

# Queer Vulnerability and Russian Poetry after the “Gay Propaganda” Law

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Я заливаю глаза керосином  
I pour kerosene on my eyes

IC3PEAK

Is it possible to imagine queerness in today’s Russia beyond the headlines about violent homophobic attacks? The 2013 law against the “propaganda of non-traditional family values to minors” generated an unprecedented amount of attention toward Russian LGBTQI+ issues. However, while this legislation has elevated the topics of nonnormative sexualities and gender identities in the country to international prominence, individual queer voices tend to be underrepresented in discussions of queerness in contemporary Russia.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>In addition to countless media reports, the propaganda law prompted a wave of new scholarship in the field of Russian gender and sexuality studies, for example, Aleksandr Kondakov, “Formirovanie kvir-arkhiva issledovaniia seksual’nostei,” in *Na pereput’e: Metodologiya, teoriia, i praktika LGBT i kvir-issledovaniia*, ed. Aleksandr Kondakov (St. Petersburg, 2014), xi–xxii; Dan Healey, *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi* (London, 2018), 1–23; Richard C.M. Mole, “Constructing Soviet and Post-Soviet Sexualities,” in *Soviet and Post-Soviet Sexualities*, ed. Richard C.M. Mole (London, 2019), 1–15; and Michelle Rivkin-Fish and Cassandra Hartblay, “When Global LGBTQ Advocacy Became Entangled with New Cold War Sentiment: A Call for Examining Russian Queer Experience,” *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 21:1 (2014): 95–11. Most notable examples of scholarship tend to grapple with the new law by exploring the formation of views and opinions on homosexuality by the majority. While these studies provide valuable synthetic perspectives, they generally do not focus on subjective experiences of LGBTQ+ Russians. See Laurie Essig, “‘Serdsia geev nado zaryvat’ v zemliu’: Razmyshleniia ob okhote na gomoseksualov v Rossii,” Nikolai Gorbachev, “Proizvodstvo normativnosti v diskurse zapreta ‘propagandy gomoseksualizma,’” and Veronika Lapina, “Networking rossiiskikh LGBT-

The “gay propaganda” law aims to manage nonnormative sexualities by restricting their visibility: the law does not ban homosexuality, but prohibits affirmative mention of it.<sup>2</sup> This compulsory silencing both draws attention to the existence of queer citizens and turns queer visibility into a punishable offense. Regular reports of brutally quashed attempts to hold symbolic pride parades in St. Petersburg and Moscow, along with rising incidence of homophobic violence and an exodus of LGBTQIA+ Russians abroad, underscore the cost of being publicly queer in Russia.<sup>3</sup> And it is these familiar images of violence that are the primary markers of contemporary queer life in the country.

This focus on violence highlights the strength of oppressive political structures and emphasizes the victimhood of queer Russians in ways that ignore strategies of queer resistance to the homophobic and heterosexist state. A discourse that excludes the voices of queer Russians can be manipulated to support the aims of the propaganda law. In the absence of a queer voice, the prevalent narratives of suffering link homosexuality and gender nonconformity with deviance and punishment, while stripping Russian queers of agency and visibility.<sup>4</sup> This article seeks to mitigate such a victimhood-centered discourse by analyzing contemporary aesthetic practices and proposing a framework for recognizing queer subjectivities forged in contemporary poetry written after the propaganda law.

The turn to poetry might seem surprising considering that in the late Soviet and immediately post-Soviet periods the issues of same-sex desire were articulated most

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organizatsii v usloviakh politicheskogo geteroseksizma: Printsipy kategorizatsii aktivistov,” all in *Na pereput'e*, 3–23, 86–100, and 166–82; Aleksandr Kondakov, “Konfiguratsii prava: Kak deistvuet zakon o propagande v shkolakh,” *Zhurnal sotsiologii i sotsial'noi antropologii* 20:5 (2017): 187–206; Elena Pronkina, “Osobennosti LGBT-diskursa v rossiiskikh media, initsirovannogo diskussiami o regulirovanii seksual'nosti,” *Zhurnal issledovaniy sotsial'noi politiki/The Journal of Social Policy Studies* 14:1 (2016): 71–86; and Nikita Slepceov, “Political Homophobia as a State Strategy in Russia,” *Journal of Global Initiatives: Policy, Pedagogy, Perspective* 12:1 (2018): 140–61. An important counter-perspective can be found in Irina Soboleva, “Political Awareness and Self-Blame in the Explanatory Narratives of LGBT People amid the Anti-LGBT Campaign in Russia,” *Sexuality and Culture* 19 (2015): 275–96; and Radzhana Buyantueva, “LGBT Rights Activism and Homophobia in Russia,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 65:4 (2017): 456–83. Unless otherwise noted, translations from the Russian are mine.

<sup>2</sup>As Brian James Baer has noted, the politics of gay visibility in Russia has been fraught and underpinned by homophobia even during the relatively less oppressive 1990s and 2000s. See Baer, “Now You See It: Gay (In)Visibility and the Performance of Post-Soviet Identity,” in *Queer Visibility in Post-Socialist Cultures*, ed. Nárcisz Fejes and Andrea P. Balogh (Bristol, 2013). In the same volume see also Kevin Moss, “Straight Eye for the Queer Guy: Gay Male Visibility in Post-Soviet Russian Films,” 197–220. In a peculiar fashion, the law extends even to the posthumous reputations of prominent Russian cultural figures, such as Petr Tchaikovsky. See Philip Ross Bullock, “‘That’s Not the Only Reason We Love Him’: Chaikovsky Reception in Post-Soviet Russia,” in *Soviet and Post-Soviet Sexualities*, 103–28. See also Margarita Meklina, “From Russia, with Longing: Gay Writing and the Censorship of Roskomnadzor,” *The Cardiff Review*, October 11, 2018, <https://www.cardiffreview.com/single-post/2018/10/09/From-Russia-with-Longing-Gay-writing-and-the-censorship-of-Roskomnadzor>. All URLs cited in this article were last accessed September 30, 2020.

<sup>3</sup>A. Kondakov, *Prestupleniia na pochve nenavisti protiv LGBT v Rossii* (St. Petersburg, 2017); Richard Mole, “Identity, Belonging, and Solidarity among the Russian-Speaking Queer Migrants in Berlin,” in *Soviet and Post-Soviet Sexualities*, 129–49; and Alexandra Novitskaya’s contribution to this thematic cluster, “Sexual Citizens in Exile” (pp. 56–75).

<sup>4</sup>Masha Neufeld and Katharina Wiedlack, “Lynchpin for Value Negotiation: Lesbians, Gays, and Transgender between Russia and ‘the West,’” in *Queering Paradigms VI: Interventions, Ethics and Globalities*, ed. Bee Scherer (Oxford, 2016), 173–94.

forcefully in prose.<sup>5</sup> The narratives by Evgeny Kharitonov, Igor Yarkevich, Aleksandr Ilyanen, Gennady Trifonov, and Yaroslav Mogutin flung open the doors of the Russian literary closet that remained shut since the spectacularly queer Silver Age.<sup>6</sup> But most of those authors also wrote poetry, which has historically been a privileged genre of Russian letters. They were arguably less interested in inscribing queerness into the venerable tradition of Russian lyric—this had been achieved nearly a century earlier by Tsvetaeva and Parnok, by Kuzmin and Kliuev—than in interrogating poetic conventions and, simultaneously, taking advantage of the lyric poetry's extraordinary capacity to explore and represent subjectivities. As a distinct linguistic event, poetry offers a modality of finding a responsive language for filling the gap between the highly subjective experience and its verbally embodied expression. In turn, as Jonathan Culler has pointed out, lyric "can be a form of social action, which contributes to the construction of a world and works to resist other forms of world-making carried out by instrumental rationality and reified common sense."<sup>7</sup>

The Russian poetic tradition, if it is possible to speak of a unified tradition, earned its reputation as an intellectual and social force thanks in no small part to the cohorts of rebelliously avant-garde poets who were frequently associated with underground movements.<sup>8</sup> In choosing to analyze poetry and to do so through a queer lens, I wish to demonstrate the vital analytical and politically engaged thought that marks much of contemporary poetry. That is, my aim goes beyond simply cataloguing non-normative identities—if anything, it can be argued that much of poetry is inherently queer in the sense that it continuously works to undo imposed conventions of order and beauty. In addition to these discursive possibilities of lyric form, it is also easier than perhaps ever before to publish and disseminate poems on social media platforms. Put together, these generic and technological features make up a compelling explanation for the dominant presence poetry currently enjoys on the Russian literary scene.

