis project, as the title hints toward a De-construction of the idea of queerness within a specific community of gay males in Kazakhstan expressed through their writing online.

---

[1]Literal transaltion with the original syntax

This gives us the scope of this project. It is simultaneously very broad and very narrow, since in the example of a relatively small community of homosexual men living in Kazakhstan and writing within a specific time frame, I will be looking for depictions and applications of broad concepts such as identity, body, pride/shame dichotomy and so many more. The research for this project started in the fall of 2018 and was more or less finalized in the spring of 2020. I performed data collection almost exclusively online, on different social media platforms, chat rooms, blogs and web-sites, as that is the space where the queer community of Kazakhstan feels the safest and most true to their selves. Apart from that, I conducted interviews with five young gay men, whose insights helped me interpret and apply the data that I had collected online previously.

Language performance does not happen in isolation, and is affected by a number of non-linguistic factors. Apart from such things as memory limitations and errors that alter linguistic competence, cultural context, the perception of the real or potential audience, and the medium through which language is performed, all affect the performance. Thus, this thesis extensively examines the cultural and media context, in which queerness is experienced and constructed. In order to do that, I will be looking into different spaces online that are either monolingually Kazakh, or bilingual, where people express their opinions in Kazakh or Russian, both of which are the most widely used languages in Kazakhstan to date. It is also important to determine what cultural and economic factors shape the discourse of the mainstream media in Kazakhstan, and how those factors translate into the more marginalized areas of the media, such as queer forums and group chats. The comparisons between the mainstream and queer spaces online leads me to the discussion of politics of visibility. Chapter 2 of this project will extensively focus on these spaces, using the Foucauldian notion of heterotopias and the economy of visibility. The main purpose is to study how visibility is negotiated both within the queer community, and in its relations with the heteronormative mainstream.

Moving further, I would like to place Kazakh queer language performance into this media context, and examine examples of language performance such as fiction more closely. I am interested in the ways how different ideologies and identities get consolidated in one author and his language performance. How different notions such as norm and deviance, or taboo and transgression are reflected in these examples of language performance. Chapter 3 of this project will closely focus on these conflicting ideologies and their resolutions, and the ways, in which they are reflected in writing.

Literature review

Placing this project within a certain discipline may prove challenging, since, as was mentioned before, the topics covered borrow from different disciplines. The belonging of this particular project is to be determined by the methods of data collection, its theoretical scope and the purposes it pursues. In these regards, this is a study of a culture specific to a group of people contemporaneous to me. Although this culture unfolds largely on a "virtual" space, it affect lives of real people, making this project an ethnography of queer populations. It is connected to a wider world of queer ethnography that spans large geographic areas and theoretical perspectives. Within this body of literature, this project's purpose is twofold: 1) to situate the Kazakhstani queer community on the ethnographic maps as a distinct community that is not only defined by its challenges and oppressors; 2) to analyze a non-Western queer community from the perspective of a researcher native to that community.

As I move into the non-Western queer communities, it is of utmost importance to be aware of the terms being used and what meanings those terms carry with themselves. The structures and models of human sexual behavior may be vastly different within different cultures or even within different regions of the same country; e.g. the different gender and sexual hierarchies in Indonesia between the Muslim people with their rigid and patriarchal structures, where masculinity is largely defined by male domination over women and younger men; and the

Bugis people of South Sulawesi island of Indonesia who have a non-binary system of gender identity (with five different gender identities) and which at least according to the Bugis mythology co-exist harmoniously (Boellstorff 2005).

The very understanding of (homo)sexuality is closely intertwined with the French post-structuralist thoughts such as those of Michel Foucault that relate sexuality and power in a very extensive manner (Foucault 2012). Foucault argues that the medicalized definition of sexuality is a tool of regulation of the marginal sexualities within bourgeois societies, which through such marginalization and regulation re-instate the dominance of the 'normal' bourgeois sexualities. The power imbalances within the systems of sexuality often have clear age, class and gender related aspects. The way people manage these imbalances and build their identities within them largely determines their stance in relation to their loved ones, families and the society. Therefore, within the discourse of the global political movement of gay emancipation, fight against the HIV/AIDS epidemic and generally that of human rights, the definitions given to different sexual behaviors and the way in which these behaviors are labeled matter in a substantial way.

However, since they involve many layers of power relations, it is often controversial to attempt to universalize any term pertaining to gender or sexuality. In the academic discourse there exist different opinions about the applicability of Western sexual identity terms to different cultures. They may be perceived as an oppressive Western imposition that indiscriminately erases the indigenous identities and discourses around them. Thus, there appears the discussion between the 'imposition' of sexual identity categories and one of their 'importation'. The main difference between the two positions is determined by the agency of the Western and non-Western cultures and manners in which they interact.

Notions of sexuality and gender in Africa are very heavily affected by the "white gaze" or the perception of white colonizers of their colonized peripheries (Reid and Walker 2005). Some of the misconceptions that were widespread within the colonial attitudes towards the nature of

African sexuality went on to shape modern policies in countries such as Uganda, Malawi, Nigeria etc. (Mbisi, 2011). Initially, Western colonizing powers assumed that Africans were closer to nature and thus exhibited virile heterosexuality, revealing the European constructs about the links between the 'natural' and 'heterosexual', where only the heterosexual behavior was deemed virtuous, natural and automatic, while non-heterosexual behavior was a sign of perversion, thus abominable. Later, within the context of abolitionist movements, the Western sympathizers of Africa re-packaged the same argument to say that Africa was "sodomite-free", since it was untouched by the vices of civilization. The African man was strong and virile, and the African woman was presented as fertile and sexually voracious and all the sexual relations between them had a purely procreative purpose. The myth that all sexual 'deviations' in Africa were performed by Arabs and by those Africans who emulated Arabs in their behavior was initially propogated by the white colonizers, and eventually was internalized by the local formerly colonized peoples. Thus, there was created a mythical image of an African 'manly' man in opposition to first their Arabic speaking neighbors and then to Europe (Dlamini 2006).

Same-sex behaviors, when analyzed within the context of Islamic cultures, are often presented as victims of extremely patriarchal and oppressive structures. Both when discussed by Western and local scholars, the essentialist view of sexuality that considers sexuality to be ever-present in all geographic and temporal locations prevail and overlook constructed nature of sexualities in the Islamic world (Dalacoura 2014). The gender inversion and sexual object choice dichotomies are present in the Islamic understandings of sexuality. The manner in which the Islamic law and medicine dealt with these deviations from the patriarchal norms are often reflected both in the languages such as Arabic, Persian and Turkish and in the historical documents describing such cases of gender inversion. Islamic law considered feminization of a male as a handicap or a disease that had to be cured (Scalenghe 2014). Muslim scholars of the Ottoman period described four distinct types of males that engaged in same-sex activities: *luti* – the penetrative partner in same-sex engagements, who is usually older and has a higher social

status; *amrad* – 'the beardless boy' or a prepubescent youth, who was considered to be in a transitional stage between genders and thus not fully male; *ma'bun* – an adult male penetrated by other males, and who is usually considered to engage in these acts due to moral corruption, this type is the most condemned in the Islamic law; and *mukhannath* – or the 'effeminate' whose effeminacy is considered to be a bodily disfunction, rather than a result of a corrupt soul (Scalenghe 2014).

However, the medical taxonomy of these types of people says little about the sexual desire and its nature. As in most patriarchal and gerontocratic societies pre-modern and modern Islamic cultures implicitly accepted sexual encounters between older men and the male youth as shown in the example of dancer boys in the Middle East and Central Asia (Shay 2006). The phenomenon of dancer boys in this region predates Islam by millennia. The most famous example of it is the story of Bagoas who was a male concubine to the Akhemenide king Darius II and later was given to Alexander the Great as a war trophy. He was described as a dancer boy, who was with Alexander up to the moment of his death (Badian 1958). The image of the dancer boy has been the staple of Sufi poetry all the way until World War I, and even after that it remained in the underground for almost a century. However, Victorian ideals of bourgeois morality in the Middle East and the Soviet ideology in Central Asia ultimately killed off the tradition of bacha dancers, although currently it is still existent in rural Turkey and Afghanistan (Shay 2006).

In many Asian cultures, including those of South, South-East and East Asia sexuality and gender roles are seldom considered as separate (Loos 2009). In Japan of the 90s even the English word 'gay' was understood as a cross-dressing man performing distinctive female roles (Mclelland 2000). With the rare exception of China, in most of Asia sexuality has a very gendered nature. In the Malay language all the words associated with males who have sex with other males describe effeminate men or cross-dressing men (Baba 2001). Usually, only the receiving partner is given a separate category, whereas the penetrating partner is rarely

considered as a deviation from the established gender roles. Among Muslim men in India the act of penetrating another male is not something that would define that person's sexuality or any other permanent characteristic. These acts are not even considered as a 'proper' sexual act and are called *maasti,* which in Hindi means 'mischief' (Khan 2001). However, these identity categories are rarely clear-cut and stable and are being challenged by the Victorian law and modern Westernized psychology, which despite the recent de-colonization measures such as the overturning of the Victorian sodomy laws, still affect the popular discourse. Therefore, the borders established between sexual roles get blurred and force many men, who primarily have sex with other men in an active role to identify themselves with terms that traditionally would not be applied to them.

Another curious example of identity creation is documented by Wah-Shang Chou in the article tackling the issue of the *Tongzhi* in China and other Chinese speaking societies (Wah-Shan 2001). The term tongzhi, which initially meant comrade in Mandarin Chinese, was appropriated by men who have sex with other men to describe their same-sex relations. This word allowed the Chinese homosexuals to get away from the sexualized discourse of gayness and adopt a term that is social rather than anything else, since the term tongzhi is not associated with sexual object choice. This corresponds with how human sexuality is perceived in Chinese societies, as historically sexuality always was a part of a person's social position.

In the light of examples given above, one could claim that the Western understanding of homosexuality and being gay may often seem inapplicable in non-Western societies, as it does not reflect the reality and complexity of sexualities practices in Asia, Africa and other parts of the world. At the same time, it is difficult to pinpoint what Westernized gayness is, since this notion itself is a combination of a medicalized form of sexuality as was formulated by the Western medical establishment such as Alfred Kinsey and the more post-modern interpretations of human sexuality. Post-modern or post-structuralist understanding of homosexuality is often defined by the negation of all the previously existing theories and structures (Halperin 2004).

Thus, even if one can say that Western and non-Western structures of sexuality are not compatible due to the differing importance given to personal subjectivity as opposed to social belonging, gender performance as opposed to sexual object choice etc., calling non-Western sexualities unnegatable and as a result uninterpretable within the post-modern framework is factually wrong.

However, within the trend of 'global queering' Asian societies are emulating the gay rights movements of the West, namely the United States and adopting more Westernized views of human sexuality ("On Global Queering – AHR" 2019). The emergence of modern gayness in Asia is often perceived as an act of neo-colonialism both by scholars and the homosexual individuals themselves. However, the problem with this type of literature seems to be (this is also applicable to the example of Africa) it victimizes those, who accept these modern models and see them as a favorable venue to express themselves both sexually and politically. This type of victimization is based on the assumption that the proponents of 'Western gayness' in non-Western cultures do not have the agency to make the conscious decision based on the social and political appeal of the global gay movement and gives all the power to the supposed Western neo-colonialism (Bereket and Adam 2006).

The discussion of the West/non-West dichotomy highlights the challenges of placing this project within the wider literature. As I discuss different cultural influences that the Kazakh queer community was subjected to, such as the Soviet legacies and the globalized Western values, I do not consider Kazakh queers as distinctly non-Western, and thus, other. By analyzing the ways in which Kazakh queers make sense of their desires and identities, I wish to move beyond the West/East dichotomy. I believe this contributes to the deeper understanding of non-Western sexualities in a globalized, increasingly web-savvy and interconnected world.

Methodology

In Kazakhstan, queer people, as it will become evident further, have a general distrust towards institutions with any authority, including the academia. In addition to that, the strict laws of assembly and overall homophobia of the authorities prevents people from gathering into large groups or organize (Sabitov 2020). Therefore, the entirety of queer expression, except for few outliers such as gay bars and community centers, is online[2]. The data for my project, thus, was collected in online social media groups, personal blogs, websites etc. I knew of the existence of these online sources prior to the beginning of this project due to my personal belonging to the queer community of Kazakhstan. Before I developed an academic interest in queer expression online in Kazakhstan, I was an active user of these online platforms and was familiar with the unspoken rules, vernacular and culture of these spaces.

I believe, my being a young[3] gay man living in the capital city of Kazakhstan, and speaking Kazakh gives me a broader access to marginal online spaces, where queer individuals feel relatively free to express their opinions, desires and talk about their problems. The language barrier and a lack of access to community gatekeepers forces many researchers to resort to superficial examination of LGBT organizations, which, while performing an important function, have a limited appeal among many queer people, who are not engaged in any kind of activism and are largely closeted. I have been a part of this particular stratum of the local queer community since I was a teenager. Thus, I believe, I was capable to maneuver my communications with gay people online, who are very cautious about their interactions with strangers, in a more effective way.

While gathering data for this project I went online into the social media groups and forums that were run by queer people for queer people. I gather data only in those group, which were open to public access. However, no names, addresses or other identification was disclosed in my text. I also participated in group chats, where I let the participants know my purposes from

[2]It should be noted that when I began writing this thesis in the fall of 2018, there was only one gay bar in Astana. By the time the thesis was completed, there already were 3 operational gay bars.
[3]24 going on 25 at the time the project was written.

the beginning, and asked for their permission to take notes on some of the discussions for further use. In addition, I used materials from websites and people, who were willing to be named, and gladly shared their expertise and experiences with me.

However, the process of data collection was not without its challenges. For example, in the aforementioned group chats very few people felt comfortable being observed for academic purposes. In fact, the administrator of one group chat banned me from his chat immediately after I disclosed my purposes, and when I asked for the reasons why he did that, he said: "Only the Jews do what you are doing". I interpreted this answer, after my initial shock from the explicit anti-semitism subsided, as distrust towards not only my authority as a researcher, but also, as my interlocutor interpreted it, my cultural foreignness. Speaking openly about queerness and turning queer people's day to day experiences into discourse, in the eyes of the group chat administrator was something the "Kazakh people would never do". In the end, he added "I sincerely hope that all of the guys in my group-chat will eventually leave tema, (a colloquial name given to Russian speaking gay communities) marry women, and have children. But while they are in tema, I want to keep them away from people like you"[4]. In a similar manner, the author of the short story that I examine in Chapter 3 initially blocked me on all social media, leaving me with no ways of contacting him. Although, later he reached out to me himself, and talked to me, explaining that he was overcome by curiosity. Usually, people were scared away by words such as "исследование"/"зерттеу" (research), "диссертация" (dissertation) and "запись" (recording), since all of these words carry a connotation of control, authority and, to a certain degree, state, which under the Soviet style production of knowledge has long been in charge of all academic activities. As is evident from the example above, despite the fact that I belong to the same group, being a Kazakh speaking gay man, I am still perceived as an outsider in some spaces due to my occupation as a researcher and my ideology as an openly gay man with relatively liberal views towards LGBTQ politics.

