

Propaganda? What Propaganda?: Discourse, Identity, and Queer
Activism in St-Petersburg, Russia

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral
Affairs in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Anthropology

Carleton University

Ottawa, Ontario

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Abstract

In light of the recent ban on the “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations” in Russia, my thesis explores the queer activist movements in the city of St-Petersburg. In the wake of the ban, emerging and new modes of activism in St-Petersburg have developed and the individuals participating in these campaigns present different ways of being active/activists in means both public and private, street and academic, local and global. Firstly, after a brief historical overview of queer desires and identities in Russia, this thesis examines two prominent spheres of activism, academic and street-based, and their shifting practices in light of the ban. Secondly, I examine the effects of the ban on queer subject and identity making through a discussion of the various discourses (nationalist, moral, medical, global) that are present in their everyday lives. This focus demonstrates that despite the official bodies (state and church) attempting to delegitimize queer desires and subjects, queer activists are able to carve out spaces for themselves and continue in their attempts to fashion a queer world of their own.

Acknowledgments

The completion of this thesis has been a rollercoaster ride to say the least. Had you asked me a mere few months ago if I thought I would complete this thesis, my answer would have most likely been a nervous laugh. I had my doubts, and actually still have doubts but I have come to embrace these and now see them as imbricated in this arduous yet incredibly rewarding journey that is academic pursuit. The past two years have been filled with life-changing and eye-opening experiences and encounters. My time at Carleton and my fieldwork in Russia would not have been successful if it were not for a number of important individuals whom I would like to dedicate a few words to and thank.

First, I owe a sincerely heartfelt thank you to my supervisor, Dr. Marie-Eve Carrier-Moisan, and committee member, Dr. Kristin Bright, for their unwavering support and belief in my research. I am extremely grateful for the intellectual guidance, emotional support, and overall life advice that they have both provided me over the years. Their thorough engagement with my thesis and their grammatical and theoretical revisions as well as suggestions have been essential for its success. To Marie-Eve, it has been a privilege and pleasure to learn the ropes of this wonderful process that is a Master's thesis with you. Thank you for providing me with a safe space to simply talk about my week, to learn and to grow as an academic. The talks we had in your office were often very cathartic and needed. To Kristin, if it were not for you, I do not think I would have pursued graduate school to start with. You have and continue to fuel my academic pursuits and your enthusiasm in all my endeavours over the years has been a key factor in my success. Our discussions shared over coffee and tea have been enlightening and thought-provoking.

I owe a great thanks to those who helped with my fieldwork while in Russia. Thank you for allowing me to glimpse into your personal lives and your willingness and braveness through these hard times will not be forgotten. I am also thankful to those who casually conversed with me over drinks, on the metro, or during a walk. They momentarily welcomed me into their lives and were part of making Piter my home away from home. Without these interactions, my thesis would not be what it is today. *Spasibo*.

A great big thank you to my Anthropology cohort at Carleton. Without you, I truly believe I would have gone insane after the first month of coursework. You are the ones with whom I shared this experience in and outside of the classroom. You have been an incredible pillar of support and comfort over the past two years. I have enjoyed our discussions about theory, identity, performativity, love, globalization, and the like as well as our time together off campus (our culinary explorations will always be part of my fondest memories). To all those who have come and gone, and to all those who have come and stayed in my life, your presence in my life has shaped and changed me as an individual and as an academic. Thank you, I am better for it.

Thank you to my family for your enduring support. Who knew that this academic journey of mine would be such a long one? You have been by my side from the beginning, and I know that you will continue to support me in my future endeavours wherever they may

take me. To my mother, Lynne, and father, Chris, thank you for being the parents that you are. I am the person that I am today because of you, your love, your support, and your encouragement. You both instilled in me a passion for knowledge, a desire to tackle the biggest mountains, and taught me to be of open mind and open heart. There are honestly no words that can truly grasp how grateful I am. To my spirit-mom, Annie, thank you for always showing an interest in my work and for the careful reading of my thesis. I appreciate all of the advice and support that I have received from my family over the years.

Last but not least, I want to dedicate this thesis to two incredibly important individuals in my life. First, a special dedication to my eight year old sister, Charlie, who continues to amaze me every day. You are still so young yet so incredibly wise. You possess a tenacious will to better the world and I see in you a budding trans* rights advocate, feminist, and activist. You are so incredibly brave – please do not let anyone extinguish the fire that burns bright within you. Second, it is with a heavy heart that I dedicate these last few sentences and thesis to my late grandfather. I am only just beginning to allow myself to truly feel and grieve his absence in my life. He was an incredible man who radiated pride whenever I spoke with him about my academic accomplishments and future pursuits. He began this chapter of my life with me, however, he is not here to help me close it. Thank you for all the support and interest you demonstrated. Toodle-loo!

