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Affective Landscapes of Systemic Injustice among Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual People in North Macedonia

Keywords: justice, affective injustice, affects, systemic trauma, shame, resistance, arts

It has been often the case that upon seeing the over 20-meter high monument of Alexander the Great in the main square, foreigners visiting Skopje for the first time would not miss making the either naively enthusiastic or distantly ironic comment that Skopje must be a gay heaven and should be promoted as a major gay tourist attraction. However, both the naiveté and the comfort of irony, related to the ahistorically deemed bisexuality of Alexander the Great (Halperin 1990), would immediately be shattered once the visitors obtain a wider perspective upon the faux-baroque nationalistic project of Skopje 2014 of which this monument is the central object. Comprising more than 130 objects made of marble, bronze, and polystyrene, with a total cost beyond 630 million euros (БИПН 2018) in a country where a quarter of the population lives on the threshold of poverty (Стојанчова 2009), built with the purpose of creating a (falsified) nationalist revival and promoting a hegemonic re-articulation of citizenship by the then ruling conservative party of VMRO-DPMNE, and as a response to the name dispute the country was having with Greece – the

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project represents a *mise-en-abyme* of the wider nationalistic, patriarchal, and homophobic landscape of Macedonian society and politics³. Among the numerous sculptures and monuments of masculinist historical figures of heroes and martyrs and their triumphant and contemplative bodies, the sculpture of Olympia, Alexander's mother, is the only female sculpture in the entire project. Set in the project's central axis, in between the overpowering sculptures of her husband and son, this female sculpture (a fountain) is represented as breastfeeding, embracing, and playing with her son. In the vicinity of Alexander the Great's monument, one passes through the "Gate Macedonia": a copy of the Arch of Triumph, comprising a vast relief depicting male and female figures pointing towards the past and the future written out as MACEDONIA, thus explicitly expressing the "reprofuturist" (Edelman 2004) nationalism of the heterosexual form.

Beside the symbolic layer of the *heteronormative distribution of the sensible* in North Macedonia (Dimitrov 2015), there is an abundance of data offering a comprehensive view of the extent to which the lives of LGBTIQ+ people are marked with discrimination, stigmatization, exclusion, and injustice in the context of North Macedonia as a result of the traditionally patriarchal social attitudes and values (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung 2021), inadequate legislation, lack of information about legal methods of protection, lack of political will to guarantee and protect the rights of LGBTIQ+ people (UNDP 2017), the fear of risks tied to possible exposure of identities, and lack of relevant, positive, and affirmative representations of LGBTIQ+ in the cultural sphere including the arts, education, media, and various public cultural practices (cf. Dimitrov, Kolozova 2012; Dimitrov 2015; Cvetkovich, Dimitrov 2015; Coalition MARGINS 2018, 2019, 2020). Research has shown that LGBTIQ+ people face a higher level of everyday discrimination compared to their non-LGBTIQ+ peers also in the Macedonian context (Стојановски 2016). A significant part of the LGBTIQ+ community considers themselves victims of violence because of their sexual orientation or gender identity (SOGI). 41% of the LGBTIQ+ people in North Macedonia have reported experiences of harassment, while 33% confirmed having experienced verbal in-person harassment

³ For different accounts on how the Skopje 2014 project reproduced and intensified existing divisions and inequalities along economic, ethnic, and gender lines, see: Milevska 2014, Koteska 2011, Grigoriadou 2021.

(EUAFR 2020). In another survey among LGBTIQ+, nearly half of the respondents (49%) claimed that they felt they had been discriminated against (World Bank 2018). This data comes as no surprise when one considers the negative perceptions and attitudes of the majority of North Macedonian citizens towards LGBTIQ+ in general and homosexuality in particular. Research carried out in 2009 showed that 91.6% of the citizens disapprove of homosexuality (Klekovski 2009), with similar results confirmed again in a study conducted in 2022 (Димова 2022). The majority of young people see their future within a heteronormative frame of the couple, marriage, or family with children, and demonstrate strong authoritarian and right-wing-populist tendencies, further showing alarmingly high values on the scale of fascism (Topuzovska, Latkovic et al. 2019). Considering this background, LGBTIQ+ people in North Macedonia report a low level of satisfaction with their lives, namely, an average of 5 on a scale from 1 to 10 (EUAFR 2020), while LGBTIQ+ young people tend to suffer from depression and anxiety and demonstrate high rates of suicidal intentions in disproportionately higher rates compared to their heterosexual peers (Ќостарова УНКОВСКА 2018).

To better understand these alarming numbers, we should also emphasise here some other dimensions which constitute the present socio-political landscape, including the multicultural ethnic composition of citizenry, the ethnic armed conflict from 2001, the ongoing nationalist disputes with Greece and Bulgaria, the strong political and cultural influence of the Orthodox Church and Muslim leaders, and the accompanying affective politics of anxiety and fear centered around national identity. One should further add the displacement of social anxiety onto the axes of gender and sexuality caused by structural capitalist adjustments in the so-called transitional period following the dissolution of the previous socialist state of Yugoslavia, which has led to economic devastation and corruption (Dimitrov 2022). Another wider contextual dimension that we want to take into consideration when dealing with the issues of marginalization and discrimination during the research and analysis is the social trauma related to being in the process of multiverse and ongoing crises, transitions, ethnic conflicts, and divides; a continuous socio-economic crisis, political crisis, prolonged EU accession process, and the anxieties around the pandemic as well as post-pandemic uncertainty and new

macro-political developments⁴. Those layers of contextual complexities result in social polarization deepening, especially when intersecting with the issues of gender, sexuality, and nationalism, which is predominantly visible in the rise of the anti-gender movement (Блажева и др. 2019, Цветковиќ, Величковска 2022). All these conditions contribute to an increase in vulnerability and exposure to discrimination, violence, and marginalization of LGBTIQ+.

The long-term work and advocacy of civil society organizations provide a comprehensive overview of the existing policies, strategies, and legal framework for the protection of the human rights of LGBTIQ+, as well as extensive research and reports on human rights violations and discrimination in various areas and institutions, and analyses and qualitative research on the representations of sexual and gender minorities in North Macedonia in media and education. However, the academic community has not only persistently shown little to no interest in producing and conducting qualitative research related to matters of sexuality, but academic works and higher education textbooks continue to show signs of homophobia and transphobia (Трајановски, Димитров 2012). Research in, and in-depth analysis of, everyday practices, lived experiences, cultural and social worlds and forms, embodied subjectivities and identities, and complex analyses of experiences of injustice and their phenomenological embodiments and reproduction have been almost entirely absent both in activist and academic circles.

