

Acts of Love: Autotheorizing Queer Relating - Critical Reflection

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Abstract

My PhD thesis consists of an autotheoretical memoir about being neurodivergent, non-binary and in the closet in Greek society, as well as a critical reflection section in which I analyse my research questions, literature, methodology, creative process, and conclusions.

I use a combination of creative and theoretical methodologies to process my own experiences in a self-reflexive and analytical manner. I achieve that through a dialogue with scholars, writers and artists who inspired my research and personal journey. I analyse my personal experiences, feelings, bodily sensations, interpersonal interaction and community participation through a self-reflexive lens. I use entries in personal diaries, photographs, and logs of conversations, to process my feelings and actions, and shed light on different elements of Greek millennial, non-binary, and neurodivergent life.

The memoir explores the coming-of-age of a non-binary person who suffers from OCD, within an upper-middle class Greek family, the process of hiding their gender identity in hostile social environments and strategically performing different identities in varying contexts.

The thesis of my research is that the choice to come out as a queer person does not happen in a vacuum, as it is affected and shaped by the individual's cultural background, and choosing not to come out does not make someone less 'queer' or 'radical'. In certain cultural settings, queer people have to make concessions and compromises in order to survive and make their lives livable, realizing that what Lauren Berlant calls 'the good life' cannot be achieved. I show that coming out is not a linear process, and might be met with reactions that exist beyond the binary of either acceptance or rejection, with which queer people might have to come to terms and make their peace. Sometimes, the choice to stay in the closet might even be characterized as an act of love towards loved ones with limited understanding of the modern concepts of gender and sexuality, and may be grounded on the need to preserve the

peace within the family. This knowledge is essential if we want to accurately represent the lives and choices of queer people in non-Western, non-White-centric narratives.

Critical Reflection

Table of Contents

Introduction - p. 8

Research questions - p. 13

Situation in Greece - p. 14

Ethical issues - p. 20

My research methodology - p. 21

Autotheory - p. 21

Why autobiography? Why autotheory? - p. 25

Autofiction - p. 28

Exophony - p. 30

My theoretical precedents - p. 33

The role of personal experience in feminist theorizing - p. 33

Standpoint theories and epistemic privilege - p. 34

Trans epistemology - p. 36

Trans people's strategies of survival - p. 38

The influence of Lauren Berlant - p. 44

What is my creative practice? - 47

Plot synopsis - 47

How my thesis came to be - 49

My process - 51

Outlining the process of writing each chapter - 55

Originality of research and contributions to knowledge - 69

Epilogue - 82

Bibliography - 84

Critical Reflection

Introduction

My PhD thesis is an autotheoretical memoir, which means that it is an autobiographical work of creative writing that belongs to the cross-genre and trans-disciplinary area of autotheory. This part of my thesis is a critical reflection on my work and will include a synopsis of the memoir, an analysis of the methodology employed, as well as an overview of the context and the setting, which is the context a queer person in modern-day urban Greece experiences today. According to Bulley and Şahin (2021): ‘For practice to be practice research the research has to be articulated’ (5). Articulating the methodology and theoretical background of my research is the purpose of this critical reflection section.

The memoir explores the coming-of-age of a non-binary person within a typical upper middle-class Greek family, the process of hiding their gender identity in hostile social environments and strategically performing different identities in varying contexts (in the family, at work, in activist spaces, at home).

The timeline covers a period of two weeks during the summer of 2021 and explores the mingling and juxtapositions between intimate everyday life and public events, such as the murder of drag queen Zak Kostopoulos/Zackie Oh and the forest fires that swept the country that year. I describe my experience of these events, my grief, fear, and the sociopolitical despair they left me with, in a dialogue with various scholars, writers and artists.

The main themes introduced and analysed are the multiple facets of having a queer identity and navigating life in the socially and politically turbulent modern Greek context: queer sexuality and non-binary gender identity, family in the Greek context, staying in the closet/coming out, queer activism, mental illness, romantic relationships, and the ways in which

space becomes inhabited by young, queer subjects who exist, narrate, form communities, and participate in public discourse.

I use the insight I have gained from my place within sociopolitical events and my intimate experiences of being affected by them, such as grieving Zak, working with refugees, and dog-sitting while my parents evacuated their home during the fires, to build a narrative that allows me to navigate through larger issues. Fearing losing my childhood home and witnessing the public murder and defamation of a member of my own community were deeply personal, traumatic experiences, inextricably linked with pressing social issues, relations of power, and political decisions. I use the ‘epistemic privilege’ (Fricker) acquired by living through these experiences and filtering them through the knowledge gained from reading and engaging in academic discourse, to develop theoretical arguments, and trace connections between the personal and the political elements.

The style and form of my writing is a hybrid of creative expression and philosophical exploration, following a genealogy of feminist and queer writers who are aiming to put “‘flesh’ on the universalist pretensions of established theoretical traditions by situating the story of lived experience in politically consequential terms’ (Wiegman 7-8).

In the memoir, I describe the ways in which my partner and I hide our queerness from our homo-transphobic families by passing as a heteronormative couple. Being a feminine-presenting non-binary trans-masculine person who is read as a woman, and my partner a closeted transfeminine person who is read as a man, we can hide our identities while other people do not get that option. However, I do not consider this a privilege, as essentially the ‘choice’ we have made is a dead-end for our survival, knowing that our parents are bound to not accept us if we come out to them.

The reasons that bind us are emotional but also material. Material, as we are two

mentally ill people still trying to complete our studies, one of us a thyroid cancer survivor with chronic fatigue, and neither of us actually qualifying for disability. All these reasons bound us to work only part-time for several years, and yet today, even with full-time work, our current wages barely even cover rent. Living in a crumbling social state where the family is the only institution that can support us financially, we are privileged enough to still have that support, unlike many of our peers who work two or three jobs without being able to make ends meet.

However, the emotional reasons bind us more tightly to hiding our truths. We adore our parents and cannot bear to lose them. We have witnessed our trans friends and acquaintances get kicked out of their homes, having to go to court just to see their children, getting harassed by the police and by members of the far-right while walking on the street. We have realized that we could not bear living with all that fear for our safety. By their very nature, our stories are ineffable. We need this to survive, so we silence ourselves and put on a show in front of the people we love. The bonds we share with our respective families survive thanks to the tragic irony that enmeshes them.

I aim to show a different perspective than the dominant Western-centric queer narratives that often present coming out (liberation) and staying in (damnation) as a rigid binary. My outness is strategic, but it is not just about me being out to some people and not to others. I also have to be strategic about where I will seek happiness and solace, and where I will turn to when I need help. My parents can know some things, but never everything. That is how most people's relationships with their parents function – they do not share all of their life choices with their parents. What happens, though, when it is not about one's single choice, but about their entire identity? I describe how I live, deciding to give some people who are extremely important to me no more than they can take. I write about actively seeking happiness after attempting to redefine it on our own, queer terms, about living in borrowed

spaces and making the most of it, about changing clothes in the dark, 'selling' heteronormativity and 'buying' a relative lack of scrutiny, a type of freedom. Contrary to an identity politics that often ties us to fixed labels, life is shaped by relationships with people we care about, who are often unable to understand and accept all parts of our identities. These relationships are vital to us, and tend to dictate what we share and what we choose to conceal.

The fact that we resort to this transactional choice is extremely painful. Cis and/or straight people do not have to make that specific choice (although they have to make other compromises), but we do, and it affects everything. At the same time, I propose that the hidden bubbles where queer lives often happen in societies like ours, although oppressive, can also become places of resistance, that queer people and communities can subvert institutions even while maintaining an adaptable, adjustable, and always strategic silence that keeps them somewhat safe. These hidden lives we live may, unfortunately, resemble half-lives. However, that does not make them half-queer. This type of semi-silent queerness, the constant succession of identity performances, the changing of hats, has shaped the way people around the non-Western parts of our world experience and perform gender and sexuality.

At this point, survival within a hostile society is in itself a victory. We resist by surviving on our own terms against multiple, intersecting systems of oppression that want us either compliant or dead. The terms on which we survive are the only thing we have agency on at the current point. If we lost this ability to choose (whether or not we must remain in the closet, how we can introduce ourselves to others, and so on) we would lose our last opportunity to live life somehow on our own terms. The fact of this victory, however, does not negate the fact that there is a lot of pain in it, a denial of complete recognition, a life in the shadows.

The purpose of my memoir is to show how those queer people who feel compelled to

stay hidden, whose identities and experiences have been decisively shaped by their locality and cultural specificities create their own lives in ways that are beneficial to their survival. We will never get to live what Lauren Berlant, in their book *Cruel Optimism*, describes as 'the Good Life', that is, the life that the dominant neoliberal ideology presents as worth living, a life so unattainable that its notion condemns us to believe in a cruel optimism. But we can always strive to form our own survival strategies, to create livable situations (heterotopias) between the folds of what is considered 'normal'. We make the decision to stay silent for as long as it makes our lives safer on the street, on the bus, and during family gatherings. Those lives, though often silent or written in code, should not have to be deemed as less queer than that of the daring Diva Citizen (Berlant) who comes out and claims those streets she is not allowed to step on. What separates us from our ruin is one misstep, one wrong word, one poorly demaquillaged eyelid, and our lives are in shambles. Our precariousness persists, so we find hollows to make our nests, we decorate them, and we sleep vigilantly, with one eye open. We wear our masks, we elope, we redefine, and thus, we persevere — until living otherwise stops being an active death threat.

Research Questions

The main research questions that emerged as my thesis developed were the following:

What is life like for a non-binary millennial born and living in Greece? What matters the most? What makes this life precarious? How is this life shaped by the more or less forced decision to stay in the closet? And can such a life be made livable? If so, how? What are the survival strategies employed?

Situation in Greece

The first decades of the century saw numerous shifts in the fiber of Greek society. Following the effects of financial insecurity, crushing austerity measures and a collapsed welfare-state, Greek citizens found themselves clinging to the idea of a *nostos* towards a lost ‘normality’. It has been argued that the normality promised by the leading parties to those who had enjoyed comfortable, secure lives during the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s, was a chimeric topos, an Ithacan narrative of stability and fixity re-producing what is considered real, natural, historical (Papanikolaou 2018, p. 177, Mitralias 2019, Galanopoulos 2020).

In the wake of the economic crisis, Greek people witnessed the shooting of a fifteen-year-old boy (who was actually a student of my mother’s at my school) by a SWAT officer, multiple immigration sweeps, and the outing, public stigmatization, and ruin of HIV+ sex workers in 2012 by the Greek authorities and media. In the face of severe human rights violations and aggressive thanatopolitical tactics, a strong resistance emerged, consisting of labour, feminist, and queer movements growing in power, numbers — and, more slowly, in intersectional consciousness. People in Greece were increasingly seeking to trouble the established nexus of power, questioning the orthodox essentialist narratives about gender, sexuality, kinship, and genealogy.

In the 2010s, queer collectives started appearing in smaller urban centres, organizing Pride parades while simultaneously criticizing their shortcomings, same gender couples would dress as priests and kiss each other performatively in cathedral churchyards, articulating and embodying new ways to exist, love, play, work, and be remembered. A growing part of this movement became less interested in recognition and assimilation, and more interested in dragging (up) the institutions and values that were seen as the building blocks of the Greek nation before — and used as identity lifeboats during and after — the

financial crisis.

On the antipodes, an alarmingly large part of Greek society, feeling cynical and disappointed, set their hopes on an emboldened far-right that promised them answers, scapegoats, and punching bags. Far-right wing organization Golden Dawn eventually made its way to the Greek parliament in the elections of 2012. Their brutal tactics were almost unanimously condemned by all other political parties. Still, numerous right, off-centre, and even leftist representatives, kept holding on to xenophobic, homophobic, ableist and misogynistic ideas. The origins of such statements were not much different from the same ethnopatriarchal values that drove the killers of antifascist rapper Pavlos Fyssas; they were better dressed, of course, in a coat of respectability that was scorned as too soft by the out and proud Neo-Nazis. Human rights jargon was often weaponized to justify decisions that would result in the exclusion of refugees, immigrants, women, queer, disabled, and poor people. For a significant part of the Greek population, traditional values and systems were under attack, and their conservation was hailed as the only way back to normality.

Paul Preciado has written about Athens in his essay *An Apartment on Uranus*:

There is at once a revolution of the underlings and the stateless underway, and a counter-revolutionary front fighting for control of the mechanisms of the reproduction of life (Preciado, p. 49).

Several legislative moves favourable for the — more privileged layers of a vastly heterogeneous -queer community followed the election of the left-wing party SYRIZA, reaching new heights with the 2015 Civil Union Act expanding to include same-sex couples, and the 2017 Act for Legal Gender Recognition of trans people without psychiatric or medical prerequisites. Queer intellectual and artistic production became welcome in mainstream cultural spaces, gender and sexuality studies entered

academic curricula, parents of LGBTQ+ children formed support groups, queer people were given platforms (granted with varying degrees of agency). In my hopeful (arrogant?), recently initiated, (doe) activist eyes, the causal links between the victories brought by the long-lasting battles fought by previous generations, and the seemingly unprecedented momentum gained by the queer and feminist movements of my time, remained blurry. The only thing I can recall is a glitter-covered, queer-party-intoxicated, moth-stomached feeling that it was now safer for us to start '[...] coming out into the demos' (Herzfeld 2008 in Papanikolaou 2018, p. 80).

And then Zak was murdered.