Yet this wealth of poetry also poses methodological challenges: there are more remarkable poets than can be included in a single article, and these poets continue to produce new work, which cannot be accounted for through the regimented academic publishing process. Without implying any ranking, my selection of poems features some of the most notable recent developments, but not a comprehensive set of them. I will consider poems that demonstrate the uses and limitations of poetic language and form in engaging with literary tradition, channeling dissent, expressing queer subjectivities, and describing queer

<sup>5</sup>Brian James Baer, *Other Russias: Homosexuality and the Crisis of Post-Soviet Identity* (London, 2009). Baer has also written on the generic difference between the narrative and the lyric in explorations of same-sex desire. See his "Keep the Lyric Queer, or Poetic Translation as Reparative Reading," in his *Queer Theory and Translation Studies: Language, Politics, Desire* (London, 2020).

<sup>6</sup>I speak here only of Russian literature in Russia proper, not in emigration. See Olga Matich, *Erotic Utopia: Decadent Imagination in Russia's Fin de Siecle* (Madison, 2007), Jenifer Presto, *Beyond the Flesh: Alexander Blok, Zinaida Gippius and the Symbolist Sublimation of Sex* (Madison, 2009), and Evgenii Bershtein, "The Discourse of Sexual Psychopathy in Russian Modernism," in *Reframing Russian Modernism*, ed. Irina Shevelenko (Madison, 2018).

<sup>7</sup>Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA, 2015), 8–9.

<sup>8</sup>Catherine Ciepiela, "The Legacy of the Underground Poets," in *Russian Literature since 1991*, ed. Evgeny Dobrenko (Cambridge, UK, 2015), 207–25; and Katharine Hodgson et al., eds., *Twentieth Century Russian Poetry: Reinventing the Canon* (Cambridge, UK, 2017).

bodies. The poets I discuss belong to different generations, for example, Dmitry Kuzmin (b. 1968), Yulia Podlubnova (b. 1980), and Lolita Agamalova (b. 1997). Their writing careers are at different stages of recognition, as we can see with Maria Stepanova (b. 1972), who has won numerous prestigious awards, and Sergey Finogin (b. 1990), who has not yet published his first book. Their poems appear and circulate in different kinds of venues, from print publications and websites dedicated to new poetry to *samizdat* and social media: Elena Kostyleva (b. 1977), Galina Rymbu (b. 1990), and Oksana Vasyakina (b. 1989), for example, publish across all those venues. And they live and work not only in the proverbial capitals of Moscow and St. Petersburg but also in other Russian cities and outside of Russia—Rimma Agliullina (b. 1991) in Chelyabinsk, Fridrikh Chernyshov (b. 1989) in Kyiv, and Lida Yusupova (b. 1963) in Toronto, to name a few. Therefore, I should clarify that by “Russian” I mean language practice, not territorial affiliation. While not all poets I discuss reside in Russia—not least because some of them left Russia after 2013—they universally reflect on what it means to be queer and to write queerly in Russian in relentlessly homophobic and transphobic contexts. My approach to these poets’ poems draws on recent queer theory, and I use close readings to show that the 2013 legislation prompted the development of a new sort of writing: one that embraces vulnerability in defiance of victimhood.<sup>9</sup>

Before proceeding to the theoretical premise of my study, I would like to address my use of the term queer, which notoriously resists any singular definition. Some of the poets included in my analysis would certainly object to being referred to as *kvir*. To be sure, queer has its own history in Russian and its usage does not always match the Anglo-American connotations, which are rooted in the LGBTQI+ political activism of the 1980s and the early 1990s that enabled the reclamation of the word “queer” from its pejorative bind.<sup>10</sup> I use queer as an elastic term that is not simply synonymous with homosexuality, but one that evokes difference and brings to light the limitations of the gender binary and normative procreative sexuality.

I recognize that there is a tension between the usage of “queer” to denote a sexual identity that is “not straight” and to critique the very categories of identity (both “straight” and “gay”) as socially constructed phenomena. To follow Siobhan Sommerville’s explanation, when used as a verb, to “queer” something means to question ready-made identities, because historically they have been deployed to enforce the line between the “normal” and “abnormal.”<sup>11</sup> However, for better or worse, in practice, the difference between queer as an identity category and as a critique of identity categories is often blurred. Rather than parse the particulars of this or that meaning of queer, I think it can be more productive to accept the word’s ambiguity while paying close attention to subject positions: who, why,

<sup>9</sup>For an analysis of changing conceptions of gender in Russian poetry of the 1990s see Dmitrii Kuz'min, “‘A vdruk my devochki?': Gendernaia problematika v russkoi poezii 1990-kh godov,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 149 (2018): 564–82. See also Stephanie Sandler, “New Lyrics,” in *Russian Literature since 1991*, 226–43.

<sup>10</sup>For accounts of Russian queerness in the 1990s see Laurie Essig, *Queer in Russia: A Story of Self, Sex, and the Other* (Durham, NC, 1999); and David Tuller, *Cracks in the Iron Closet: Travels in Gay and Lesbian Russia* (Chicago, 1996).

<sup>11</sup>Siobhan B. Sommerville, “Queer,” in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies, Second Edition* ed. Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler (New York, 2014), 203. See also my “Introduction” to this thematic cluster (pp. 7–16).

and under what circumstances appeals to the range of meanings contained within the term “queer.” My goal is to trace the contours of Russian queerness as it is articulated by queer and queer-minded poets on their own terms in their texts in this precarious political moment. As the editors of a recent anthology of queer poetry, *Under One Cover* (2018) published in Kazakhstan, wrote in their introduction, acknowledging the opacity and foreignness of what queer is:

Let us have a modest opportunity to somehow tell—even if not in our “own” language yet—about our restlessness and cursedness (*svoei neprikaianosti i okaiannosti*), invisibility and hatedness (*nevidimosti i nenavidimosti*), entanglement and confusion (*smeshannosti i zameshatel'stve*), about our vigorous refusal to participate in the reproduction of patriarchal rituals and our unwillingness to submit (*podverstyvai'*) our stubbornly-still-alive selves (*upriamo vse-eshche-zhivykh sebia*) to the inhuman officialese (*kantseliarit*) of formal dossiers.<sup>12</sup>

The valiant effort to negotiate and register what queerness means and feels like in spite of threatening obstacles is the driving element of what I will describe as *queer vulnerability*. The refusal to be victimized and rendered invisible translates into sophisticated linguistic play that interweaves cultural signifiers with the lived bodily experience of queerness. By searching for textual means to contest victimhood and erasure, the poets’ “stubbornly-still-alive-selves” shape an account of resistance on a collective scale. As such, their texts can reveal common strategies of configuring poetic subjectivities in relation to the public and the state, which undermine the right of queers to have rights.

### VULNERABILITY, LANGUAGE, RESISTANCE

If, following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler, we understand queerness not only as an identity but, more importantly, “as a movement of thought and language contrary to accepted forms of authority, opening up spaces for desire that would not always be openly recognized,” we can find signs of Russian queerness that complicate the ubiquitous narratives of victimhood.<sup>13</sup> To be clear, I do not wish to downplay the existential threat that LGBTQI+ people face in Russia today. Open queerness in Russia can mean a life of discrimination and persecution, but this vulnerability does not necessitate hopelessness. I propose to consider the ways queerness works to affirm life, reclaim habitable spaces, insist on a right to visibility, and challenge the forces of normativity despite mental and bodily harm.

In her effort to reframe our understanding of vulnerability, Butler argues that there is a crucial difference between victimhood and vulnerability. She writes that vulnerability is not simply the passive opposite of strength, but that it “can be a way of being exposed and agentic at the same time,” and thereby it can constitute a mode of resistance.<sup>14</sup> As Butler

<sup>12</sup>Ruffia Dzhenbekova and Mariia Vil'koviskaia, “Chetyre kogda,” in *Pod odnoi oblozhkoi: Sbornik kvir-poezii*, ed. Mariia Vil'koviskaia (Almaty, 2018), 9.

<sup>13</sup>Judith Butler, “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance,” in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, ed. Judith Butler et al. (Durham, NC, 2016), 17; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC, 1993), 8.