Given this situation and the long-term experiences and observations of the multitude of unfavorable factors affecting sexual minorities in North Macedonia, prompted by the Coalition MARGINS, in 2021/2, we conducted research on the everyday life and affective life of the experiences of injustice among Roma, lesbians, gay and bisexual people, and women textile workers. The objective was to cover the various aspects and influences over the position of minorities and their marginalization through the subjective experiences of discrimination and injustice and their overall health and social condition. The purpose of the research was to understand how discrimination and injustice affect everyday lives and (mental) health, shape experiences and worldviews, and frame the social position, relationships,

⁴ On the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of LGBTI people see ПИНА 2020.

and realms of communities affected by discrimination. This text focuses on some of the results related to the experiences of injustice on the part of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals (LGB), extended by a brief account of some critical art and cultural practices in North Macedonia seen as tools for alternative forms of struggle against affective injustice that go beyond identitarian and discrimination-based legal logics⁵.

The research adopted a qualitative approach grounded in a) feminist, queer, and phenomenological epistemology and research traditions, especially in the field of affect/emotion studies and their intertwining with issues related to power, justice, and equality, b) critical legal studies and feminist political philosophy, and c) critical discourse analysis. For the purposes of the research, we used a semi-structured interview as the primary data collection method, further extending the possibility for the interviewer to ask additional questions for clarification or allow the conversation to expand in order to consider a wider scope of clarifications and needs as expressed by the interviewee. The questionnaire also contained a section devoted to demographic data so as to ensure the linkage of various intersectional factors. Twenty LGB persons were included in the research; seven of the interviewees identified as female, eleven as male, and two as other. Along the axis of ethnicity, seventeen interviewees identified themselves as Macedonians, two as Albanians, and one as Other. Most of the interviewees were living in Skopje and had a higher education and a medium or high social status, which constitutes one of the limitations of this research sample, considering that other research has previously found that “LGBTQ+ persons living in smaller towns described additional stigmatization that harmed their mental health and hampered use of services.” (Stojanovski et al. 2021: 7)

Injustice, Affects, and Social (Non)Reproduction

Within this research, discrimination was not treated exclusively in terms of a formal absence of equal and consistent treatment, as one-time or

⁵ In this research we have not focused on the specificities related to the experiences of transgender people. This decision was made not only due to the time-related and financial limitations that narrowed the scope of this research, but, even more importantly, because detailed and comprehensive account related to processes of socialization, violence, embodiment, and identity formation amongst transgender people in North Macedonia has been provided in other recent studies. See: ДИМИТРОВ 2018 and Dimitrov 2022.

repeated action, but rather in terms of an absence of essential, systemic, and structural equality, which combined with the redistribution of goods includes experiential, affective, and social effects visible through historically accumulated institutional obstacles in one's wellbeing, the development and exercise of one's capacities, the expression of one's own experiences and needs, as well as institutional obstacles to self-determination and determination of one's own actions (Young 1990: 33-37). Following the approach taken by Sandra Fredman (Fredman 2011), we looked at discrimination through an expanded, multidimensional, and systemic lens of equality which goes beyond an individualizing and reductive judicial-procedural perspective. This framework allowed us to see the subject of justice as a wider socio-political and cultural structure comprising multiple processes and relations rather than individuals or separate institutions and bodies (Rawls 1971, Young 2011). We approach experiences of injustice and inequality through integrated theories of justice developed by the feminist political philosophers Nancy Fraser (Fraser 1997, 2010; Fraser, Honneth 2003) and Iris Marion Young (Young 1990, 2000, 2011), which – besides social inequality and redistribution – also include the problems of recognition (Honneth 1992), i.e. the cultural, symbolic, and identity-related injustice and inequality faced by the interviewed members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Another key starting point in the research was the inclusion of an affective dimension of the experiences and its connection not only to the subjects' mental health and psychological wellbeing but to all aspects of social dynamics and experiences of injustice. Affects are treated as a force shaping relationships, thus representing a key operative component of social dynamics. In line with transdisciplinary affect studies, affects are seen as always mediated by social conditions, relations, opportunities, and environments, thus representing sensory and embodied indices of power relations in society, as well as those of cognition and values – culturally normed dimensions beyond the subjects' conscious reach, through which they interpret themselves and orient themselves to the world around them (Ahmed 2004, Clough, Halley 2007, Gregg, Seigworth 2010, Wetherell 2012). Affects tell us stories about bodies and their worlds, about the ways in which embodied subjects, through social relations, are affected by and affect others and the world (Spinoza 2018). By the same token, we wanted

to explore how affects speak of the way embodied lesbian, gay, and bisexual subjectivities are formed with certain capacities, potentials, and dispositions for action: that is, to see how the affective life of power and inequality creates conditions for the formation of embodied subjects who, in different and variable nuances, can change and influence the surrounding world or else participate in the social and embodied reproduction of inequality (Slaby, Scheve 2019).

Further in the paper, we analyze the individual experiences and attitudes towards personal (mental) health, their connection with the experiences of discrimination and inequality as well as with the treatment, services, and the availability thereof in/at health institutions. In doing so, we aim to avoid a reductive medicalizing model of mental health and the discourse of illness and dysfunction (Cvetkovich 2012). In agreement with modern transdisciplinary research and social epidemiology (Krieger, Smith 2004; Krieger 2005; Sullivan 2015), we analyze mental health as a set of lived experiences that act as a response to bodily and psychological functioning in specific, contextually determined environments and situations. The focus of this section is on mental health by tracking experiences of stress, anxiety, depression, and traumatization. Systemic trauma is treated as one of the central sources of stress, anxiety, and traumatization (Cvetkovich 2003), and is used to refer to experiences in a social context that threaten the need for security, belonging, and dignity and are the result of repeated abuse, subjugation, deprivation through systemic restrictions, segregation, limited access, etc. (Haines 2019). The approach to relational and systemic trauma in our research relies on significant feminist interventions in understanding the so-called covert trauma (Brown 1995), which imposes a necessary revision of the dominant theories of trauma as based on experiences of white middle-class Western men.