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT	I
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	II-III
TABLE OF CONTENTS	IV-V
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	VI
CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION	1
Terminology and Personal Genealogy	6
Background to the Research	9
Methodology	15
Significance	20
Overview of Chapters	21
CHAPTER TWO – A BRIEF HISTORY OF QUEER IDENTITIES AND ACTIVISM IN THE USSR AND RUSSIA	24
Beginnings: 18 th to Mid-20 th Centuries	26
Experiences under Article 121	34
From Criminal to Pathological: Mid to Late 20 th Century	37
Queer Russian Organizations Today	43
<i>Vykhod</i>	44
<i>LGBT Network</i>	45
<i>GayRussia</i>	47
CHAPTER THREE – LIVED EXPERIENCES: QUEER ACTIVISM IN ST-PETERSBURG	51
What <i>Is</i> Activism? What <i>Does</i> it Look Like in the Context of St-Petersburg?	52
Finding the Familiar in the Unfamiliar: Queerfest 2013	55
At the Crossroads: A Conference on Methodology, Theory, and Practice in LGBT and Queer Research	71
‘Out’ in the Streets: Street Activism in St-Petersburg	75
	IV

Quasi-Boundary Publics: Queer Visibility and Identity Work	81
CHAPTER FOUR – DISCOURSE, IDENTITY, AND ACTIVISM	89
Why is ‘ <i>stol</i> ’ masculine?: A Short Introduction to Russian Language	91
Gender Ideology in St-Petersburg, Russia	93
State-Based Discourses: I Am a Human Being, Not Propaganda	96
Medical Discourse: What is so ‘sick’ about Queerness?	103
Nationalist Discourse: The Milonov Factor	105
Moral Discourse: Shame by Association and by Failure	112
Global Gay Discourse: the West’s Influence	117
CHAPTER FIVE – CONCLUSION	122
The Future for Queers and Queer Activism in Russia	126
REFERENCES	130

List of Illustrations

Figure 3.1 – Rainbow Timeline	64
Figure 3.2 – Graffiti	67
Figure 3.3 – May Day March	78
Figure 4.1 – I Am a Human, Not Propaganda	102
Figure 4.2 – IDAHOT Rally	103

Chapter One

Introduction

November 4th, 2013

I woke up this morning, like every other St-Petersburg morning, in the dark. This morning was different though for two reasons. The first reason being that after two months in St-Petersburg, I was going home. I had quietly gathered my belongings then sat on my bed to wait for my driver to arrive and take me to Pulkovo. As I scrolled through my Facebook feed on my phone, one item struck me to my core. Two Russian individuals had been harmed by two masked assailants at LaSky, an LGBT community centre, the previous night. This was the second reason this morning was different. I was torn between a sense of relief that I was on the first leg of my flight home and a sense of shock and nausea that the situation in St-Petersburg has escalated so drastically overnight. I was uncertain whether my reaction was because the incident occurred so close to 'home' (Piter was my home, not only this time around, but several years prior) or because I had started to think that private gatherings were safer than public ones. This incident shook the foundation of comfort and familiarity that I had built during my stay. This could have happened at any of the events or venues I had visited. It could have happened to anyone, at anytime, anywhere. I felt guilty. It occurred to me, sitting on the bed, that I had the luxury of leaving; this volatile atmosphere was not my reality, but for many queer Russians, it was. The events at LaSky reignited my fire and brought home why I chose to come to Russia in the first place.

In March 2012, St-Petersburg became the fourth Russian locale and first Russian urban city to ban 'homosexual propaganda' among minors. Five other regions followed suit, enacting similar legislations against 'homosexual propaganda' which brought the total to nine regions within Russia to adopt this legislation. This ban effectively prohibits all public events in support of queer rights anywhere where minors may be present. Russian politicians, nationalists, and the Orthodox Church banded together to push for the ban to be enacted nationwide, drawing on the safety of children as their cause. The legislation

unanimously passed its second reading in lower parliament on June 8th, 2013. The wording of the final bill to pass shifted from ‘the propaganda of homosexuality’ to ‘the propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations’ in the guise of being less discriminatory. This version of the legislation, now signed by President Putin, ultimately nullifies the 1993 decriminalization of homosexuality.