---

[4]These are not a direct quote from the group chat administrator, but rather a free retelling by me. I did not feel comfortable recording what he said to me, since he clearly did not want to be recorded.

The main bulk of textual data collected for this project came from two sources: a Reddit style group on a Russian social media platform VK called ГЛШК (Gay and lesbian whisper of Kazakhstan; further I will use the name Whispers for this group) and a blog on the same social media platform called Көгілдір Кітап (Blue Book; this name will be used further). Whispers is bilingual, a vast majority of posts and comments being written in Russian, although Kazakh language posts and comments appear occasionally. A more detailed discussion of Whispers and the type of content posted there will be provided in Chapter 2. Blue Book is entirely in Kazakh and it is run mostly by a single author, a 21 year old young man, who lives in Almaty – the largest city in Kazakhstan, often called "the cultural capital of Kazakhstan". There are texts by another author on Blue Book, who joined the blog later and largely imitates the style and content of the first author. This second author began as a fan of the initial author, and eventually posted his own story about a high-school soccer team, inspired by sports anime (Japanese animated series). However, the story by the second author will not be included into the analysis in this project.

In addition to the textual data, the story "Renaissance", which is analyzed in Chapter 3, was given to a group of 5 gay men ages 18-35 to read and express their opinions about it. The main criteria for being included in this group of interviewees was to be gay and to speak (or at least read) Kazakh. All 5 men are college educated, live in Astana (Kazakh capital) and have a steady monthly income. These men were selected due to their willingness to talk and share their opinions, as well as the logistical convenience, since all of them live in the same city as I do, and some even live on the same university campus. These men were selected to represent the audience for which the stories of Blue Book were written. The problem of my interviewees' representativeness will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 2.

The results of these interviews were used in my interpretation of the text of "Renaissance". While interpreting this fictional story, I used close reading of different scenes that I deemed to be illustrative of the larger discourse that this text represented. Special attention

was given to certain linguistic elements of the text, such as usage of special words, phrases, metaphors and associations. These particular elements were then contrasted with the wider cultural context in which these texts exist.

While I was working with the text of "Renaissance", I developed a peculiar relationship to the text's author. As I mentioned before, the author initially refused to talk to me, and even blocked me on social media, although he did not deny me the access to his texts, as they were accessible to the public on his blog. The vast majority of the work done over the text, as a result, was done without the cooperation of its author and virtually no biographical information about him. This fact gave me a certain freedom from descending into psychoanalysis of the author's persona, and allowed me to focus on the text exclusively. The text was considered to be not only a reflection of its author's intentions (in fact, it was purposefully not considered so). Rather, the text was perceived to be a part of the cultural discourse, to which both I and the author belonged, along with all the other readers, who ever had access to these texts. This fact also heavily influenced the theoretical framework, in which the text was interpreted. The logistical impossibility of reaching the author gave the text a primacy, which grew exponentially as the work progressed. At a certain point, everything was encompassed in text, which became the only thing being researched and doing the researching.

Theoretical framework

Within the framework of this project, texts from different sources e.g. Whispers or Blue book will be analyzed through the prism French critical theorists such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida etc. This creates the question of applicability that these theorists may offer to the inherently Kazakhstani and thus, non-Western context. This issue is addressed in one way or another throughout the entire body of this project, since it became one of the foundational problems from the thesis' inception. The most satisfactory answer to this conundrum is given by a philosopher who also exists in the liminal space between East and West – Gayatri Chakravorty

Spivak. Spivak is concerned with the notions of the Western subjectivity and the role of the subaltern in a world defined by the Western male (Morris 2010). Spivak's essay problematizes the very dichotomy of subject/object and East/West, putting under scrutiny the notion of "giving voice" to those, who cannot speak for themselves. Ultimately, Spivak arrives at the conclusion that the subaltern is defined by her inability to speak. All the speech ascribed to the subaltern by the Western academia or media is nothing but a replacement of the subaltern's speech. This issue will be explored in more detail in Chapter 3.

A similar problematization is present in my position as a researcher and the theories that I employ for analysis. The Westernized understanding of philosophy has become an inalienable part of me as a researcher. The institutions and traditions that constitute my education give me the voice that I employ here, while also imprinting in me all of their limitations and biases. In other words, my attempts to give voice to the voiceless i.e. the Kazakh queer community will inevitably lead to a certain level of substitution of their voices with mine. Trying to isolate the "indigenous" voices of non-Western communities and keeping them clean of Western influences would be an act of insincerity, since the West still remains the measure of all things, as is evidenced by the very term "non-Western". Thus, the resolution of the applicability problem raised above is offered not so much by a justification of Western theories, but by an understanding of the fact that Western theories permeate the entirety of the academia. Alternately, one could say that the true division is not between West and East, but rather between the voiceless and those who speak.

Further, I focus on online spaces in which queer people express themselves, and the structures of these spaces. The usage of spaces in governing people's bodies and their lives is examined in great detail in the works of Michel Foucault, who acts as the main theorist of Chapter 2. The intricacies of the relations between spaces and non-spaces (heterotopias) will be analyzed through the usage of Hegelian dialectics, as I see these different types of spaces to be a reaction to each other. The justification of this method is given in more detail in Chapter 2.

I will also examine the inner goings-on of these spaces. The theoretical shift between chapters 2 and 3 is discussed in the intermediary chapter titles Chapter 2.5. Such a discussion was necessary, as I was dramatically changing the scale of my analysis, narrowing down from large forces that shape our societies to the level of language and the expression of queerness in fiction. Chapter 3 with its scale and the object of analysis required the usage of theorists who focused on the in-between and the beyond of language, such as Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida.

As a result, this thesis relates to many fields, among them queer theory, cultural studies and literary studies, as I analyze fiction produced by queer people and published on spaces that are a product of their peculiar culture. The queer nature of the texts that I analyze (they speak about gay experiences, societal stigmas and the issue of expressing one's desires) keep the entire thesis very queer-centered. I discuss the possibility of queer expression in different spaces and the strategies employed for that expression. At the same time, this project is text-centered, as text is considered the main milieu of queer identity construction and expression. Semantic peculiarities of certain words and phrases, literary techniques used by authors are all used with the purpose of analyzing queerness in the Kazakhstani context.

Ethical considerations

The project should concern itself with two types of ethical problems: confidentiality and misrepresentation. First of all, the statistics on the way non-heterosexual individuals are perceived in different countries around the world show that LGBT are a vulnerable group in Kazakhstan (Badgett, Park, and Flores, n.d.). Therefore, the issues of confidentiality and anonymity are of utmost importance. In many cases, this problem is mitigated by the authors themselves, since most of them write under nicknames or pen-names. Therefore, these authors remain anonymous and their texts will either be translated or paraphrased and cannot be looked up online and be attributed to the author. In all cases, all the names, nicknames and pen-names as

well as any image representation will not be included into the body of research in its original format, with the purpose of preserving the confidentiality of the authors who are subject to this research.

I myself am a gay cis-gender male, thus I am only entitled to speak for that group. Since the politics of identity and personal experience play an important role both in the lives of LGBT individuals and in the philosophical considerations of the science of gay and lesbian studies, the identity of the author is as much a part of this research as any of the participants involved. Therefore, this thesis does not claim to be objective or impartial. In this research, I attempt to be as transparent as possible about my personal biases and political convictions. At the same time, my position as a gay researcher also allows a better access to the source materials, since participants may be more cautious to talk to a researcher outside of the LGBT community. Therefore, the fact that I, as a researcher, belong to the queer community of Kazakhstan may present the thesis as the community's reflection over its own condition and give a certain level of agency to this particular group of people.

Another ethical issue that merits some discussion is the problem of discursive violence. This issue was somewhat touched upon in the section of theoretical framework, where I speak of the influence of Westernized academia in the construction of my voice as a researcher. This influence also creates a certain discursive inequality between me and my research participants. In the end of Chapter 2 I discuss this problem in depth. I compare the relationships between me and the authors of the texts to the relations between fans of cultural products and the "acafans", who while remaining a part of the fandom community, possess numerous privileges. In a similar manner, I have to be cognizant of the privileges I carry as a researcher and be mindful of the discursive violence that I may inflict upon the queer community of Kazakhstan.

Further research

With the purpose of keeping the scope and size of this project manageable, many interesting texts that I came upon, and many aspects of the texts that I used in the project had to

be omitted. Apart from that, many other spaces that queer people use for self-expression such as gay bars, informal and formal meetings, community centers were also not covered in this thesis. The texts used here still merit a psychoanalytical reading with an in-depth focus on the concept of desire. A deeper discussion of the role shame plays in the construction of queer identities and cultures in Kazakhstan and Central Asia also deserves a consideration.

This research could benefit greatly from an expansion of its geographical scope, which should in future include other cities and Kazakhstan, and perhaps, even other Central Asian countries, such as Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan etc. In the context of online spaces, dating boards on different social media, usage of much dating apps as Tinder, Grindr and Hornet could present an interesting research opportunity. As I mentioned before, the queer community of Kazakhstan is a little researched community, with many discoveries yet to be made.

Chapter 2. Online spaces and anti-visibility

In this chapter I would like to talk about slash fan-fiction and other queer themed or queer-oriented genres of fiction as a kind of alternative medium, through which a certain informational product is produced in response to the mainstream media. The main focus of the chapter will be locating the place that fan-fiction and other alternative media products take within the wider media landscape, in particular in the dialectics of high/low culture. I will discuss the motivations that drive the authors of this type of fiction, and the impact it may have on its readers. As a result, I will analyze the ways in which fan fiction creates value. The chapter will also use a series of interviews with self-identified homosexual men, who had been given a story written in Kazakh from a queer-run fan-fiction blog to read, and later, share their opinions about it. These participants are not regular consumers of fan-fiction in general, or fan-fiction in Kazakh in particular. Therefore, they represent an interesting cross-section between the non-fan, or lay consumers of culture products, and queer individuals, who struggle to find themselves represented within the mainstream media. The interviews will focus on the questions of what fan-fiction can give to these readers as a source of entertainment, as well as how it serves as a socially significant tool of representation.

In the analysis of fan-fiction as a medium and the blogs taken as case studies, I will employ critical theories of mass media developed by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their essay *Culture Industry* published in 1944 in their collective work *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Namely, I will use the understanding of mass-produced art as a force of equalization and normalization. Queer media in general, and fan-fiction in particular, will be juxtaposed to this force of normalization, and analyzed as an antagonizing force to the bourgeois culture industry. This antagonism will be examined through the double prism of Jean Baudrillard and Michel de Certeau. On the one hand, Baudrillard's hyperrealism, or its reinterpretation as a heterotopic device of restructuring, will be utilized to make sense of the reordering of knowledge and texts within the space/time of queer fiction. On the other hand, Henry Jenkins' reworking of

the term "textual poachers" in reference to Certeau will be instrumental in transposing the dialectics of culture industry vs. radical media into the realm of fan-fiction, as Jenkins builds his ethnography of fan-fiction through Certeau. Then, Baudrillard and Certeau will be brought into dialogue in the discussion of the politics of visibility, which will be presented as the moving force within the antagonistic relations between mass culture and radical culture. Ultimately, in the dialectical formula of thesis-antithesis-synthesis, the pair Adorno-Horkheimer will present the thesis that is the culture industry; the pair Baudrillard-Certeau will examine the antithesis of subversive radical culture; and the synthesis will be provided in the visibility politics in accordance with Foucauldian heterotopias. At last, this dialectic formula will be juxtaposed to the textual analysis of the next chapter, in order to delineate the limits of the aforementioned heterotopias and examine them critically.

The chapter will cover two distinct online spaces created by queer people for queer people. The blog Blue Book publishes fictional short stories in Kazakh, operates on a Russian social media platform VKontakte, and is read by some 700 subscribers, including me. It has about a dozen active readers, who comment on a regular basis[5]. The bulk of the comments is requests for the next chapter or requests for more overtly sexual scenes. Occasionally, readers comment on their reaction to a given chapter within a story, sometimes taking guesses about the next steps for the protagonist etc. For example, in a story titled "Renaissance", under the chapter where the main protagonist receives the news of his father's death, which starts the third act of the narrative, a reader commented: "When will we have a love story??? My brain hurts from all the action here". Another comment reads: "A very nice story. May the author's talents never run dry". Stories that feature explicit romantic plots get more active engagement. Under the final chapter of the story "The Tripod of Hope", which was written in the style of hurt/comfort fiction, in which the story revolves around one of the characters going through some kind of a trauma with the help of his/her love interest, a reader commented: "Author, you're my hero! However,

_____
[5] I am not among these active readers, who comment the texts. I do not have such an intimate relationship with the texts.

Shyngys was left kind of hanging in the air. He does not have a boyfriend and he is already 25 y.o.! You should write a season 4, because I still wonder whether Sanzhar and Shyngys will end up together…" As is clear from the comments given above, the readers have a sense of ownership over the characters in the story and wish to play an active role in their fates within the story. Readers follow the stories regularly and provide feedback for them.