Furthermore, we analyze relations and systems through the subjective experiences of vulnerability and resilience in a social context. In this way, the overall research has a cyclical structure, or feedback and recursive loops, whereby the implications of the analyses in the first parts are reflected in the final section that analyses the relations and systems in which embodied marginalized subjects participate, and how these modes of embodied social interaction influence possible future changes, or the reproduction of initial social inequalities and oppression. Schematically, we

can say that this research follows the line of outside-inside-inside-outside. That is, in the last part of the research, the phenomenological and social analyses are connected so that we perceive the implications of what Bourdieu calls *habitus* or *bodily hexis* (Bourdieu 1977, 1984, 2001), a concept by which he expresses the “ontological complicity” (Bourdieu, Wacquant 1992) and the mutual possession of the world and the individual. Consequently, the research looks at how LGB as a group and as individuals embody attitudes towards others and themselves, i.e. aspirations, values, and dispositions that bear witness to the ways in which institutions, social structures, and conditions are imprinted on their bodies and model their bodily subjectivities (Charlesworth 2004).

The Ordinary Life of Injustice

The experiences of the LGBTIQ+ community as shown in our research bear witness to *cultural and symbolic domination* (Young 1990: 123) and to physical, verbal, and psychological *violence* as key forms of injustice that mark their lives. The production, circulation, reproduction, and everyday practice of stereotyping (Dyer 1977: 28; Hall 1997: 258; Fanon 2008), as well as the socio-structural re/production of unequal power relations through the circulation of stigmatizing attributes, i.e. “attributes that are deeply degrading” and which signify a “flaw of individual character” (Goffman 1963: 13), are key tools of the heteronormative sexual and gender regime of oppression and the construction of sexual otherness as abject bodies. Almost without exception, all interviewed LGB persons showed a high awareness of existing stereotypes and stigmatizing representations of LGBTI+ people in public discourses, including education, media, religion, social media, cultural institutions, artistic practices, and political discourses, and singled them out as key sources of oppression and inequality which they have faced. Some of the stereotypes and stigmatizing representations that were identified by our respondents refer to the images and representations in which: gay men are reduced solely to their sexuality marked as perverse, unnatural, abnormal, queer, etc.; LGBTI+ people are pathologized; hate speech circulates with impunity; or else the presentation and recognition of LGBTI+ love, sexuality, and cultural-social production is completely absent so that this form of “heteronormative ignorance” or *agnology* (Cvetkovich, Dimitrov 2014) becomes an equally productive strategy of

oppression and consolidation of the presumed universality of heterosexuality; the voice of LGBTI+ people is absent in debates that directly or indirectly affect their lives; and where they are present, the assumption of a universal and homogeneous experience of all LGBTI+ people is observed alongside a denial of heterosexism and its long socio-political and cultural history, a binary and exclusionary gender frame, etc.

The stereotypes and stigma that mark LGB lives represent specific forms of *psychological oppression and alienation*, as vehicles soliciting the circulation of degrading, dehumanizing, and twisted images of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people throughout the entire private and public life of patriarchal and heteronormative culture, while at the same time the activities, self-definition, self-respect, pursuit of happiness and pleasures, and personal autonomy are stolen and placed under the control of others, causing “alienation in the production of one’s own personality” (Bartky 1990: 32), as testified to by the following responses:

Gay, sissy, freak, double-pipe, pervert sectarian, that Hitler should come back and take care of me, nothing creative really. (J., 27 years old, gay)

Yes, of course, it happens to me on a daily basis, I live in Chair and every time I come home I hear comments like ‘fag, fag’. It’s sad that even small children who don’t know what they mean use these offensive words towards me and they don’t know what they mean. It’s already on a daily basis for me, but because it’s just a word I don’t take it so personally, I know I have a big ego and I don’t let those words get to me. Sometimes they threaten to kill me... (D., 25, gay)

Yes, all the time, throughout my life, I think this was continuous throughout my childhood and school, starting from first grade and then in high school, because I think I was always the only gay boy in the classes, I was always picked on, right... Those standard type of insults, ‘sissy’, ‘faggot’, ‘queer’. (S., 32, gay)⁶

Stigma, discrimination, the shock of insult, harassment, everyday micro-violence and bullying are key modalities of materialized oppression against the researched group. As concurrent traumatic events in their everyday experience that remain deeply imprinted in the memory and bodies

⁶ Responses translated by the authors of the article.

of these lesbian, gay, and bisexual people, they “shape the relation one has to others and the world and thereby shape the personality, and the subjectivity, the very being of the individual in question” (Eribon 2004: 15). The wounded consciousness and the self thus constituted at the moment of the discriminatory act of the insulting and stigmatizing interpellation as a performative linguistic act (Austin 1977, Butler 1993) testifies to a constitutive and reproductive role of the performative act, i.e. the (re)creation of the borderline between the ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’, assigning a designated place in the world to the one to which it refers, while simultaneously transposing this border onto the individual who is the object of the insult. The time of the discriminatory speech act necessarily forces us to look at, and insist on, a history of inequality and oppression that precedes it, a time that is not the time of the discursive act and which simultaneously constitutes the power of the offending act. The gravity of the insult, in this way, carries a far greater burden than the individual act of discrimination and humiliation. It evokes a hidden history of social structures and systematic oppression and opens up to the time to come, as we will see later in the text.

First mocking and humiliation... I remember some words like... I’m not a woman enough, I’m ugly, like a lesbian, right, “Ha-ha-ha, Marija Šerifović [Serbian pop singer and publicly out lesbian representing Serbia in the Eurovision contest in 2007] is ugly, so are you, isn’t it, ‘That’s how you are’... All kinds of derogatory words on the Internet, from ‘slut’, ‘whore’, to ‘disgusting’, that I shouldn’t have existed, that if they found me they would bury me. I remember one such very painful comment because it cut me like a knife. It was around the time we organized the first Pride, I received a huge message from some guy, and it was something of the insulting type: ‘What kind of freaks, morons are you, etc., infidels, right?’ And there was something along the lines of ‘Your father must have some kind of seed to create someone like you.’ My father is actually deceased, so it hits me sometimes, right, especially when it concerns my family, and this really hurt me. (E., 38, lesbian)

Additionally, while the various forms of verbal violence and insult represent an unequivocal form of discrimination and harassment, the forms of epistemological, psychological, and cultural oppression experienced by LGBTIQ+ people cannot be fully understood, nor encompassed if framed exclusively in this legalistic framework. The insult, for example, in

the various micro-, meso-, and macro-social contexts in which it appears, represents only an extreme and explicit point in a continuum of linguistic, cultural, habituated, and symbolic forms of oppression and micro-violence (Sue, Spenerman 2020) which include a multitude of gestures, forms of gossip, insulting looks, ambiguous changes in voice intonation, jokes, teasing questions and comments, silences, ignoring and refusing to know and hear, more or less explicit assumptions and common-sense truths, and daily disciplinary rituals through which heteronormativity and gender normativity are established and maintained:

No, but I felt that I was strange to people and that they were whispering to each other, asking if I was male or female... It's not discrimination, but that happened to me. (P., 31, lesbian)