<sup>14</sup>Butler, “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance,” 24–25.

explains, vulnerability inhabits the middle space between receptivity and responsiveness, which means that vulnerability is a process of both affecting and acting simultaneously. When we are vulnerable, we are not necessarily disempowered. Conversely, she points out that vulnerability can be and is mobilized for collective agency when being vulnerable is understood not as a subjective disposition but as a positionality within a “field of objects, forces, and passions that impinge on or affect us in some way.”<sup>15</sup> That is, recognizing the mechanisms through which vulnerability is reproduced leads to mobilizing vulnerability as resistance, as a response to injustice that “is happening as the injustice occurs.”<sup>16</sup> The examples Butler cites of vulnerability as resistance range from unsanctioned public assembly to living a life as a minority, risking safety by merely walking on the street at night. One can also recall a particularly striking example of vulnerability as resistance from the U.S. campaign in the early 1990s to demand that Congress pass the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The demonstration known as the “Capitol Crawl” brought together scores of individuals with impaired physical mobility who crawled up the massive Congressional staircase to highlight the impact of inaccessible architecture on their daily lives and to underscore the urgency behind the need to pass the ADA.<sup>17</sup> Russia has a storied history of political demonstrations, and one that very memorably brings out vulnerability as resistance is the 1968 Red Square demonstration against the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. The protest of eight individuals lasted barely more than a few minutes for which most of them received harsh punishment. But their decision to exercise agency by displaying antigovernment political banners in Red Square, while being perfectly aware of such action’s consequences, remains a legendary symbol of resistance fueled by vulnerability.

In the realm of the arts, vulnerability as resistance can make for a powerful aesthetic and political expression. For example, the line “I pour kerosene on my eyes” quoted in the epigraph is taken from the lyrics to the song “There’s No More Death” by the Moscow-based experimental electronic band IC3PEAK. The lines that follow read “Let it all burn” (*pust’ vse gorit*) and “All of Russia looks at me” (*na menia smotrit vsia Rossiia*) repeated multiple times like an incantation. The music video makes it clear that the fire imagery alludes to self-immolation on the steps to Russia’s House of the Government, known as the Russian White House. The well-known image of that white building’s charred façade during the constitutional crisis of 1993 promised a renewed Russia. In 2018, IC3PEAK members Anastasia Kreslina and Nikolay Kostylev invoke this symbol of government authority in response to Putin’s reelection to his fourth, and clearly not last, term as president. They embrace their vulnerability as a young, sexually ambiguous couple to highlight the exhaustion from the cynicism of Russian political life and their unwillingness to uphold it.

Butler’s reconceptualization of vulnerability can therefore help us see how being queer in Russia already represents resistance in itself, in the sense that deliberate exposure to potential hate and violence—the act of being different—connotes agency. I draw on Butler’s insights to explore the cultural forms of queer resistance and to suggest that, in the current environment of openly homophobic hostility in Russia, vulnerability permeates the realm

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 25.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 26.

<sup>17</sup>I thank one of my article’s referees for suggesting this example.



of the aesthetic and shapes poetic texts, which in turn challenge queer silencing, discursive powerlessness, and political pessimism. Specifically, I assemble here and examine a provisional archive of contemporary Russian poetry organized around Butler's theory of vulnerability as resistance and what, after Butler's theory, I will describe as queer vulnerability. If we extend to literature Butler's epistemological definition of vulnerability as resistance, we can discern how vulnerability functions in some contemporary Russian poems as queer vulnerability, as a distinct modality of engaging with and intervening in prejudiced and antagonistic public discourses and spaces. As a way of reading Russian poetic texts written in the wake of the gay propaganda law, queer vulnerability helps us recognize the entanglement of desire and politics in the acts of claiming visibility for nonnormative sexualities, identities, and forms of kinship.

These theoretical considerations are emblematically illuminated in a poem by Fridrikh Chernyshov, a poet and activist who mines vulnerability to carve out an affective space for a queer poet on the street and in the poetic tradition. The poem begins with the line, "The dreams of June/ly two thousand thirteen" ("Mechty iunია/lia dve tysiachi trinadtsat") and registers the time, summer 2013, when the gay propaganda law was enacted. The poem's language is explicitly nonnormative, which of course can be said of all poetry, but Chernyshov's linguistic queerness seeks to rebel against normativity by all available means.<sup>18</sup> The slash cutting through the month of "June/ly" evokes the Barthesian slash, the elegantly destructive sign that points to the instability of meaning.<sup>19</sup> Whether the reference to Roland Barthes's influential *S/Z* is intentional or not, Chernyshov enlists the slash to a similar end of interrogating normative conventions: to signal the vulnerability of things that seem to be natural but are imposed structures like calendar, like gender. As we learn from the poem, Chernyshov's subject is a transgender man, and his "dreams of June/ly" take him to an intimate moment of recalling a kiss of a woman; of him persuading her not to marry another man; of the two of them being mistaken for lesbians and laughed at; of him running home in physical pain. The poem's final lines build on the ephemeral moments of human connection in affection and humiliation to bring together queerness, vulnerability, and resistance into a powerful unity:

И быть заметней или не заметней  
для всех других зависит от настроения  
Когда украдкой выхожу гулять  
Перебинтованный и двадцатидвухлетний<sup>20</sup>

And to be more or less noticeable  
for all others depends on the mood  
When I cautiously go for a stroll  
in bandages and twenty-two years old

<sup>18</sup>See his essay "(Obo mne i kvir poezii)," in *Gendernye issledovaniia*, no. 24 (2020), <http://kcs.net.ua/gurnal/24/07-gi24.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup>Roland Barthes has famously argued for plurality of textual interpretation by linking rhetoric and sexuality in Balzac's novella *Sarrasine* (1830), a story of a young man's misguided passion for a castrato singer. See Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York, 1974).

<sup>20</sup>Fridrikh Chernyshov, "Mechty iunია/lia dve tysiachi trinadtsat'," in *Pod odnoi oblozhkoi*, 110.

Chernyshov points to the queer poet's inability to blend into the crowd. The difference he is referring to is both external and internal. His look embodies the liminality of the slash and disrupts the unequivocal gender categorization as either female or male. Unlike the others, he cannot simply control the degree of his visibility according to his "nastroi"—this word can be rendered as the "mood" or "setting" or "tuning"—because his "nastroi" appears to be in literal transition. But the poet's vulnerable illegibility in the present is countered with a redemptive image from past: Chernyshov ends the poem with a reference to Vladimir Mayakovsky's *A Cloud in Trousers* (1915).<sup>21</sup> Such a reference might seem ironic considering that Mayakovsky's full-throated, handsome twenty-two-year-old alter ego is at odds with Chernyshov's timid twenty-two-year-old poet who ventures outdoors in secret, covered in bandages (perhaps an allusion to scars of violence, top surgery, or to the compression binder to flatten breasts). Nevertheless, Maykovsky's poem also operates on the premise of acute vulnerability: the lyric subject is madly in love, he rebels against convention, and he is willing to renounce his aggressive masculinity to be as "tender" (*nezhnym*) as a cloud in trousers. In identifying with Mayakovsky, Chernyshov takes the "cloud in trousers" metaphor seriously and allows for a queer reading of this modernist classic. In doing so, Chernyshov suggests a muted but hopeful futurity by making room for queer feeling in the canon and in the increasingly vulnerable times after "June/ly two thousand thirteen."

### APPROACHING QUEER VULNERABILITY

To foreground the discussion of queer vulnerability in Russian poetry written after 2013, I consider a poem that appeared before the propaganda law was enacted: Maria Stepanova's "Iphigenia at Aulis" from her cycle of poems "Four Operas" (2010).<sup>22</sup> This poem provides a cultural backdrop against which we can approach exploring how queerness, vulnerability, and resistance overlap in recent Russian poetry. Stepanova's poem is a playfully provocative meditation on the role of the queer subject in Russian society. The first two stanzas of the poem effectively invoke the tropes of victimhood and vulnerability in historical perspective:

Действие продолжается у воды,  
Война не на жизнь, траншеи, мечи, кирасы,  
Левый берег занимают жида,  
На правом стеной стоят пидорасы.

Эта битва идет пешком,  
Никогда не кончится,  
Перемолет и зажует пятьсот поколений,  
Настойт на своем, как ядерная зима,  
Потому что с небес их атакует конница,  
А из-под земли наступает тьма,  
Уязвляя пята и врозь разводя колени.

<sup>21</sup>"Thundering the world with the might of my voice, / I walk – handsome, / twenty-two-year-old" ("Mir ogromiv moshch'iu golosa, / idu – krasivyi, / dvadtsatidvukhletnii"). See Vladimir Maiakovskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v trinadtsati tomakh*, ed. V.A. Katanian, vol. 1 (Moscow, 1955), 175.

<sup>22</sup>Maria Stepanova, *Protiv liriki: Stikhi 1995–2015* (Moscow, 2017), 330–31.



The action continues by the water,  
 The war is not for life, trenches, swords, cuirasses,  
 The left bank is occupied by the yids,  
 The right bank stands a wall of faggots.

This battle is waged on foot,  
 It will never end,  
 It will grind and chew up five hundred generations,  
 It will get its way, like nuclear winter,  
 Because from the heavens they are attacked by the cavalry  
 And from under the earth advances the darkness,  
 Wounding the heel and moving the knees apart.