Another social media group called "Whispers" on the same Russian social media platform has readers and contributors from all over Kazakhstan, plus other Central Asian countries, such as Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. In order to get some detailed information about Whispers, I reached out to Danyar Sabitov – an Almaty-born LGBT activist and one of the editors of the website kok.team, which creates original content for LGBT readers in Kazakhstan. Since kok.team started publishing content in Kazakh, I have been an active participant in the project. That is how I developed a friendship with kok.team's editors, including Daniyar Sabitov. Daniyar has an extensive knowledge of Whispers both as a participant and as a researcher. When developing the concept of his own media platform, he examined the posts published on Whispers, in order to learn about the media demands of the local queer community. Thus, it was imperative for me to ask Daniyar for his expert opinions about the group. I told him about the project I was working on, and asked him to give me an interview, where I would ask some questions about Whispers. In our interview, he said that "Whispers" is a group that creates and spreads content predominantly targeted at male gay readers. Most of the posts are written by readers seeking advice from other readers on topics that range from negative romantic/sexual experiences, rejection within family or wider community, health issues such as HIV and other STIs, etc. Sabitov also noted: "I've got to say that he number of supportive comments has increased quite a bit. Even last year (meaning 2019) the tone of conversation taking place there was much more toxic. All sorts of victim-blaming, slut-shaming etc." A search within the group with key words "HIV" or "AIDS" shows a noticeable shift in the tone of the discussion. For example, on January 30, 2020, an anonymous user posted: "I've noticed a pattern lately, that

people, who actively try to prove that being HIV positive is normal, are usually themselves with HIV. No offense, but this is statistics". HIV/AIDS is one of the most widely discussed topics on the group. Under this post a number of users berated the post's author for his rhetoric against people living with HIV. One user commented: "What statistics are you even talking about? Besides, I have two friends who live with HIV, and they are decent dudes. If I have to "actively" prove that HIV is not a death sentence, I am ready to do it!" In contrast, on December 1, 2018, the community published a post dedicated to the World AIDS Day. The post did not have any of the supportive comments that abounded in 2020. A couple comments read: "Stop advertising AIDS!" This supports Sabitov's observation about the positive shifts on the pages of "Whispers". Occasionally, readers of the group write posts in which they try to contextualize their experiences within the wider LGBT community of Kazakhstan. Although the content in "Whispers" is moderated by group administrators, there's minimal control over the topics of the content. The administrators limit themselves to banning people, who post nudes[6], cause disorder by continuously starting conflicts, although the rule about conflicts is not clear-cut and depends on the administrator's definition. Thus, the opinions expressed on the pages of the group may vary greatly from overtly homophobic to radically queer.

Culture industry as a panopticon

Further, I would like to establish the wider media context, within which the blogs "Blue Book" and "Whispers" exist in opposition to, or as a reaction towards. Apart from arguing about the heteronormative nature of the mainstream media in Kazakhstan, I will also argue that the mass media operates within a particular politics of visibility. This kind of media manufactures a certain type of reality that is marketed towards lay media users through creating an image of "slice of life" authenticity. By telling viewers the stories about their "reality", mass produced media creates a normalized and standardized media market. In arguing this point, the most vivid example is going to be the genre of reality TV, not only because of its popularity among the

---

[6]Whispers administrators define a photo as nude only if genetalia are visible. Pictures of men only in their underwear are allowed to be posted.

viewers, but also because of the genre's claims to represent an image of "reality". Blue Book and Whispers also claim ownership over their own kind of reality, and fill the niches that are ignored within the mainstream media. Thus, an action-reaction relationship is established between the mainstream and radical media, which I will discuss further.

In 2018, a new reality show called "Qalaulym Sen" (You're my choice) debuted on the Kazakhstani TV. The show quickly gained infamy, and soon after its debut it had a large group of fans and avid haters. The show is created in a format of a dating show, with a basic scenario of participants pairing up on the show, and voting every week to exclude some participants. The show has a wide variety of characters, designed to be appealing to every kind of viewer, and shows a very dubious relation to reality. As such, the reality show presents a quintessential example of the Kazakhstani culture industry. In line with the Frankfurt School critics of mass media, I will further analyze this particular sample of media – the "Qalaulym Sen" reality show, as a bio-political phenomenon. A special attention must be paid to the surveillance format that is used in creating the show. As most reality TV, Qalaulym uses two types of camera work – one that films the studio, where the participants along with the show's host discuss what happened in the show; the other is a "secret" camera that films the participants as they interact with each other. In combination, these two types of cameras create an image of a panopticon, where the viewer gains an ability to *see* the participants seemingly at all times. In addition to these cameras, the contestants are also encouraged to use social media such as Instagram extensively to cover their lives outside of the project. Within the concept of the reality show, nothing evades the watchful eye of the viewer. Greg Elmer in his "Panopticon, discipline, control", which was published in the anthology *Routledge Handbook of Surveillance Studies* edited by Kirstie Ball, critically examines the notion of panopticism, and the role it plays within surveillance studies. Namely, Elmer compares the panopticon developed by its original inventor Jeremy Bentham, and the reworking that Michel Foucault gave to the term. The main difference, argues Elmer, is the addition of the Foucauldian understanding of discipline as an *in-situ individuation* that is

practiced through the panopticon. (Ball 2012) In other words, the Foucauldian panopticon functions as a taxonimizer, which defines and individuates all of the objects under its surveillance. Reality TV show Qalaulym functions in a similar manner, when it divides all participants into men and women, and then each category is broken down to different stereotypical types of men and women, such as "a spoiled rich girl", "virtuous country girl", etc. In the news article that was published on the news website nur.kz February 3, 2020, as an exposé of the reality show, one of the former participants of the show says that in the show she was supposed to play the role of a young woman who easily gets upset, and likes to throw tantrums, which was not her real self. (NUR.KZ 2020) This type of young woman is only one of the rather exhaustive cast of different kinds of women showed on the project. For example, the city of origin plays an important role in determining the contestants' characters. On an episode that was uploaded to Youtube on February 14, 2020, a new female contestant comes to the project in pursuit of one of the current male contestants in the show. The moment she mentions that her parents are originally from Taraz, other contestants start chanting a song that ascribes certain traits to women from different regions of Kazakhstan. Lyrics read: "Girls from Shymkent are good kelin (a daughter-in-law). Girls from Taraz are the most beautiful". In addition to that, the project has women wearing hijabs – religious attire, and women in bright make-up and pink nails. The women in heavy make-up and manicured hands are usually the ones who cry the most, fight the most, and generally create most drama. Men get the same treatment, as there are men in tainted glasses and slick coiffures, as opposed to more "traditional" looking men in black jackets and unremarkable hairdos. They also get their in-show classification, such as the "serious guy", "fun guy", and "spoiled guy".

These types of taxonomies claim absolute knowledge of their subjects. This problem is addressed in Foucault's *The Order of Things*, where he uses the term *taxinomia* in order to describe the way how, within the Classical episteme, complex notions get structured, in accordance with the principles of difference and identity (Foucault 2005). The difference in the

foundation of this taxonomization is the main principle of the Classical episteme, and thus, unquestionable. Liminality and vagueness are excluded from such taxonomies, and hidden out of sight. This principle, in application to the mass media, is widely criticized in Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* in which the authors criticize the Weberian notion of instrumental reason, which Max Weber in his *Economy and Society* defines as: "… determined by expectations as to the behavior of objects in the environment and other human beings; these expectations are used as "conditions" or "means" for the attainment of the actor's own rationally pursued and calculated ends"(Weber 1978, 24). In other words, instrumental reason uses objects and other human beings as means to the end of the rational actor, which in this case, is the culture industry. As a result, they claim that the culture industry imposes its own models, depriving the consumers of independent thought. The bourgeois values of order and reason in the form of the culture industry limit the freedoms of lay consumers (Horkheimer, Adorno, and Noeri 2002). The Qalaulym reality show neatly fits the description of the culture industry, which propagates its own order of things, its own taxonomy of types of people through mass production of cultural goods. Thus, the culture industry, in the form of the reality show, perpetuates the episteme based on difference and identity through its taxonomy, making visible only that, which can be taxonomized.

However, there exist spaces where different epistemes collide and collapse. As an example of these spaces, in the introduction to *The Order of Things* Foucault gives an example from Jorge Luis Borges and his Chinese Encyclopedia, in which very real animals and those which only belong to the realm of imagination are taxonomized in the same space, thus collapsing the lines between real and unreal, and the principles that divide them. Foucault calls these spaces *heterotopias* (Foucault 2005).Further in the chapter, I would like to examine Blue Book and Whispers – my examples of queer spaces – as heterotopias, in which the order presented in Qalaulym is challenged and restructured. I will argue that these spaces exist as a

reaction to the mainstream media, and as an antithesis of it, which present and practice an alternative politics of visibility.

Heterotopias online

The author of the blog "Blue Book", while understanding that his blog is ideologically and functionally close to slash fiction, is unwilling to be associated with the genre. In the introduction to his blog, the anonymous main author offers the following lines: "*Fic (fanfic) is usually a short story written by people, who are actively engaged within a certain fan group. The stories in this blog are written not because I am actively engaged in the LGBT community or because I am a fan of it. Rather, I write them drawing inspiration from the real events taking place in my life.*" The lines above present a certain contradiction in the author's self-identification as a creator of a cultural product. While he does call his short stories fan-fiction, he is careful to note that he does not identify as a queer fan, or as a fan of queerness. This duality in the author's self-identification is caused by the nature of the space, where his stories are published. I will argue that the blog Blue Book exists outside of the mainstream media space, the nature of which is dictated by the dialectics of culture industry. Rather, the blog operates in a deviant space, or in a *heterotopia*, where the characteristics of different epistemes are represented simultaneously, which is evident in the author's style of writing and the themes that his fiction covers.

Before further discussing the peculiarities of style and its heterotopic functions within the Blue Book texts, it is important to bring some clarity to its relations to the culture industry. In 1967 Adorno published an essay titled "Culture Industry Reconsidered" as a commentary to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In this essay, Adorno addresses the use of the term mass culture to describe the culture industry and the confusions that such a use may engender. The term "mass culture" may be interpreted as culture that spontaneously emerges from the masses. Adorno is adamant that the culture industry is not that. Rather, the culture industry tailors culture products

31

specifically for the consumption by masses, thus making the masses not its subject, but object (Adorno and Rabinbach 1975). Blue Book in particular and fan fiction in general, in this regard, are mass culture in its former sense, and an antithesis to the culture industry as Adorno and Horkheimer define it.

In the same essay, in defining the culture industry, Adorno writes the following: "[Within the culture industry]… the seriousness of art is destroyed in speculation about its efficacy; the seriousness of the lower perishes with the civilizational constraints imposed on the rebellious resistance inherent within it…" (Adorno and Rabinbach 1975, 2) In other words, the culture industry stifles the culture that emerges from the masses, by imposing its own will and using it as a means for its own ends, while also turning the high art into a product of mass consumption, depriving it of its aura. In other words, for the culture industry the distinction between high and low art is not so important, as long as both serve its rationally calculated ends, thus a fusion of high and low is not a radical thing for the culture industry. Being a reaction to such a culture industry, the heterotopic texts of Blue Book also mirror this fusion of high and low art. In my discussion of the high/low art dualism, I would like to highlight the arbitrariness of such a division, and the fluid and dynamic character of art, which often traverses the lines of such dualisms. However, for the purposes of this chapter and this work in general, I will be dealing with what my interviewees and the masses that they represent, receive to be classical "high art" literature and "lower" literature. The existence of such dichotomies within the texts themselves and the author's treatment of them will also become evident, as we go on to analyze the stories in depth.

As it is clear from the passage given earlier, the author insists on not being affiliated with the LGBT rights movements, and that he does not have any political agenda. However, I will argue in this chapter that the author's activities on his blog, being a reaction to the culture industry and a re-imagination of it within a heterotopic scape of the blog, are radically political. Nathan Rambukkana, in "Is Slash an Alternative Medium?", calls slash networks a queer

heterotopia, referring to Foucault's definition of heterotopias as "… a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Rambukkana 2007, 73). As follows from this definition, the representation, contestation and inversion of the major elements of the dominant culture within the texts in Blue Book will be the main prisms through which the functions of heterotopias are examined. In other words, slash writers create a liminal space outside of the social norms of the dominant culture industry, in order to *contest* these norms by reworking the subject/object structure of the culture industry, thus creating a media that is alternative to the mainstream. Blue Book's author also creates a space, where the models of homosexual relationships are reenacted under different fictional circumstances, *mirroring* (or representing, using the term from the earlier definition) those which we discussed earlier in the analysis of the reality TV show Qalaulym. For example, the region specific characteristics of men and women are present in Blue Book stories as well, like how the two side characters in Renaissance – a story that will be discussed in the next chapter – find relationships difficult, as the fact that one is from Semey and the other from Almaty creates an insurmountable cultural obstacle between the two. The taxonomies of men and women and their types presented in the TV show are *inverted* through queering in the different texts of Blue Book. The queer individual and his (almost exclusively "his" in Blue Book) relationships with gender roles, institutions such as a university or a place of employment are the tools used to queer the imposed taxonomies.

One of my interviewees, a young man in his early 20s, who will further be identified as Arsen[7], noted, after reading one of the short stories from Blue Book, that the world created in these stories seemed utopian to him. Namely, the fact that queer characters could act on their sexuality without ever feeling the need to come out to each other, or to conceal their feelings to each other in fear of being outed, looked like an idealized reimagining of the Kazakhstani society, and its attitudes towards queer people. However, as the interview went on, and we

---

[7] The name of the interviewee is changed for the purposes of anonymity

discussed other aspects of the story, such as the near complete absence of female characters, it became clear that the story is not a utopian reimagining. Unlike a utopia, which is a perfect society, the space/time created by the author of Blue Book is simply different. While it is a site of resistance to the homophobia of the wider society, where queer individuals are deprived of the freedom of expression that the story's characters enjoy, it is also a site of reordering of knowledge production, where different space/times are juxtaposed, thus deconstructing the existing episteme. Utopia, in other words, is the domination of a "good" or "desirable" structure, while a heterotopia is a contestation of all structures. Robert J. Topinka in "Foucault, Borges, Heterotopia: Producing Knowledge in Other Spaces" gives the following definition to heterotopias: "...sites in which epistemes collide and overlap, creating an intensification of knowledge" (Topinka 2010, 55). In other words, they are odd spaces within spaces. Blue Book in this regard may be considered as a Russian nesting doll of odd spaces, as each story, (which, according to the author, is inspired by real happenings in his life), with a little idealization of romantic and sexual relations, takes place within the odd space of the blog itself.