Well, especially in fancy cafes or restaurants, I've received strange treatment from waiters based on my appearance, very cold and uninterested. I immediately notice a difference when I see how another normal cis person is treated and compare how they treat me, it's kind of a... not discrimination, it's just very uncomfortable and I've felt like I don't belong in that coffee shop or restaurant. (D., 25, gay)

The experiences of a significant proportion of our interviewees testify to the persistence and violence of *gender and sexual discipline* (Foucault 1991, 2007) as a set of assumptions, norms, and techniques through which people interpret, understand, frame, and govern their behaviors, bodies, and subjectivities, as well as those of others, through the lens of hegemonic *gender technologies* (de Lauretis 1987). Most of the participants in this research have experienced a forced performance of gender norms and verbal, psychological, or physical violence due to the violation of the norm. For many of the respondents, especially those among whom the non-conformity with the gender norm is more pronounced, gender and sexual discipline are the first set of punishments, corrections, insults, and violence they receive.

But other relatives dare to ask you about your marital status, and earlier it was even more problematic, for example, especially about my image, about my appearance, that I dress up as a man and 'What is this, what do you look like?'. And the feelings they evoke in you are feelings of insecurity, that

you are less valuable, that you are extremely different and it is wrong to be different from others, belittled, hurt, misunderstood, and ultimately the saddest thing in the world, so it's... (K., 35, lesbian)

About 5-6 years ago, we were sitting with a girlfriend at the time, in the old bazaar, it was late at night, one or two o'clock after midnight. We exchanged some affections, and a group of men came, about 4 to 5 younger men, in their 20s, and they started insulting us, forcing us to get up, to leave the place, and then at one point they started to pull us, to physically pull us away from the place, and one of them threatened us, he had a bottle in his hand, and he threatened to hit us in the head. And we got up and left, yes, there are more serious situations like that... (G.A., 28, lesbian)

One day I decided to go to the hairdresser's and I decided to have pink hair, and I was attacked in the street because I had pink hair, because I was gay and all that other stuff. And my defense was 'I'm sorry, man, but you don't care,' and they kept pushing me... It was on a random street, there have been many other such incidents, from which I can also single out one incident when a high school student came to my school where I studied, a vocational school. The guy was sitting in class, and he waited for me to finish so that he could beat me. A legal action and a lawsuit were made in relation to that situation, but still... (H., 21, gay)

Another intersection significant in these experiences of cultural and symbolic oppression is the *intersection of class and sexuality*. As claimed by some of the interviewees, those lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons who have significantly greater financial and social resources at their disposal, especially in the context of education and school, are less subjected to insults, ridicule, and/or discrimination on the part of teachers and professors. On the other hand, those who have a lower social status and come from poor families, or are already victims of economic domination in addition to cultural oppression, face experiences of *exploitation* and experiences of *deprivation* of basic material goods and infrastructures for a dignified life, thus being further subject to humiliation, ridicule, and exclusion as a result of their social status.

The last form of oppression we identified among lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals is *affective injustice* (Whitney 2018, Staudigl 2007). With this concept we would like to provisionally signify, on the one hand, the

aesthetic, i.e. sensorial, corporeal, and affective and materialized impressions, inhibitions, impediments, and lived effects of practices of economic domination, exploitation, deprivation, powerlessness, misrecognition, disrespect, violence, and cultural domination, all of which decrease, regulate, immobilize, and limit the bodily capacities to affect and be affected, both of individuals and different social and cultural groups (Sennett, Cobb 1970, Mbembe, Roitmann 1995, Ngai 2005, Sedgwick 2003, Ahmed 2010). On the other hand, we refer to the different forms and social situations of invalidation, misrecognition and devaluation of feelings, desires, suffering, pain, hurt, and anger, and the multiple and varying images associated with these affective intensities of socio-cultural groups and individuals, and the deprivation of socially relevant contexts and common infrastructures for the expression and transformation of those affects (Al-Saji 2021). Furthermore, we signify the unequal distribution of vulnerability and precariousness among different populations (Butler 2009) and the emotional exploitation as the unequal and surplus emotional labor which the oppressed and dominated groups and individuals invest into maintaining the affective comforts and cushions of the social privilege of others and their affective anchors and objects, on top of carrying the burden of their privatized responsibility for coping with experiences of exhaustion, stress, shame, violence, and other emotionally draining experiences (Wacquant 1993: 156). Lastly, affective injustice refers to the unequal division of affective labor essential for social reproduction and the “hidden abode of production” (Fraser 2014: 61), salient in both traditional and contemporary forms of labor and production.

The first level at which affective injustice is experienced among LGB people is the *invalidation* of their intimate, affective, erotic, and love lives and relationships, as well as the failure to recognize their love suffering and losses. Another level of affective injustice is found in the *affective exploitation*, that is, in their continuous, exhausting and excessive emotional investment and expenditure of psychic energy to maintain the emotional comfort of heteronormative life. Such affective exploitation is most paradigmatically legible in excessive caution and the development of dramaturgical skills for decoding and managing everyday interactive situations and possible places of conflict. The most emotionally draining situation in this context arises from the so-called “spectacle of the closet” (Sedgwick

1990). Gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals who are forced or “choose” to hide their sexual identity, are never entirely sure whether the ones from whom it is being concealed do not know, or whether they do know and act as if they do not, while at the same time retaining the privilege of gossiping, sharing sneaky information, mocking, and generally commenting on the former persons’ sexuality.

In this way, through the epistemological supremacy of others and their own epistemological insecurity, lesbians, gay men, and bisexual people are placed in a “situation of inferiority” as they “can be the object of the discourse of others who can toy with” them and “draw profit from the privilege they gain.” (Eribon 2004: 53) The paradoxical situation comes to the fore particularly in those situations in which they decide to disclose their sexual identity, and here heterosexual people again hold their privilege, but this time through the refusal to know or to listen, as the “privilege of ignorance” (Sedgwick 1990), requiring that closet “discretion” be maintained.