On the 21st of September 2018, the Greek public was shocked by the news of a brutal death that took place in broad daylight, in the centre of Athens. Allegedly, a drug-addicted burglar had died from self-inflicted wounds while trying to escape through the glass window of a jewellery store into which he had tried to break. The violent video that was circulated, however, told a different story. The first posts began appearing on social media, informing the members of the LGBTQ+ community that the alleged thief everyone had seen on TV getting beaten to death by the shop-owner and the boots of the police, was our own Zak Kostopoulos/Zackie Oh.

Zak/Zackie was a widely popular drag persona in Greek LGBT circles, living openly with HIV, a queer activist advocating for the rights of his. Zackie had claimed life as a diva citizen (Berlant 1997) demanding sufficient space to openly express herself and advocate for the rights of people in her community.

In the following days, the media intensified the effort to tarnish his reputation, with a non-condemning, almost sympathetic, narrative, towards the shop-owner and the police, insisting on allegations about the victim holding a knife, planning to steal, and dying by

complications of drug abuse. It was an effort that was inscribed in queer collective consciousness as Zak's second death. This propaganda became interactive in the public arena of morning talk shows, inviting viewers to vote on whether they agreed with the action of the shop owner who killed a homosexual, HIV+ drug addict to protect his property. Zackie's character assassination persisted even after the results of the toxicological and forensic reports were published, disproving all allegations.

We were feral. We took to the streets, we threw glitter at the funeral, we had nothing to lose. We could feel our marginality in every cell, we were dispensable, we were spitting on the faces of God-fearing shop owners, esteemed family men whose photos were circulated, showing them left alone and unbothered by the police, sweeping the entrance of their shop clean from the glass shards and the blood. The shop-owner was eventually arrested and released with a restraining order later, and the trial was postponed indefinitely last year due to the pandemic. In the face of silence or possible elimination — in all its different definitions, we choose the latter, the consciousness of our mortality thrust on the sex, drag, revolution, the Madonna and Pokémon of our youth. It felt absurd, but historically, congenitally ours. That aporia of being spared was, for our generation, a violent coming of age. I remember the freeze, the flight, the fight. I remember the empty pages adding up, the hole, the crater.

The following couple of years were a blur, following a dramatic and traumatic breakup that caused a quick regression in my mental health. Fast forward to 2021, in the midst of a pandemic that so far had cost Greece over 26,000 victims (Reuters), I was entering a new relationship, and starting to heal emotionally. During that year people in Greece lived through ecological catastrophes, with the gravest being the forest fires in Evoia (Kakissis) and the floods that followed it (Smith), the rise of the Greek #metoo movement (Stamatoukou), the deadly push backs of refugees (ECRE), as well as an increase in poverty (Fotiadi).

My memoir takes place in the turbulent sociopolitical context of 2021 and within the

Greek family, or, in Dimitris Papanikolaou's terms, 'Holy Greek family', and the dichotomy between the picture-perfect 'photo frame' family and the explosive, fragile 'short circuit' family. Dimitris Papanikolaou's book *Something's up with the family: Nation, desire and kinship at a time of crisis* (2018) traces the malfunction and the pathologies of the Greek family as they are depicted in recent literary and artistic production. He locates the main point of interest not in the distinctiveness of the Greek family, but in its representation. based on 'The Holy Greek family', a narrative of exceptionalism. that ascribes to it the biopolitical role of maintaining the heteronormative ethno-patriarchal state.

Through the power relations that permeate the family, certain codes have been established, terms the untranslatability of which Greeks often take pride in. Untranslatable Greek terms such as 'παλικάριά' and 'μαγκιά' came to be the 'deep characteristics of the New Greek, as well as central keys in the understanding of their History' (73). Essentially that means that in Greek we have many different terms to describe the 'Old School Man', the man who is tough, proud, hard-working, full of swagger, a man 'with balls' and 'honour', with egoism, wit and cunning, a man 'who wears the pants'. We also have many different terms about purity and shame. Τα εν οίκω μη εν δήμω: 'What happens in the house must not come out to the demos'.

According to Papanikolaou, it is the family's job to protect its secrets, to suppress any sign of conflict, degeneracy and immorality, to hide the shortcomings of its members and to present itself as God-fearing, modern but not too modern, well-off, and most of all, 'normal'. I use the framework described by Papanikolaou to analyse processes that take place within my own family, in ways that I believe represent a wider set of values that are prevalent in Greek society.

Last but not least, I think it is relevant here to question the issue of intergenerational conflict in Greece, as the theories pertaining to it are very relevant to my examination of my

relationship with my parents. Politakis explains that, according to the American genealogic timeline, the Boomer generation (born between 1946 and 1964) corresponds to the Greek generation born during the Greek Civil War that lived through the dictatorship of 1967-1974, the Polytechnic School uprising against the junta, and the early regime change period.

As for the next generation, Generation X (born between 1965 and 1979), it is easy to classify it as ‘the PASOK generation’. The Panhellenic Socialist Movement (Pasok) dominated the Greek political scene for more than three decades, soaring to power in 1981, after the dictatorship, and transformed Greece into a modern European country by creating a welfare state (Lowen). As Lowen writes: ‘Pasok modernized Greece, enriched it, but then mismanaged it. The country racked up vast debts while Pasok and the centre-right New Democracy alternated in power. Both parties have been shaken by corruption and clientelism’. The years of Pasok, which have served for the creation of countless memes in Greece, have remained in the collective consciousness as the years of imaginary abundance, as the bubble of luxury and stability that burst, leading to the financial crisis. Generation X is a product of those years.

In my memoir I am describing the experiences of non-binary people belonging to the Millennial generation. For the Millennial generation (born between 1980 and 1996), it largely aligns with the global concept of Millennials who took a glimpse of the abundance as children, but came of age in a technologically advanced but rapidly crumbling world, both financially and ecologically, plagued by imperialist wars and by the breaches of human rights. According to Politakis, the Millennial generation is the ‘generation of Crisis’.

Ethical Issues

The main ethical issue that arose while writing my thesis was the inclusion of characters based on my parents and brother in my memoir and the exposure of intimate details about their lives. To handle this issue, I chose to anonymize them and semi-fictionalize. Moreover, I have included a disclaimer at the beginning of the memoir to explain how the experiences described are solely written from my point of view and do not necessarily reflect the opinions and feelings of other members of my family.

Furthermore, my own safety and privacy are also secured through my anonymisation, as I do not intend to publish this memoir under my legal name, by which I am recognized in my country. Re-traumatization while writing about sensitive subjects was not a major concern either, since writing autobiographically in such a manner proved to be a healing, therapeutic process, in which I engaged consciously, while receiving professional psychological counselling.

My research methodology

Autotheory

My memoir is written in the form of autotheory, which I am exploring in this section. Autotheory came into my life when I first read Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* which I purchased from the historic bookstore *Gay's the Word* when I visited London. My then partner was a trans man undergoing medical transition, and I was just starting to identify as non-binary and to explore my gender feelings and expression. Reading *The Argonauts* was the first time I saw theory being used to reflect values, ideas and feelings I could strongly relate to. I felt heard and represented, as if someone had peered in my own diary and decided to analyse my most intimate thoughts. What drew me to Maggie Nelson's autotheory was the point where the personal, the situational, and the political fade into each other.

Autotheory is a cross-genre form of life writing that merges autobiographical writing with theory. It combines personal, theoretical, and often political elements, using intimate and everyday life experiences of the writer alongside intellectual thought to produce theoretical arguments. I remember the feeling of exhilaration with this newfound discovery: autotheory was a way to use theory in a practical way to pursue solutions to my own problems. I then realized that all the studying I had done as an undergraduate student could actually be used to guide me through life.

The term autotheory, that is the combination of theory with autobiographical writing, was coined by Stacey Young (1997) in her book *Changing the Wor(l)d*. It refers to a set of artistic and literary works produced after the 1960s and crossing different media (conceptual art, video art, performance, body art), disciplines and genres (mainly by women of colour). Fournier traces the origins of women basing their philosophy on their personal experiences in early manifestations of Western feminist writing, like the works of political intellectuals Mary

Wollstonecraft (1792) and Sojourner Truth (1851). Writing autotheoretically became particularly relevant and prevalent in the 1970s and 1980s. The following decades saw a feminist shift towards the personal and its incorporation in activism and academic work (Nancy K. Miller's 'Personal Criticism' (1991) and Jane Gallop's 'Anecdotal Theory' (2002)) (Fournier 17).

Long before the use of the term 'autotheory', Nancy K. Miller in her book *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts* (1991) defines the term 'Personal Criticism', as a form that 'entails an explicitly autobiographical performance within the act of criticism' (1). Nancy Miller starts her book with a quote by Paul Valéry: 'There is no theory that is not a fragment, carefully preserved, of some autobiography' (Valéry in Miller 1).

Although it has come into the spotlight in recent years, especially after the publication of Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, autotheory has a long history in Western thought, particularly within postmodern, feminist and queer discourse. It has been argued that a collateral genre called 'autocritique' by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson dates back to Michel de Montaigne and his famous *Essais* (1580), where he unprecedentedly brings his own life to the forefront of his writing, basing his theoretical arguments about spirituality, ethics, and living well, on personal anecdotes. Several intellectuals such as Virginia Woolf and Friedrich Nietzsche wrote diaries in which they developed a philosophy, philosophical autobiographies, or used personal anecdotes in their theorizing.

Many feminist scholars of the twentieth century like Gloria Anzaldúa and bell hooks have extended the insight gained through hybrid forms of autobiographical writing to found their theoretical universes, establishing autotheory as a valid form of criticism. What we today call autotheory is inextricably linked to the Western feminist tradition and to the second-wave feminist mantra 'the personal is political'. However, autotheory is an interdisciplinary genre originating not only in diverse feminist practices (Carmody), but also in critical theory, black

and post-colonial studies, cultural studies, ethnography, and queer studies, as well as Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart's theories of affect (Wiegman 6).

The term became prominent in the last twenty years, responding to a growing intellectual need to locate personal experiences within collective and systemic analytical frameworks. Today, it is mainly used to refer to writing that queers genre and combines transmedial and transdisciplinary forms to address important issues of identity and society like gender identity, racism, and climate change. Such works are Chris Kraus' *I love Dick*, Ann Cvetkovich's *Depression: A Public Feeling*, Paul Preciado's *Testo Junkie*, Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* and Lara Feigl's *Look! We have come through!*

Autotheory is self-reflexive, with the author examining in a critical manner their own feelings, experiences and ideas, as well as their place in the nexus of social power. Autotheory is an ideal genre for tackling social issues, raising awareness and visibility and, more generally, doing activism. It is, thus, potentially a socially engaged approach to writing and doing art. This is why it is a form chosen mostly by women, queer and working-class people, people of colour, and other writers whose identities are in some way marginalized.

From the very beginning, reading and writing autotheory felt natural to me — a way to connect with other thinkers and writers across history while putting my own experiences under the microscope. I always had a complex relationship to theory. When I first got into university I realized that this was what I knew how to do best, and this was what I wanted to spend the rest of my life doing: Learning. Writing. Philosophising. Even though Greek academia proved to be a quite hostile place towards queer and neurodivergent people, I knew I wanted to pursue theory as a career and life purpose.

What always troubled me about it, though, was how many of my professors and classmates always seemed, at least to my eyes, to separate one's lived, practical experiences,

from theorizing. For example, trans people were a topic of debate, an opportunity for abstraction; our lived realities hardly seemed to matter in front of the higher ontological questions, whenever I ended up having a dreaded discussion with some professor. I hated feeling like I constantly had to justify my existence, and the life choices of me and those I loved. I always tried to turn the conversation from ‘Why do trans people exist? Where do they come from?’ to ‘We exist anyway, so let’s try to make our lives more livable’. Needless to say, these professors and classmates felt they could easily have these conversations with me without offending me, as I was not out as trans to them. In my eyes, autotheory offered a solution to that problem, by bringing the theorist’s personal experiences to the forefront, and making them matter.

Why Autobiography? Why Autotheory?

Autobiographical writing has been described as a tool of resistance for marginalized people for more than half a century, allowing the representation of those whose voices are otherwise silenced, the diversification of the stories being told, as well as the decolonization of academia. In her book *Getting Personal*, Nancy Miller highlights that ‘[p]ersonal criticism may include self-representation as political representativity’ (2). My work has been my main contribution to the political discussion about trans rights, and the main contribution I felt I could make in the three years during which I went through illness, treatment and recovery. It was a low-energy period that did not allow me to attend protests or activist meetings, but I soon realized that there are other ways one can be politically active. Reading the theory others had produced on queer issues and contributing to the existing dialogue, communicating with my supervisors, receiving feedback and discussing my work, as well as joining a feminist writing group and participating in slam poetry events, were ways for me to remain engaged.

In an interview Nancy K. Miller gave to Kathleen Green and Laura Roskos in 1992, she said:

The whole anthropological gamble of autobiography is that you are like other people, that the further you go into your singularity, the more you are like — which is not to say identical to — other people. It’s about identifying with another experience, while recognizing that a space of difference between identities will always exist. (58).

As Lauren Fournier writes in *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing and Criticism*:

Indeed, the history of feminism is, in a sense, a history of autotheory — one that

actively seeks to bridge theory and practice and that upholds tenets like 'the personal is political' (643).

When it comes to trans autobiographical writing, Jay Prosser was one of the first to write extensively on it, and who 'claims there is an affinity between transsexual identity and autobiography' (Fournier 137). Based on Prosser's work, Fournier argues that '[n]arrative is universally key for the construction of any coherent sense of identity, [...] and therefore if one's identity is non-normative, then reading other similar personal stories is a (trans)formative act' (137).