The style of language, in which the stories in Blue Book are written, also illustrates the collision and overlapping of epistemes. When asked about the language of the story, my interviewee Arsen said that he was at times annoyed by the poetic description of the scenery and the excessively highbrow language used to do so. To him, this type of language seemed out of place in a work of fiction that was dealing with such "modern" issues as queerness, and created an impression that the author is trying to seem "more sophisticated" than he really is. The Blue Book author, in his style, tries to imitate classical Kazakh literature, the main bulk of which was written in the 20th century. Written in the modernist tradition of juxtaposing human characters against the might of nature, this type of literature often employed nature as a character in itself. For example, the most prominent example of literature written in this period – Mukhtar Auezov's "The Path of Abay" – starts with a long description of the scenery, where the image of the untamed steppe is used in contrast with the city, where young Abay was studying. In this

example, nature plays the role of a metaphor of freedom and innocence that are reflected in the character of young Abay himself. (Auezov 1977) In contrast, the stories in Blue Book are more focused on the inner conflicts of characters, and nature does not get to play any significant role neither in the plot nor the themes of the stories. However, the descriptions of sceneries in a romanticized manner are included to give the stories an aura of classical Kazakh literature. The language of the Blue Book stories will be discussed in depth in the following chapter, where I will analyze the short story "Renaissance" from the blog.

However, simultaneously Blue Book tries to imitate the genre of serialized TV. For example, the author uses the language of TV, as he calls each chapter an "episode" (*seria* in Kazakh) and puts a TV emoji in the beginning of each such episode to give it a more TV-like feeling. Sometimes, when developing romantic relationships between characters, the author leaves on a cliffhanger, and adds a post-scrip such as "will they end up together, or will fate play its tricks on them? Find out in the next episode". The stories that mimic the plots and themes of popular TV shows, which are considered to be a form of low culture of mass production, yet also mimic the language of classical literature that belongs to the realm of high culture, illustrate that the blog heavily borrows from different cultural sites. As a result, the author challenges the existing order of knowledge production by elevating the low culture to the style of classics and profaning high culture by employing it in fan fiction, and thus deconstructing the binary of high/low cultures. Each of these sites carry a certain ideology with them. For example, according to Theodor Adorno, low, mass culture, or the products of the culture industry, are created to be accessible and easily consumable by the everyman. This production is driven by a profit motive, and does not deliver a deep conflict (Adorno 2013). However, most of fan-fiction is not created to be sold, and is usually not included into the mass culture landscape. Despite the fact that the Western fan-fiction writers are finding new ways of monetizing their work, such as setting up Patreon accounts, fan-fiction in Russian, particularly in Kazakhstan is rarely successfully monetized. Blue Book, in particular is not monetized at all. In his critique of the American public

radio as an example of mass culture, Adorno says that most independent broadcasters are excluded, and branded as "amateurs" (Engelman 1996). Fan-fiction in general, and slash fiction in particular, often gets the same treatment. Even the commercially successful examples of the genre, such as E.L. James' *Fifty Shades of Grey* published in 2011 by Vintage books and started as a fan-fiction to S. Meyer's *Twilight* series, become subject to vitriol, as evidenced by the reaction of the famous British-Indian writer Salman Rushdie, who in his interview to Telegraph on October 9, 2012, said: "I've never read something so badly written that also got published. It made Twilight look like War and Peace" (Irvine 2012).In Rushdie's words, the comic effect of comparing another example of the lower literature such as *Twilight* to the classic example of high literature Tolstoy's *War and Peace,* is used to highlight how both of these works are nowhere near high art, and *Fifty Shades of Grey* is even lower than the low art. The same sentiment was expressed by two my interviewees: Arsen called fan-fiction "unserious literature that is largely considered to be not worthy of attention", while interviewee Nurlan said: "most fan-fiction is written by 20something year old women, who have no idea what same-sex relationships are like". Readers like these question the consumption value of fan-fiction by questioning its aesthetic value and its capacity to represent reality. As a result, they devalue the labor value of this products as well. Thus, fan-fiction blogs inhabit a heterotopia within the capitalist production of culture, deviating from its principles and practically creating a gift economy.

As the monetary value of fan-fiction disappears, new kinds of value have to be created. The author of Blue Book puts in countless hours of work creating his stories, while not asking for any compensation for his labor. The blog does not feature any advertisement and generally does not seek to make any profit. The author's motivation in giving away his labor is self-expression and the support of his community of readers. The price of production of these stories is virtually non-existent, as the author can reach his readers directly, without having to publish his works through traditional venues. The product is also infinitely reproducible. Walter

Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" discusses the democratization of art, as the price of its production falls (Taylor 2007). In this essay, Benjamin welcomes this new trend of mass cultural production, yet he notes the problem that the new medium may radically change the nature of art itself. While Benjamin mostly talked about cinema and broadcasting, in the age of the internet the price of production is even lower, thus bringing the spectators' perception of art's worth down. As cultural products lose their connection to specific location and are easily accessible, the religious and didactic functions of art disappear altogether. Fan-fiction, as a radically devalued cultural product, now has to reconstruct the way in which value is produced.

I will interpret the reconstruction of value by still using the labor that is put into the product. However, I will define the product not as the text itself, but rather the heterotopic space that this text creates, and the contestation of meaning that happens within these spaces. In other words, the value of fan-fiction lies in the total annihilation of meaning, or rather of the meaning currently created by the culture industry. I would like to present the way meaning gets shaken, deconstructed and reconstructed within online heterotopias as, at worst neutral, and at best a positive phenomenon. As the argument of Walter Benjamin about the reproducibility of culture gets extended to the age of television and advertisement, the critical theory of Jean Baudrillard develops it into nihilism within his philosophy of hyperrealism. Baudrillard criticizes mass culture for infinitely reproducing simulations of the real, until the real is not referenced altogether, thus creating a truth that is truer than the truth (Taylor 2007). As a result, Baudrillard paints an Orwellian picture of modern society, where nobody is capable of manipulating hyperreality, since it loses its reference to any knowable reality. In contrast, Anthony King in his article "A Critique of Baudrillard's Hyperreality: Towards a Sociology of Postmodernism" highlights the flaws in the philosophy of hyperreality by pointing to its Cartesian epistemology, which is problematic in its own way. King claims that hyperreality is based on a flawed epistemology, which prioritizes the subject/object or signifier/signified dialectics of meaning

creation. Further, referring to the Heideggerian critique of Descartes, King argues that since all meaning is essentially linguistic, culture engages in a dialectic relationship with itself (King 1998). In other words, meaning is constantly reconstructed in reference to meaning, without ever relying on an objective and transcendental signified. In this regard, fan-fiction, existing as a reproduction of a reproduction, eliminates ~~meaning~~, and reconstructs it anew, continuing the chain of signification further.

Irana Astutiningsih in "The Voice of Fans: Representation of Hyperreality in Fandom through Fanfictions and Fan Activities" claims that hyperreality in fan fiction is created as a result of a semiotic battle between different orders of representation and knowledge creation. In her examples of fan fiction forums and the readers' engagement with the content, she highlights how the perception of the audience is shaped both by the fan-fiction text and the original text that fan-fiction borrows from (Astutiningsih 2018). As a result, the audience perceives the happenings within the fan-fiction text to be real in the universe of the original text, however subversive the themes and plots of fan-fiction texts may be. The act of copying, consequently, becomes an act of (hyper)reality creation. While employing the tern hyperreality as it was developed by Baudrillard, Astutiningsih circumvents the epistemological fallacies of Baudrillard that were pointed at by Anthony King by adapting a constructivist view of reality herself. Similar to Astutiningsih, I would like to use the notion of hyperreality as a process of disruption and subversion of meaning, since Baudrillard seems indispensable in the discussion of textual hyperrealities that compete with original texts in their realness. However, the term hyperreality aids in uncovering the meaning of fan-fiction only partially, because Baudrillard's epistemology, which focuses on the direct signifier/signified relationship between a representation and the object of that representation, omits the socially constructed nature of modes of enunciation that ultimately create the socially sanctioned knowledge. In other words, reality, the loss of which Baudrillard laments, lies within the structures built according to clearly defined ways of

taxonomization or modes of enunciation by Foucault, which themselves are historically constructed and are subject to archeological analysis.

Therefore, the hyperreality interpretation of fan-fiction has to be supplemented by the philosophy of Michel de Certeau and his dichotomy between *strategy* and *tactics*. Henry Jenkins in his book *Textual Poachers: Television, Fans, and Participatory Culture* applies Certeau's term of "poaching" to the practice of fan-fiction (Jenkins 2012). Certeau focuses on the way his "poachers" make visible that which is hidden in plain sight. As Certeau analyzes city spaces and the way citizens find tactical uses of the city space against the city's design, he touches upon the subject of the constructed nature of the visible/invisible dichotomy. For example, citizens may find shorter routes to their destinations that are not supposed in the city's planning, making new routes that were hidden from sight in the city maps and the minds of the city planners. Thus, Certeau's poachers traverse the lines of visible and invisible. Jenkins, applying this term to the way fans treat cultural products, claims that through the practice of fan-fiction production, consumers tactically subvert cultural products and take back control over the narrative. In other words, Jenkins' "textual poachers" also traverse the lines between the visible and invisible within cultural products. The common thread that connects the vision that Baudrillard had of a mass culture and that of Certeau is the notion of control over visibility. Baudrillard's critique of mass culture is based on the statement that simulation of reality renders reality invisible, thus unknowable. Both philosophers focus on the manipulations of reality along the lines of visibility. Further, I will argue that the politics of alternative queer media, such as Blue Book and Whispers, is organized around the dichotomy of visible/invisible. As in the link between Baudrillard and Certeau, these politics engage both the notion of knowability and the tactical use of that knowledge. The radical politics of visibility and its capacity to create new meanings by deconstructing the existing epistemes will be discussed further.

Politics of (in)visibility

Although legal persecution of sodomy was abolished in Kazakhstan more than two decades ago, the popular understanding of homosexuality as a social phenomenon is constructed within the Soviet modernist technical matrix of knowledge creation. From its inception, the Soviet ideology had a clear dichotomy of a "good" and "bad" citizen. "Bad" citizens, who hindered the development of the society, had to be made visible and fixed, in order for the society to function well. Rustam Alexander in his "Homosexuality in the USSR (1956-82)" claims that the persecution of homosexuals was motivated by the Khrushchev and Brezhnev era ideologies of the New Soviet Citizen, which, according to Alexander, was the bedrock upon which rested the social and political stability of the USSR (Alexander 2018). This attitude towards citizens who transgress the societal norms can be seen in online hate-speech on the web of independent Kazakhstan as well. In 2018, International Center for Journalism MediaNet published a report titled "Monitoring the perception, tone, and scope of LGBT coverage on media", which concluded that the news websites create LGBT related original content only in 9% of the time, while the vast majority of articles related to LGBT issues are translations from other, mostly foreign sources. In the same report the tone of social media discussion of these articles is shown to be homophobic, including threats of violence. These comments were characteristic to the "find them and fix them" approach to social deviations, as some were suggesting that gay people are mentally ill, and have to be helped by the society, others suggested that gay people should be sought out and sent out of the country, while others offered to find them and kill them. None of these comments allow queer people to remain unseen and hidden. The visibility is forced upon them and used as a tool of discursive violence.

Earlier in the chapter, it was mentioned that both the author and the readers on Blue Book operate with anonymous accounts. The vast majority of Whispers participants are similarly anonymous. Anonymous accounts manipulate the level of visibility that the users are willing to give to different facets of their identities. Paul Manning in "Altoholics Anonymous: On the Pathological Proliferation of Parasites in Massively Multiple Online Worlds" uses the term

"social alt" developed by Tom Boellstorff, and defines it as a semiotic mediator between the user and the online world, which may represent a single, multiple or no identities, as opposed to an intermediary which represents a single identity (Manning 2013). The anonymous accounts of Blue Book or Whispers readers also act as a mediator between the users and the queer underground of the local social media. In other words, these users exist in the online world not as their "main characters", which have a direct link to the users as they perform themselves offline, but as *social alts,* which, according to Paul Manning, are designed to perform a non-identity, and be seen, yet not noticed (Manning 2013). In other words, the creation and usage of anonymous accounts are directly tied to the construction of partial visibility of the users' identities.

The users' capacity to manipulate their visibility through means of anonymity connects to the nature of heterotopias, which exist both as spaces that can be entered and left with ease, and spaces within which visibilities are disrupted. The manipulation of visibilities is performed both for the agents and the heterotopic spaces within which they exist. The reordering of knowledge within heterotopias is made possible by the disruption of visibilities. Michel Foucault in *Archeology of Knowledge* calls this disruption *rupture d'evidence* referring to the Latin root of the word "evidence", which is derived from the word "videre" or "to see" (Foucault 2012). In "Foucault's Art of Seeing", John Rajchman analyzes the entire epistemology of Foucault along the lines of visibility. Rajchman claims that the restructuring of knowledge that followed the Age of Enlightenment was not caused by the fact that scholars started looking harder at the objects of their investigations, but rather happened because the order of visibilities had changed (Rajchman 1988). In other words, the historical period itself allows to "see" some things, and not others. Alternative media represent both the visible and that which is not supposed to be seen, thus disrupting the epistemological order that was imposed by an institutionally established visibility.

The group Whispers, being a heterotopia in which different epistemes collide, represents various dichotomies of visible/invisible. On the one hand, the overwhelming number of personal stories that vary in their believability turn real or hypothetical experiences of queer people into

discourse. The contributors, by sharing their experiences, map out, spatialize or visualize the types of non-heterosexual sexualities. In this regard, Whispers acts as a kind of a panopticon, which renders all of its participants visible to each other. On the other hand, the anonymous participants are invisible to each other and the external readers. My interviewee Arsen, when asked about his opinions about the group, said that although he himself does not regularly read the content posted on the group, he finds it to be a good "safe space" for many queer people, who wish to express their thoughts and feelings to an understanding audience.

The participants who post on Whispers often have a relatively clear idea about what type of an audience they are communicating with. Sometimes, the authors of posts are willing to give that audience an immense amount of authority over themselves and their lives. For example, a 25-year-old anonymous man published a post on Whispers asking for mental health advice. He starts his post with the sentence "I know that the majority of people sitting here are well-educated, knowledgeable people. Thus, I hope that you will understand my situation". Further, the author goes on to describe his tendencies for self-harm. It is clear from the text of the post that the man is unwilling to seek professional help with his situation, in fear of becoming visible to the mental health professional, who, undoubtedly, will exercise authority over him. Instead, the young man wants to become visible to the institution of his own creation, an institution of "well-educated and knowledgeable men on Whispers".