Additionally, and again in line with this paradox of secrecy and openness, affective injustice is also materialized in *feelings of guilt that follow feelings of shame* caused by the insulting, violent, and discriminatory gestures of the homophobic society, whereby LGB people also *become agents of responsibility*, blaming themselves for not having enough courage and for the shame experienced. Reduced to the object of other people’s devaluing gaze and wounding insults, they *bear the emotional burden and expectations of heroism* in situations that a priori make it impossible and unfeasible:

You become a kind of object and not a subject, you are a certain image from television and not a real person. Plus I think that the thing that most affected me was when I developed a good relationship and had a relationship, I felt that I was too much. You can’t do most ordinary things, you can’t go to the cinema, everyone will look at us, not everyone is ready, in fact very few people are ready, to survive it. Who can live with you when they know that wherever you appear they will look at us? Who would spend that kind of time with you? (K., 49, gay)

...However, these things are a problem for me at home. My family is my pain. Sometimes I ignore it, sometimes not, but it remains in the subconscious. Sometimes it doesn’t work for me on a conscious level, but of course, I have impaired health because of some of those things, the stress,

and psychotherapy helped me a lot, especially for these relationships, and of course, my sexual orientation is something that is affecting me because of that incomplete courage to come out, and I feel guilty that I can't do that, that I feel some shame and fear that I have and somehow I haven't done it yet. That guilt of conscience is killing me in a way, there are days when I get up and wake up with it. (E., 38, lesbian)

The *emotional burden* is also multiplied in situations in which lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons are open socially about their own sexual identity, but in this case, the imposed responsibility and guilt are created as a result of the assumed responsibility for the suffering of their close and loved ones (who become victims of discrimination by association), or as the responsibility for being the cause of someone else's unhappiness due to their not following the already established path for a happy life and the parents' expectations.

Finally, the disproportionate emotional burden that they carry is the burden of being, always and everywhere, representatives of their own identity and group, the assigned spokespeople for sexual injustice and on-duty fighters in all social contexts.

Systemic traumatization

The picture of mental health among gay men, lesbians, and bisexual people in the study is complex. The most common complaints about factors which hinder the daily functioning of the respondents are exhaustion and headaches, followed by anxiety and depressive experiences, experiences of isolation, reduced libido, constant anxiety, the feeling that something bad is going to happen, and engaging in risky behaviors. The data shows that stress is the broadest category of negative health impacts experienced: in this case, this is due predominantly to the constant pressure and self-disappointment linked to not meeting expectations imposed by parents and the environment.

A large part of the respondents show marked emotional deregulation, that is, an inability to bear and deal with emotions. Emotional (de)regulation represents an (in)adequate emotional and behavioral response in a specific situation as a result of an early traumatic experience, brain injury, or experiences of chronic mistreatment, abuse, neglect, or institutional deprivation. Emotional regulation is a relational phenomenon (Schoore

2003) through which primary bonds are created, i.e. the basis of social functioning and self-image building. From there, the capacities to cope with stress refer neither to the individual nor to the systemic aspects of functioning but are constantly linked to the complex social dynamics, relationships, and context.

The density of the respondents' insights and their experiences bear the burden of injustice, discrimination, and marginalization. In terms of health, and especially mental health, the threat of constant non-acceptance, the challenges faced by the person due to a certain identity mark or the subjection of the person in a system of hierarchical oppression are extremely powerful. Fear stems from the constant threat to security, non-acceptance affects the need for acceptance and belonging, and subordination (or) defiance and (dis)respect affect the self-image.

Therefore, the basic concept distinguished by the discursive and phenomenological analysis, and the one through which the analysis of mental health in this chapter is further constructed, is trauma – with a focus on systemic trauma (Haines 2019). Trauma manifests itself through beliefs and behaviors such as withdrawal, isolation, shame, and feelings of inadequacy. One of the main phenomenological features of trauma is the imprint which it leaves on bodies, memories, and behavior. The freezing of experiences and the engraving on the overall bodily and mental functioning necessarily change individuals' behavior and are reflected in the way that they experience themselves and reality. Thus, traumatization engenders a constant feeling of absence, deviation, strangeness, uncertainty, or experiences related to the phenomenon of dissociation, especially functional dissociation as a protective mechanism in a situation of direct exposure to discrimination, abuse, or exclusion. An example of affective dissociation is when the emotion of anger or rage is not felt directly, therefore all the energy that comes from this anger is “stored” in the body, and instead, the person experiences indifference or dullness. Double consciousness is also a phenomenon of dissociation, recognizable in the constant monitoring of oneself and adapting to situations in which a constant feeling of inadequacy is present. Desensitization is another characteristic manifestation of the traumatic experience in which the psycho-physical injury is reflected again through distortion of the senses and dulling of sensory experiences, that is, the inability to experience the world, stimuli, and relationships in their

fullness and diversity. It directly affects contact, the basic process through which we connect with ourselves and the world. Desensitization affects the ability to experience pleasure, passivates the life energy or libidinous currents and prevents dynamic pulsation of affective energy in response to changing situations. Instead, it introduces an anesthetized, frozen or bound and immobilized inertia of affective experiences. Inadequate affective dynamics can further contribute to the general feeling of insecurity, absence, alienation, rejection, inadequacy, and strangeness.

Another important dimension of trauma necessary in understanding the way in which traumatic experiences change a person, relationships, and the environment, is retraumatization. Due to the permanent imprint which trauma creates in the person and their body, any association, sign, experience, and/or sensation of a possibly similar threat or injury may activate the overall survival of the traumatic experience.

To add to the complexity of the health situation, we also included the aspect of treatment by doctors and health institutions. The survey data shows that, in general, the respondents trust family doctors more than specialists. The most significant difference in the evaluation of the treatment is made by the trust that is based on the relationship, that is, whether they feel understood as patients or treated without any care being shown.

What seems specific for lesbian, gay, and bisexual respondents is their (in)sensitivity to issues related to sexual health. If they do not have access to a verified doctor, they usually do not receive adequate care. That is, due to the feeling of mistrust resulting from insensitive approach, a significant part of them will not ask for help, which results in their being deprived of adequate health services. This means that, to a large extent, the preventive function and care for sexual health remain uncovered.

In terms of sexual health, members of the LGBTIQ+ community rely more on the services provided by non-governmental organizations precisely because of the sensitive approach they receive there. However, the question arises as to how many of the services offered by civil society organizations can really cover the overall health services related to sexual health. For example, for the lesbians who were interviewed, there are no gynecological and other health services sensitive to their needs. That is, there remains a large area that is still shrouded in taboo, and this, like other health-related issues, can have serious and even fatal consequences.

Relations and Systems: Affective Dynamics, Vulnerability, and Resilience

In this section, we address the problems pertaining to different relations and systems by analyzing subjective experiences of vulnerability and resilience in social contexts. Although vulnerability refers to a certain limitation of personal capacities, in the context of inequality and systemic injustice, vulnerability is not the result of a lack of personal capacities but on the contrary, that of inadequate systemic and social infrastructures and a safe and caring environment for all. The goal is to understand the weaknesses, but also the possibilities, of using social support systems as necessary in the protection and care of lesbian, gay, and bisexual subjects in dealing with experiences of marginalization and systemic traumatization.