Concerning the relationship — and often the overlapping — between transgender studies and autotheory, Robyn Wiegman writes:

both modes of address [autotheory and transgender studies] rupture the normativities safeguarded by traditional conventions drawn around genre and disciplinarity alike (7).

When it comes to the challenges faced by queer people in academia, Adale Sholock, in *Queer Theory in the First Person: Academic Autobiography and the Authoritative Contingencies of Visibility*, adds that 'the widening scope of queer studies over the last decades has shifted our sense of audience to include nonacademic readers in addition to scholars and students' (141). The self-articulation of queer people has, therefore, contributed to the democratization of theory, by making it accessible for those who belong to the less-privileged end of the making, consumption, and practice of theory.

Finally, citation in feminist and queer texts, which is a constitutive element of autotheory, is a way to pay respects, a constant reminder of our history, a salute to those who paved the way, using tools based on personal experience, to make theory as relevant and useful

for marginalized people — both within and out of academia — as it is today.

Autofiction

The term ‘autofiction’ was coined in 1977 by Serge Doubrovsky who sought to describe his autobiographical novel *Fils* (Warner). It refers to a cross-genre area of writing that combines autobiographical elements with fictional ones. Central names in autofiction include Chris Kraus, Sheila Heti, Rachel Cusk and Ben Lerner, Tao Lin and Teju Cole (Clare 85, Lorentzen), and in France, Annie Ernaux (who is influential on the Anglophone writers). In autofiction, the borders between truth and fiction are often blurred and not easily distinguishable. Despite the recent coinage of the term, many critics believe that autofiction can be traced further back (Clare 85). The origins of autofiction can be located particularly in post-structuralist French writing of the second half of the 20th century, with writers such as Christine Angot, Virginie Despentes, and leading feminist theorist Hélène Cixous (Cooke 20).

Autofiction as a genre or an amalgamation of genres has sparked an ongoing discussion about the presence, limitations, (im)possibility and ethics of ‘truth’ in autobiographical writing. In the words of short story writer Lucia Berlin:

[S]omehow there must occur the most imperceptible alteration of reality. A transformation, not a distortion of the truth. The story itself becomes the truth, not just for the writer but for the reader. In any good piece of writing, it is not an identification with a situation, but this recognition of truth that is thrilling' (Berlin in Davis).

Other approaches, such as that of Edmund White, note that fiction writers take liberties with truth by altering, combining, or playing with factual events, characters, or the timeline. These liberties taken ‘are a way of freeing them from the charge of lying by, paradoxically, making things up’ (White in Clark). I have semi-fictionalized mainly in terms of altering the

timeline. Other than that, I have stuck closely to my memories of events.

I would not call my work one of autofiction, as I have not dared to fictionalize the events to a great extent. I do refer to the genre, though, considering that I have taken liberties mostly with the timeline of events, squeezing wider amounts of time into a short period of two weeks. Additionally, works of autofiction like James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Edouard Louis' *History of Violence*, Didier Eribon's *Returning to Reims*, and Chris Kraus' *I love Dick* have influenced my writing in terms of their style, content, and methodology. Still, even if I have not (consciously) altered many of the events described in the memoir, one can argue that there is fiction in my auto-fiction, in terms of creating characters out of real-life-people and myself, and giving them new lives, somewhat independent of real-life events. Even I (*especially* I) became a character in my memoir, as I took my distance and allowed my creative writing to give separate life to that persona whom I use in order to shed light on the sociocultural issues that have affected me.

Exophony

Exophony is the practice of people who write creatively in a language that is not their mother tongue. The term is derived from Greek words ‘exo’ meaning ‘from outside’ and ‘phonic’, referring to sound and voice (Gustanto). Some exophons may have been raised bilingual or multilingual, while others may write in a language that was acquired either early in life or later on, for instance through immigration (Pugliese).

The term ‘exophony’ made its appearance in the late 1970s, in the works of French linguist Louis-Jean Calvet, and began to be used in literary and cultural studies as late as in 2007 by German scholars Susan Arndt, Dirk Naguschewski, and Robert Stockhammer. In English, Chantal Wright promoted a more widespread use of the term in 2008, and started teaching a course about exophony at the University of Warwick in 2016.

However, the practice of writing creatively in a language other than the author’s mother tongue is much older, dating back to Voltaire and Oscar Wilde. Other, more recent exophones include Samuel Beckett, Milan Kundera, Joseph Conrad, Chinua Achebe, Vladimir Nabokov, Jack Kerouac, Kazuo Ishiguro, Khaled Hosseini, Yasmina Khadra, Elif Shafak, and Yoko Tawada.

There are various reasons that motivate an exophone to write in a language different from their mother tongue. They might be personal, political, historical, socio-economical, connected to personal trauma, geographical dislocation, or war. Chinese exophone author Yiyin Li decided to write in English in order ‘to erase her unhappy past and create a new internal world’ in what she calls her ‘private language’ (Lesiewicz). Jhumpa Lahiri, an American author of Indian origin writing solely in Italian, has explained that her chosen language has allowed her to become ‘a tougher, freer writer, who, taking root again, grows in

a different way.’ Lesiewicz herself, a Polish-born British writer, calls changing creative language not a rebirth, but a metamorphosis, that makes writers more resilient and inventive (Lesiewicz).

My privileged middle-class upbringing allowed me to learn a second language (English) before primary school even began, considering that my parents deemed it necessary and filled our house with books and VHS tapes directed to children learning English. It was my obsession with Harry Potter that drove me to read 600-word books written in English when I was 10, carrying a massive dictionary around on family vacation. What first prompted me to write in English was my discovery of the virtual universe of fanfiction. I wanted to share the stories I wrote with people from all over the world who loved those characters as much as I did. That was when I fell in love with writing in gradually less broken English.

I used to feel like English was a separate world, one of fiction, escapism, and magic, a world in which I could experiment with and explore the endless possibilities of who I wanted to become. English was, for me, a language reserved for play and imagination, one that my parents could not understand very well, yet always encouraged my fascination with it.

When I eventually started to question my sexual orientation and gender identity, English had already become my secret language, a language different than that of my parents, in which I could describe how I felt and share it with the world without feeling scrutinized or exposed. It was also a language that allowed me to avoid gendering myself in a binary way, unlike Greek that felt confining and limiting. Even though I started writing in Greek as well when I came of age, I very consciously decided to write this memoir in English, under a name that is not known in my country of origin, in order to avoid

recognition and exposure. Still, I infused my English with Greek words, reclaiming it and finding a way to stay connected with my culture of origin. The reader can see a more mature version of this when reading my recent works. It is visible in this Critical Reflection, with the use of words such as ‘nostos’ (p. 13) and ‘antipodes’ (p. 14). This freedom to oscillate between the two languages, to mix and match, to infuse one language with the other, is another way for me to experience the inbetweenness that feels so right and defining to me.

While, today, I recognize the colonial violence of the world’s most widely spoken language, I also acknowledged that, in the privileged setting of my upbringing, learning to write in it saved me. Humans are social animals, and this experience of mine proved to me the importance of being able to communicate with — and relate to — people from different parts of the world. While the widespread use of English has been helpful in that, we must acknowledge the imperialist tactics with which it has been enforced around the world, more often than not at the expense of other cultures and languages. Thus, I believe that, in the name of this universal need for communication, we need to search for ways to democratize this process by deprioritizing the widespread use of English and re-prioritizing more democratic, polyglottic ways to communicate with each other, without being lost in translation.

My theoretical precedents

The role of personal experience in feminist theorizing

My first question when I started writing my memoir was: why would this story matter to anyone? Why should it be written? I believe in the importance of having autobiographical stories written by members of marginalized communities, when they are written in a self-reflexive manner, as they produce new knowledge about those lives which are erased by systemic narrations. This is why I decided to ground my research on the concept of situated knowledges and feminist standpoint epistemology. The term ‘standpoint’ describes the position of a subject in society, which arises out of the person’s experiences of social relationships and power structures. This position holds epistemological power, as it is followed by the privilege connected with access to knowledge about social relations of power and oppression. According to Donna Haraway (1988), feminist objectivity in academic and scientific knowledge means that knowledge is situated (581), dependent on and shaped by the social position of the subject who acquires and possesses it.

Members of oppressed, marginalized groups are considered by standpoint epistemology to have privileged access to knowledge relevant to different sociopolitical structures and institutions, given that they experience first-hand the consequences of those structures and relations of power. Queer writers and writers of colour such as Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, and Cherrie Moraga have demonstrated the importance of using such approaches when analyzing the experiences of social groups that face multiple forms of oppression due to their intersecting, marginalized identities.

Standpoint theories and epistemic privilege

According to Nancy Hartsock, standpoint theory is a location defined as ‘interested’ (not in the sense of *biased* but in the sense of *engaged*), the conditions of which offer an epistemic privilege to the subjects who occupy that location (Harding 1986, 148). One’s standpoint is the result of the active sociopolitical engagement of those subjects who claim the same social location. According to Sandra Harding, the standpoint occurs when people who share a position oppressed by dominant social groups analyze the conditions of their lives and work politically to change them. Analyzing and understanding the oppression I am facing gave me direction and valuable tools for action.

Bulley and Şahin write that

There are examples of ‘situated’ practice research that emerges from the activities of communities. Following theorist Donna Haraway, we can understand that these ‘situated knowledges’ ‘are about communities, not about isolated individuals.’⁶⁰ [...] In situated practice research the research emerges, and is shared in real-time: it becomes clear as the practice occurs what the knowing is, and that knowing is shared instantaneously amongst those involved. (13)

In my memoir, I describe my father’s surprise when I tell him I read the works of Alexandrian poet C.P. Cavafy as queer, partly *because* he was homosexual. My father (as a seventy year-old cis, straight man) feels that Cavafy’s sexuality did not affect his poetry and did not matter to the way it is read. His reading only makes sense in a conservative society, in which no mention of Cavafy’s sexuality appears when he is taught in schools. This is part of our intergenerational chasm — as Francioli, Danbold, and North write in their study about the chasm between my dad’s generation and mine:

Millennials are often depicted by their elders as lazy, entitled, disrespectful, and responsible for the perceived decay of the American way of life (Paul, 2017). On the contrary, Baby Boomers also come under fire, portrayed by younger critics as greedy, complacent, wasteful, and taking advantage of economic, environmental, and political resources at the expense of other generations (e.g., Lopez, 2016; Romano, 2019).

I believe that these categorizations of generations, although they can often be too generalizing and perpetuate harmful stereotypes, offer a very accurate explanation of my conflict with my parents, who see their world rapidly changing, who feel like the values they were brought up with and created are becoming less relevant. At the same time, I often feel resentment towards a generation that keeps oppressing mine with its world-views, denying my gender identity while occupying positions of power and actively affecting my life with its decisions, even after the detrimental effects its actions left on the economy, the world and the environment. What I mean to show is that my father's standpoint and mine are affected by the multiple, intersecting social identities we occupy as generational categories can, according to Francioli et. al, 'function as powerful social identities (e.g., Taifel & Turner, 1979) and catalysts of meaningful intergroup relations (e.g., North & Shakeri, 2019; Timonen & Conlon, 2015)'.

I believe that memoir is the ideal form and genre for this exploration, as it would be very difficult for an external observer to navigate and describe my experiences, given that I find myself in a very specific situation (being non-binary and in the closet, in a romantic relationship with another person who shares these identities with me, while pretending that we are a heteronormative couple). Only we can know the intimate details about how such a life is lived and made more livable with concessions, compromises, and the subversion of dominant norms and institutions. *Trans*

Epistemology

The above analysis of standpoint epistemologies led me to search for a trans epistemology. What would it look like, and what new things would it introduce to the realm of feminist epistemologies? How do trans people view, process and perceive the world, how do they approach and produce new knowledge?

As Emma Heaney writes in *Feminism Against Cisness*, it is not just transsexual people who bear a ‘desiring relationship toward their own embodied relationship to gender and sexuality — just the opposite’ (143). For everyone, regardless of whether they have undergone medical transition, the ideological operations of gender are central in the construction of their subjectivity (143). This insistence on embodiment, this ‘liberatory horizon of a pleasurable, disalienated life matters to cis and trans people both’ (148). We need a trans epistemology that explains the ways in which both trans and cis people relate to the world in conjunction with their gendered embodiment. An epistemology that focuses on gender as an analytical category which drastically shapes and permeates everyone’s lives.

Moreover, intersectionality is a fundamental aspect of trans communities. Every trans person I have met has had a different story, with similarities and differences from the dominant narrative of coming out and being either accepted or rejected. A trans person living in Ireland has a very different set of rules that permeates their life than a trans person living in Greece. A Syrian trans refugee in Greece is likely to have completely different experiences from me, and a trans woman may have to face a completely different set of threats and problems than a trans man or a non-binary person.

Trans epistemology is deployed when we think queerly about transgender people and communities. Thinking ‘queerly’ means that we see subjects as ‘fluid, unstable and perpetually becoming’ (Browne and Nash, p. 19 in Meadow, p. 319). The writing of my

memoir is done queerly. For its biggest part, I refuse to pinpoint the exact gender identity or biological characteristics of the protagonists, showing how fluidly identities and practices are employed based on different circumstances. I do not even give half my characters a name. This is how we live our gender and sexuality: it is not compact, fixed, linear. Rather, there are multiple little bubbles of feelings, presentations and performances, and we jump from bubble to bubble, messily, experimenting, tweaking and playing, handling things as they come. The reasons I choose not to include fixed identity labels and names are multiple: first of all, because we are not out as ourselves to people who matter greatly to us, therefore I need to protect our anonymity. However, it is also a conscious choice about relatability — I have come to realize that many queer people in Greece and in other hybrid cultures struggle with (and yet choose) this instability, this fluidity, and we often live like chameleons in order to minimize our suffering and survive — albeit with a great cost, that of openness and outness.