The opening line indicates that the conflict that the poem elaborates is an old and enduring one. The references to Euripides's play *Iphigenia at Aulis* and to Gluck's eponymous opera in the poem's title underscore that the "action" and the conflict itself are a sort of performance and public ritual; here it is the ritual treatment of minorities as scapegoats.<sup>23</sup> The use of the slurs "yids" and "faggots" shocks, especially in a refined lyric poem that is otherwise chaste. But these pejoratives are ubiquitous in common speech, and they promptly establish the framework of habitual discrimination. These ethnic and homophobic slurs signify linguistic violence against the minorities who are maligned in Russia as enemies from within. Whereas historically, the Jews were the obsessively feared, envied, and ostracized minority, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, that role has been gradually transferred onto the gays.<sup>24</sup> This shift in the targets of scapegoating is suggested semantically in the rhyming pattern of the first stanza. The rhyme "water/yids" (*vody/zhidy*) associates the two and can be interpreted as the slow dissolution of the antisemitic sentiment in the liberating expanse of flowing water. The inventive rhyme "cuirasses/faggots" (*kirasy/pidorasy*), on the other hand, points to the necessity of cuirasses, protective armors, for the queers in the battle of everyday life.

The war invoked in the poem is not between the Jews and gays, however. Rather, it is the seemingly endless and timeless war on both groups by everyone else, such that even the skies and the earth close in on them. In the structure of power relations that Stepanova evokes, being Jewish or homosexual, or both for that matter, compromises one's standing in society: belonging to either group is the modern Achilles's heel, as the phrase "wounding the heel" implies. In the same line there is also a gesture toward sexual violence, "moving the knees apart," and this overlapping imagery of violence and vulnerability sums up the predicament of Russian queers, those who deviate from the imagined ideal of Russianness.

Yet in the following stanza, the poem's perspective suddenly shifts. Three consecutive lines begin with the phrase "every one of us," asserting through repetition that this war affects everyone and that anyone can eventually find himself or herself on the side of the Jews or the queers: in the position of the victim. The poem's subject shows that by not intervening in this battle, by not resisting the systemic bigotry, "every one of us" participates in the oppression and deserves to be called offensive slurs. The subject then subverts the

<sup>23</sup>René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore, 1989).

<sup>24</sup>Masha Gessen, *The Future Is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia* (New York, 2017).

offensiveness of the slurs and implores, “Admit me to be with the yids or the faggots / I have dreamed of it since third grade” (*Voz'mite menia v zhidy ili pidorasy / Ia mechtaiu ob etom s tret'ego klassa*).<sup>25</sup> Unable to join the struggle for survival as a queer person, the poem’s speaker offers herself as a human sacrifice for resolving the conflict, modifying the mythological story of Iphigenia. The drama of Euripides’s Iphigenia lies in the heroine’s late realization that she is chosen as a sacrifice to advance the Trojan War. Stepanova’s Iphigenia seeks to impede the war; she is an outsider figure who volunteers to sacrifice her body on the queers’ behalf. In doing so she refuses to be the passive “every one of us” and performs, instead, the act of ultimate resistance in the deliberate exposure of her bodily vulnerability. The final couplet of the poem captures the essence of that embodied vulnerable resistance:

Я с мечом в груди пою и не умираю  
На войне, ведущейся на подступах к раю.  
  
With a sword in my chest, I sing and don’t die  
In the war being waged on the approaches to paradise.

The line “With a sword in my chest, I sing and don’t die” captures the simultaneity of being exposed and agentic, as described by Butler. Despite being pierced with a sword, the poet defies death by singing, thus continuing to resist. Her seemingly self-destructive resistance is a performance of a non-violent attempt to draw attention to injustice, to the war that has become a normal modality of being. Moreover, the poem underscores the relentlessness of the external forces shaping our daily lives: the moment we enter the “action,” we are confronted with the preexisting sets of rules and roles, which we cannot avoid, but can oppose. To quote Butler again, “in this way we are, quite in spite of ourselves, vulnerable to, and affected by, discourses that we never chose.”<sup>26</sup> That is why the poem is organized from a panoramic perspective and the subject, marked as non-queer, decides to thrust herself into the conflict she initially only observes, as if to demonstrate a potential path of resistance. The text’s formal features as a lyric poem allow it to function as a weapon in its own way, too: so long as the poem is read, the lyric subject will continue to sing and not die. Yet the speaker’s lone lyrical position, coupled with her heroic sacrificial gesture on behalf of the oppressed, also betray her privilege of having and being able to make that choice, not least because she exists in a temporality external to queerness. But what happens when the lyric subject *is* queer and her membership in the imagined community of “every one of us” is compromised?

Chernyshov offers one model of the queer vulnerable subject’s relation to the external world by transcribing the historical avant-garde poetics into the now in an attempt to imbue the harrowing present with a promise of queer futurity. The St. Petersburg-based poet Sergey Finogin questions the very possibility of futurity and contemplates the vulnerability of self-representation while on the margins of the collective “every one of us.” He does so

<sup>25</sup>Perhaps there is also an allusion here to Marina Tsvetaeva’s famous line “All poets are Jews” (Poety – zhidy) from her “The Poem of the End” (“Poema kontsa,” 1924). If so, Stepanova might be suggesting that all genuine poets are identified with whatever is the scapegoated category of the moment.

<sup>26</sup>Butler, “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance,” 24.

by taking up the trope of the closet, the central metaphor of the (Western) gay imaginary. Finogin probes the closet's idiosyncrasy as a simultaneously oppressive and protective rhetorical structure in the Russian context in his poem "Coming out" (2014). Written at the time the homophobic discourse was reaching ever greater heights, the poem is an exercise in lucid restraint. The subdued, matter-of-fact language, devoid of complex cultural references, and the balanced structure of his two-stanza poem are in stark contrast to Chernyshov's syntactic fluidity and Stepanova's overwrought labyrinthine palimpsest. The relative simplicity of Finogin's poem is meant to situate the sexual, personal, and political in the quotidian:

Теперь, благодаря мне, эти бородатые люди в кедах,  
весело глядящие из-за абсолютно одинаковых очков с черными дужками  
каждые две секунды будут делать себе комплименты  
за свою невъ...бенную толерантность.

А посмотрев в потемневшее окно можно увидеть  
как под фонарями резко мелькают фигуры,  
и по улице, сбавив скорость плывет  
полицейская машина.<sup>27</sup>

Now, thanks to me, these bearded men in Converse sneakers,  
looking jolly from behind their completely identical glasses with black frames,  
will compliment themselves every two seconds  
for their unf...ckingbelievable tolerance.

But looking out the darkened window one can see  
under the street lights brusquely flickering figures  
and, gliding along the street with reduced speed,  
a police car.

The poem begins *in medias res*, focusing on the social response to the poet's coming out. With a mixture of irony and melancholia, Finogin records how his casual mention of being gay at a party empowers not him but his heterosexual peers. The poem's speaker fades into the background as the response of the Converse-wearing party crowd that sees the world through "completely identical glasses" metaphorically extends to signify the attitude of the so-called Russian "creative class"—urban, educated, well-paid, and young white-collar workers—toward the LGBTQI+ individuals. One might speculate that their "unf...ckingbelievable tolerance" is just another fashionable accessory like their glasses and shoes, and therefore can be easily discarded with changing fashions. The unimaginative similarity of these "bearded people" in their hipster uniform of black-rimmed glasses and trendy sneakers corresponds to their ethical inertia: they are eager to self-congratulate themselves for accepting a gay person, but their support likely does not extend beyond a social gathering. Far from the compassionate subjectivity of Stepanova's *Iphigenia*, the liberal contemporaries of Finogin's speaker are too busy processing their superficial progressiveness to take note of the queer subject's precarious position, reinforced by the presence of the police car in the poem's last line.

<sup>27</sup>Sergei Finogin, "Kaming-aut," *Polutona*, <https://polutona.ru/printer.php3?address=1004190021>.

In calling our attention to the view from the window, to the “brusquely flickering figures” and the slowly gliding police car, the poem’s subject ponders his vulnerable solitude before the machinery of the state. The window frames the ubiquity of danger and makes clear the absence of solidarity in the room. Finogin’s overall sentiment echoes the argument Barthes makes in *The Rustle of Language*, contending that “speaking of homosexuality permits those who ‘aren’t’ to show how open, liberal, and modern they are, and those who ‘are’ to bear witness, to assure responsibility, to militate.”<sup>28</sup> While Barthes thus mockingly rejects any open discussion of homosexuality, Finogin does not dismiss the value of coming out, but he resents being caught in the dialectic of disclosure and concealment upon which coming out is predicated. The feeling of resentment animates the poem as the subject evades speaking in the first person, resorting instead to a series of noncommittal impersonal utterances to show how little the disclosure of sexuality actually reveals: considering the detailed descriptions of the “bearded men,” the poet shares very little information about himself; and even his coming out takes place outside the poem. But the poet’s intentional opacity is suspended by the image of the all-seeing and all-exposing window. The window’s transparent materiality corresponds to the poet’s vulnerable positionality in the space between the public and the private.<sup>29</sup> Yet in this space Finogin finds poetic affect—a distinctly queer vulnerability of exposure and resistance—that allows him to capture the bleakness of the historical moment without surrendering to the forces of pessimism. Although his coming out fails to deliver any genuine sense of liberation, this failure nevertheless enables him to evidence queer presence with calm urgency.