Research into the affective repertoires that mark the lesbian, gay, and bisexual lived experience as well as the experiences of vulnerability, bear witness to the dynamic interactions, exchanges, transactions, expectations, and sanctions of embodied subjects with the world, the socio-political system, and the categories in which they are placed (Turner 2007). That is, relational and insidious trauma, affects of helplessness, powerlessness, exhaustion, depression, fear, shame, anxiety, etc. testify to the opportunities or the deprived opportunities, the availability and unavailability of infrastructures and resources for support and care, and the positive or negative sanctions from others, within all levels of the social structure. Hence, emotional experiences represent various *core relational themes* (Lazarus 1991) in the transactions between individuals and the world, which include “bodily changes when those changes are constituted by evaluative judgments (or appraisals, in Prinz’s terms) of the transactional relationship that an organism has with its various environments” (Sullivan 2015: 38). On the other hand, emotional experiences do not only have their basis and source in social relations and contacts, but they simultaneously enable social reproduction or mobilize the capaciousness for social change, in such a way that through the evaluation of contextual influences they simultaneously enable “readiness to act on such evaluations” (Barbalet 1998: 66). Therefore, the affective system is the “primary motivational system” with varying complexity of freedom and transformation (Tomkins 1995: 35–75), and it sources the potential for action and agency, or else for suppressing the ability to act and engage in social interaction and change.

The majority of those interviewed feel most vulnerable inside their families and often avoid family gatherings and celebrations. The feeling of insecurity and the constant fear of rejection and disappointment create an intrinsically complex traumatizing situation since it is precisely in family systems and relationships that the most insidious and complex experiences of the so-called relational trauma (Benjamin 2018) are encountered, and because the primary attachment processes occur in the family system, a dynamics which further influences the creation of the self-image (Fisher 2017). Non-acceptance is not only experienced in radical situations of rejection but also through subtle signs which are not consciously recognized and result from long histories of certain behaviors or attitudes that have been experienced as non-acceptance of oneself and others. This non-acceptance or disappointment inevitably becomes a constant accompanying affective burden in relations with the parents of lesbian, gay, and bisexual children. Fear and shame due to constant (sometimes anticipated as potential) non-acceptance and disappointment are a constant threat to the person who does not fit into the hetero-patriarchal norms of gender or sexual identity. Within a culture of non-acceptance and stigmatization of gender and sexual minorities, entire families face the same pressure and struggle in terms of fear, shame, and threat of non-acceptance and disappointment.

Experiences of fear of non-acceptance and disappointment to a certain extent form the basis of the emotion of shame. Shame is one of the most complex emotions most directly related to the experience of oneself, that is, one's identity (Sedgwick 2003). In that sense, it is at the core of relational traumatic experiences and the embodied experience of all accepted, inscribed, shared, expected, and assigned social norms. Shame manifests itself phenomenologically as a withdrawal from the world in a specific way of enclosure (implosion) within oneself, the need to cover up, but also to destroy part of oneself as it is not acceptable to others and the world. Shame is the defining affective energy among the interviewees, and the research data renders it visible in actions of avoidance and self-isolation:

Yes, it would be those moments with my family at home. In those situations, I was very lonely and vulnerable, perhaps the most in that family context. Generally, when you are outside and when you are with your partner, you feel vulnerable. When you show a bit of affection, all eyes are

on you all the time. That's how it feels, there were many individual situations, so... (G., 28, lesbian)

Well, maybe I try to avoid large family gatherings like distant relatives, cousins, and such things where they ask all these questions about my status, marriage, wife... with people who don't know about me. I try to avoid all those inconveniences. [...] Albanians here are a little bit more conservative and traditional, patriarchal, I don't know which word is correct, I avoid too much closeness... And they dare to ask some private and intimate questions very openly and directly, "Why aren't you married? Come on, it's about time", so they put me in uncomfortable situations. (A., 37, gay man)

In addition, new and unfamiliar situations and people are often perceived as a threat to oneself and one's security: these are encounters in public spaces, in the street or different neighborhoods in the city, predominantly heteronormative clubs and bars, concert events, and larger gatherings, wider circles of friends, workplaces and socializing with colleagues, etc. In these situations, the exposure to the eyes and judgment of the public is the biggest "trigger" of the feeling of fear, shame, and inadequacy, having its genealogy in experiences of systemic trauma and the constant repetition of the messages of stigma and rejection circulated in patriarchal discourses, functioning as "affective clues" (Major, O'Brian 2005) for assessing situations, even when there is no explicit act of discrimination or insult. For example, such messages are most clearly and unequivocally visible during Pride Month and the Pride Parade, when hate speech culminates in public.

Another common experience is the feeling of vulnerability, insecurity, and exposure in institutions. That is, the feelings of vulnerability, insecurity, and lack of self-confidence are created in situations when the interviewees feel exposed, i.e. unprotected, when they find themselves in front of something or someone who has the power to violate their personal boundaries and integrity. Due to their perception as insignificant and powerless in relation to institutions, the interviewees do not have enough information and feel like victims in a system that decides against their will and manages their lives. Vulnerability in relation to institutions is also reflected in those situations where the persons are deprived of the possibility to directly intervene for the sake of their own protection from violence

or abuse, visible in the frequent experiences of bullying at school (when the school, instead of preventing the violence and protecting them, creates further conditions for the harassment to continue).

The general conclusion is that secure social relationships are relatively limited to the microworlds of intimate relationships. The circles of trust in which LGBTIQ+ people feel relatively free and enjoy a sense of belonging are often comprised of friends and partners who also stem from marginalized sexual minorities themselves, or an extended network of friends and social and subcultural spaces.

In a phenomenological sense, we can say that such constant or potentially effective and lived experiences of shame drastically limit the physical, social, and affective space as a horizon for the possibilities of bodily extension, action, and encounters, for feeling the space as a home for one's body. As such, they represent immobilizers of *bodily intentionality* through which the body projects "the potentiality of a certain world". As anticipatory and enactive, intentionality (Gallagher 2020) implies the projection of capacities, needs, possibilities, desires, affects, and mobility of the embodied subject in space, time, and intersubjective relations, i.e. the extension of corporeality through the projection of possibilities for use and engagement with various affordances in the social space. When experiencing shame and the anticipation of shame, we can undoubtedly speak of a *limited and inhibited intentionality* (Young 2005) and of a *limitation of the constitutive "I can"* (Merleau-Ponty 2009) through which the intentional openness of the embodied subject is manifested, and of stigmatized subjects being marked with feelings of insecurity, self-doubt, ambivalent extension, and reticent engagement with the world. Hence, cultural domination and injustice prove destructive to the capacity to make sense of the world and ourselves seen as practical engagement in the social world and projection of unforeseen possibilities (Staudigl 2007).