A theory that heavily influenced the writing of my memoir and my theorizing of hybrid identities was that of Jose Esteban Muñoz. In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Politics of Performance*, he explores the ways in which queer artists of colour use the hybrid parts of their identities to their advantage, reclaiming and subverting them as political tools to navigate the difficult realities of living always in the middle: never here, never quite there. Defined by contradicting ethnic and sexual characteristics, they manipulate the relations of power that permeate their lives in order to identify with both ethnos and queerness, even though they find themselves persecuted in both areas.

Muñoz writes that by ‘working on and against’ dominant ideology, hybrid subjects try ‘to transform a cultural logic from within’ in order to permanently change the dominant structures of society, ‘while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance’ (12). I find myself using these tactics to survive in the Greek cultural

environment, to be myself while also staying safe. I believe Muñoz's theory of disidentification is necessary in the creation of a queer and trans epistemology differing from the dominant Western trans narratives, taking into consideration that each cultural background creates and shapes the foundations of people's sexual and gender identities.

The main questions I find myself compelled to answer when it comes to creating my trans epistemology based on the already existing theories are:

What should trans studies be grounded on? As Rubin (1998) writes, they must be grounded on the 'phenomenology of [trans-] embodied experience' (p. 265), centering the self-determination and self-identification of transgender subjects without invalidating it.

What kind of knowledge do trans studies produce? According to Noble, they 'comprise a contesting form of knowledge emerging in relations with clinical and discursive histories, social movements, and lived experiences as well as in contested relation to both queer and feminist scholarship' (p. 257). Moreover, Martino, Kuhl, and Omercajic (2021) highlight the contribution of transgender studies in the '[d]ebates about the question of gender authenticity — what and who counts as a *woman*)' (496), a question which has been at the center of feminist studies since Sojourner Truth and Simone de Beauvoir.

I argue that, based on the above, our quest for a trans epistemology would point towards a deconstruction of the man-woman binary, a re-definition and re-articulation of gendered experiences of oppression so that they include those of trans binary and non-binary people, taking into consideration their financial, disability, ethnic and religious backgrounds. A trans epistemology would describe the different ways people perceive, experience, and understand their own gendered feelings, identities, and performances in different environments. A trans epistemology will help us move away from trans-exclusive feminist accounts that first and foremost demonize trans women and deny them recognition, and

towards an intersectional and materially conscious epistemology (Stryker & Aizura 2013, p. 3) informed by the standpoint of gender-non-conforming subjects who embody trans experience, work towards trans liberation, and produce new knowledge through critical self-and-community reflection.

Who should transgender studies include? Martino et al. point out how various feminist trans theorists such as Namaste (2009) have criticized Anglo-American feminist theory that objectifies trans bodies and appropriates trans experience to serve its own epistemological exploration (Namaste, p. 12), ‘without a commitment to centering the subjective perspectives of transsexual women as pivotal to generating knowledge about trans-informed bodily ontological questions with respect to gender’ (Martino et al., p. 496).

Moreover, as mentioned above, a trans epistemology can be effective only if it is intersectional, expanding its methodologies to include non-white and non-Eurocentric tools and narratives, and acknowledging the variety and importance of the real, material conditions that shape and determine one’s experiences. Finally, a de-colonization of gender cannot be achieved without a focus on two-spirit and other non-Western, subaltern gendered experiences, identities, and performances (Driskill 2010 in Martino et al., p. 498).

Trans people's strategies of survival

In my master's thesis, I explored the strategies of survival of Greek university students studying in Athens. The main strategies described by the participants were those of passing and covering (Goffman 1963, Yoshino 2006).

According to Anderson (2020) and Pusch (2005), the tactics of passing and covering are indispensable parts of many trans stories due to trans people's need to navigate difficult social situations in transphobic, heteronormative societies. In his book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963) Goffman analyzes the strategies of stigma management employed by the subjects to render the social situations in which they participate more viable. One of the most common tactics is the effort to make the stigmatizing characteristic invisible, that is to 'pass' (Goffman 1963, p. 92) especially in cases when the characteristic is not always immediately visible to the eye.

Passing is followed by the threat of the person's true identity being revealed through some mistake or 'accident', as well as by the threat of it being revealed by people who know them personally and can shed light on their biographical information that goes against their virtual identity. Thus, there may occur a discrepancy between the two different biographies of the subject, which are constructed by people with different degrees of knowledge about their life and social identity (p. 94). In my memoir, I often show this danger, in the form of my mother seeing me on TV protesting about equal marriage, or in the epilogue, where I mention the various ways in which malicious family members or co-workers threaten to 'out' me in one way or another.

Social routines and behaviours which are normally considered as automatic and do not require a lot of thought and attention from the non-stigmatized people, are a result of the preparation and attention of the stigmatized people when they participate in them. When certain

situations occur for the first time, the stigmatized person cannot use their previous experience to handle them. They are required, instead, to remain constantly vigilant to manage situations that may threaten their virtual identity (p. 109). This theory perfectly describes my experience as I recount it in my memoir, of putting all my efforts and energy into keeping our gender identities hidden from our parents. Trans and gender-non-conforming people often try to pass as cisgender, given that the social treatment they receive changes radically depending on the extent to which they conform to dominant gender norms.

However, not everyone can pass with the same degree of success — many trans people do not even *wish* to pass as they feel euphoric and true to themselves when they retain a more gender-non-conforming appearance and behaviour. This pressure and discrepancy must be a central tenet of trans epistemology, as trans people perceive and understand the world through this externally determined, oppressive lens of having to do everything in their power in order to pass as cis.

Goffman also analyzes the strategy of covering, that is of making the stigmatized identity invisible by concealing certain characteristics, in order to make life easier for themselves and for others by redirecting their attention away from the stigma (Goffman 1963, p. 124). The most interesting part about covering is, according to Goffman, the management of social situations and of communicating according to dominant social norms (p. 126). The difference with passing is that people do not try (either because they do not desire to, or because they cannot) to hide their identity. They accept it, but they try to lessen the degree to which it affects their connection to others, and to render the stigma as invisible and damaging to their social identity as possible.

My master's thesis was grounded on the work of gay Japanese-American scholar Kenji Yoshino (2006). Yoshino expands through an autobiographical lens on Goffman's notion of covering, analyzing the covering of sexual, racial, and gender identity, as well as the processes

of assimilating and adapting to heteronormative, patriarchal, and white-dominated societies. He narrates his own story of coming to terms with his identity, the story of its oppression, concealment, outing, and management in social relations, using strategies of passing and covering.

Covering operates oppressively for many racial minorities, who are expected to ‘assimilate’ and to behave as ‘white’ or ‘Western’, for women who are expected to act in a masculine way in order to be taken into account, and for gay people who are expected to not ‘flaunt’ their homosexuality.

According to Goffman, there are people who choose to reveal their stigmatized identity completely (p. 122). Non-stigmatized people tend to categorize those who violate the norms of assimilation by making their difference known, not with a political language anymore, but with a psychiatric one. Those people who make their stigmatized identity known in a more assertive and demanding way are called unmovable, stubborn, problematic, and defensive. On the other hand, those who cover sufficiently, are appreciated by the non-stigmatized as mature and well adapted to society, as they view themselves as simple, whole people, who are only excluded from one tenet of their social life (p. 139).

In my memoir, I describe how I cover my identity after I come out to my father and he insists on calling me ‘daughter’, ‘woman’ and ‘girl’. Even though he now knows about my gender identity, I do not attempt to correct him or to ask him to use different pronouns. I do not wish to ‘push my luck’ and I prefer laying low and choosing to not confuse or upset him anymore.

Covering has been a strategy I felt obliged to follow when I realized that my parents would have a hard time coming to terms with my bisexual and non-binary identities. Although it involves not pushing others for the recognition I need, it has often seemed like the only

solution with people who know parts of my identity but cannot handle the complete truth in a way that would serve anyone involved. The theories of passing and covering have helped me rationalize and process my own experiences in a way I sometimes feel that only theory can do.

Covering one's identity does not mean that they cannot act in pursuit of its recognition. People can still be political and active in certain communities, out on some fronts and in the closet among certain people. Their actions and decisions may have political weight — they can contribute to a cause even while staying partially hidden. For me, that meant being a queer activist and presenting it to my parents as if I was fighting for feminism (the second-wave kind that they have in their minds), working with LGBTQI+ refugees without naming myself, and signing my writing with a name many people who know me in Greece will not recognize.

The Influence of Lauren Berlant

In their book *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Lauren Berlant explores how precarious and marginalized people manage to live in conditions of crisis. They introduce the term 'good life' to describe the model of living promoted by neoliberalism that can never be attained. This is why the optimism of trying to live the 'good life' is described as cruel, as the fantasies invested in it become an obstacle to the subject's flourishing (Berlant 1). Cruel optimism 'names a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility' (24). Our process of seeking the 'good life' is filled by crises. This creates the situation of a 'crisis of ordinariness' in which we live in our societies (10), and only by understanding that can we seek to create alternative modes of living that promote our flourishing.

In the example of my memoir, the 'good life' can mean two things: on the one hand, what my parents deem a 'good life' — one with enough respectability and money, a nuclear family, a 'normal' life no one has anything to gossip about — and on the other hand, what many queer people deem a 'good life' in Western cultures: one where they can be completely out, visible, and accepted for what they are. I suggest that these are two excellent examples of cruel optimism, as on most occasions and specifically in my story, they cannot be attained.

Berlant introduces the concept of 'intimate publics', spaces in which the collective becomes intimate as strangers 'consume common texts and things' (Berlant viii in Hamm) and vice versa. In those publics, strangers tied together by shared emotions and worldviews form communities, as Jay Prosser explains in his opening of an interview he took from Berlant in 2011. My memoir starts by showing our very own intimate publics: at my parents' house we seek refuge in my childhood room, managing to retain our truth among each other while sharing the texts and art pieces that shaped us when we were younger. In the privacy of our apartment, we live truly, making sense of our everyday life with the help of our favourite

theorists and their works.

Prosser quotes *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (2008), in which Berlant writes: ‘The autobiographical is not the personal. [...] In the contemporary consumer public, and in the long duree that I’m tracking, all sorts of narratives are read as autobiographies of collective experience. The personal is the general. Publics presume intimacy’ (vii). He proceeds to note that this concept renders intimate and public as absolutely intricately, instead of antithetical. In this reading, Berlant problematizes the focus on the individual life as it has been largely done in autobiography, that is, the ‘exemplification of some lives to the exclusion of lives, affects, and often deaths that won’t fit the normative story’.

Berlant explains that

[s]ometimes conventionality is a defense against norms too, a way to induce proximity with our assimilation (this used to be called ‘inauthenticity’); and sometimes it’s a way of creating another, counterconventional, space. Think of Foucault’s ‘heterotopias,’ the folds within the normative world where one can encounter the positivity of being otherwise.

Marginalized people living precarious lives, such as queer people, which is the example Berlant offers, can thus create new, ‘potentially genuine alternative conventionality’, that is, alternative ways to survive, live, and even flourish, in spaces that lie between the folds of neoliberal normativity.

In that same interview, Berlant asserts that

[p]olitical publics in struggle often take on the logics of intimate ones,

deploying sentimental modes of affective recognition to establish political grounds for imagining survival according to their own interest. [...] At the same time, in times of crisis, intimate publics often redirect their attention to transforming the terms of the political, converting their collective inside knowledge about injustice to political labor-power in struggle against the dominant terms.

For autobiography, Berlant's theory means that, when written and used intentionally by marginalized people, it has the potential to inspire and drive collective resistance against injustices. This is a notion that informs my autobiographical writing, in that it is informed by the sociopolitical struggles of queer people in Greece, and at the same time it is written with intentions of resisting, in my own way, dominant structures, by articulating the alternative ways in which closeted queer people attempt to create livable lives in their own terms.

Not everyone can or wants to live in their motherland, but still, they find other ways to make life more livable, creating heterotopias of resistance, creation, and solidarity. Migrating (flight) is not an easy way out, as it means that one has to leave their family and culture behind and sacrifice the privileged identity of 'the local' or 'the native', but it is the best solution we have reached based on our circumstances. Other people might freeze or fight when faced with the same fear. All these reactions can be just as viable as long as they minimize the suffering of the subject. When fearing for one's life, safety, and relationships, we should not be expected to thrive. No thriving is allowed where one is discriminated against, excluded, and erased. In order to ameliorate our conditions we need to keep fighting, but throughout this process we should also be allowed to freeze (think) and to flee (hide, keep ourselves safe) when faced with such dilemmas.

What is my creative practice?