In another case, a gay man who doesn't disclose his age or any personal information posted a lengthy text about prostitution within the queer community of Kazakhstan. He also seems to have a clear idea about the general constitution of his audience, as he presumes the kind of reaction his post will engender by saying "I will probably get a lot of attacks from you for saying this, but…" Further, he goes on to question morality of having sex for money, and later, discloses that he himself pays for sex. The man is willing to disclose a lot of very intimate information about his sexual life, as he comes with a plea to the court of public opinion on Whispers. If, in the first case, Whispers played the role of a mental health professional, in this

one the group acts as a panel of jurors. In other words, Whispers participants have created a society within a society, which mirrors many institutions of the mainstream. It is, in a sense, an anti-society, where gay men escape the institutionally imposed visibility within the mainstream, yet reconstruct those visibilities among themselves. The type of visibility that is constructed within Whispers and groups like it, thus, could be termed an anti-visibility.

The politics of anti-visibility involve cloaking reality for tactical purposes. In other words, participants of Whispers and Blue Book create a hyperreality by poaching elements of the reality imposed upon them. Therein lies the value of this content, that it offers alternative visibilities, alternative knowledge, and as a consequence, alternative history to its readers. The short stories published on Blue Book, being a type of art lower than low art, exists in an alternative matrix of knowledge creation. This new knowledge is created through establishing knowledge-creating institutions that are themselves new, but often mirror existing institutions. As Foucault suggests, a mirror is simultaneously a utopia and a heterotopia, since the image in the mirror is virtual and non-existent, yet it reflects only that which exists in the real world (Rajchman 1988). Hyperreality, that for Baudrillard was a harbinger of the death of meaning and a profanation of reality, becomes a liberation from the oppressive nature of the same reality for queer people, since anti-visibility, similar to hyperreality, creates new truths.

Limits of heterotopias

Four young men that I interviewed for this chapter told me that they either do not read Whispers at all or try to limit their exposure to this group to a certain degree, while only one reported being on the blog regularly. One of the reasons given was that the discourse of Whispers was excessively "toxic". Namely, Nurbek noted that Whispers did not welcome women, transgender people, or Kazakh speaking individuals. Although, he noted that this was his impression five years prior to the timing of the interview. Another interviewee used a word *mambetniki* that would roughly translate as "hillbillies" or "rednecks" to describe the Whispers

participants, as most participants lived in different smaller cities and towns around Kazakhstan, as opposed to the main cities of Almaty and Astana. The word *mambetniki,* which my interviewee used in Russian, used to be a derogatory term used against nomadic peoples of Central Asia by Russian settlers. Later, it turned into a derogatory term that is used by city dwellers of any ethnicity to describe people from rural areas or small towns. The interviewee said that this was the reason why he could not relate to most of the content published on the group, and, generally, did not find it useful to himself. Both men to certain degrees referred to the high levels of internalized homophobia within the group's discourse. However, both were careful to note that there are people who need these groups as safe spaces.

It is clear from what my interviewees expressed that groups such as Whispers do not act as a safe space for all queer individuals living in Kazakhstan. The words that they used referred to certain linguistic, ethnic, and even class considerations, which caused their distaste for Whispers. Often, similar sentiments can be found on the pages of Whispers itself, as people lamented the frequent usage of profanity, prevalence of explicitly sexual content, and the frequent appearance of online trolling, bullying, etc. This brings us back to the discussion of heterotopias as spaces explicitly distinct from utopias. Examples of alternative queer media like Whispers, while disrupting existing matrices of knowledge, essentially remain an oversized closet, or a collection of closets.

The discourse of the "closet" as a space of confinement for queer individuals takes a central role in the discussion of queer rights. In *Epistemology of the Closet,* Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points at the fact that all oppression is structured differently, and thus intersect in complex embodiments (Sedgwick 1990). Closets as symbols of that oppression also draw different lines, which, although overlap frequently, remain distinct. The lines of these closets, as described above, can be drawn along ethnic or class lines. The anxieties about the blurring of these lines can be traced both on Whispers and Blue Book, as well as the answers given by my interviewees. For instance, in the following chapter, while analyzing the text "Renaissance", I

will discuss the importance that the author gave to the fact that his protagonist speaks, or at least is learning English. In the same chapter I will refer to the symbolic meaning of English as a gateway to middle class life. In another example, roughly a month after our interview, Arsen reached out to me with his concerns about the "insightfulness" of his answers, and he did use the word *insightful* in English, while mostly texting in Russian. Believing that since he speaks English, and is exposed to the Anglophone media, his understanding of the given texts might be compromised and inauthentic. He recommended that, perhaps, I should find people who speak only Kazakh, and thus, are protected from the influence of other non-Kazakh factors. In other words, Arsen convinced himself that he doesn't belong in the discourse being developed on Blue Book, and that his closet is separate from the closet of the author. Foucault used the metaphor of pirate ships as heterotopias, since on pirate ships state laws get suspended, and the crew is free to redraw the moral code of their conduct (Rambukkana 2007). However, it is important to note that rich and middle class citizens seldom end up on pirate ships. In a similar manner, the "ivory closets" of bourgeois queers may prevent them from getting aboard the queer heterotopias such as Whispers and Blue Book. The anti-visibility politics of upending the existing structures may often threaten the existing identities that queer individuals live with. These identities may include ethnic or class identities.

As these heterotopias are threatening to class and ethnic identities, they may also be threatening to women and transgender individuals. Although Daniyar Sabitov pointed at improvements in the tone of the discourse in Whispers in the later years, high levels of misogyny and transphobia remain. For example, on January 21, 2020, an anonymous user posted in Kazakh: "Terrible how many trans people there are these days! Guys, at least do not lose your male qualities". In the dating section of Whispers announcements like "no femmes", or "I am a manly man, and looking for the same" abound. Many of the patriarchal models that define the mainstream society that oppresses these individuals are carried over into these odd spaces as well. As the constitution of Whispers remains overwhelmingly male, incidences of toxic

masculinity which manifest itself in femmephobia and transphobia are commonplace. As is evident from the examples given above, these heterotopias, despite being safe spaces for certain individuals and presenting with freedoms that they cannot find elsewhere, have their own inner contradiction and dissonances.

The complex and fluid nature of heterotopias makes examination of them immensely challenging. Apart from the discussion of positionality that I presented in the previous chapter, here I would like to discuss the epistemological challenges that heterotopias carry. One of the issues that merit discussion is the notion of discursive power that I, as a researcher, have. These problems of power are widely examined in fan theory, in relation to the interaction between the fans and producers of certain cultural products. Derek Johnson in his "Inviting Audiences In: The Spatial Reorganization of Production and Consumption in "TVIII" highlights the way in which fans are invited into spaces of culture production, yet never given ownership over those spaces. For example, TV shows may organize fan-fiction competitions, where the creative work that the fans do is either not compensated at all, or compensated with symbolic gestures (Johnson 2007). In other words, the creative energies of the fans, as well as their consuming powers, are exploited by the culture industry, almost as if the industry was parasitizing on the body of the masses. In his 2013 documentary film titled "The Pervert's Guide to Ideology", directed by Sophie Fiennes, Slavoj Zizek offers his interpretation of the popular 1997 film by James Cameron "Titanic". There Zizek claims that the upper classes, symbolized by the character of Rose, who literally travels in the upper level of the ship, appropriate the life energy of the lower classes in the image of Jack. The eventual death of Jack to the end of the film is presented as inevitability, as only through consuming him could Rose regain her will to live (Fiennes 2013). The appropriation of fan works by studios is reminiscent of these power dynamics, which are also reflected in my use of the content created by the dwellers of Whispers and Blue Book.

While having unobstructed access to these spaces and being welcomed there as a queer individual, my access to education and alternative locations such as academia, where, arguably,

wider freedoms are accessible, makes a certain level of discursive violence inevitable. In agreement with the concerns of my interviewee Arsen, who worried about the effect that his exposure to Anglophone media may have on his perceptions of the fiction published on Blue Book, I also carry my own ideologies and structures into these heterotopic spaces, restructuring them around myself, and, ultimately, appropriating them. Katherine Larsen and Lynn Zubernis in their *Fan Culture: Theory/Practice* address a similar problem, referring to their position as both fans and academics. Credentials that are made accessible by their position within the academia gave Larsen and Zubernis access to the spaces that are kept beyond the reach of regular fans, much to their dismay. Thus, they refer to the term *acafan*, meaning an academic, who studies fandoms, but who also identifies as fans themselves, in their attempts to address these power imbalances between them as academics and the fans, who were subjected to their academic gaze (Larsen and Zubernis 2011). The term *acafan* blurs the lines between the researcher and her research object, making the academics a part of the culture they are observing. This raises questions of inclusion and academic gaze, shifting the positions of the subject and object, and allowing power to freely move between them. In a similar manner, I belong to two distinct spaces, which carrying differing levels of discursive power, since the heterotopias I research are located on the margins, and the academia has the power of legitimate interpretation. Unlike Blue Book's author, who claims that he "is not a fan of LGBT", I am, indeed, a fan of all things queer, while queer remains my object of research. This fact makes me an acafan too.

However, it is important to put Larsen and Zubernis in conversation with Derek Johnson, and look at the acafan critically. Larsen and Zubernis treat the acafan as an entity with special epistemological powers, which allow them to not only better relate to their researched objects, but also give them better capabilities at representing the community, which they are giving a voice to. Johnson, on the other hand, is careful to note that despite the amicable facade, the meaning creating industries, which I will argue academia is one of, will have more power and control over production, at the end of the day (Johnson 2007). In other words, Johnson's critique

47

allows us to see acafan as, first and foremost, a labor relationship, in which the more powerful will exploit and appropriate the labors of those with less discursive power. The *aca-* in acafan will always prevail, since this part of the word makes the researcher a speaking subject, thus giving her an upper hand in the power imbalance.

The problem of power imbalances directly leads to the next limitation in researching heterotopias. This limitation stems from the nature of heterotopias as spaces, where different epistemes collide and get restructured. Namely, when these dynamic and complex spaces are observed externally, they collapse into the episteme of the observer. In other words, in my work I freeze queer heterotopias within a certain space and time. Jorge Luis Borges often used mirrors as a metaphor for heterotopias, since mirrors both reflect and distort images that they come into contact with (Foucault 2005). If Whispers and Blue Book are both mirrors in their heterotopic qualities, my description of them is but a photograph of a mirror, which reflects the photographer himself. For example, on an average day Whispers posts roughly 40-60 posts, each of which is commented by an average of 20 people. The day is concluded by a "Nightly Chat", which collects more than 1000 comments each night. Each of these posts and comments reflect radically distinct opinions on a wide range of topics, making Whispers different on any day an observer may access it. Similarly, new stories are being written on Blue Book, as I am writing this text, often following the same recurring characters, whom the readers and the author want to see in different fictional contexts. As a result, the same character may assume different functions and roles from story to story. The author often experiments with genres and lengths of his stories, as a melodrama that takes place in a college is written in three chapters, each of which contain 15 episodes on average, while the horror/detective, taking place in a hotel, spans only 18 episodes. Such a variety and dynamism seems to escape examination, leaving my examination to be a mere snapshot of these spaces.

As I move away from the wider cultural context, in which heterotopias are located, and try to take a closer look at these spaces from within, the volatility of heterotopias become a

major challenge. In the next chapter, when I go deeper into the heterotopia that is Blue Book, and analyze a story from it, the methodology used in this chapter will prove to be obsolete. The dialectics that I used in the current chapter, juxtaposing queer heterotopias to the mainstream media spaces prove useful in the examination of large structures, such as the culture industry. However, as I go inside the heterotopias, it will be impossible to find a clearly defined thesis that engenders an anti-thesis, since the characteristics of heterotopic spaces are ever-changing. Therefore, the next chapter will be written through prisms of Derridean deconstruction and Deleuzian *nomadic science,* the use of which will be discussed further.

Chapter 2.5 Into the heterotopias

As I am dealing with a fictional story in chapter 3, the idea of heterotopia, which was discussed in-depth in the previous chapter, will be translated into the plane of written texts. As a result, in the following chapter a certain shake-up in the vocabulary will occur, and this shake up is guided by the notions of *text* and *representation*. Previously, I mentioned that the dialectic method will be inadequate for the in-depth analysis of heterotopias, for the reason of there not being a clearly discernible thesis within the heterotopic texts of Blue Book. The term *heterotopia* was instrumental in the previous chapter, since I talked about the nature of these spaces in comparison to the wider media context, and the term described heterotopias in relation to other spaces external to them. In chapter 3, I go inside the heterotopias, and attempt to examine their internal structures. Therefore, the term heterotopia further will be replaced by terms such as "in-betweenness", "liminality", and at times, when appropriate, "heteroglossia". I believe these terms will aid in divorcing the heterotopia from its external context, and allow me to better see its internal elements. In other words, these terms serve me as a microscope would serve a biologist, who wished to examine life at a different scale. However, the change in terminology does not rid me of the problem of representation, which I first mentioned at the end of the previous chapter. The problem of representing liminal spaces in text, be it my text within this project or the Blue Book text that will become the object of analysis, runs through the entire discussion of the construction of queer self. Thus, the main purpose of this liminal chapter is to address several methodological issues that will be of utmost importance in my upcoming analysis. Namely, I want to justify the use of Derridean deconstruction and Deleuzian nomadic science, and how they are applied in the following chapter, since I hinted that these names would be the potential solution to the problem of representation.

The shift of theory to a different plane, in the context of my thesis, has a double meaning. First, I shift from analyzing media structures and products and their relationship with the "society", wherever the lines of which may be drawn, to a fictional text created in the mind of a

single author. At the same time, I shift from the plane of the "reality of living people" to the "reality" that only exists within a text. When I move from one object of my examination to another, this movement has an element of scale to it, as if I go down from general to particular. However, it will become increasingly clear as I go further that this shift is never quite complete, or rather that this wasn't a shift to begin with. In the following chapter I wish to challenge such binaries as general/particular, mind/body, and signifier/signified, since these binaries always carry within themselves a hierarchical and linear structure – a structure that will do a disservice in my study of heterotopias and fail to give a faithful representation, since, as was mentioned before, within heterotopias these structures collide and collapse.

I think it would be appropriate to mention here that in the progress of my writing, chapter 3 was produced earlier than chapter 2, and the discussion of which one should be given which number went on for a while. Eventually, the chapter, which will be laid out from here onwards, was designated a number "3", yet it still contains *traces* of a chapter "2" that comes before numerically. The reason I mention this is to illustrate that the "naturally" linear movement from general to particular (or vice versa) is not necessarily always presupposed, and that the two parts of the thesis do not engage in a clear causal relationship with each other. Rather, these two planes exist within a wider *plane of immanence,* each existing as *becomings,* and turning into *beings,* when confronted with each other. This fact is mirrored in my object of research as well, and the same vocabulary is to be used at every level of my analysis in pursuit of representation. This vocabulary, and the confrontation between the notions of *immanence* and *transcendence* is exactly the reason why I need the guiding hands of Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida moving forward.