In order to fully understand the devastating consequences of social inequality and its affective landscape in this context, we must also recall the frequent feelings of sadness, anxiety, depression, and helplessness that strongly mark – although with different intensity – the experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons. Argued as early as in Darwin (1965: 176-195), these emotional complexes are associated with inactivity, passivity, immobility, and the absence of a desire to act, and lead to additional

insecurity, inhibited intentionality, isolation from others, consequently towards the narrowing of resources for action, and ultimately towards the reproduction of social inequality. Against this emotional assemblage stands self-confidence as a feeling of self-understanding, usually below the threshold of awareness, which expresses the readiness and emotional energy to act, and through which images, projections, and beliefs related to the future are materialized into action (Barbalet 1998). In addition, self-confidence is the effect of lived histories of social relations of acceptance, recognition, and accessibility to social capital and material resources, which guarantee the availability of self-confidence at a future time (Smail 2015). The obstruction of self-confidence and opportunities among our respondents often leads to withdrawal from investing in, and projecting, the future and showing motivation for achievements – as a result of continuous disappointments, silence, withdrawal, excessive vigilance, and internalized inferiority in relations of injustice and insult, visible at a certain stage of their lives; and insecurity in speech, self-expression, self-affirmation, and participation in interactions with others.

I have noticed that this feeling of numbness has often made me behave or live extremely chaotically, to have serious problems in organizing, planning, carrying out obligations and tasks, etc., where I constantly feel dizzy or whatever is the right word... Absolutely no focus at all, which I think has seriously damaged me in the long run in terms of academic success, career development, etc., and even in my personal relationships with people around me, friendships, partnerships and similar... I think they have seriously affected me in lots of ways and have made me extremely closed and quiet, or, for example, in terms of work, always extremely humble, exceptionally accepting about what will be said to me, obedient, etc. And in school, I remember that the teachers pointed me as an example, as someone who obeys, it was like a very good example. At work, in all situations, in all previous jobs, my colleagues always perceived me as, and I quote, 'nice but in the sense of someone who will do anything for anyone, compliant and obedient'. I think that's the key word, disciplined, obedient, I know how to follow the rules and so on [...] (S., 32, gay man)

In counter-distinction to these affective landscapes, our interviewees have brought forward the socio-cultural spaces and intimate relationships in which they are involved as spaces of freedom and comfortable expres-

sion, where information related to sexuality, intimacy, and gender expression does not need to be managed nor do they have to negotiate and resolve tensions. Within these friendships and social worlds, the interviewees find comfort and care for the experiences of wounded identities, as well as confirmation and recognition, which is an additional incentive for self-valorization and avoiding confinement in the “psychological ghetto” encouraged by the homophobic world. Gay friendships, social microworlds, and subcultural circles and practices create a social and mental space for the resubjectivization and transformation of the subjugated habitus. Such resubjectivization involves a critical and distanced re-enacting of sexual subjectivity in such a way that discredited and stigmatized characteristics, bodily behaviors, feelings, and intimacies are colored with tender and valorized nuances, while hegemonic and heteronormative codes, bodily disciplines, and linguistic genres are exposed to ridicule and irony, thus disempowering them and reducing their capacity to hurt. In addition, those respondents who have a longer trajectory of LGBTIQ+ socialization show, to some extent, a defiant refusal or rejection of heterosexual rituals and social spaces, or homosocial circles, and of affective trajectories (Ahmed 2006) that delineate the objects and life forms of affective investments and orientations.

In effect, we find the images and feelings shared by some of the respondents, related to their experiences of resistance, i.e. participation in collective actions of resistance and protest, as exceptionally promising. For the respondents, participation in collective actions represents an opportunity: (1) to overcome the isolating individuality and psychological alienation; (2) for accumulation of power resulting from co-appearance with others; (3) to express the anger resulting from obstructed opportunities and unrealized needs; (4) for the construction of pride and for transforming the status of inferiority and the affect of shame; (5) to participate in decision-making processes related to matters that affect their life and freedom; (6) to feel the *collective joy* that comes from being part of something bigger than oneself; and (7) an opportunity for the consolidation and affirmation of one’s own identity. We refer to its character as exceptional because we take into account and recall the specific bodily habitus and affective orientations that mark the everyday experience of injustice. Against these tendencies, the participation in protests and collective actions against

injustice gives individuals space for self-recognition as part of a collective and, thus, for self-constitution as a political subject. What is more, it also offers a platform for emotional, informational, and instrumental support. In this way, the protest becomes both a means and a source of *resubjectivization* (Rancière 2010) and an opportunity to transform the entire political organization of experience. Through the act of protesting, oppressive isolation is transformed into world-building action, and social destiny and necessity – into political agency.

In Lieu of Conclusion: Arts, Culture, and Justice

The experiences of oppression felt by lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals testify to the need for an expanded understanding of concepts of equality and justice. The concepts of equality and justice, on the one hand, place the social structure as the subject of justice that determines life's expectations, opportunities, and hopes (Young 2011) and, on the other hand, indicate that anti-discrimination legislation and legal remedies, although necessary, are insufficient for social transformation and reduction of social suffering of historically and systemically oppressed groups. Nor can – we argue – formal and legalistic anti-discrimination discourses which have become the hegemonic mode of activists' struggles against injustice in the context of North Macedonia, capture the affective dynamics, complexities, histories, and wounding persistence of relational traumas and vulnerability, or the political and collective capacities for affective, and hence, social transformation. Certainly, this does not entail that we neglect that "law as life of the bodies that bear the law in them" (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2015: 108) or, inversely, its absence. However, positive and transformative actions and institutional and collective commitments are needed that will strive for a cultural revolution and politicization of affective and everyday gestures. As shown in this paper, social structures are recursive, by which we wish to indicate the recursive (re)production of structural and objective social positions through, and only through, human quotidian – and not always intentional, deliberate, conscious, forced, and calculated – individual and institutional practices and actions. Consequently, socio-structural processes should encompass not only institutions, laws, and explicit state policies, though they be constitutively linked to these structures. Above all, the former must include everyday habits, affects, and actions, informal re-

marks, and aesthetic judgments, as well as the ways in which people relate to one another, both in public, semi-public, and private contexts (Young 1990).