Ultimately, Finogin’s resentful gaze into the darkness of the night stops short of becoming a visionary gaze: for him, the present is too contingent to imagine a future. A comparable critique of the present can be found in a poem by Yulia Podlubnova, who lives and writes in Ekaterinburg. Whereas Finogin’s speaker remains indoors, Podlubnova places her poetic subject outside, in the domain of Finogin’s police car:

Столичный проспект. Деревья – рентгены смерти.	A capital city’s main avenue. Trees – X-rays of death.
Обязательно праздник – черепно-лицевая площадь.	An obligatory municipal celebration – craniofacial square.
Скамейка в Парке Победы: «Лена + Катя = любовь».	A bench in Victory Park: “Lena + Katia = love.”
Надпись в музее свободы: «Открытые окна не трогать руками!» <sup>30</sup>	A sign in the museum of freedom: “Do not touch open windows!”

<sup>28</sup>Barthes’s remarks first appeared in his Preface to Renaud Camus’s novel *Tricks* and later were published in his *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley, 1989), 291. Cited in Nicholas de Villiers, *Opacity and the Closet: Queer Tactics in Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol* (Minneapolis, 2012), 63.

<sup>29</sup>Moreover, the cruising police car at the end of the poem suggests both the new legal environment and the broader specter of surveillance—the regimes of discipline and control foundational in modern subjectivities, as argued by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *The History of Sexuality* (1976), and by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990).

<sup>30</sup>Iuliia Podlubnova, “Stolichnyi prospekt,” *Polutona*, <https://polutona.ru/printer.php3?address=0901172155>.

Podlubnova's queer flaneur fixes urban landmarks in a telegraphic style fashioned to intensify the contrast among the forms of private feelings in public spaces, from ritual patriotic celebrations that inevitably end in gross violence ("craniofacial square") to the image of the park bench on which lesbian lovers have carved out their names.<sup>31</sup> Although Podlubnova positions her subject on the street, like Finogin, she employs the image of the window to convey the sense of vulnerable alienation. The directive not to touch open windows in a "museum of freedom" is a brutal reminder of the limits of ostensible freedoms: the park bench testifying to a lesbian romance signifies a coming out of sorts, but the bench's location in the Victory Park, a recreational zone to be found in every major Russian city, points to the ubiquity of similarly unclaimed, anonymous benches across the country.

There is an added layer of tragic irony in the poem as well. The Russian (formerly Soviet) Victory Parks commemorate the victory over Nazi Germany, but their symbolic value can also serve to assert the superiority of "traditional family values" which are supposedly under siege from the morally corrupt West. Furthermore, the reference to the museum of freedom is a colloquial moniker for Ekaterinburg's Boris Yeltsin Presidential Center, which epitomizes the unfulfilled promise of genuine democracy of the post-Soviet 1990s. The very phrase "the museum of freedom" is an elegy for the ethos of liberation associated with new Russia's first president. In Podlubnova's poem that ethos is contained in a museum exhibition space where political imagination is deprived of vitality and reduced to X-rays, messages carved on benches in parks, and public announcement signs. However, as with Finogin and Chernyshov, Podlubnova relies on the emotional strength of vulnerability to explore the capacity of language to reflect queer experience and to render that experience visible.

In their explorations of the queer subject's vulnerable positionality vis-à-vis social realities, Podlubnova, Finogin, and Chernyshov are painfully aware of the limits of visibility: making something visible does not make it legible. But the legibility of the poetic form itself and the accessibility of lyric subjectivity via vulnerability allow the queer poet to become a participant in the broader discourse, not merely an observer. Writing poetry thus leaves representational traces in the environment that impedes the publicness of queerness. Therefore, the aesthetic strategies in the poems I discuss are closely and openly interlinked with political concerns. Indeed, I find that some poets writing about the issues of queer representation after the gay propaganda law turn to formal devices and the pitch of civic poetry (*grazhdanskaia poeziia*), which is anchored at the intersection of the lyrical and the political. It is not incidental that in her programmatic poem, "the moving space of the revolution" (2014), Galina Rymbu, originally from Omsk, invokes Nikolay Nekrasov, the unrivaled icon of nineteenth-century Russian civic poetry: "you think you're Nekrasov or something, bitch?"<sup>32</sup> One could argue that the seemingly stilted and somewhat ethically suspect genre of civic poetry—a genre, which in the past has been used to instrumentalize the lyric in the service of the state—is enjoying a revival as a number of notable contemporary

<sup>31</sup>While Lena and Katia are common Russian nicknames, here the names also refer to the poets Elena Baiangulova and Ekaterina Simonova, who reside in Ekaterinburg.

<sup>32</sup>Galina Rymbu, "the moving space of the revolution," in her *Life in Space*, trans. Joan Brooks (New York, 2020). The Russian original reads "vozomnil sebja Nekrasovym, suka!" in Galina Rymbu, "peredvizhnoe prostranstvo perevorota," in her *Kosmicheskii prospect / Kosmikais prospekts* (Ozolnieki, Latvia, 2018), 12.

poets, including Rymbu, experiment with the boundaries of conventional lyric voice to make the most effective political statement in the current age of civic despair.<sup>33</sup> In the following pages, I would like to suggest that civic poetry serves as a conduit for queer vulnerable resistance against the culture of lethal homophobia.

## QUEERING CIVIC POETRY

It might seem counterintuitive to locate queer subjectivities in the generic framework of civic poetry. In the Russian tradition, civic poetry is typically associated with oratorical excess, patriotic feeling, and the righteousness of the lyric subject, who bemoans various social ills. Queerness, on the other hand, seeks to undermine any normativity and thrives on the contradictions of human desire. The poems I gather to document the poetics of queer vulnerability invariably reflect the dual dimensions of vulnerability as an exposure to danger as well as a source of agency. And civic poetry operates precisely on the principle of vulnerability by mobilizing the tension between exposure and agency. The goal of a civic poem is to provoke a political response by amplifying the vulnerability of a lyric voice. The higher the personal and political risks for the poet, the more effective the poetic utterance. (Though when privileged poets perform undue vulnerability and civic concern in these sorts of poems, the poetic utterance is deflated, if not odiously disingenuous, as was often the case in Soviet “civic lyric poetry.” This legacy is one of the main reasons why this genre can be seen as problematic.) For a queer poet, however, the rhetorical capacity of civic poetry, within which the lyrical and the political merge, creates an opening for engaging with the state and the public and resisting institutionalized oppression and systemic erasure. The resulting poetry is civic in the sense that the poet searches for a way to rethink what has come to be considered normal in Russia by means of subverting the very norms of representation. In speaking about queerness in its relation to the country’s broader sociopolitical fabric, these poems constitute interventions into social zones where they are unexpected, incongruous, and unwelcome.