Plot Synopsis

My memoir follows the life of the young, queer bisexual, narrator, a non-binary person diagnosed with OCD and living mostly ‘in the closet’ when it comes to their gender identity. The dominant, conservative, traditional ideas of their family and the wider Greek society create a hostile environment that renders coming out a risk for family relationships. The memoir follows the narrator and their partner, a closeted transfeminine person whose identity is known only to the narrator and a couple of friends. It starts with a visit to the narrator’s childhood home for their partner to meet the narrator’s parents, who are not aware of the identities of either of the young couple. The couple can pass as heteronormative, and the two young people perform cisgender, heterosexual identities to hide their queerness from the conservative parents. The visit triggers a wave of nostalgia for the narrator, who returns home and dives into books, movies, and memories from their childhood, dragging their partner with them. The next two weeks follow the narrator on a journey of reminiscence, self discovery, and navigating complex familial and romantic relationships. The narrator comes to terms with the loss of their previous relationship with a co-activist transman, the decline of their grandmother’s health, and the conditional acceptance as a bisexual, ostensibly cisgender woman, by their parents after years of struggle in their relationships. Approval has been gained through the masking and hiding of their non-binary identity.

The narrative form is in the first person, addressed to the partner and may resemble a love letter at some points. This form resembles the epistolary memoir, a sub-genre with a long history, starting with Ovid and Seneca’s autobiographical letters (Enenkel 565) and leading to recent works such as Isabel Allende’s *Paula* and Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We Are Briefly Gorgeous*, both of which are memoirs written in the form of letters to loved ones. I believe that

this form is ideal for the introspection that happens during writing, as the revisiting of the memories, the feelings, and the events described happens in two stages that facilitate the process of introspection: first, recounting the events, and second, participating in a dialogue of sorts about them, with the — more or less silent — recipient of the writing.

The story spans a two-week period set in the summer of 2021 the events of which are formative for the narrator's story, and includes flashbacks that give more insight into the narrator's past, their relationships, family, childhood, and sociopolitical context. Each chapter is delimited both as a day in the plot that takes place during two dense weeks, and thematically, focusing on distinct emotional, social and political issues and/or historic national events. This structure allows for a detailed analysis of events that affected me during a short, meaningful period of transformation and introspection.

As the plot unfolds, the narrator reflects on the juxtaposition of the caring, containing family of their childhood, and the heavy weight of having to perform a different identity from their bisexual past, relying on their seemingly heterosexual relationship to gain the family's acceptance. The plot leads to an unexpected coming-out of the narrator to their father that offers partial closure and a coming-of-age resolution as they must deal with the excitement sparked by the father's initial accepting behaviour, and with the disappointment that comes when nothing really changes in his behaviour to accommodate their identity needs. He keeps misgendering them and avoids mentioning their identity. The reason the memoir ends at that point is because I feel like this hybrid stance of care and partial acceptance which often borders erasure, is a situation many queer people who live in Greece find themselves in when they come out (or do not) to their families.

How my thesis came to be

Defining and presenting my methodology for the creative process has been challenging. The murky waters of defining practice as a research method have often led to challenges of legitimacy within the academic community (Bulley & Şahin 30). Additionally, as Nicola Boyd writes, ‘Creative arts and creative writing specifically, have shied away from the idea of methodology until recent years’. She cites Stewart, who ‘defines the framework of research for the creative artist as ‘concerned with either identifying or evaluating the theories underlying and shaping our practice’ (Boyd 5). This definition describes my own research process quite satisfactorily. In writing autotheory, my writing relies on, and participates in a wide discourse with, various theoretical frameworks and ideas.

I identified the themes I wanted to write about: gender identity, current situation in Greece, the views of Greek society on issues of gender, sexuality, relationships, and institutions such as the family. I also knew that I wanted to write an autotheoretical memoir and analyse my own experiences through the lens of various theoretical accounts. Based on these themes I wanted to explore, I also identified my research questions.

Then, I researched the current literature relevant to these themes and questions, read, kept and organized notes. I read autotheoretical works such as Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts* and Paul Preciado’s *Testo Junkie*, as well as researching the genre of autotheory, mainly Lauren Fournier’s work *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*. I read more widely about life writing and memoir and deepened my knowledge in critical and queer theory. I also read works of Roland Barthes, Lauren Berlant, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler and Jose Esteban Muñoz. Finally, I researched Greek reality, focusing mainly on Dimitris Papanikolaou’s comprehensive work on the Greek family, and on gender and sexuality politics in the Greek context.

I identified the key plot points and constructed an outline of the plot organized into chapters in a hybrid structure that combines themes and chronology as organization criteria. I mostly follow the real order of events while taking some creative liberties concerning their duration and in-between distance. The form of memoir allows for these liberties. According to Thomas Couser (2011), the narrative of a memoir usually does not follow the chronological order of how things unfolded in the author's life. The author can, in fact, organize their memoir based on different criteria (64), select to omit or emphasize different events, and transcend the boundaries of linear narration (65). The alteration or even subversion of chronology may often be purposeful, as the form of the narrative often shapes the content, meaning, and reading experience (66).

I added an extra layer to my plot outline, aligning each theme that arises in the plot to one or multiple theoretical approaches and arguments.

I wrote eight chapters of creative non-fiction that included theoretical elements, often in the form of quotations followed by my interpretation, following the model that Maggie Nelson uses in *The Argonauts*. Like Nelson, I started writing in media res and included flashbacks to introduce past events, focusing both on life-changing events such as Zak's murder, and on everyday moments that helped me theorize.

I revised and edited each chapter based on the feedback given by my supervisors.

My process

Seven years ago, I submitted my undergraduate thesis, which was a comparative study of Feminist Standpoint Epistemologies and the theory of Intersectionality. I then completed a Masters Degree in Human Rights and Education, which equipped me with valuable knowledge in Social Studies and Critical Theory. The topic of my Master's thesis was the strategies of survival of trans people in Athenian universities. I conducted semi-structured interviews through which I documented the experiences of young trans people in the universities of my city of origin, and found that they felt intensely invisible, although the university remained comparatively one of the most welcoming climates towards their gender identity. The most hostile space appeared to be that of the family, in which the identities of the participants remained a source of conflict. The reason I chose this topic for my Master's thesis was the need to explore in a more systematic manner the experiences of people with similar identities to mine — experiences which had been severely under-researched in Greek literature.

Ever since I started studying epistemology in my undergraduate degree, I became interested in how we get to know things about the world and the ways that process is affected by our position in society. In every essay I wrote, I tried to combine epistemology with both feminism and literature. My dream from a very young age was to write creatively, but my writing sample was not initially thought to be good enough to get me into a practice-led Creative Writing PhD. I also got rejected when I applied for a Creative Writing Master's at another British university. Eventually, I was accepted into a Critical PhD, not a practice one, at the University of Leeds. I started my PhD amidst the Covid-19 outbreak remotely, and decided to continue studying through distance-learning due to personal and health reasons. This process functioned extremely efficiently for me, and provided me with the opportunity to study at a British university while staying in Greece. In my mind, the prospect of studying

abroad, in a more liberal environment, felt utopian. Of course, that has ceased to be the case following Brexit and the recent turn of 'gender critical' academia in the UK, as well as the UK Supreme Court judgment in *For Women Scotland v The Scottish Ministers*.

My initial goal when I got accepted into my PhD was to analyze the creative writing other young queer and trans people had produced in the Greek context, but the way I best knew how to write was predominantly creatively, and my supervisors agreed that it would be best to switch to a practice-led PhD and write autotheoretically, inspired by the model of Maggie Nelson. A couple of months after the beginning of my PhD I switched to a practice-led programme and started revising my first research questions.

The idea for the main themes and outline of my memoir came to me fairly early in the process. In the summer of 2021 I spent a few days at home with my partner, our cats and my family dog. We talked about our childhoods, watched nostalgic movies and read books we used to love as kids, shared our passions and desires. During those days, I engaged with texts that inspired me and made me feel that theory could help me better understand and live my life. I decided to write about those days, compressing them into a period of two weeks inside which I took the creative license to fit several major life events that had taken place that summer (my trans partner meeting my family while staying in the closet, the forest fires that swept Greece and threatened my family home, my coming out to my father) as well as in the past (the murder of Zak Kostopoulos, my breakup with my previous partner).

I started with writing a short analysis of the sociopolitical situation in Greece, and the history of the Greek transgender movement. In the beginning, I did not know exactly what my research questions were. I read, and I wrote about what I read, and what I had experienced, and soon the first chapter of the memoir started to take shape, describing my relationship with my partner and their first meeting with my parents. Artist researcher Carole Gray describes how the way in which problem formation takes place for practitioners is not always neat or

predictable, but the problems keep evolving following the process and the needs of the practice until the completion of the project (Bulley & Şahin 24-25). Even though my research questions informed the process of my practice research, the methods I used and the problems that arose changed several times and remained blurry for a while before they eventually crystallized in my continuously evolving work.

Bulley and Şahin (2021) write that: ‘Practice research is when practice is the significant method conveyed in a research output’. They distinguish practice research from ‘traditional’ research by defining the practice itself as ‘the significant method of a research output’ (4). Defining practice research in my own terms was my biggest challenge in writing my thesis. To tackle that task, my supervisors advised me to take some distance from my work and approach it as if it were produced by someone else. That is what I attempt to do in this section of the Critical Reflection.

The reason I decided I had to write about my experience and research its components and specificities was that I knew that, since I keep so many parts of my identity personal and hidden, an outsider could not sufficiently study these aspects of my experience if they had not gone through similar things. Trans (binary and non-binary) people often keep parts of their identity hidden for reasons of privacy and safety, and I believe that this is part of the reason why I have not read many trans narratives that reminded me of mine. Trans people in Greece and in other conservative, traditional cultures, often have to face a difficult dilemma: come out and experience freedom while risking losing important relationships, or stay in the closet, perform the wrong gender identity, and deal with the grief of covering?

My practice of writing a memoir is research conducted using the methodological tools of autotheory. It is a work of practice research because it follows the methodological process of using and analyzing data in the systematic and reflexive process of theoretical inquiry in order to produce new knowledge, while using the tools of creative writing.

The knowledge I produce concerns the ways non-binary trans people in Greece create livable lives for themselves, as well as some of the means, tools, and methods employed to achieve this. Moreover, the knowledge I produce is also about the relationships non-binary trans people who were born, raised, and still live in Greece form and maintain with their loved ones, the choices this entails in order to stay safe, as well as the work that is required from all parts for these relationships to flourish, despite the keeping of secrets often imposed or necessitated by the specificities of Greek culture, society, and tradition.

However, writing this Critical Reflection in 2025, following the global turn to the far-right which led to political events such as the re-election of Donald Trump in the US and the 'gender-critical' turn in the United Kingdom, including the 'Judgment for Women' which ruled sex as a biological category, I have recently come to realize that my work might have generalizable aspects outside Greece. Hundreds of thousands of transgender (binary and non-binary) people into the West have become witnesses to an extreme regression of their rights, and have been obliged to return into the closet, to alter the ways in which they live and perform their gender in order to remain legal and safe. Unfortunately, I believe that my work highlights many of the struggles faced by gender-non-conforming people in the West, as well as in non-Western countries where being trans is criminalized and trans people are persecuted by the law: the compromises, the sacrifices, the hiding, covering, and non-recognition of their identities, the practical difficulties that arise, and the pain these changes cause to the psyche.

Outlining the process of writing each chapter

The first chapter of my memoir is inspired by the meaningful moments I collected from those few summer days I spent with my partner and our pets at home. It includes intimate conversations, a description of our relationship as ostensibly heteronormative but fundamentally queer, and a theoretical analysis of the closet, family, memory, and childhood nostalgia. The process of writing my first chapter included deciding on the topics it would consist of (family, sexuality, gender identity, tradition, childhood, nostalgia), reading critical and creative works on the same topics, and engaging in a dialogue with other writers and theorists. The chapter opens with a description of our bodies (mine and my partner's) as they interact with each other and perform gender in a non-conforming, experimental fashion. Even though the issue of the body and embodiment does not feature strongly elsewhere in the memoir, in this first chapter I describe my body in relation to others: to my partner as we flirt while washing the dishes, to my mother reacting to my hair after I dye it pink, to the people who perceive me as female when I walk down the street in a floral dress and red lipstick.

Practice research, and more specifically autotheory, allows the body to enter the equation of theorizing and producing new knowledge. According to Rea McNamara, autotheory 'centers and legitimizes individual, bodily experiences as a means of processing knowledge production — basically, a way of thinking through 'high' cultural theory via our physical, embodied selves'. In my memoir, at some points bodies become metaphors or metonymies — for change, for autonomy, for freedom — yet in other points, they just are what they are — the body I have, the body I love, the bodies I fall asleep with, flesh sweaty and warm. I have always felt inspired by reading what people write about their bodies and the bodies of others. It has been something I always felt was missing from the more 'traditional' Philosophy I studied at university. The practical aspects of life, the materiality,

the haptic, the sensory, the intimate. In reading feminist and queer theorists I found the body, and I consciously decided to write openly about it.

After I completed the first chapter, ‘Family’, I outlined the rest of the plot based on the topics I wanted to explore and the events I wished to describe. I used scrapbooks, quotes, perfumes, photos, and memorabilia from each period, soon realizing that my main goal was to preserve memories as a way to analyze my feelings, ideas, and growth.