In *The Non-Philosophy of Gilles Deleuze,* Greg Lambert says: "In taking up the critique of Western philosophy after Descartes, Deleuze is not far removed from Derrida, although each express the critique of representation in radically different terms" (Lambert 2002, 41). In this, Lambert means that the difference between the two lies in their approach to representational

knowledge, since unlike Derrida, Deleuze attempts to grasp that which is external to the plane of immanence – a pre-linguistic plane, in a sense. This attempt in Deleuzian thinking is termed *nomadic science*. Yet, for the purposes of this thesis and the chapter that follows, Deleuze and Derrida are used to clarify each other, and approach the notion of immanence from two different perspectives. For my manifold purposes in this project (*manifold* meaning both "numerous" and "containing many folds" in a topological sense), which include an examination of heterotopias, unfolding the construction, i.e. creation of the queer Self, and untangling the web that connects space, time and body, it is important to both arrive at the impossibility of transcendence through Derridean deconstruction, and to decipher through Deleuze the process of creation of the Self from the standpoint of the creator.

In his "The Vertigo of Immanence: Deleuze's Spinozism", Miguel de Beistegui writes that the thread of immanence runs through Deleuze's whole body of work and serves as a source of his thinking (Beistegui 2005, 80). Immanence, apart from its dictionary meaning of "indwelling" and "inherent", specifically within the Deleuzian thought, evades definition. Beistegui even doubts whether Deleuzian immanence can be identified as a concept, since it is not an immanence *to* the substance, meaning that it dwells within the substance, but rather immanence is the substance itself. For the purposes of this thesis, I will stick to the understanding of immanence as a rejection of the existence of a thing external to Being, the word *external* covering both the before and after of Being. Thus, Being is not created by an external and transcendental force, but rather creates itself, acting both as the creation and the creator. In application to the story from Blue Book this Deleuzian understanding of Being will aid in the deconstruction of the queer self – the ultimate goal of this entire project.

On the matter of deconstruction, the way one repeats that everything within the tradition of post-structuralist thought "escapes definition" may be infuriating, yet deconstruction does just that. Deconstruction is a rejection of binaries, yet not quite. Deconstruction is also a refutation of the metaphysics of presence, yet not quite that either. In fact, Derrida himself wrote more about

what deconstruction is not, or rather what it ought not be. In Derrida's "Letter to a Japanese Friend", which was addressed to his Japanese translator, he wrote:

> *To deconstruct was also a structuralist gesture or in any case a gesture that assumed a certain need for the structuralist problematic. But it was also an antistructuralist gesture, and its fortune rests in part on this ambiguity. Structures were to be undone, decomposed, desedimented…* *(Derrida, 1983, 2)*

The ambiguity that Derrida addresses here is both deconstruction's essence and its *telos,* or purpose in being. In the introduction to his *Strategies of Deconstruction: Derrida and the Myth of Voice,* Joseph Claude Evans says: "… [D]econstruction is not something one does, it is something one can become aware of" (Evans 1991, xvii). In agreement with Evans, I try to be aware of deconstruction, when I study the play of space and time in the text that I analyze. It permeates my thought when I link space and time to body as well. This awareness brings about the terms such as "in-betweenness", "liminality" and "heteroglossia", since in flipping binaries, my analysis will inevitably be left somewhere in-between. However, the most important function given to deconstruction in this project has to do with transcendence. In "Of Grammatology", Derrida defines modern understanding of grammar as being driven by "the exigent, powerful, systematic, and irrepressible desire for a "transcendental signified" (Derrida 2016, 49). By transcendental signified, Derrida refers to a meaning which exists outside of any system of signs and ends the reference from sign to sign (Wood 1979, 22). Through a Heideggerian critique of Being as presence, Derrida untethers the sign from the concept of presence by prioritizing writing, and its relations to time. This is the moment that Lambert talked about, when he said that Deleuze and Derrida are not far removed from each other (Lambert 2002, 41), since through this untethering Derrida exposes the metaphysically presupposed organization of time, which assumes an external beginning, an origin of sorts. Since said untethering eliminates the requirement for such an organization of time, it also eliminates the need for a transcendental signified. Thus, I arrive at the collision of immanence and transcendence, which is instrumental in chapter 3.

Both in its original Heideggerian *Destruktion* and its Franco-English Derridean rendering *deconstruction*, the term has in its etymology a meaning of undoing and destruction. This, quite understandably, may lead to the conclusion that I have the intention to "destroy" my author's text through the execution of a deconstructionist reading to it. Derrida himself addresses this problem in the following passage:

> *Let it be said in passing how surprised I have often been, how amused or discouraged, depending on my humor, by the use or abuse of the following argument: Since the deconstructionist (which is to say, isn't it, the skeptic-relativist-nihilist!) is supposed to not believe in truth, stability, or the unity of meaning, in intention or "meaning-to-say", how can he demand of us that we read him with pertinence, precision, rigor?... The answer is simple enough: this definition of the deconstructionist is* false *and feeble...* (Derrida 1988, 146)

Derrida himself warns against the nihilism that may follow a misunderstanding or a non-understanding of his deconstruction. Thus, as with the hyperreality of Baudrillard in chapter 2, I would like to perform a positive, or even an optimist deconstruction in the chapter to follow. David Wood in his "An Introduction to Derrida" says that the politics of Derrida are "not inconsistent with Marxism" (Wood 1979, 18). In other words, Derrida's writing is not without a revolutionary rigor, which I try to emulate to the best of my capabilities, since the object of my research demands nothing less than that.

This liminal chapter is to be considered both a detour from the main narrative of the thesis and a bridge that connects the two last chapters. I found it necessary to include it, in order to set up the politics and the mood of the chapter to come. A similar purpose is given to chapter 1, which also aims to explain, unfold and presuppose the chapters that follow. However, if my thesis were a Sophoclean play, chapter 1 would be akin to dramatis personae, whereas the present part is a chorus song. Jacques Lacan in his seminar on "The Essence of Tragedy" says of the chorus: "Your emotions are taken charge of by the healthy order displayed on the stage. The Chorus takes care of them. The emotional commentary is done for you..." (Lacan 2013, 252). In a sense, chapter 2.5 is given the same task. Now, that I have defined what is and what is not

deconstruction in the context of my thesis, have discussed Deleuzian nomadic science, and have

also set up the vocabulary that will guide the next chapter, there's nothing left but to transition.

Chapter 3. L'identité soufflée: (de)construction of the queer self in gay fiction in Kazakh

The short story Renaissance (*Ренессанс* in the original Kazakh) talks about the adventures of a young man – Ali, who recently graduated from high school in his provincial hometown – and moves to Almaty – the largest city in Kazakhstan. Once in Almaty, Ali starts working in a hotel owned by his father's old friend. Working there, he meets his future love interest – Abylai, who also works in the same hotel as a waiter. The hotel gives Ali a room to live in, and the very first night he is in his room, he starts hallucinating and having nightmares. Ali quickly realizes that the hotel has a lot of secrets hidden within its walls, and those secrets are closely related to him personally. These secrets become the main driver of the story's plot. Along the way, Ali teams up with his love interest Abylai and another man, who had been living in that hotel in disguise, dressed as an elderly woman. As this team starts unearthing the hotel's secrets, Ali finds out that the hotel once served as a prison for young women run by his father and his friend – the hotel's owner. These young women were impregnated by the two, and their children were sold immediately after being born. One of these young women was Ali's mother, who died in childbirth, and whose spirit started haunting the hotel. Ali's father previously developed feelings for his mother. Motivated by those feelings, Ali's father gets him away from the hotel, and they move to the small town, from which Ali arrives in the beginning of the narrative. Once the dark history of the hotel is discovered, Ali and his friends notify the authorities about it, and the owner gets arrested. It is important to note here that before publishing the final chapter of the story, the author addresses his readers and confesses his inability to finish the story. The author refers to his inexperience in working with this particular genre, and a general fatigue. He then concedes, and agrees to give the story an ending "only out of respect to his readers". In the final chapter, all the conflicts are hastily resolved through erasure, and two conflicting endings are given: one, in which the hotel gets appropriated by the government after the owner's arrest, and another, in which the protagonist buys the hotel, and

becomes its owner himself. This duality of endings and the impossibility of the conflicts' resolution will further be interpreted as another metaphor which communicates the queer self.

One of my interviewees – Dimash – noted that the story's plot was "all over the place". He lamented that "Renaissance" lacked structure, and it was at times difficult to follow what is happening. When asked about the topic of queerness in the story, Dimash said that queerness was not communicated well, since the protagonist never was written as thinking about his identity in a clear text. I argue that this miscommunication or misrepresentation of the queer Self, which was so insightfully noted by Dimash, indicates the elusion/illusion of the queer Self, which is spirited away at the moment of its enunciation. In other words, Identity is never quite captured in the text; it is always piercing the text in different locales, always in between states and always in motion, folding into hybrids, and unfolding into becomings. In the story, this motion is communicated through such plot elements as coming-of-age, parents and family origins, trauma related to family, and anxieties associated with alienation and creation of a Self. The story is told from the third person perspective from the protagonist's point of view and all of the main themes are played out in his experiences and actions. The phenomena listed above are described through the usage of dialogue, metaphorical language and narrative devices such as introduction of side characters, and the use of supernatural elements like ghosts, clairvoyance, etc.

The in-betweenness of the protagonist's position and the hybridity of his Self are communicated all throughout the story through different means. For example, we begin the narrative when the protagonist had graduated from school, but hasn't gotten into college yet. This motivates the main character to start working at the hotel, which is given different names throughout the story, such as *Grand Blue* or *Rubin Plaza*. Although, the author uses two different names for the hotel, both of the names are in English and are written in Latin script in an otherwise Kazakh text that uses Cyrillic. Both of the names are there to communicate the foreignness and the otherness of the place. Given what an important role the hotel itself plays in

the novel, this type of othering cannot be anything but deliberate. From the first lines of the story the reader is bombarded with depictions of opposites, as in the opposition of a big city and a provincial town, high school life and young adulthood, a Kazakhstani city and the distinctly foreign named hotel that our protagonist works in. For example, here's the first ever sentence of the story: "Жайма-шуақ жаздың маусымында Алматының аспанын қара бұлт торлап..." (In the warm and sunny summer season, Almaty's firmament was draped with dark clouds...) The first words give such an opposition, it is frankly oxymoronic. The word "жайма-шуақ" in direct translation means "clear", "sunny", whereas "қара бұлт" is "dark clouds". The protagonist is always positioned between the aforementioned opposites, while never fully belonging to either of them, always existing as a hybrid. The image of dark clouds in the warm and sunny season, and the usage of two directly antonymous words, immediately put the protagonist in a state of not-being-at-home and stepping into the realm of the uncanny.

The author does not address the protagonist's inner conflicts and anxieties about his sexuality directly anywhere in the story. However, these anxieties are communicated through usage of symbols and metaphors. I argue that positioning the protagonist between the numerous opposites communicates the anxieties of existing outside of the male/female binary. The protagonist, himself being a man, describes his love interest wearing a waiter's uniform as "like a groom ready to start a family", while positioning himself as his partner. As in the dominant discourse "groom" exists only in relation to a "bride", the protagonist gives himself a female role. Thus, he makes himself neither a man nor a woman, moving beyond the binary or outside of it. I also argue that the author uses a sort of a "language of hybridity", in order to depict this hybrid nature of his protagonist, and of the queer identity in general, as it is performed in the Kazakhstani society.

The creation of the queer as a hybrid has a long history rooted in colonial discourses. Michel Foucault argues in his *History of Sexuality* that historically, the very being of the queer or a non-heterosexual subject was created 'as a species' in the newly industrialized nations of

Europe through medicalization and state control over sexuality (Foucault 2012a). This species was created as an "other", who lived in disguise among "us", and was indeed of "us". This image of sexually deviant subjects was then disseminated into other parts of the world by means of colonization. In her *Affective communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and The Politics of Friendship,* Leela Gandhi examines the history of coupling between heteronormativity and the notion of being civilized (Gandhi 2006). She argues that the increasing control over sexuality through the institutions of family planning and medicine for the purposes of the rapidly industrializing economies solidified the exceptional importance of "sex for procreation only". All other models of sexuality were deemed to be less "natural", and thus, more associated with less civilized cultures and peoples, making sexual marginalization a part of the colonial projects. Thus, the queer was solidified as a perpetual Other, and bundled together with all historical Others, such as women and colonial subjects.

This association of the homosexual with the other is present in the history of post-Soviet regions as well. Historian Dan Healey's *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia* establishes the links between Western medicalization of sexuality, its implementation in Tsarist Russia, and subsequently, its manifestations in Bolshevik views towards homosexuality. Namely, Dan Healey notes that homosexuality after the revolution was associated with the Russian-Orthodox clergy and Central Asian men, as these "undesirable" sexual activities indicated the backwardness of these groups (Healey 2001). Mass education and the promotion of atheism were supposed to eradicate homosexuality as a remnant of less civilized times. The legislative imposition of these norms in the form of anti-sodomy laws was adopted by all of the Republics within the USSR, including Central Asia. In Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, the laws prohibiting same-sex relations are in use as of the time this thesis project was written. In Kazakhstan, a similar law was repealed as recently as 1998. This illustrates how the Sovietized understanding of homosexuality, or in fact, any sexual activities without the purpose of procreation, were

internalized by the population of the Soviet Kazakhstan as well, and people who identify as gay in independent Kazakhstan are still operating very much within this discourse.

However, the "other" can only be an "other", when it's voiceless. One can never narrate one's own story from the perspective of the other, as the narrating agent will appropriate the space and time of narration, homogenize them and present them to the reader as intelligible. This process, where the "other" assumes the role of a speaking subject, inevitably involves the creation of "us" that includes the narrating and the narrated selves. In fact, since the subaltern "other" can never speak, as was argued by Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak, the representation of the subaltern by the author's authority is impossible without a certain level of substitution (Nelson and Grossberg 1988). The author, as a gay man telling the story of a gay man, is simultaneously an "other" and the "Subject". In narrating his story, he creates the space-time or the chronotope, within which the story will make sense. Bakhtin defines chronotope in "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel" as "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (Bakhtin 1981). In accordance with Bakhtin, the process of creating the chronotope is shaped by the genre, in which the author is writing and the language that they are using. For the author of Renaissance, the genre of horror/detective and its space/time dictates the narrative's direction and pace.