One of the earliest and most direct responses to the propaganda law came from the influential poet, critic, and publisher Dmitry Kuzmin. His blistering quasi-satirical text, “On the Day of the Russian Literary Assembly,” first appeared in Kuzmin’s LiveJournal blog and was tagged under the rubric “proclamations and pamphlets.” The poem is indeed

<sup>33</sup>See Marijeta Bozovic, “Poetry on the Front Line: Kirill Medvedev and a New Russian Poetic Avant-Garde,” *Zeitschrift für Slavische Philologie* 70:1 (2014): 89–118; idem, “Performing Poetry and Protest in the Age of Digital Reproduction,” in *Cultural Forms of Protest in Russia*, ed. Birgit Beumers et al. (New York, 2018), 200–220; Jason Cieply, “Non-Identitarian Revolution: ‘Object-Oriented’ Protest Art in Russia since 2011–2012,” [*Translit*] <http://www.trans-lit.info/retseptsiya/jason-cieply-non-identitarian-revolution-object-oriented-protest-art-in-russia-since-2011-2012>; Kevin M. F. Platt, “Dmitry Golyenko and the Weaponization of Discourse Poetry,” in *A/Z: A Celebration of Alexander Zholkovsky’s Contributions to the Study of Russian Literature, Linguistics, and Literary Theory*, ed. Igor Pil’shchikov et al. (Boston, 2017), 420–33; Platt, “Pozhar v golove: Pavel Arseniev, estetieskaia avtonomiia, i Laboratoriia poeticheskogo aktsionizma,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 145 (2017): 278–91; Stephanie Sandler, “Kirill Medvedev and Elena Fanailova: Poetry, Ethics, Politics, and Philosophy,” *Russian Literature* 87–89 (2017): 281–313; and Kirill Korchagin, “Maska sdiraetsia vmeste s kozhei’: Sposoby konstruirovaniia sub’ekta v politicheskoi poezii 2010-kh godov,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 124 (2013): 225–38; as well as Sanna Turoma, “When Satire Does Not Subvert: Citizen Poet as Nostalgia for Soviet Dissidence,” in *Cultural Forms of Protest in Russia*, 221–43.



a long and loud civic pamphlet-like proclamation that moves from searing rage to a tender, loving reminiscence, and to a parodically calculated disclaimer at the end. The impetus for writing the poem was not the propaganda law itself, but the Kremlin's initiative in fall 2013 of gathering various makers of Russian literature, from writers and publishers to translators and librarians, into a big state-sponsored convention with the goal of assessing the state of contemporary literature, debating the reasons behind the decline in readership, and outlining the pathways of restoring the might of the Russian literary world.<sup>34</sup> The significance of the occasion was symbolized by the presence of the descendants of the Russian literary elite reaching all the way back to Pushkin and Lermontov. The astonishing earnestness of the convention resembling a postmodernist performance of a Soviet writers' congress would be amusing were this assembly not used to enshrine patriarchal conservatism as national policy. Naturally, Kuzmin did not take part in the event himself, but facing the radical shortage of meaningful ways to protest, he deployed his poetic arsenal to counter the event and expose its duplicity and dishonesty.

*Вот ужo заебу вас в рот и в жопу  
Катулл в переводе Сергея Шервинского*

В день Российского литературного собрания,  
созванного по поручению Администрации Президента  
потомками знаменитых писателей Пушкина, Лермонтова,  
Толстого, Достоевского, Пастернака, Шолохова и Солженицына  
(трое из семи потомков оказались липовыми:  
вдовой, невесткой, троюродным правнучатым племянником,  
остро не хватало потомков Тоголя и Салтыкова-Щедрина),  
я думал:

ебал я в рот и в жопу ваши духовные скрепы,  
ебал я в рот и в жопу ваши традиционные ценности,  
ебал я в рот и в жопу ваши крокодиловы слёзы  
о самой читающей (и самой расстреливающей писателей) стране,  
ебал я в рот и в жопу вашу «глубокую тревогу»  
об «оскудении мысли и, как следствие, одичании душ»  
у народа, ежедневно растлеваемого официальными media,  
ебал я в рот и в жопу ваши секции и пленарные заседания,  
ваши комитеты и комиссии, банкеты и фуршеты,  
ебал я в рот и в жопу ваши вашу фамильную гордость,  
крыловские гуси, годные лишь на жаркое.<sup>35</sup>

*This is how I fuck you in the ass and in the mouth.  
Catullus in Sergey Shervinky's translation*

On the day of the Russian literary assembly,  
called together at the behest of the Office of the President  
with the descendants of the famous writers, Pushkin, Lermontov,  
Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Pasternak, Sholokhov, and Solzhenitsyn

<sup>34</sup>See "Rossiiskoe literaturnoe sobranie," <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19665>.

<sup>35</sup>Dmitrii Kuzmin, "V den' rossiiskogo literaturnogo sobraniia," <https://dkuzmin.livejournal.com/531973.html>.

(three of the seven descendants turned out to be fake: a widow, a daughter-in-law, a third cousin thrice removed; particularly felt was the absence of the descendants of Gogol and Saltykov-Shchedrin), I thought to myself:

I fuck in the ass and in the mouth your spiritual ties,  
 I fuck in the ass and in the mouth your traditional values,  
 I fuck in the ass and in the mouth your crocodile tears  
 shed for the best-read (and most-writers-executed) nation,  
 I fuck in the ass and in the mouth your “deeply seated sense of alarm”  
 about the “impoverishment of thought and, in consequence, degeneration of souls”  
 among a people corrupted daily by the official media,  
 I fuck in the ass and in the mouth your panels and plenaries,  
 your commissions and committees, your banquets and buffets,  
 I fuck in the ass and in the mouth your familial pride,  
 you’re the geese from Krylov’s fables, fit only to be roasted.<sup>36</sup>

Beginning with the epigraph drawn from Catullus 16, Kuzmin is demonstrating the persistence of literature. This infamous poem was censored and mistranslated for centuries for its perceived indecency, yet despite it all the text survives and Catullus’s message, directed at his contemporaries, is as clear and relevant as ever: genuine art cannot be subjugated to the will of the hypocritical, prudish majority.<sup>37</sup> The quoted fragment’s unabashed homosexual imagery also advances Kuzmin’s aim of countering today’s “traditional values” with traditions of classical antiquity. Moreover, Kuzmin’s citing of Catullus in the Russian translation by Sergey Shervinsky, a prominent Soviet scholar and author, deconstructs the polished literary genealogy conjured up by the state: throughout the poem, Kuzmin attempts to achieve absolute transparency and to show that, just as some of the literary descendants are fake, the popular knowledge of the canon is deliberately whitewashed, too.

The central theme of the pamphlet-poem is the revelation of false appearances—including mistranslations of canonical texts, misrepresentations of ancestry, and assumptions about gender—which in Kuzmin’s case can be understood as the queer literary expert’s civic duty. He embraces the conventional lyric *I* and uses such traditional poetic devices as anaphora to ground the poem in the act of declaration and naming to methodically expose the hypocrisy of writers loyal to the regime and to assemble the gay self from the entanglement of raw hate and love.

А ночью ко мне пришёл любимый мальчик,  
 мечтающий писать, но падающий без сил каждый вечер  
 после двенадцатичасовой смены в обувном магазине,  
 и всю ночь и всё утро я ебал его в рот и – не в жопу,  
 в пизду, у транссексуальных мальчиков есть пизда,  
 целовал его тело, спускаясь от шеи всё ниже,  
 осторожно обходя не зажившие после мастэктомии соски,

<sup>36</sup>I modified the existing translation by Alex Cigale, which can be found in *Springhouse Journal*, <http://springhousejournal.com/Issue1/Kuzmin/>.

<sup>37</sup>Marilyn B. Skinner, ed., *A Companion to Catullus* (London, 2007), 120–22; 346–47.

впивался ртом ему между ног, намертво обхватив его бёдра,  
 чтобы он, дёргаясь от невыносимого наслаждения,  
 не расшиб голову об изголовье кровати,  
 обнимал, обессиленного, свернувшегося в клубочек,  
 и баюкал, и шептал по-французски слова любви,  
 и с поздним ноябрьским рассветом, безнадежным, как жизнь в России,  
 подумал:

And at night, my beloved boy came to visit me,  
 he dreams about writing, but collapses in exhaustion every evening  
 after a twelve-hour work shift at a shoe store,  
 and all night and all morning, I fucked him in the mouth and - not in the ass,  
 in the pussy, transsexual boys have pussies,  
 I kissed him all over, starting from his neck and moving lower and lower,  
 careful to avoid the nipples, not yet healed after the mastectomy,  
 digging my mouth deep between his legs, fatally embracing his hips,  
 so that he, twitching from the unbearable of pleasure,  
 would not bump his head against the headboard,  
 I hugged his spent body rolled up into a little ball,  
 and hummed a lullaby, and whispered in French words of love,  
 and with the late November dawn, as hopeless as life in Russia,  
 I thought to myself:

The scene with the lover is nestled protectively in the poem's middle, framed by the noise of the obscenely politicized official discourse. The narrative logic of the poem suggests that the expletives Kuzmin uses are much more innocent than the obscenity of public lamentation about "spiritual ties," "traditional values," and "crudeness of souls." Kuzmin's unbridled linguistic play eventually morphs into the unlimited intimacy of human erotic connection in the third stanza, which, in turn, cancels the forceful hate of the poem's first half along with any feeling of shame. In this moment of vulnerable exposure, the emotions we associate with love become a source of resistance to the outside forces impinging on the poet's private domain, as well as on the autonomy of language.<sup>38</sup> The graphic representation of queer desire and domesticity dramatizes the tension between the lyrical and political utterances: the poem's language familiarizes queer pleasure, affirming its organic relation to the broader infrastructure of sexuality.