I altered the timeline slightly, deciding to fit all events into a compact period of two weeks. It also had to do with the way I experienced time — it often used to feel like too much was happening too quickly, like everything was coming all at once. It was a summer full of new, formative experiences, and a summer of processing previous ones, full of discussions, self- and inter-reflection, and analysis of the events taking place in my life. I often kept notes during conversations that led to breakthroughs, and used those logs to inform the realizations I describe in my memoir. I returned to childhood photos, toys, books, and movies that helped me recall and reconstruct old memories, and I examined the effect they still had on me during that time. It has been helpful for me to imagine my memoir as a movie, trying to evoke (or reinvent) all the sensations of the moments I describe: the sounds, the sights, the smells, the haptic experiences, trying to show the reader how my persona felt. I often took a step back and listened to some music while I consciously tried to visualize every scene, noting down all the intimate aesthetic details I could grasp. I approached time as if I was writing a script for a movie that was supposed to last a couple of hours — I wanted to condense every scene into a digestible storyline that one could sit down and read at one go.

During that period, I also started crafting dollhouses and miniatures as a way to relax and decompress. I remember feeling guilty for not writing and making a dollhouse kit instead, but then I realized that this was another creative way for me to process my feelings and ideas. The dollhouses became a means for me to preserve memories in a compact form,

and to dream of the possibility of a queer futurity of togetherness. As Gaston Bachelard writes in *The Poetics of Space*: ‘In point of fact, imagination in miniature is natural imagination which appears at all ages in the daydreams of born dreamers’ (149) and ‘Representation becomes nothing but a body of expressions with which to communicate our own images to others’ (150). For me, building miniatures means exactly that: finding a way to show my dreams to other people, to share with them the images I have in my head, to give them life. Dollhouses and miniatures always made my imagination run wild, accelerated my creativity and gave me a concrete means to hold my desires in the palm of my hand.

From the very beginning, I somehow knew that I wanted my memoir to directly address my partner, like a long love letter. The memoir is written in my own voice, yet that of my partner is implied everywhere, even when it is not explicitly stated, as our conversations intensely shape my perception and processing of things. My work has been inspired and informed by the model followed by Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick in her memoir *A Dialogue on Love*, which is written as a long conversation with her therapist. Sedgwick uses this strategy as a way to mirror her feelings and experiences through the voice of someone who knows her soul very well. This dialogue is a sort of an intimate and vulnerable epistemological process through which she comes to know herself. One such example is when Shannon, her therapist, realizes that she was ‘a mess’ as a child, and frames it as an inter-subjective revelation:

I guess I’ve been staring off at the grim distance as I produce this account.

Because when I turn back toward Shannon at the end of it, looking for the impassively friendly countenance that always greets me, what I find is — his face buried in one hand, head shaking back and forth in some weird combination of mock despair and real despair and disbelief.

I’m still not quite sure why.

But it's kind of a powerful thing.

'You were a mess!' is all he at first manages to say. 'A mess!' I hear it!

'It's that the you I see when I look at you, sitting there on the couch so nicely, is the product of an arduous and almost endless labor. You really were very, very different from the way you are now — the person I know is someone who's been torturously polished, rubbed,

shaped, repainted, pinked,

molded... You've done so much!

You're

really different.' (32)

When she looks at Shannon, Sedgwick feels perplexed with his unusual reaction, she does not really know what is happening and why he is behaving so oddly, and she expects him to give her some answers about herself — which he does. This process is very similar to the way I turn to my partner when I feel lost, when I do not understand what is happening or when I do not know why I am the way I am, and they usually know. They understand, because they know me so well, and they can see me from the outside. This journey of getting to know ourselves within the relationship has been a crucial inter-reflexive process, of being read, of being echoed by someone we trust. The parts of ourselves that remain invisible to us, are finally seen and recognized.

In the first draft of this Critical Reflection I wrote that it felt natural to describe this

intimately shared period through directly addressing my partner, the person who made everything possible by forming this pact of secrecy with me, the person who helped me understand more things about myself, my relationships, and the world. However, my supervisors commented that nothing is natural — it is all constructed, social, discourse. I decided to unpack what natural’ meant and the process that had led me to feel that way. Once again, discussing it with my partner, I realized that I had come to feel that way because the two of us had spent years, up to the point when I wrote this Critical Reflection, being completely open and truthful only to each other. We were hiding things from others but we were raw and confessional when it came to our relationship. We discussed everything with honesty and made sense of it together. Through the depth of the relationship we had built, my process of thinking through everything had become intersubjective — we thought together, we processed everything together, even when the two of us reached separate conclusions, we were both part of the same process. I had always liked to write in the epistolary form to explore romance and identity when I was younger. I was obsessed with love letters — thus I now acknowledge that addressing my memoir to my partner was not just natural — it was also a conscious choice I made, a device I used in order to make my writing more intimate, to invite the reader in, to help them relate to it and, in that way, build another intimate relationship, this time between me and the reader, between my partner, our relationship, and the reader.

I often returned to my writing, altered scenes, and added my new realizations. My writing process had largely been shaped through the years by two genres: academic writing and fanfiction. The second one was a way for me to explore the topics of romance, sexuality, and identity (which had felt increasingly pressing to me ever since I was a child) while using pre-existing imaginary characters whom I loved and related to. The interesting part of this was that I often wrote fanfiction autobiographically (as many fanfiction writers do), giving the characters experiences, traits, and reactions similar to mine, as a way to process things. I

became well versed in writing long monologues about a character's feelings, analysing their personalities, motives and actions, and through that processing my own experiences. My fanfiction writing was always multi-medially inspired, obviously or invisibly informed by songs, scents, places, tastes, and bodily sensations. It often followed stream-of-consciousness narratives, as in this example from my memoir:

I am lucky enough to still remain in those 'good old days' of being a graduate student who consumes too much coffee and reads Barthes doe-eyed, mesmerized, feeling as if I have just discovered the wheel — a really old wheel that has been there for several decades but still makes the reader feel unique, chosen, in Barthes' hedonistic, melancholic process of wooing, unrequited. A wheel, or rather a hoop and stick for a Victorian boy to roll down the pavement, or the wheels of a bicycle I learned to ride in the ripe old age of nineteen, relearning to scrape my knees, relearning to ask for mum, to show her no hands, to ask for her concern like I beg for the attention of a lover.

In the age of #aesthetic, consider me afflicted. I practically live in the #lightacademia side of Tumblr, I revel in the pleasure I derive from my Pinterestmoodboards, I thrive the most in performing, making a scene, in a black turtleneck and a tweed mini-skirt, sipping a glass of rosé, in a dimly lit bookshop café near our home, where I am writing these lines. I somehow even embrace pretentiousness, trying to convince myself that it is of the good kind.

I worked similarly with the following chapters. The second chapter, 'Fight', focuses on my activist years and the collective grief and political awakening that followed the murder of drag queen Zackie Oh. I describe how I first became an activist by joining a LGBTQ+ Youth group, how I fell in love with a trans man, got into a relationship with him, and was dumped by him a little while after Zak was murdered. I reminisce on both my personal grief

(for my relationship) and the collective grief of the movement for justice (Zak), both a violent coming-of-age. I juxtapose the abruptness of this realization to what my now partner, then friend, a transfeminine person experienced: for them the realization of queer vulnerability was not abrupt — it was something they had learnt to live with from a very young age, being perceived like a boy and a man yet not feeling like one, as trans people who are assigned female at birth are often made urgently aware of their ‘freakishness’ and, thus, their vulnerability:

Stefanos and I already knew how little our lives mattered in the minds of traditionalist, religious homophobes with whom we still had the courage to pick fights in the bus and at the bank. Still, Zak’s death was what really made us face our fragility. It was the first blow to our bliss.

For you, it was different. Being a transfem person that didn’t pass, you never had the privilege to think of yourself as invincible. You knew from the get go that the queer existences we led in our country couldn’t be carefree ones. Trans women and feminine people are scrutinized, discriminated against, and facing violence more than any other demographic, in every country. People who have been assigned male at birth and visibly play with gender are abhorred by conservative, more often than not. It is the blow to their own masculinities, a sort of ‘trans panic’, that traditional cis men cannot stomach. So, while we yelled chants and danced at Pride, you were guarding your friends, walking up and down and suspiciously eyeing the lurkers. Back then, we didn’t know how much we owed to you. ‘Safety’ was a word you cherished and yearned for, long before we realized we needed to.

The third chapter, ‘Freeze’, recounts the days during which Greece burnt, ponders on environmental catastrophes, and on my own fear about losing my childhood home to the fires. I describe the different degrees of involvement in and distance from various

sociopolitical issues, depending on the level of my readiness to participate in public matters. Still, despite my active participation or the lack thereof, the events my characters go through are deeply political and show the kind of things that people in Greece are often faced with, such as the sense of loss before the frequent environmental catastrophes and the inability of the state to be proactive and protect us, as I show in the following fragment.

What mattered was that one government after another kept failing their people, sentencing them to a life of precarity by leaving them naked in the face of this rapidly expanding kind of climate injustice. Those who lost their homes, shops, animals and crops after waiting for hours for state assistance would be granted an official apology by the prime minister — the first in a series of what was about to become a habit — as well as the promise of immediate financial reparations. Justice was buried in Pompeii. For years, people in Greece remained fought in the arena of survival as the political games went on in the Colosseum.

In this chapter, I also explore my turbulent relationship with my brother, as we are brought together by our shared care for the family dog, and I describe the depth of my relationship with my pets. I think that my relationship with my brother is an excellent opportunity to show how important the role of nuance is. An abusive relationship between children is explored through showing that the roles of victim and abuser become fluid within a problematic family, and everyone can become the perpetrator of violence when they are treated violently.

As for my relationship with my pets, it was one of the easiest parts of the memoir for me to write, as it is a relationship that engulfs me, that makes me one with nature, that nurtures me and makes me kinder. I write:

Are words good enough? (Nelson). With Lucy, I find my words are failing me, because this relationship is experienced by me largely in emotional, spiritual, and

corporeal terms. I do not mean I want to have sex with my dog. I mean that we are ‘Significantly other to each other, in specific difference, we signify in the flesh a nasty developmental called love. This love is an historical aberration and a naturalcultural legacy’ (Haraway, p. 3).

In the fourth chapter, ‘Falter’, I explored our first experiences of grief, such as being broken up with, my new partner losing their cat, and both our grandmothers being sick before dying off-page. Writing this chapter really helped me process what had come to pass and served as a way for me to deal with the new (at that point) concept of grief. It also felt like a coming-of-age for my writing. For decades I had insisted on writing only happy things, on steering clear from the hurt and the grief. My motto was that ‘there is enough sadness in real life, why write and read about it too?’ With this chapter, I realized how writing about sad things allows my writing to evolve and become more honest and well-rounded. Grief is an inescapable part of everyone’s lives, and queer people are often forced to face loss and grief from a very young age. That is why I believe it was important to show these inextricable aspects of growing up in my own version of a queer bildungsroman.

In my memoir, I write about happiness and suffering — the two sides of the same coin:

I think that being queer goes against binaries of happiness and suffering. I have found both in the same places, because it is those places where relating really happens. [...]

I’ve come to recognize happiness as relating vulnerably, resiliently. [...] It is, in my view, a choice of persistence, the abolition of a cis/heteronormative quest for mass acceptance, of the perfectionism of normality, of meeting others’ expectations as a condition for recognition. It means to love unconditionally, with honesty and boundaries, or else to not love at all.

Being happily queer means, for me, staying queer, grieving those things that ‘you miss out on’ as a result, and then making space for the construction of a world based on new, personal and collective standards, a world in which failure is welcome, communication necessary, a world that makes it possible to rebuild those relationships with parents, sisters, brothers, neighbours, that went through misrecognition, disrespect, and chaos, only for overwhelming care to eventually prevail over difference. [...]

This is why I write about my mother and about our cats, this is why I write about you.

In the fifth chapter, ‘Friend’, I explore friendship, community, and the concept of chosen family, which I believe are quintessential for the survival of queer and trans people. In a dialogue with various scholars, such as Marilyn Friedman and Sasha Roseneil, I explore the de-centralization of the heteronormative, family-centric model, and the voluntariness that characterizes friendship and differentiates it from other relationships. I also explore the notion of queerplatonic relationships, another state of in-betweenness that encompasses intimacy that transcends friendship, without the need for romance or sex.

In the sixth chapter, ‘Fawn’, I describe my experience with anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), as well as the way I was traumatized by the malpractice of mental health professionals. I believe that this chapter describes a very specific situation which manages to be quite widespread, as it turns out, of mental health professionals not maintaining the necessary boundaries and letting their personal and political lives permeate the therapeutic process. I connect this issue to that of placing role models with marginalized identities on a pedestal in tight-knit communities and the dangers that ‘Messiah complex’ entails.

The seventh chapter, ‘Flight’, deals with my attempts to escape to a simpler life by

taking a short holiday to my island of origin, Naxos, and with my desperate need to get accepted by my traditional, conservative family. I explore the concept of homeland and, through writing about this break, realize that it goes hand in hand with my being constantly misread. In this chapter I describe our plans to get married traditionally, in church (although we were both atheists) as a performance for my grandmother, who was still alive in 2021. Her passing, almost a year later, made the arrangement no longer necessary, but for us those plans were an exercise in compromise, a secret pact that allowed us to navigate how to be our true selves in the presence of each other while protecting our safety and relationships in our wider social circle.

The eighth chapter, 'Free', follows an attempt to come out as non-binary to my father, who is comparatively my most progressive parent. I describe how I was hoping for approval and dreading rejection but was faced with neither: my father accepted the predicament but did not really believe in its truth. He told me that I could be whatever I wanted yet continued to call me his daughter, 'girl' and 'woman', showing me that nothing had really changed. He did not kick me out or disown me, but he also did not acknowledge my identity. He was as accepting as he could be, and I had to learn to live with the limitations posed by my parents' experiences, values, and ideas. It was a middle ground, a liminal space. My mother was an entirely different case. I knew and still know that she will not be able to take the revelation. Even if she became able to accept it, I knew it would make her sad. This is how the memoir ends: with the realization that I cannot have everything I need, I am deeply loved yet not in the ways I want to be, and I have to create alternative spaces in which I will be able to live as my true self, and make compromises with the relationships that already exist and which are important to me. I want to show that staying in the closet can be a choice, but also that it does not have to be an all-encompassing one.