It is for this reason that instead of a conclusion, we would like to propose the fields of arts and culture as sites of justice-reclaiming “struggle within and over the affective plane” (Grossberg 1992: 83). Cultural formations and life-worlds created by queer subjects can transform and institute alternative, and survival-wise necessary, sensibilities and practices, and bring into being “mattering maps” comprising investments in places, scenes, objects, relations, fantasies, and desires, and the different uses and purposes these can have in empowering marginalized subjectivities (ibid.) in a context of ordinary, pervasive, and affective injustices. Artistic action can also shock the habituated senses, the ways we feel, the mechanisms of perception and visibility, our capacities for hearing certain things, the relation between words and meanings, and the social positions and capacities to which these are considered to belong. Starting from the premise that art is a praxis for generating alternative, non-normative, defamiliarized, and innovative models of “redistributing the sensible” (Rancière 2004), we argue that art can offer transforming and subversive organizations of the common, or that it can disclose silenced movements of everyday life. As argued by Deleuze and Guattari, “artists are presenters of affects, the inventors and creators of affects” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 175). The affective atmospheres created by artworks plug in and agitate our nervous systems as spectators and co-sensors; in other words, they enable us to become anew with them, encompassing us in the affective apparatuses created from different materials. It is from these premises that we close our paper with two examples of queer art and cultural practices and projects in the context of North Macedonia.

In 2012, the old Turkish bathhouse turned museum of the National Gallery of North Macedonia in the Old Bazaar in Skopje hosted the *Archive of Queer Emotional Experiences in Macedonia*⁷. This heretic archive comprised daily objects (a wooden dildo, cucumber, letters, photographs,

⁷ The project was co-curated by Slavcho Dimitrov and Velimir Zernovski, while produced by Coalition MARGINS Skopje. It incorporated also a conference titled “IN/VISIBLE: THE POLITICAL AND SEXUAL REGIMES OF THE ARCHIVE”. Some of the objects and their descriptions are available at: <https://okno.mk/node/17755>. Last visited 05 Dec 2022.

plastic bottles of HIV retroviral pills, jewelry, shoes, dining table, underwear, icon, vinyl, etc.) connected to numerous experiences of queer people as indicators of the affective life of injustice, as well as testimonies to the ways in which queers evade and transform their worlds of hurt. Even more importantly, the exhibited objects collect affective investments and perform a cultural and political collectivity (Ahmed 2006). The project further problematized the hegemonic, nationalist, and heteronormative regimes and politics of archiving in place within national cultural institutions, challenging the hypocrisy of the national public sphere that is allegedly affectively sanitized, while constantly providing conditions and seeking to reproduce the presentation of heteronormative intimacies as the only intelligible and recognized forms of relationality.

The second example of an art and cultural project in the context of North Macedonia is the festival for queer arts, culture, and theory *Skopje Pride Weekend*⁸ which for ten years now has been an important platform for problematizing the reduction of queer political struggles and activism to the legalistic domain and advocacy for legal changes, bringing forward the ways in which knowledge production, the aesthetic, the sensible, the corporeal, the affective, and representational/discursive/image making represent one of the crucial sites for political struggles for equality and justice. Starting from the presumption that intersectionality is the crucial paradigm by means of which all identity positions are constructed and performed, the festival offers a radical and multifaceted critique of the binary gender system, heteronormativity, and nationalistic homophobia, as well as intersections of these oppressive and disciplinary regimes of power with class, ethnicity, race, and health. Presenting queer performance art, dance, and visual artists, as well as translating and publishing queer, gender, and critical theory work, the festival sets the body and its affective relationality as the battleground whereby power relations are actualized and contested, and treats them as crucial sites for thinking and staging resistance and alternative life forms (Desmond 2001, Jones 1998). In the course of previous years, through its curatorial programming, the festival has addressed different aspects of affective injustice and resistance, includ-

⁸ Photographs and video material from the festival, as well as the festival catalogues, are available on its Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/prideweekend>, and the webpage of the Coalition MARGINS Skopje at <http://coalition.org.mk/?lang=en>.

ing “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2011), precarity and brokenness in 2020, the queer commons and politics of friendship, love, and affects in 2021, or the relational, ecological and processual performativity of bodily materiality, sex and gender, as well as the ethical and political implications arising from the ontological assumption of bodily vulnerability, exposure, uncertainty, and generosity, in 2022. For instance, the 2019 festival edition was titled *Glittering Wounds: Relations, Vulnerability, and Resistance*, and explored and problematized contemporary hegemonic political imaginaries and practices of the isolated, possessive, decisionist, privatized, rational, and self-sufficient subject and their intertwining and constitutive dependence on normative frameworks and representations of gender, sexuality, race, class, and the neoliberal capitalist ideology. Presenting works by performance artists such as Ron Athey, Rachael Young, boychild, and Marikiscrycry, exhibiting the work of del LaGrace Volcano, publishing David Halperin’s *How to Be Gay*, and hosting an international drag show and club party, the festival has brought into view various non-hegemonic world-building projects and the historical, social, and political lived experiences of queers and marginalized women, as sources of alternative social and democratic horizons based on relationality, solidarity, care, affectivity, and transformation, beyond identitarian recognition.

In essence, the festival has been persistently mobilizing and opening platforms through art and cultural-discursive production as tools for imagining alternative and utopian worlds, creating different and non-normative affections and desires, and redistributing the sensible that frames injustice and its present regimes of the visible and the sayable.

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The paper is a collaborative product, meaning that revisions, comments, development of ideas, etc. were cross-read and collaboratively developed. The research methodology was developed by both of authors. The contribution of both authors is of 50% each.

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Summary

This paper explores the affective landscapes of systemic injustice faced by the lesbian, gay and bisexual persons in North Macedonia. The analyzed data stems from our qualitative research conducted in 2021 among 20 lesbian, gay, and bisexual people living in Skopje using a phenomenological, critical, and feminist approach. Our research applies a broader multidimensional and systemic method towards equality so as to overcome individualizing and reductive judicial-procedural perspectives on experiences of discrimination and (in)equality. A central concept for this analysis is Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the habitus/bodily hexis, which helps bring to light embodiment of social structures. Affects are explored as not only subjective experience but a force for shaping relations, representing a key component of social dynamics and the (re)production of social structures. Furthermore,

as part of the affective landscape of marginalization and experience of systemic injustice, phenomenology of vulnerability, shame, and belonging is discussed. To conclude, we look at collective actions of resistance and protest as integral experiences in building resilience and resistance in a state of constant systemic trauma, and at the role of critical art and cultural practices in North Macedonia as tools in alternative forms of struggles against affective injustice that move beyond identitarian logics.