Broadly, my research and thesis explore queer activism in St-Petersburg, Russia, in light of the recent ban, based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between September and November 2013. I endeavor to engage with the discursive practices of state officials and to explore the various forms of activism that have emerged in the aftermath of the ban in the context of St-Petersburg. Within this vein, I analyze how queer activists negotiate and articulate their individual and collective identities, as well as subjectivities, within the various fields that are present in their everyday lives. Throughout my work, identities are generally to be understood as various facets individuals have established for themselves such as identifying as a woman or man, queer or non-queer, etc. “To be a ‘person’ is not just to be a reflexive actor, but to have a concept of a person” (Giddens 1991:53). In light of Russia’s past, this frame of thought – the concept of a person - is important in weighing contemporary Russian identities. I am not suggesting that collective forms of identification are not possible but rather that the idea of the individual as a person outside of the collective is a recent notion in Russian history and should not be omitted when analyzing any cultural aspect of today’s Russia. Subjectivities, on the other hand, are informed by an individual’s personal experience and have the potential to vary from person to person. Expanding from this, subjectivities are also a form of being expected by social institutional interests (Good, Kleinman, and Biehl 2007) and these expectations, in many ways, create realms of

belonging such as citizenship (Bunzl 1996) as well as realms of being. Subjectivities and identities are not interchangeable but they do interact with and play off of each other. As it will be discussed in this thesis, this framing is crucial to my argument of activism as discursive and is also important in understanding the negotiation of identity along the axes of subjectivity and practice. It will be highlighted that while activists react to the subject positions the state wants them to inhabit, they are also struggling to define a space where those subjectivities can be leveraged so as to be rearranged.

What has emerged through the process of writing my thesis is a discussion about the two prominent kinds of activism I had the opportunity to observe and engage in and with while in St-Petersburg. These were street activism and academic activism respectfully. In this thesis, I examine the various discursive situations that shape street and academic activism. Furthermore, I consider the relationship between these two activism. I address the activities that are held in outdoor public spaces as street activism such as one man protests, silent kiss-ins, rallies, and marches. Academic activism is explored as events and activities that have underlying goals of education such as workshops and conferences. I utilized these terms throughout the thesis as descriptive terms, not as analytical ones, and this descriptive usage is not representative of the multitude of activism that are happening in St-Petersburg and Russia. Furthermore, my choice to speak of these activism as street and academic is not indicative of the activists' own understandings and articulations of their advocacy. While one of my informants, Sergey, spoke of the conference as academic activism, I recognize that his views are not reflective of all activists in St-Petersburg and Russia.

Additionally, branching from these forms of activism, I explore the discursive fields that queer activists are subjected to and engage with when participating in advocacy campaigns and events. State-based, moral, global gay, medical and criminal discourses are some of the few that I delve into for the purposes of my analyses. The emergence of activist organizations in Russia is a recent byproduct of the current environment surrounding queer rights and activism. The ban has created new obstacles compelling queer activists to rethink and renegotiate the ways in which they advocate. This certainly was not the intended outcome of the ban but innovative methods have surfaced in its wake. These new dynamics present innovative modes of thinking and identity making through activism within everyday life in Russia worth further engagement from social scientists.

Drawing on Foucault's insights (1980, 1981, 1990) that desire and sexualities are constantly produced and constituted through social practices historically and spatially situated, I examine how these various discursive terrains have the potential to frame desire and identity and in turn affect queer subject making. The state and Orthodox Church have a hand in the enactment of this legislation banning the 'propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations;' as mentioned above, the terminology shifted from earlier readings which read the 'propaganda of homosexuality.' The construction of the law title is interesting in and of itself and is something I briefly explored in a few of my interviews. What is considered propaganda? Why the word 'propaganda?' Does the word choice have an effect on how queer activists view their campaigns and efforts for queer visibility?

Another aspect of the title worth further exploration is the switch from 'homosexuality' to 'non-traditional sexual relations.' The choice of 'non-traditional sexual relations' creates a divide between traditional and non-traditional and positions individuals

who desire outside of the norm as ‘abnormal,’ ‘non-traditional’ and as both sexual and national outlaws. In looking at discursive practices, the focus shifts away from sexual identities, in and of themselves, to the various structuring techniques utilized by religious figures, the state and, activists in shaping and contesting the normative frameworks through which these identities are constituted. How does this ban frame how queer individuals are seen and how they see themselves? Does it factor into how queer activists make sense of themselves as Russian citizens? These are but a few of the questions I ask in attempting to understand how queer activists engage with and navigate these new frames pertaining to their sexuality.