The last chapter was written with the active participation of my partner. We were on a

weekend away at Methana, a peninsula in the Peloponnese, in a room with a stunning view of the sea, eating instant noodles made in the kettle we had carried with us and smoking, one cigarette after the other. I kept rewriting the ending and reading it out loud to my partner. ‘Not good enough,’ they would tell me, because they believed in me and knew I could play with words in an even better way. Eventually, I chose the two final words of the chapter, referring to the relationship of love and secrecy that I shared with my parents: ‘a miracle, a bluff’. My partner nodded. ‘You’ve done it’. I have not changed that ending since.

The reason I chose to write about family, friendship, community, culture, and resistance, is that together these topics paint a picture of my intersecting identities and positionality, showing what Greece feels like from the perspective of a native-born outsider — extremely privileged in many aspects of my life, yet having a story to tell that deviates from the dominant narrative. I wanted to show what it is like to bear such contradictory identities — to be treated as a daughter, a sister, a granddaughter and a niece, (but also to not feel like any of those things), to be read as straight and cis while identifying as queer, to have class privilege and be a White local in a society full of inequalities, and yet possess other identities that prevent me from belonging.

As Nancy K. Miller describes in her article ‘But enough about me, what do you think of my memoir’, the experiences we describe in our memoirs are not ‘“merely” personal but part of the bigger picture of cultural memory’ (426). Through my memoir I aim to show the complexities of Greece but also, those that define the West more widely in the 21st century: I navigate the sociocultural conflicts about identity, generation, recognition and conservatism that often dominate the public discourse using my personal narrative, in order to shed light on the ways social and political issues are experienced by a trans non-binary, neurodivergent, middle-class, White person. My experiences as a Greek queer person who grew up in a relatively conservative family are not just my own — they reflect those of my partner, of my

friends, of people in my wider community. They highlight the wider specificities of Greece and its somewhat prophetic position in global politics: in a sense, we were ‘pioneers’ in being regressive when it came to human rights — the fact that our financial crisis preceded the more widespread recession following the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent global rise of the far-right meant that in Greece we knew what it was like to be backwards before it became ‘a thing’.

During my PhD, my grandmother passed away and I was diagnosed with thyroid cancer shortly after. I got an extension in my studies in order to go through treatment, which was straightforward and uneventful, but the fear that came with a cancer diagnosis and my severe hypothyroidism caused my OCD symptoms to flare up and debilitated me for years. Reading and writing theory through an autobiographical lens became a way to process things and deal with them, a way to keep in touch with my reality without having to escape its parts that troubled me deeply.

Through my work, I tried to challenge stereotypes about non-binary people, to present narratives that have not been extensively examined; to question and reframe the way I understood different identities and the politics they informed. What started as a rather solipsistic work (taking into account that most of it was written during the pandemic, and the fact that I felt excluded from the Greek queer community after breaking up with a fellow activist and suffering the results of the malpractice of my therapist — another fellow activist) became a way to reflect on wider sociopolitical issues, to move away from identity politics and towards a more queer understanding of collectivizing. I learnt to accept states of flux, uncertainty, middle grounds and compromising, while at the same time making a drastic decision: deciding to migrate together with my partner, and start over, away from everything.

As Papanikolaou describes in *Something's Up with the Family*, in Greek society it is the family that takes up the role of regulating the sexualities and identities of its members,

asserting biopolitical control on behalf of the state. I believe it is worth mentioning in my methodology how this PhD started and how it ended: with Papanikolaou's analysis of the Greek family. His theory worked for me as a valuable tool and to frame, organize, and structure my thoughts around the memoir. In a conversation I once had with Papanikolaou in person, I asserted that resistance can also be achieved from within the closet but did not fully convince him. I feel eager to return to that conversation again if I ever get the chance, as this has become a topic I feel very strongly about.

After completing the Critical Reflection section of my PhD, I wrote an epilogue to the memoir. I decided I wanted to close with the 'Fear' that Greece sadly often instills inside us, as well as the ways that, together, we have always managed to 'Find' what we needed, both in our homeland and elsewhere.

I am finishing my PhD with the conclusion of that epilogue: the only thing we have left is each other — our relationships, our communities and coalitions. It is redundant but inescapably true. In fear we respond with flight and fight, we freeze and we fawn, we falter, we see ourselves reflected in our family members and we deal with that, and sometimes we fail, and we apologize, and we do better, we forgive and are forgiven, we lean on our friends, we find each other.

Originality of Research and Contributions to Knowledge

The research concerning the experiences of trans (binary and non-binary) people in Greece is extremely limited. When I looked in major Greek and international academic websites for research concerning specifically non-binary people I came up with only one result, about the body-image of non-binary people in Greece (Bakopoulou). My search for the keywords ‘Greek autotheory’ (in both Greek and English) came up with no results, and there are only a handful of research papers examining trans issues in general.

The main issues researched are gender identity in the Greek law (Vidou), trans women and sex work (Papadogiannis), trans fertility and reproduction (Voultsos et. al), trans and gender nonconforming asylum claimants (Avgeri), and the experiences of trans and non-binary people in connection with medical doctors (Palmou, Geroulanou). There are more examples in grey literature, suggesting that students are becoming increasingly interested in trans and non-binary issues. The theses I found examine the visibility of the trans community (Chatzidaki & Moustaka), the experiences of trans elderly people (Valsami), mental health in the face of stigma and discrimination (Kremmyda), the experiences of trans people in the health system (Perpinioti, Boukali), the gender recognition law (Pavlogianni), and the social approach of gender dysphoria (Kechagia). There has been some research examining the closet in the Greek context, but it mainly focuses on the experiences of LGB+ individuals (Dragkouli-Kyriakoglou).

My research on Greek non-binary experiences through autotheory is, to my knowledge, the first autotheoretical work about Greece that calls itself autotheoretical and examines the genre, its methodology and tools. At the same time, people in Greece seem to love autotheory and autofiction, given the relative success of Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts* which was translated in Greek by Maria Fakinou in 2020, as well as the success the works of Annie Ernaux and Edouard Louis were met with in my country. I describe my personal

relationship with theory as finding a way to ‘be in communion with the world’:

It reminded me that my experience was not my own to carry; it was a tile in a mosaic of what it means to be human. People had felt the need to write about it, which meant that it mattered. I spent that summer sending you passages from my favourite texts, an invitation to communion, come meet my family.

At the same time, I acknowledge the privilege that permeates this ability to relate and connect, showing that there is still privilege in the (cultural, linguistic, and material) ability to autotheorize:

I will never be able to fathom the extent of my privilege, to have a family, that is, to have been written about. White, middle-class, European, living in my own country. I have been written about for centuries. Of course, what I once experienced as my womanness, my eventual transness, the feeling of losing my mind as I came to terms with my OCD, my being queer in Greece, had only recently started appearing in text. But still, at times, when I read passages with big words and cited them to back my argument, when my parents passed me their credit cards to pay for my tuition fees, whenever I go to a therapy session or go shopping to feel better; at those times my privilege becomes tangible. Every day, hopefully, a compass.

In this way I show that autotheory is not always and a priori an accessible and democratic process. As the genre and methodology of autotheory gradually rise to the level of canonization, being taught in universities and coming into the literary mainstream, the discussion about intersectionality, privilege, and representation becomes increasingly pressing.

In my work, I have shown how a typical Greek upper-middle class family shapes, perceives, and polices the sexual and gender identities of its members, and how non-binary

people often try to survive in hybrid, ‘middle-ground’ situations, while covering parts of their identity. Family acts as a powerful source of control on Greek people in general, and its values continue to permeate the existence of the adult child. It is a mixture of love, devotion, self-sacrifice, shame and guilt that shapes the psychic conditions into which one grows up. In my memoir I describe how we managed to pass as a cis-heterosexual couple to our parents, in exchange for their acceptance, approval, and support. I write that ‘The closet was the price we had to pay for the privilege of parental presence’, and this is more or less the main topic of the memoir.

In my work I describe the choice many queer and trans people make to not come out to their families, based on the specificities of their cultural, racial, and ethnic background. As Mexican poet and academic Asiel Adan Sanchez writes:

I’ve made my peace with never coming out to him [their father], or the rest of my extended family, for that matter. For someone straddling two cultures, this is a radical act. Mainstream queer narratives are often shaped by gay rights activist and politician Harvey Milk’s edict to ‘burst down those closet doors once and for all’. Ideas of visibility and the closet have largely been shaped by white America and the gay liberation movement of the 1970s.

Refusing to subscribe to this narrative gives us space to connect with our gender, our culture and our sexuality on our own terms.

and ‘when so much of queer visibility is grounded in white history, white bodies and white gatekeepers, we have to question who benefits from coming out.’

I am White, Greek, neurodivergent, non-binary, coming from an upper-middle class family although still dependent on my parents’ support due to my miserable salary and the

extreme rise of the cost of living in my country. Each part of my identity places me in a different location in the nexus of social relations, my privileges and oppressions overlapping and often contradicting one another. I am not a person of colour, but I live in a country with an ancient, patriarchal history and very specific cultural norms that do not allow me to romanticize coming out in a liberatory and celebratory manner. This has also not been researched extensively, as Adan Sanchez's text is the first I encountered that describes an experience I relate to.

Moreover, I received a university education with my parents' encouragement and support, which places me in an even more privileged position. Writing autotheory is itself a process ripe with privilege, as I can use academic language — exclusive to the few people who 'speak' it and inaccessible to many others — to define and analyze my experiences. Lastly, living in an economic context in which young people earn very little no matter how hard they work, thus relying heavily on family for their survival, makes the situation even more complex as it binds them to their parents, denying them their financial independence and the freedom of openly expressing their identity.

Adan Sanchez describes their parents perceiving their romantic relationship with their partner as an inbetween state between 'friend' and 'life companion'. In my case, things are different since my partner is a non-binary fem person but, both of us being in the closet means that we appear like a traditional cis-heterosexual couple. This narrative has not been widely written, and I believe it is important to shed light on queer relationships that are defined and function in their own terms. As Adan Sanchez writes, the cultural specificities of a certain community create different understandings and meanings of terms such as 'gay' and 'non-binary' from those same utterances as they appear in Western and White-centric narratives.

In addition, non-binary genders in modern cultures which do not fit into the white Western, progressive paradigm (Greece is neither Western nor Eastern, both Balkan and European), remain ineligible and incomprehensible to most people because, as Adan Sanchez writes, there is nothing they can connect them to in their cultures — despite the fact that the gender binary has historically been a system imposed on colonized countries by Western settlers. In the same way that Adan Sanchez has been shaped by a culture that, pre-colonially, perceived, mythologized, and often worshipped gender-non-conformity, I also stand upon an ancient history ripe with gender and sexual norms very different from the ones that shape our lives today. As Judith Butler writes in *Who's Afraid of Gender*: 'The dimorphic idealism of gender has been tracked to colonial power as well as slavery and has a long and brutal history' (236).

The limitations posed by the Greek binary language are also very important. Being non-binary remains largely inexpressible in Greek, as all nouns and adjectives are gendered. As I describe in my memoir, 'We have to learn to lead ineffable existences, which often feels incompatible with survival. Inexpressibility means a lack of recognition, of rights, of respect. We have to fight constantly to be seen, to be believed, for our existence to prove its reality and materiality, to be acknowledged.' In the words of Judith Butler:

These lifelong efforts to decipher and translate a demand imposed by categories and names do nothing more than open up a zone of provisional freedom where we claim or coin a language of our own in the midst of a linguistic dispossession for which there is no remedy and no exit. For what we call our language both is and is not our own; the terms by which we seize ourselves may or may not be translatable, even to ourselves. The untranslatable may be another name for the desire that exceeds every effort at lexical capture and normative control (266-267).

I am planning to become an immigrant to Ireland soon. I have not yet lived the immigrant experience to an anglophone, safer country (where the police won't be carrying guns, even though Ireland has also been heavily shaped by Christianity and colonization, with its own contradictory cultural specificities), but I already know, in a different way, what it is like to not belong where one's supposed to belong, to be in the middle of things, to dis-identify. That was my main goal: to add to the pre-existing discourse of queer dis-identification and hybridity, to further explore the blurry notion of 'inbetweenness'. To show what it is like being both Greek and non-binary, having class privilege and being neurodivergent, being queer in an ostensibly normative relationship. I wanted to show what that is like from the inside, without the censorship that comes with naming oneself. I am out in academia, and yet as an academic, I remain anonymous to my parents. I use a different name and surname when I write and, hopefully, publish, and I remain vague to my parents about the topics I research. They are proud of me — and they should be. This arrangement, unbeknownst to them, allows me to be honest.

Reading Adan Sanchez's work helped me crystallize my ideas, as I felt mirrored and less alone in them. Sanchez writes that coming out 'requires a certain safety in visibility, in our families, in our jobs, in our cultures and in our homes.' The case for many queer people is not so simple, as they do not have access to those privileges, and often are required to choose between openness and safety. They also write: 'As much as I'd like to say it's a radical act to challenge the whiteness of coming out, it is also rooted in a very primal and humane fear: the loss of one's parents.'