In Renaissance, the author hints at the peculiarity of the hotel's architecture several times throughout the story. It was important for the author to communicate the message that in the general landscape of Almaty, the hotel stood out as a remnant of a past forgotten. Ashleigh Prosser in her article "No Place like Home: The Chronotope of the Haunted House in Peter Ackroyd's *The House of Doctor Dee*" points at the fact that within the genre of Gothic horror: "the specters of the past are returned to the present through temporal dislocation… by the haunting of a house" (Prosser 2015). The haunting of the hotel in Renaissance also makes past and present collide in one space – a space that is intrinsically connected to the body of the protagonist. In other words, the author is operating with these discursive tools to create the

authorial voice that narrates the story within a defined space/time, and thus, brings into existence the Self that is hybrid in its nature.

The Heterogeneous Unity: Space, Time and Body

In this section I will offer a poststructuralist reading of the short story "Renaissance", with the purpose of examining the complex interrelationships between the author, the narrating voice and the protagonist of the story, in order to bring out the inherent in-betweenness, in which the story develops, and the hybridity of the main character. First, we will interpret the nature of the hotel as the story's setting, as a unity of space and time that is peculiar to the narrative. Since we consider space and time as a unity, yet examine each separately as components of a larger unity of space, time and body, the term space/time will be used instead of the Bakhtian "chronotope". As the connection between the time and space of the narrative is established, it will further be connected to the body of the protagonist by reading him as a corporeal being whose corporeality is engendered by the uniquely hybrid space/time of the hotel. This will be done through the usage of Judith Butler's reading of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and his use of the physical touch as a phenomenon, which brings out the "I", which is able to narrate its own existence. However, we will argue that the "I", or the ~~Subject~~ that is the protagonist, is never fully established throughout the story, as his Subject-ness is constantly deferred, and eludes firm representation in language. This will be argued in the light of Jacques Derrida's non-concept of "différance", which will be applied to the protagonist's Subject-ness that is presented as a new *~~meaning~~* in the story. Finally, the linguistic non-representation of the ~~Subject~~ will be connected to the concept of sexuality and body through the use of Jacques Lacan's notion of "inalienable split", which presents an attempt to apply Freudian concepts of desire and lack to language and its use in narrating the Self.

In Renaissance, the narration is done from the "third-person limited" point of view. In other words, the narrator's voice looks at the protagonist as if from above, yet somehow penetrating his inner thoughts and feelings. However, the narrating voice enters the story at the

exact moment the protagonist does, and it does not have any superior knowledge about the narrative, or the world in the background. The narrator, in this sense, serves as the representative of the protagonist, who is telling his story on his behalf, while being a part of him. This bifurcation between the queer character with his otherness, and the narrator, who represents him by giving the protagonist a voice is the milieu, within which the hybridity of the protagonist, as well as of the narrator, is established. It is established through the heteroglossia that includes two voices: the narrator's and the protagonist's that signify each other.

Starting from the preface of the story, the narrator establishes the time and space of the narration. The establishing sentence goes as follows: "*Алып шаһар Алматының таулы ауданындағы архитектурасымен ерекшеленіп тұрған қонақ үй қала тұрғындары мен қонақтары арасында танымалдылыққа ие.*" (The hotel with a peculiar architecture, located in the mountainous areas of the megalopolis Almaty, has notoriety among the city-dwellers.) The use of the present tense in the word "ие" (*iye*) as in "*has* notoriety" establishes the time of the narrative as contemporaneous to the reader. Here one can see an example of another heteroglossia, since the author's language and style speaks to the novelistic tradition of Kazakh literature. As is evident in the article by Kaliyeva and Yertai titled "National and Humanistic Values in the Modern Kazakh Novel", as well as in Zharylgapov's article "On the Modern Kazakh Novel", the historical time in the Kazakh literary tradition always propels the story forward, and often serves as the main source of conflict within the characters themselves (Kaliyeva and Yertai 2017) (Zharylgapov, Amangeldina, and Ospangaliyev 2017). In other words, the narrative's time exists strictly within a certain historical time, as if enveloped by it, and the characters' actions and values represent the morals of the epoch. For example, Oralkhan Bokei, who wrote his main body of works in the late 1980s, in his novel "Atau Kere" narrates the story of alienation both from society, and from one's own culture and roots, thus, the entire story is set in a remote farm up in the mountains. However, the main character's inner conflict is caused by the repressions against the Kazakh intelligentsia in the late 1950s, as the author clearly

alludes to the case of Kalizhan Bekhozhin, who was put under house arrest for writing a poem about the Kazakh resistance to the Tsarist colonization efforts in the late XIX century. The dialogue between characters' inner worlds and the events in Kazakhstan's history is rarely broken in Kazakh language literature.

The young author of Renaissance imitates this tradition in his own writing, yet already in the second chapter quickly retreats to the special time of the hotel that exists outside of historical time. This shift is subtle, yet unmistakable, and is communicated through the increased use of present continuous tense, which in Kazakh is expressed through the use of auxiliary verbs such as *тұр, отыр, жатыр*. For instance, the sentence "*Классикалық үлгідегі стилі оның көркіне көрік қосып,нағыз джентльмен атына сай қылып тұр.*" (The neat suit and tie look is adding to his beauty and truly giving him the stature of a gentleman) shows that the scope of narrative time is significantly narrowed down, as the narrating voice starts speaking about the characters who inhabit the hotel. The divorce from the historical time is all the more evident towards the end of the story, when the hotel's origin is explained as a former military hospital from the World War Two period. This device is used to explain the fact that the hotel had underground tunnels and dungeons, apparently to protect the hospital from enemy bombardments. While Central Asia did serve as a resource base and a refuge for many wounded soldiers, Almaty never was under the threat of aerial bombardments during the Second World War. This past given to the hotel, along with its architecture and air of sinister hauntedness largely imitate Gothic horrors, which often utilize Nazi atrocities as a narrative device. This style and plot clichés are a peculiar imposition on Almaty's history. The past of the hotel as well as its present only exists to serve the purposes of the narrative and is not linked to the historical time of Almaty as a city, or even Kazakhstan as a country.

In other words, the hotel is the embodiment of the story's chronotope. The relation between the hotel and the character is one of simultaneous deterritorialization and reterritorialization that is inherent to the rhizomatic relations between becomings (as opposed to

beings) as argued by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Deleuze 1987). In this structure of relations, neither space/time nor the protagonist and his "Self" act as the main source, or the center of events that pre-exist the relationship between them. Just like the rhizomes of grass in connection to each other create a rhizomatic net, as opposed to a root in the center that engenders all the subsequent offshoots, space, time and the protagonist's body each exist as mere becomings prior to the establishment of connections between them, and only in those connections do they express themselves and each other. As these rhizomes arrange themselves in space, they 'territorialize', using the Deleuzian term. Yet, they also deterritorialize themselves and each other, as they constantly exist in a state of flux.

The rhizomes in the story are the multitude of voices, including the narrator, the protagonist, other characters and, of course, the voice of the hotel itself. None of these voices represent the root, or the foundation of the story, and the connections between them are rhizomatic. Both the hotel and the protagonist define each other, and bring each other into existence through the connections between them. Therefore, the 'queer' space/time of the hotel or the 'queerness' of the protagonist are never presented as beings or solid existences that communicate with their surroundings, but rather as possibilities that realize themselves, when connected to other rhizomes. The narrative structure and the language of the story are reflective of this unstable and hybrid nature of its protagonist's identity, by constantly creating and tearing links between characters, settings and events. The severing of the links between the hotel's time and the historical time is but an example of this process.

Since, as we established before, time and space are intrinsically linked in the narrative, a similar thing happens to the space of the story. In the beginning, as our protagonist arrives in Almaty, he is already deterritorialized from his provincial hometown and re-territorialized in Almaty, once again tearing his connections to one space, and creating new connections in another. He stands in the middle of the street under the pouring rain, enjoying the smell of the

wet ground, and really incorporates himself into the space around him. However, in the next sentence, the protagonist is knocked over by a man passing by. The author is specific that it was a man. The man says: "*Why the hell are you standing right in the middle of the street like a mad man?!*" The protagonist is almost immediately denied ownership over that space, as the space really belongs to the "man". This episode is significant in showing that the queer protagonist doesn't truly own any space that is familiar to the Kazakhstani reader. In other words, this episode is an example of a symbol of hybridity, as it shows that the protagonist both belongs and doesn't belong in the space/time. In another example, in the first chapter as the protagonist walks around Almaty in the rain, the author mentions that his shoes had holes in them through which rain water leaked inside. The author had the intention to communicate the destitution of the protagonist as he bounces around spaces, where he doesn't belong, as the hostile other denies him this belonging. However, this is the first and last allusion to poverty in the entire story. As soon as the protagonist gets to the hotel, and is given a room there to live in, there seems to be no need to communicate his destitution. When the hero arrives at the fictional space of the hotel that exists as if beyond Kazakhstani space/time, he sheds this Dickensian image of a poor boy crushed by the system. Instead, he firmly establishes himself within the space/time of the hotel and narrates his story.

The role of the setting as the new queer space for the protagonist is of a paramount importance in the story. Even the fact that one of the names the author uses for the hotel is *Grand Blue* speaks to the association of queerness and this hotel in the text, since the word *blue* (голубой) is often used within the Russian speaking communities interchangeably with the word *gay* to signify a homosexual male. The firm association of this word with homosexuality in Kazakh speech communities is evident from its wide usage in the queer oriented media such as kok.team which itself is a variation on the word *blue*. Kok.team is a website which was created by a group of LGBT activists in Kazakhstan to address the issues of the queer community in the country. In their interview given to the magazine "Calvert Journal" on August of 2019, the

founders of the web-site Daniyar Sabitov and Anatoly Chernousov say: "Kok" in Kazakh means light blue — a color that's associated with LGBTQ people in many post-Soviet countries.", thus indicating the indexicality of the word *kok*. The name of the blog on which the author publishes his stories is also called "*Көгілдір кітап*" (Blue book). The hotel and the secrets that it holds become the main moving force of the protagonist's sexual coming-of-age. This is revealed already in chapter two which starts with the description of the protagonist walking around naked in his hotel room. The author wants the reader to know from the get-go that the protagonist has a body and sexuality, and his sexuality is manifested within the premises of this hotel.

As further evidence for corporeality and sexuality, in the paragraph that follows the episode with the naked protagonist we meet his future love interest. Later in the story, the reader is presented with an episode where the protagonist touches his own body in front of a mirror and takes a photo of his body, while his love interest is in the shower. This link between the hotel's space and the expressions of queer sexuality is explained by the in-betweenness of the very notion of a hotel. Hotel is not fully a public space, yet it is not home. It is always somewhere in the middle. The protagonist's sexuality can only flourish in such a middle space that falls out of the public/private dichotomy, because his queer sexuality neither belongs in public nor in private spaces. The in-betweenness of the hotel becomes a pre-requisite of this touching, which in its own turn becomes a pre-requisite of the protagonist's establishment of the Self. Judith Butler, in her essay "Merleau-Ponty and the Touch of Malebranche" (Butler 2005), in which she discusses the role of the flesh in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, talks about the importance of touching the body in bringing about the "I". She suggests that touching or being touched inaugurates the feeling that the "I" can report to itself in language, thus creating the "I". Butler writes:

> *Indeed, Malebranche offers Merleau-Ponty the opportunity to consider how the body in its impressionability presupposes a prior set of impressions that act on the body and form the basis for sentience, feeling, cognition, and the beginning of agency itself. These impressions are, importantly, tactile, suggesting that it is only on the condition that a body is already exposed to something other than itself, something by which it can be affected, that it becomes possible for a sentient self to emerge.*

These lines suggest the central role of 'affective life' of the body in birthing the self, since the flesh is a web of experiences, which one inhabits. Thus, the body, affected by the touch, engenders the sentience that makes experience and its subsequent narration possible. However, since the touch is external to the "I", and essentially precedes its existence, the "I" cannot distinguish the active touching and the passive being touched, thus all touching also posits being touched (Butler 2005). Our protagonist touches himself in the anticipation of being touched by his love interest, and this touch solidifies the protagonist as a being with a body, thus with a sexuality. In his *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty offers a critique of empiricist and intellectualist explanations of the origins of sexual experience, where the former claims sexuality to be purely driven by instinct and the subconscious desires of flesh, and the latter claims it to be an imposition of conscious categories, such as power onto otherwise neutral experiences (Merleau-Ponty 1982). Merleau-Ponty instead suggests that the sexual experience comes about only when the mind and body exist in a unitary reality. The episode with the self-touch in Renaissance becomes that convergence of space/time and mind/body components of the narrative, thus engendering the body of a protagonist as capable of having a sexual experience. The touch itself is engendered as a result of the in-betweenness of the hotel as a queer space/time. In other words, this touching signifies the birth of our protagonist as an agent who goes on to drive the plot of the story, which in the widest sense serves as a metaphor of the protagonist coming in terms with his newly gained sexuality and his identity.

Thus is created the heterogeneous unity between time, space and body. This unity, established in the initial chapters of the story, sets the stage for the conflict that is to come. However, this unity also envelops the entire narrative, in fact, constituting it. In the paragraphs above, it was shown how the rhizomatic connections between the hotel as space/time and the protagonist's body created the "I" of the protagonist as a queer character. Consequently, the narrative becomes the signifier of the Self that is created within the story. Ochs and Capp in their article "Narrating the Self" (Ochs and Capps 1996), claim that the self and the narrative are

inseparable, and they point to the simultaneity of an experience and the narrative of that experience, which gives it shape and meaning.

However, it is curious that the "touch" which brought the protagonist into existence, constructing his "I", happens only in chapter 3 of the story, as if the narrative pre-exists the Subject. I argue that the simultaneity of the Subject and narrative is constantly broken throughout the story, since the Subject's Subject-ness is always deferred. Each time the Subject is unveiled, as in the case where the protagonist territorializes in the space of the hotel, we find out another layer of veil, as if the veiling and unveiling happen at the same time. It is evident in the fact that as the space/time problem is resolved, the protagonist is immediately thrown into other conflicts, such as Father/Mother, truth/deception etc. Even the fact that the story isn't given an ending, and a resolution of the conflicts speaks to the unattainability of the protagonist's Subject. Thus, the Subject of the narrative becomes a ~~Subject~~ under erasure, never quite attained. In other words, the narrative as the signifier always pre-exists the signified, and the signified constantly eludes representation in language. Regarding the dichotomy of signifier/ signified, Jacques Derrida criticizes these binary oppositions that are inherent to Saussurean structuralism, claiming that these oppositions are often arbitrary and unstable (Derrida 2016). Instead, Derrida claims that the meaning created out of difference between oppositions never reaches the final transcendental signified, and is constantly deferred, thus creating his non-concept of "différance", combining the word difference and deferral. Here, the meaning itself becomes a ~~meaning~~ under erasure, as Derrida himself uses it in his works. In the same manner, the ~~Subject~~ of the protagonist in Renaissance that is signified by the narrative, immediately becomes a signifier of meanings to come.