But here also lies the paradox of Kuzmin's position as queer citizen and poet. In insisting on recognizing certain sexual practices as already existing, he invites their classification. Rather than suspend the paradigm of normativity altogether, he seems to wish to inscribe the illicit lovers into an expanded version of it.<sup>39</sup> Formally, this contradictory

<sup>38</sup>Cf. Leo Bersani, "The Gay Daddy," in his *Homos* (Cambridge, MA, 1995), 108.

<sup>39</sup>Writing polemically about Kuz'min's aesthetic practices from a class-based perspective in the early 2000s, Kirill Medvedev has commented that Kuz'min can be seen as a more extreme gay poet than Iaroslav (Slava) Mogutin: "The society entirely accepts the image of a libertine [*razvratnika, libertena*]—even if he is gay, even if he is pretending to be a fascist superhuman—since this image does not question the society's moral pillars. But preaching open relationships while simultaneously accepting "traditional" family values ... is far more serious." See Medvedev, "Dmitrii Kuz'min. Memuar-esse," <http://kirillmedvedev.narod.ru/Dm-Kuz.html>. Cf. Il'ia Kukulin, "Mir sovershennoletnikh zhelanii (vmesto predisloviia redaktora)," in *Svobodnyi stikh Dmitriia Kuz'mina: Sbornik statei*, ed. Stanislav L'vovskii and Il'ia Kukulin (Moscow, 2018), 5–13.

impulse is embodied in a volta, the turn of the poem's argument in stanza four, when the speaker flips the rhetorical structure and proclaims that "one must not fuck in the ass and in the mouth spiritual foundations," "traditional values," "hopes and aspirations of Russian intelligentsia," because doing so is "unhygienic" and can lead to a "wretched disease— inflamed patriotism of the cerebral membranes," "syphilis of the spirit, patriarchy of the sexual and print organs," and so forth. This ostensible reversal of the lyric subject's original message intensifies political satire but at the expense of projecting an entirely new configuration of sexual citizenship. The speaker contrasts his lover's queer body with the corrupt body politic, the purity with pollution, but then the final stanza concedes to the very rhetorical devices that were adamantly critiqued earlier. Kuzmin's proclivity to adjudicate culminates when the poem's lyric and civic trajectories are conflated in the last stanza's declaration that the "present text is not liable under statute 6.21 of the RF code of administrative offenses / ... even though / it details 'the appeal of non-traditional' sexual relations." The rest of the poem is parodic to be sure, but the presence of this legal disclaimer haunts the text as a reminder that the framework of duplicitous state power remains intact.

Kuzmin's poem makes clear that although formal aspects of civic poetry lend themselves to constructing lyrical subjectivity in the political context, the trouble with writing (and reading) civic poetry queerly lies in the overwhelming normativity of language available for envisioning queer subjects as both political and desiring. That is, shaping the poem as a political statement while retaining the subject's queerness and upholding dignity without sentimentalizing victimhood is perhaps among the most generative challenges of contemporary queer aesthetics. Such challenges readily manifest themselves through the figure of the speaker and through the choices made in conceptualizing the voices of those who get to speak in a poem. In the following section I consider further how lyrical subjectivity informs the poem's political charge from the positions of queer vulnerable resistance articulated from explicitly feminist positions.<sup>40</sup>

## POETRY (AND) POLITICS: WHO'S AFRAID OF THE LYRIC I?

Some of the most remarkable experiments in bridging lyrical and political poetics can be seen as part of the broader feminist turn in contemporary writing that was galvanized by the Moscow protests of 2011–13 and the torrent of repressive legislation that followed, including the propaganda law.<sup>41</sup> In searching for a position from which to speak in the disempowering civic climate, a number of queer women poets, many of whom began writing and publishing in the age of the propaganda law, underscore the connection between the hostility of language norms and the habitual violence of the neoconservative state that permeates all areas of

<sup>40</sup>As Polina Barskova puts it, it is impossible to separate one's gender identity from the social milieu – "there is nothing unimportant" in writing poetry today. See "'... net nevazhnogo': Gendernaia identichnost' i noveishaia literatura. 11 interv'iu Denisu Larionovu," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 149 (2018): 615.

<sup>41</sup>See Alexander Etkind, "Introduction: Genres and Genders of Protest in Russia's Petrostate," in *Cultural Forms of Protest in Russia*, 1–15; Elena Georgievskaya, "Russkaia feministkaia poeziia: Zametki na poliakh," *LiTERRatura* <http://litteratura.org/criticism/2688-elena-georgievskaya-russkaya-feministskaya-poeziya-zametki-na-polyah.html>; and the special issue "Feminizm dlia vsekh" of *Gendernye issledovania*, no. 24 (2020), <http://kcgs.net.ua/gurnal/24/>.

life. To quote Rymbu's haunting lines, "the dream is over, Lesbia, now it's time for sorrow," "o, Lesbia, the time of war has come," and "it's a time when love and politics are one and the same."<sup>42</sup> Figuring the queer political subject in the setting aptly captured by Rymbu activates a range of methodologies with the common purpose of recovering the poem's speaker from linguistic normativity.

In this project of resisting normativity, the use of the lyric I becomes crucial for disrupting the masculinist conceptions of poetic subjectivity.<sup>43</sup> As if in opposition to Kuzmin, who cites Catullus at the beginning of his poem, a Siberian-born Moscow poet, Oksana Vasyakina (b. 1989), begins her poetic cycle "Wind of Fury – Songs of Fury" with a short quotation from Monique Wittig's novel *Virgil, No!* Vasyakina's epigraph can be read not only as her alignment with the decidedly feminist lesbian tradition of writing represented by Wittig, but also as the refusal to follow the time-honored classical tradition encapsulated in the phrase "Virgil, No!" Following her French predecessor, Vasyakina charts a woman's vision of the human condition. In "Wind of Fury," vulnerability circumscribes the woman's existence and is inseparable from it:

и выхожу из  
подземки навстречу миру мужчин  
Я вижу на них одежду стилизованную под военную форму  
над ней плывут солоноватые взгляды  
они скользят по моему телу:  
они дают мне сигнал:  
ты просто женщина<sup>44</sup>

and I emerge from the underground passage  
into the world of men  
I see them in their clothes styled to look like military uniforms  
above swim brackish eyes  
they slip along my body  
they give me a signal:  
you're just a woman<sup>45</sup>

The entire text then struggles against such objectification and the sexual violence that it entails. The interlinked poems of Vasyakina's "Wind of Fury" constitute a therapeutic process of harnessing the vulnerability of being "just a woman" through collective identification with all women. She demystifies lyric expressivity—at one point she writes about a "thousand-headed woman" whose "stomachs absorb potatoes and meat by the ton"—in order to imagine the radical lesbian solidarity necessary for political interventions into

<sup>42</sup>Galina Rymbu, "Son proshel, Lesbiia, nastalo vremia pechali," in her *Kosmicheskii prospect*, 46. For the English translation by Joan Brooks see Rymbu, *Life in Space*.

<sup>43</sup>Note that the Russian (originally Ukrainian) version of #metoo is #яНеБоюсьСказать (I am not afraid to say).

<sup>44</sup>Oksana Vasiakina, "Veter iarosti – Pesni iarosti," [https://vk.com/doc708944\\_442793005?hash=db4501fbd2e9160e80&dl=e0c706fb2781992fd4](https://vk.com/doc708944_442793005?hash=db4501fbd2e9160e80&dl=e0c706fb2781992fd4). Since first appearing in a *samizdat* version, "Veter iarosti" was included in Vasiakina's second conventionally published book of poetry, *Veter iarosti* (Moscow, 2019), 62–80.

<sup>45</sup>Oksana Vasyakina, "Wind of Fury – Songs of Fury," trans. Joan Brooks [deadname: Jonathan Brooks Platt], in *Sinister Wisdom* 110 (Fall 2018): 35.

the social realm dominated by men. The strength of her lyric I emerges from the unabashed revelation of memories of harassment and rape conveyed not as intimate confessions but as a vengeful declaration of a future beyond the “world of men.” And it is through the shared exposure of speaking in the first person on behalf of all injured women that Vasyakina finds strength for moving forward. So strong is her conviction that she is able to forge her way forward by harnessing vulnerability to imagine a futurity that remains closed off in Finogin’s and Kuzmin’s poems.