I wanted to show that the dismal option of staying in the closet (as it is described in dominant narratives, and as parts of it are often genuinely experienced), sometimes, might be grounded on love. With the risk of sounding martyr-like, self-sacrificial and cliché, I want to assert that love, respect, and acceptance, are also terms that can be — and are —

understood differently in different cultural settings, and that the choices they entail represent different queer realities than the ones we have come to recognize as ‘truly’ queer and radical.

This notion of ‘inbetweenness’ that I analyze above, as well as a sociocultural understanding of gender, is where I believe I depart from Jay Prosser’s groundbreaking theorization of transsexual identity and embodiment. In his 1998 book *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, Prosser explains how transsexual embodiment and the medical transformations through which the skin goes in transsexual transitions form the basis of identity (62) — actually how the body is essential to the formation of any identity, like that of the post-mastectomy breast cancer survivor woman, who can only become politically mobilized and find her community after coming out as monobreasted or unbreasted (93-94). I do agree with Prosser that the body plays a determinant role in everyone’s identity formation, let alone in the identity formation of transgender people who experience bodily-driven dysphoria or even euphoria. However, my own experience, that is reflected in much of non-binary literature, has shown me that sometimes being trans, while always based on the body and how it is experienced by the self and read by others, also manages to go beyond it. For me, dysphoria means being perceived as a girl or a woman, and euphoria is often derived by other people wondering about my gender identity, realizing I am neither this nor that, that I am standing somewhere in between. Surely, these assumptions are always based on bodily presentation and perception, but they also go further, putting into questions binary gender roles and cultural understandings of gender and sex. I have come to understand that, for each trans, binary and non-binary person, identity means something different and unique, even though there are of course similarities and parallels in experiences that must be acknowledged, discussed, studied and theorized. Moreover, where Prosser writes in *Second Skins* that post-mastectomy women must come out as such in order to become politically mobilized and seek out their community (94), I argue that there are ways to be radical and politically mobilized even while keeping parts of one’s identity in the closet.

In my memoir, I also describe how limiting and suffocating Greece often feels for young people, due to the conservative values and political decisions that have shaped society and debased the quality of life. I believe this knowledge is important for the anglophone reader, given the touristic romanticization of the country that comes with a disregard for the lives of its people. Young people flee Greece at an alarming rate, due to the extremely low salaries, the lack of a social state, the change in climate, poverty, racism, misogyny, and homo-transphobia. Added to that, we have learned to live in fear: fires, femicides, negligence and poor infrastructure that leads to tragedies such as the crashing of a train transporting students in 2023 at the region of Tempe, killing over 50 people. I want to raise visibility for those issues and show what it is like to live in fear in one's homeland. I attempt to show that by describing my feelings of hopelessness and suffocation as a teenager and then as an adult living in Greece and wanting to leave for a vague 'somewhere else'.

I also show how queer young people survive in such environments: they resist mainly through community and art. I describe my relationship with fanfiction and my journey in finding a community and becoming an activist. It was getting into university, starting to participate in activism and falling in love that made me slowly fall in love with Greece, only to feel betrayed by it on several occasions shortly after.

My work is also research on autotheory. I describe how a person feels and what they gain by consuming and producing autotheory, a relatively recent genre of academic and autobiographical writing. Theory has often been a way for me to feel in communion with the world, in a language that I understood well enough. It has been a way for me to process my feelings and experiences in an analytical, self- and inter-reflexive manner that helped me move forward in my life. Inspired by Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, I show how enlightening and therapeutic autotheory can be for people with marginalized identities and experiences.

I describe the feeling of sociopolitical numbness that often plagues young people in Greece, who resort to memes about fleeing to space, or being jealous of a kitten that was saved from drowning by a tourist and left the country with her. I mention instances of police violence that took place during the pandemic, the protests that followed and their often-violent suppression, often using the social distancing measures as a premise. In a country plagued by corruption, poverty, climate change, and political instabilities, often fateful negligence like in the case of the Tempe train crash, as well as inequalities perpetuated in the status quo, young people of all genders and sexual orientation, and always informed by class, tend to flee the country in search of a better future. This forced displacement (or the frequent inability to pursue it) is something that I believe must be represented in literature and theory. Being driven out of your own country because you do not feel like you belong in it, you do not feel heard, respected, represented, can take a real toll in the psychology of those generations, and often presents them with a painful dilemma.

Another issue that I have attempted to highlight is the importance of community (as described in the second chapter in the form of activist spaces, and in the fifth one in the form of friendship), as well as the prevalence of inter- and intra- community tensions that render even those spaces unsafe. Community and friendship can change everything for the better, they can be restorative for the mistakes of the family, but for that to be sustainable, it is vital that all the members involved are constantly self-aware, receptive to criticism, and willing to resolve conflict by listening actively and making a genuine effort. Unfortunately, I show that it is impossible for all the members of a tight-knit community to always perform ethically, taking into consideration the balance of power, especially when some of them eventually climb on the systemic ranks. I show that in my sixth chapter, by presenting the breaches of professional ethics that may occur in small, localized communities. I do that through telling the story of how both my psychologist and an older prominent queer activist who acted as a parent figure traumatized me by failing to protect the boundaries necessary

for the multiplicity of relationships arising in a community setting to function in a healthy manner. I conclude that for any kind of relationship to work, especially when it is a ‘chosen’ relationship (kith, not kin) it is vital for all members involved to be constantly in tune with each other and with the ethics of care and values that pertain the community, to own up to their mistakes, and to work reparatively if they happen to harm someone, willingly or unwillingly. I highlight the danger of too much duality existing in psychotherapeutic relationships, and assert that boundaries must be in constant re-negotiation, always respected by all parts of the relationship (and sometimes their romantic partners as well, the involvement of whom rendered multiple relationships toxic).

In the seventh chapter of the memoir, I show a glimpse of how society works away from the city, in the island of Naxos where the values towards religion, traditional ethics, and the dominant gender and sexual norms have remained largely unchanged compared to the capital. I show how intergenerational trauma has shaped and affected me deeply even though I only ever visited the island on summer vacation and never really lived there. However, being the origin of my mother, aunt and uncle, and my grandparents, the island of Naxos has always felt more like home than Athens did. That romanticization is also partly due to the nature of my visits there — Naxos always meant vacation, a break from school and work for both me and the ‘grown-ups’ — but I have concluded that I mainly see myself at home in the island because of how it shaped the history of the family, how it created my grandparents, their values and their trauma, all of it eventually being bequeathed on me by themselves and my mother.

I then explore the role of the mother as it is designated in Western societies, inspired and aided by Jacqueline Rose’s analysis of motherhood (*Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty*, 2018). I tell the story of my great-grandmother whose son was killed in the Resistance when my grandmother was only 8 years old, and how the matriarch of the family often blamed herself for the loss of her child after wishing to miscarry her firstborn for

conceiving it outside of marriage. I believe that this shame, the grief and the religious guilt intensely affected the environment in which my mother grew up and eventually the one in which she brought me up. For my family, who lost a son by the hand of a Nazi, grief was never enough; it was always followed by shame, guilt, and blame. ‘Silly boy, he went and got himself killed, destroyed a family,’ my grandmother would often say, having grown up in a heavily depressed environment, one where her mother took upon her shoulders not just the blame for the loss of her son, but also the responsibility of never showing her grief, of always being funny and optimistic for her other two children. The tradition of people who were assigned the female gender at birth (including myself) and learned to always put others above themselves persisted and often informed our expectations as well: for my grandmother, who was very proud of me, I would be the perfect child — if it were not for my refusal to attend mass. For my mother, who is also very proud of me, I would also be the perfect child — if it were not for my shameful sexual experimentations. Through all this I want to show how oppressive the traditional and religious values that persist in the Greek family, especially in the countryside, can be for the psyche of a person growing up in it. Away from the capital, the pressure to keep everything hidden from the vigilant eyes of the neighbours (my sexuality, my brother’s refusal to get a university education, my aunt’s divorce, and the list never ends) is even more oppressive, causing people who live in or return to the countryside further back into the closet.

In the same chapter I come to the realization that visiting the island on summer vacation has ceased to be the kind of flight I need. In Greece, it has gradually become impossible for me to seek shelter anywhere. I escape to an island with the hope of regaining a space that used to feel safe and carefree when I was younger, only to find that it is impossible for me to survive while performing for my family. At the same time, I get closer, and I slip further away from them. Right then, before the realization has truly settled, my partner and I come to the decision to get married traditionally, at church, despite being atheist, as a gift to

my grandmother while she still lives. At the time, for us, that would also be a subversion of norms and institutions, as we felt we would be ‘queering them up’ from the inside. My grandmother passed away before that could happen, and the plans were changed and postponed, but this ‘deal’ between us is extremely indicative of the way queer people in Greece are often pushed to conform to traditional institutions that might seem oppressive at times, because that is ‘what they are supposed to do’. Queer people in Greece — and in other conservative countries where the family holds so much power over individuals — often have to resort to innovative solutions in order to navigate their hybrid identities, and this narrative is very different from the dominant American narrative of coming out of the closet. The ways in which queer people in Greece often choose to subvert dominant social norms and institutions are not always direct and out-of-the-closet, assertive and loud, but sometimes they act in an underground way, maneuvering their way around what is expected of them.

In my last chapter, I show that the concept of the ‘big’ coming out does not always work in a binary way: I mean that it is not always followed either by complete acceptance or by rejection, but there are in-between states in which queer people often find themselves. This is also, in a sense, my contribution to the discussion of queer happiness and suffering. The outcome of my coming out to my father does not make me feel only this or only that but is instead bittersweet and sobering. I learned that happiness and suffering are not binary — neither are acceptance and rejection. My father keeps on loving me all-consumingly, helping and supporting me in all the ways he can, even without completely understanding or internalizing the revelation about my identity. Thus, I describe how, most of the time, queer people (especially when they come from conservative cultural backgrounds) come to the realization that they have no choice but learning to live with this ambiguity and this nuance, that sometimes feels close to enough, and sometimes hollow.

Moreover, I show that we can rarely be completely accepted by our families, and when we are not, we can rarely leave them and not look back. The lack of representation of

those in-between states makes queer people with hybrid identities feel like they have maybe done something wrong in the process, like they do not deserve complete acceptance as opposed to those in the West who — ostensibly — are sometimes met with it. What I want the reader to understand is that the complexity of a cultural background almost always affects the reaction of a cis-heterosexual individual to the coming out of their relative. Of course, this is my personal narrative, based on my experiences, but I believe that every narrative adds to the richness and complexity with which we understand gender and sexuality.

I believe that the main contribution of my memoir to the discourse around non-normative gender and sexualities is that the ability to be ‘open’ about one’s identity is highly dependable on the socio-cultural values that more-or-less dominate and shape the machineries of the family. These stories must be shared, light must be shed on the silence that is often brought by those cultural specificities, which lead to the scatteration of the individual’s identities — individuals who keep on fighting and resisting, in their own, closeted ways.

Epilogue

Throughout the process of writing my thesis, I was often prompted by my supervisors to think who I was writing it for. Essentially, who would care about my memoir? I thought about it for a long time: although in my heart this memoir was written for people like me, for the closeted Greek queers who have to juggle their multiple realities and identities every day, I realized it would not exactly be directed to them, as I was not planning to publish it in Greece for fear of my parents finding out about my identity (one could call this a meta problem). At first it seemed like irony: writing a memoir directed to those who were not compelled to struggle with this specific set of problems. And that should be kind of enough — I did wish for people outside of my country to learn more about what living in it was like for a person like me: not the idealized, romanticized version they get to live in through tourism. But, eventually, I also realized that there would be other potential readers to whom this work could speak, who would be able to relate to the feelings invoked and the questions posed by it. Perhaps people like Adan Sanchez. People in the margins, people in the in-between. I know these people exist everywhere in the world. Closeted queers, immigrants and refugees, masking neurodivergents, people who belong neither here nor there, who carry their culture with love but often have to settle for less than the truth for themselves. Adan Sanchez made me realize I was not alone, and I expect that my writing might make someone else feel the same way. People who travel, pray, sleep, celebrate, mourn and love between words, hidden in the subtext — and the pain this brings. I remain hopeful that other people who have felt this way will be able to draw a sense of strength and solidarity through the practically anonymous publication of my soul's contents.

That is what made my writing feel like an intensely political occupation during my period of illness and inactivity. For two years I could hardly get out of bed. My partner would be translating and writing about geopolitics as a journalist, during deeply turbulent times

globally. Their work was published every day on a news website. In my eyes, they were Doing The Work, while I was moping around and napping away with my cats. During one of our long conversations, they disagreed with me. ‘Your writing is how you contribute to change. This is the time when you finally get to focus on that’. I was touched by their words, which lifted the heavy weight of guilt and shame from my weary shoulders.

With the radical shift of world politics towards the right, I find myself, towards the end of my PhD, realising that my work will not only be relatable to people living in Greece. Unfortunately, many people in the US and the UK will have to experience a regression of their hard-earned rights, will have to revert into the closet, when showing their ID to officials, when explaining that they do not experience their gender within the man-woman binary. I hope that this work will take its place among many others, and remind those people that nothing is lost, that there is power in continuing to fight, in whatever big or small way they can. We are who we are, and we love who we love — passionately, hopelessly, experimentally, with every fiber of our being. Nobody can take that away from us. As long as we do not lose ourselves, we can find each other — and in those coalitions rests our power.

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