Derrida's critique mainly targets the binary oppositions in structuralist linguistics. However, as we want to apply Derridean concepts onto the (non)representation of the ~~Subject~~ in a narrative, we will rely on Jacques Lacan, who makes a similar claim that all linguistic expression and interpretation is driven by the quest for the unattainable signified, thus operating

as an incessant chain of signifiers (Lacan and Fink 2006). For the purposes of this thesis project, Lacan is chosen to present a bridge between the narrative's language and the Freudian concepts pertaining to sexuality. Thereby, we come a full circle in constructing the elusive ~~unity~~ (which also should be put under erasure) between space, time and the body of the protagonist. The construction of the narrative and its peculiar relationship with the notions of space/time and the embodied Self of the protagonist that are produced as a result of this relationship establish an appropriate setting of hybridity and in-betweenness on which the story develops.

In this chapter I tried to focus mainly on the ways identity is created within queer fiction. Due to the fact that queer identities often exists beyond the established history of the society and even its public spaces, these identities function as shadows flickering in the in-between areas of both space and time. For this reason, I established above, the queer identity of the protagonist in Renaissance is always spirited away, never firmly established. The desire that was designated as the main creating force in birthing of identity in my line of argumentation is hidden away in peculiar, queer spaces and timelines, perpetually inhabiting heterotopias either on social media platforms or between the letters of fiction.

As I was finishing up writing this thesis, Renaissance's author finally contacted me, and we had a very brief chat about the work I was doing. During that chat, my author told me that he currently identifies as asexual, although at the time he wrote the story he was having both romantic and sexual relationships with men. This made me rethink my reading and interpretations of the story that I've been developing since the beginning of this project. Subtle conflicts between sexuality and aversion to sex as a concept have been present in the text all along in the protagonist's relationships with his ghost mother, his love interest and the hotel itself. This revelation invites a wholesale revision of this chapter with a focus on the complexities of the desire/shame dichotomy that moves Renaissance's protagonist, and perhaps, the author himself. However, this also proves the main point that this chapter has been trying to prove – identity is ever-fluid and each contact between me, the text and the author will engender

new interpretations, new rhizomatic connections that like a kaleidoscope will create new images with each revolution.

Conclusion

Identity as a phenomenon takes place on the space and time axes, as it was shown in the present thesis. However, queer individuals are often excluded from public and visible spaces, and their presence in history is also either erased, or ignored altogether. Queer people in modern Kazakhstan create their own spaces and their own peculiar history, which is often hidden from the lay person's eyes, and has its internal culture. This thesis was an attempt to look into these spaces and examine their rules and characteristics.

The analysis performed in this thesis was inseparable from its historical context. Therefore, historicity of the very notion of queer and its construction was given a special attention. Nevertheless, writing a history of those who have been silent and wish to remain silent presents a formidable challenge for any researcher. Indeed, one is forced to articulate silence and write its history. In this thesis, I attempted to walk the fine line between "letting the speechless speak" and ascribing to them a speech foreign to them. The only way to navigate this maze, it seemed to me, is to be frank about my own privileges, as well a my limitations.

I concluded that queer individuals in Kazakhstan inhabit spaces that, where the rules of the mainstream are suspended and the very politics of visibility are constantly negotiated. The notion of heterotopias was used to study these spaces. The examples of these spaces were collected online, where the Kazakhstani queer culture flourishes. These spaces were compared to the mainstream performance of visibility in the form of reality TV. Queer individuals, existing in their heterotopias recreate the visibility of the mainstream among themselves, yet keep their spaces hidden from the outsider's gaze. In order to maintain this complex economy of anti-visibility, queer individuals create their own institutions and hierarchies.

Within these heterotopias queer people feel free and safe enough to construct and deconstruct their identities. This is often done through the means of storytelling, including fiction, real life stories, and many stories that exist in the gray area between these two. This

thesis focused on fiction, in order to trace the trajectories of the queer quest for identity, personhood, embodiment. A short story titled "Renaissance" presented a treasure trove of these phenomena. However, I avoided using existing structures and models in my interpretation of this short story for a couple of reasons. First, I did not want to impose external structures and foreign histories to my fellow Kazakhstani queers and let them speak for themselves. Second, I concluded that no structure of literary analysis or anthropological inquiry can do justice to the dynamic nature of the queer spaces and the phenomena taking place within them. Instead, I focused on the relationships between bodies, space and time, and analyzed to processes of creation and destruction of various links between them. As a result, I arrived at an identity that is precarious, dynamic, even borderline ephemeral, yet an identity that exists as a force, as a phenomenon.

This thesis was written for readers, who are interested in the lives and experiences of the overlooked people in an overlooked region. I wished to shed some light to the "terra incognita" that is the queer culture of Central Asia in general, and Kazakhstan in particular, despite the fact that this is the one terra that is the most cognita to me. However, I would urge the reader to reject the view of the world as a grand jigsaw puzzle, where Kazakhstani queer culture is but a missing piece. Instead, I would want the reader to perceive this thesis as an alternative configuration, which combines post-modern critical theories and queer ethnographies of Kazakhstan, since this thesis was written as a queer ethnography that attempted to problematize queer ethnographies.

This research is a small step into the queer ethnography of Kazakhstan. It could gain from an expansion of its geographical scope, that would include various regions of Kazakhstan, or go beyond one state, and cover greater Central Asia. It also requires an elaboration into the concepts of pride and shame, biopolitics, Kazakhstani queer people's perceptions of death, sickness and despair, as they live on the background of HIV/AIDS and suicide epidemics. New theoretical lenses can be applied to the material presented in this thesis, as one could dive into Lacanian psychoanalysis, deeper examine the gender aspects of queer experience etc. It is absolutely

imperative to expand this research in the future to include lesbian and bisexual women, transgender individuals and other groups overlooked here.

Bibliography

Adorno, Theodor W. 2013. *Aesthetic Theory*. A&C Black.

Adorno, Theodor W., and Anson G. Rabinbach. 1975. "Culture Industry Reconsidered." *New German Critique*, no. 6: 12–19.

Alexander, Rustam. 2018. "Homosexuality in the USSR (1956-82)." http://minerva-access.unimelb.edu.au/handle/11343/216276.

Astutiningsih, Irana. 2018. "The Voice of Fans: Representation of Hyperreality in Fandom through Fanfictions and Fan Activities." In , 49–55. Universitas Sebelas Maret.

Auezov, Mukhtar. 1977. *Путь Абая (The Path of Abai)*. Жазушы (Zhazushy).

.Baba, Ismail. 2001. "Gay and Lesbian Couples in Malaysia." *Journal of Homosexuality* 40 (3–4): 143–63.

Badgett, M V Lee, Andrew Park, and Andrew Flores. 2018. "LINKS BETWEEN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND NEW MEASURES OF LGBT INCLUSION," 17.

Badian, E. 1958. "The Eunuch Bagoas." *The Classical Quarterly* 8 (3/4): 144–57.

Ball, Kirstie. 2012. *Routledge Handbook of Surveillance Studies*. 1st ed. Routledge.

Beistegui, Miguel de. 2005. "The Vertigo of Immanence: Deleuze's Spinozism." *Research in Phenomenology* 35 (1): 77–100.

Bereket, Tarik, and Barry D. Adam. 2006. "The Emergence of Gay Identities in Contemporary Turkey." *Sexualities* 9 (2): 131–51.

Boellstorff, Tom. 2005. "Between Religion and Desire: Being Muslim and Gay in Indonesia." *American Anthropologist* 107 (4): 575–85.

Butler, Judith. 2005. "Merleau-Ponty and the Touch of Malebranche." In *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, edited by Taylor Carman and Mark B. N. Hansen, 181–205. Cambridge University Press.

Dalacoura, Katerina. 2014. "Homosexuality as Cultural Battleground in the Middle East: Culture and Postcolonial International Theory." *Third World Quarterly* 35 (7): 1290–1306.

Deleuze, Gilles. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. University of Minnesota Press.

Derrida, Jacques. 1988. *Limited Inc*. Northwestern University Press.

———.1983 *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds, 270-6.*

———. 2016. *Of Grammatology*. JHU Press.

Dlamini, Busangokwakhe. 2006. "Homosexuality in the African Context." *Agenda* 20 (67): 128–36.

Engelman, Ralph. 1996. *Public Radio and Television in America: A Political History*. SAGE Publications.

Evans, Joseph Claude. 1991. *Strategies of Deconstruction: Derrida and the Myth of the Voice*. U of Minnesota Press.

Fiennes, Sophie. 2013. *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*. Documentary.

Foucault, Michel. 2005. *The Order of Things*. Routledge.

———. 2012a. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.

———. 2012b. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.

Gandhi, Leela. 2006. *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship*. Duke University Press.

Halperin, David M. 2004. *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*. University of Chicago Press.

Healey, Dan. 2001. *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent*. University of Chicago Press.

Horkheimer, Max, Theodor W. Adorno, and Gunzelin Noeri. 2002. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Stanford University Press.

Irvine, Chris. 2012. "Sir Salman Rushdie: 'Fifty Shades of Grey Makes Twilight Look like War and Peace' - Telegraph." 2012. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/booknews/9596577/Sir-Salman-Rushdie-Fifty-Shades-of-Grey-makes-Twilight-look-like-War-and-Peace.html.

Jenkins, Henry. 2012. *Textual Poachers : Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. Routledge.

Johnson, Derek. 2007. "Inviting Audiences In." *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 5 (1): 61–80.

Kaliyeva, A, and S Yertai. 2017. "National and Humanistic Values in the Modern Kazakh Novel (Национальные и Общечеловеческие Ценности в Современных Казахских Романах)." *Мир Науки, Культуры, Образования*, no. 6 (67). https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/natsionalnye-i-obschechelovecheskie-tsennosti-v-sovremennyh-kazahskih-romanah.

Khan, Shivananda. 2001. "Culture, Sexualities, and Identities." *Journal of Homosexuality* 40 (3–4): 99–115.

King, Anthony. 1998. "A Critique of Baudrillard's Hyperreality: Towards a Sociology of Postmodernism." *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 24 (6): 47–66.

Lacan, Jacques. 2013. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*. Routledge.

Lacan, Jacques, and Bruce Fink. 2006. *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. W.W. Norton & Company.

Lambert, Gregg. 2002. *The Non-Philosophy of Gilles Deleuze*. A&C Black.

Larsen, Katherine, and Lynn Zubernis. 2011. *Fandom At The Crossroads: Celebration, Shame and Fan/Producer Relationships*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Loos, Tamara. 2009. "Transnational Histories of Sexualities in Asia." *The American Historical Review* 114 (5): 1309–24.

Manning, Paul. 2013. "Altaholics Anonymous." *Semiotic Review*, no. 1 (March). https://www.semioticreview.com/ojs/index.php/sr/article/view/30.

Mclelland, Mark. 2000. "Is There a Japanese 'Gay Identity'?" *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 2 (4): 459–72.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1982. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Routledge.

Morris, Rosalind. 2010. *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*. Columbia University Press.

Nelson, Cary, and Lawrence Grossberg. 1988. *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. University of Illinois Press.

NUR.KZ. 2020. "'Қалауым live' экс-қатысушылары жоба туралы бар шындықты жайып салды." NUR.KZ - Свежие новости Казахстана. February 3, 2020. https://kaz.nur.kz/1839089-kalauym-live-eks-katysusylary-zoba-turaly-bar-syndykty-zajyp-saldy.html?

Ochs, Elinor, and Lisa Capps. 1996. "Narrating the Self." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 25 (1): 19–43.

"On Global Queering – AHR." 2019. March 8, 2019. http://australianhumanitiesreview.org/1996/07/01/on-global-queering/.

Prosser, Ashleigh. 2015. "No Place Like Home: The Chronotope of the Haunted House in Peter Ackroyd's The House of Doctor Dee" 2 (1): 1–19.

Rajchman, John. 1988. "Foucault's Art of Seeing." *October* 44: 89–117.

Rambukkana, Nathan. 2007. "Is Slash an Alternative Medium? 'Queer' Heterotopias and the Role of Autonomous Media Spaces in Radical World Building," 17.

Reid, Graeme, and Liz Walker. 2005. "Sex and Secrecy: A Focus on African Sexualities." *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 7 (3): 185–94.

Sabitov, Daniyar. 2020. "В Казахстане 1,5 миллиона ЛГБТ - говорит активист Данияр Сабитов." Kok.team. May 25, 2020. http://kok.team/ru/2020-05-25/v-kazahstane-15-milliona-lgbt-govorit-aktivist-daniyar-sabitov.

Scalenghe, Sara. 2014. *Disability in the Ottoman Arab World, 1500-1800*. Cambridge University Press.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. 1990. *Epistemology of the Closet*. University of California Press.

Shay, Anthony. 2006. "The Male Dancer in the Middle East and Central Asia." *Dance Research Journal* 38 (1/2): 137–62.

Taylor. 2007. *Critical Theories of Mass Media: Then and Now*. McGraw-Hill Education (UK).

Topinka, Robert J. 2010. "Foucault, Borges, Heterotopia: Producing Knowledge in Other Spaces." *Foucault Studies*, no. 9 (September): 54.

Wah-Shan, Chou. 2001. "Homosexuality and the Cultural Politics of *Tongzhi* in Chinese Societies." *Journal of Homosexuality* 40 (3–4): 27–46. https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v40n03_03.

Weber, Max. 1978. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. University of California Press.

Wood, DC. 1979. "AN INTRODUCTION TO DERRIDA," 18–28.

Zharylgapov, Zh, M Amangeldina, and M Ospangaliyev. 2017. "On the Modern Kazakh Novel (Қазіргі қазақ романы туралы)," March. http://rep.ksu.kz//handle/data/1652.