Much like Vasyakina, the Chelyabinsk poet Rimma Agliullina favors the lyric I in creating allegories of civic feminist resistance. Yet in Agliullina’s “Songs about Love and Motherland,” the speaker is more cautious but as unequivocal as Vasyakina’s about the need to transform the “world of men.” She writes poignantly about our troublesome entanglements within the existing system of social relations and the challenge of writing in a language that perpetuates this system:

ЭТОТ ЯЗЫК НЕ СОЗДАН	this language is not made
ДЛЯ ЛЮБВИ	for love
ЭТА ЗЕМЛЯ НЕ ГОДИТСЯ	this soil is not fit
ЧТОБЫ ЖИТЬ	for living
...	...
ЭТА ЗЕМЛЯ ДЛЯ ТОГО	this soil is for
ЧТОБЫ ЗА НЕЁ УМЕРЕТЬ	dying for
Я ВЫВЕРНУЛАСЬ С КОРНЕМ	i wrenched myself from it with my root
И ОН ИСТЕКАЕТ КРОВЬЮ <sup>46</sup>	and he is bleeding

Agliullina achieves a strong lyric tone as she describes an attempt to detach herself from the toxic motherland. The striking image of the bleeding root, in masculine gender and with obvious phallic connotations, signifies the poetic subject’s political becoming as she removes words and objects from their original uses and prepares to repurpose them. Though the image of the bleeding root is somewhat sentimental, it nevertheless illustrates how deeply seated patriotic attachments are, regardless of gender. Removing them is painful but necessary for supposing a way of being in the world that does not depend on patriarchal investments in loving the motherland. “Not every song about the Motherland is an anthem,” writes Agliullina in another poem and thus persists in her linguistic emancipation through solitary lyrical meditation.

Lyrical subjectivity paves the way to queer subjectivity in the work of Lolita Agamalova, who came of age in the Chechen capital of Grozny and is now based in Moscow. She probes the extent to which poetry can be weaponized for the cause of upending normative gender dynamics in the heteronormative state. Her ambitious and unapologetic “Lesbian Diary” is a long-form hybrid poetic narrative which can be qualified as queer civic poetry in that the speaker aims to rethink the system of conventional linguistic signification from a profoundly gender-aware perspective:

<sup>46</sup>Rimma Agliullina, “Pesni o liubvi i rodine,” *45ia parallel*, [https://45parallel.net/rimma\\_agliullina/pesni\\_o\\_lyubvi\\_i\\_rodine.html](https://45parallel.net/rimma_agliullina/pesni_o_lyubvi_i_rodine.html).



Кто поборет меня, когда окрепну от языка, кроме самого языка, чьё сопротивление я поборола? Виктимный сопротивленец-язык, истый насильник, сабмиссив, сопротивлению тела уподобляясь, уподобился камню. Но помяни: истерзанной букве, на самом дне-деле, больно. За буквой скрывая женщину, не букве, а ей.<sup>47</sup>

Who will vanquish me when I get stronger from the language, except for the language itself, whose resistance I vanquished? The victim-prone rebel-language, the true abuser, the submissive, in the process of becoming like the resistance of a body, became like a stone. But remember: the tormented letter, underneath its very core, is in pain. Hiding the woman behind the letter, not the letter is in pain, but she.

By pitting the conventional lyric confession against the politically-charged intimate disclosure, Agamalova attempts to demonstrate that there is little difference between discursive and physical violence. The act of speaking—using the language understood to be deceitful and masculinist by default—turns into a practice of daily political struggle. Her entire diary constitutes the project of documenting “lesbian existence” through what she calls “therapeutic notes toward speech empowerment,” such as the one quoted above. As a result, Agamalova’s poetic speaker emerges in the process of converting non-verbal experience into narrative poetry that grapples with the social and physiological conditioning of the gender binary. As she puts it in one of her diary-entry-poems, “My body – is a body of political / struggle between / myself and me.” This acknowledgement of vulnerability to one’s own body and one’s own language permeates Agamalova’s textual experiment and supports an impossibly honest self-examination as a basis for political action.

As can be seen in the texts of Vasyakina, Agliullina, and Agamalova, speaking in the first person becomes a political gesture, because the lyric I is central to conceptualizing the act of writing as a struggle with the norms of language and the poet’s bodily vulnerability to those norms. However, there are poets who exaggerate the conventional lyric form to emphasize the sense of political hopelessness and to demonstrate the inability to break through the ever-greater degrees of normalized violence. For example, the Moscow poet Elena Kostyleva wrote on the 2016 organized arrests and torture of gay men in Chechnya using the mold of a love lyric but pushing recognizable words and meaning almost to the point of transsense, or *zaum'*:

Я ХОЧУ ТОЛЬКО ТЕБЯ И ПЫТКИ ЛГБТ  
ТОЛЬКО ТЕБЯ ЧЕЧНЯ  
ТОЛЬКО ХАРДКОР  
ТОЛЬКО МОЛЧАНИЕ ГОР  
ТОЛЬКО ТЕБЯ ЧЕЧНЯ<sup>48</sup>

I WANT ONLY YOU AND THE TORTURE OF THE GAYS  
ONLY YOU CHECHNYA

<sup>47</sup>Lolita Agamalova, “Lesbiiskii dnevnik (2),” *Polutona* <https://polutona.ru/?show=0607231218>.

<sup>48</sup>Elena Kostyleva, “Ja khochu tol'ko tebia i pytki,” *Snob*, March 9, 2018, <https://snob.ru/entry/158271>. The author explains that “molchanie gor” (“silence of the mountains”) is a reference to an online social network for dating in the Caucasus.

ONLY HARDCORE  
 ONLY THE SILENCE OF THE MOUNTAINS  
 ONLY YOU CHECHNYA

Whereas the avant-garde *zaum'* is the practice of creating poetic language that does not have any recognizable, definite meaning, Kostyleva inverts this technique to render the assigned meanings of existing words virtually meaningless, as if to show the disintegration of language used in daily life. The horror of the reports on the persecution of gays in Chechnya was so totalizing that Kostyleva shaped her poem's subject from what looks like screams in a no-longer-comprehensible language, punctuated by the howling "o"s and the harsh "kh"s and "ch"s. But as the poem's capitalized words amplify the senses into raw desire, the object of that desire is unclear, making the poem all the more unsettling. At the same time, this discomfort is yet another dimension of the political impact Kostyleva is attempting by broaching the topic of utmost civic concern via distorted lyricism.

This sort of distorted lyricism is the hallmark of the cycle of poems "The Verdicts" (2016) by Lida Yusupova, who shares her time between Canada and Belize. In the vein of documentary poetics, Yusupova transforms publicly available court records into surprisingly moving, yet fiercely political poetry: each poem in the cycle focuses on a victim of a violent crime and is composed of language replicated verbatim from the court hearings of those crimes.<sup>49</sup> Yusupova manipulates legal records, rearranging the lines of the original documents to lay bare the horrors of habitual violence against women and gay men in Russia. The documents Yusupova works with are meant to deliver objective judgment, but in their supposed impartiality they only replicate and reinforce societal misogyny, heterosexism, and homophobia. Yet Yusupova manages to resuscitate queer subjectivities by the use of repetition to create a sense of choral intoning and lament. She manipulates indifferent legal language to recover lives buried within it. The structural length of these poems makes it difficult to cite a representative excerpt, but suffice it to say that her experimentation with documentary poetry offers further proof that linguistic vulnerability is central to the queer civic aesthetic, which interrogates the validity of accepted social norms in the name of patriotic values and envisions instead a groundwork for an inclusive society by suspending assumptions about linguistic neutrality and fairness.

The construction of poetic subjectivity by means of reimagined lyrical conventions is inextricably linked with such political concerns as advancing the cause of gender emancipation and queer visibility in queers' terms. The various approaches to the use of the lyric I that I have sampled show that being a queer minority in a straight world offers a wealth of insight into systemic injustices and that that personal insight is then transformed into a politically inflected poetics. The poets I discuss offer models for queering lyric subjects by showing the ways in which these subjects are never in a subjective disposition. Their poems show that the queer lyric I cannot be fully autonomous, but rather that it is always implicated in a broad network of social and political relations. Indeed, most of the poets I mentioned in this article envision themselves within a much larger community and

<sup>49</sup>Ilya Kukulin, "Documentalist Strategies in Contemporary Russian Poetry," trans. Josephine von Zitzewitz, *Russian Review* 69 (October 2010): 585–614.

engage with many of their peers, such as the astonishing poet from the Urals Ekaterina Simonova, the curatorial guru and remarkable poet Ilya Danishevsky, the unflinchingly feminist poet and activist Daria Serenko, the inter-lingual poet and scholar Alexander Averbukh, the daringly experimental Ivan Sokolov, the chillingly precise Elena Fanailova, and the rapturously analytical Polina Barskova—to mention only a few names. Their continuously growing body of work shows that confronting and interrogating interconnectivity and interdependence in poetry creates the foundation for articulating not just general political, but specifically civic positions against policing gender expression and sexuality practices. And it is the sense of vulnerability, understood in Butler’s terms as resistance, that animates much of this writing, helps navigate social precarity, and forges the modern Russian queer poet and citizen.