The Russian state and Orthodox Church have in the past, and are currently once again, attempting to eliminate the dissemination of knowledge in regards to non-traditional ways of life (according to their definition of what is ‘traditional’). As in the past, there is an attempt to make sex (non-traditional sex) irrelevant and personal, and by doing so enable heteronormative conventions which ultimately work to hinder, and seek to make invisible the building and acceptance of nonnormative public sexual cultures (Berlant & Warner 1998:553; Rubin 1988). My understanding of the different ways discourses have the potential to affect identities and subjectivities is informed by my engagement with the works of Foucault (1980, 1981, 1990), Butler (1988, 1993a, 1993b), Sedgwick (1993, 2008), Duranti (1997), and Silverstein (1976, 1988), among others. I draw on their claims that discursive practices have the potential to create truths, sometimes taken as innate aspects of everyday life, and that these truths are often contested in innovative ways, both through linguistic, embodied, social and political practices.

Terminology and Personal Genealogy

Before going further, it is important to highlight my choice in terminology throughout the following chapters. Given the social and linguistic ambiguities involved in translation from Russian to English, it is important to point out that some individuals do and others do not use or identify with the English word “queer.” Many Russian organizations and individuals use the English acronym LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender). This might be the result of there being no term holding the same weight, history, and meaning as the English term ‘queer’ in the Russian language. The term was reappropriated in the 1990s in North America by the LGBT community from its derogative and anti-gay use; it is often used by activists, individuals who reject traditional gender binaries, identities, and sexualities; and those who feel oppressed by the heteronormative culture. Indeed, the work of Laurie Essig (1999) suggests that Russians may not identify under the term “queer” – an aspect that I was cognizant of when conducting fieldwork and discussing with activists. I thus use the term “queer” in this thesis as an umbrella term that suggests inclusivity and variety. It has been brought to light in many conversations, both academic and non-academic, that there will always be a person or population that feels neglected by the use of acronyms. It is my belief that regardless of how many letters you tack onto an acronym, someone is bound to feel as though there is not a term that best suits their identity. Additionally, certain terms such as a gay and homosexual have historically been rooted and associated with male sexuality. I have chosen to use the term “queer” to eliminate the possibility of exclusion. I recognize, however, that there are still individuals who may feel as though they do not fit neatly under the “queer” umbrella. In outlining the historicity of the movement in Russia, or when addressing particular organizations, some version of the LGBT acronym is used.

This is not my usage, however, but that of the subject at hand. In all other instances, when I am speaking of individuals or organizations, I use the term “queer.”

Furthermore, I feel, as an emerging academic, that I must acknowledge my privileges as well as address what has fueled my academic pursuits. Where has my interest in queer activism in St-Petersburg, Russia emanated from? What grants me the right to discuss their struggles? I certainly do not want to equate my personal struggles with those of the queer individuals in Russia. This task would be absurd, and prove to be rather impossible in the end. The circumstances are completely different and the way individuals deal with life struggles vary across the board. I am, however, no stranger to discrimination. The first time I experienced any type of hate and discrimination was as a young child from merely being my mother’s daughter. I cannot remember any specific instance in my early childhood when my mother sat me down and explained to me her sexuality. It just was and I grew up accepting the fact that my mother had women partners. This does not go to say that I was fatherless. My parents were both incredibly present in my childhood. I always viewed my offbeat family as a gift because I was blessed to witness their love and their hardships. My father’s relationships were no less different than my mother’s and both were pervious to the same bumps along the road. I viewed both of my parents’ various relationships on equal grounds; there was no normal or abnormal, deviant or not. It was not until children at my grade school began to bully me because they had seen my mother kiss another woman that I came to recognize that not everyone shares in my understanding. I vividly remember defending my mother until I was blue in the face. She was my mother after all and I had never taken her as anything else. Her choice in partners did not reflect the type of person that she was. Why could they not see that? It was infuriating.

In looking back, it seems that I became a queer rights activist before I even knew of the term and before I self-identified as a queer woman myself. I became involved with PTY (Pink Triangle Youth), participated in Pride marches, and wrote letters with the help of my spirit-mom (my father's partner) to the *Ottawa Citizen* in regards to the current climate surrounding same-sex marriages at the time. Truthfully, discrimination and hate directed precisely towards me are not acts that I have much experience with. Indifference and a laissez-faire attitude were the common reactions that I encountered personally. Perhaps this was due to the earliness at which I came to self-identify as queer. People would always casually shrug it off and chalk it up to my mother being a lesbian, or the fact that I was only fourteen, as if it really were that simple. Around the same time, I remember my father coming home from work and telling me that he had started learning Russian. I was intrigued and had always been quite taken by the history, architecture, and culture of Russia. It was when I registered for my university classes that I took the opportunity to engage with a new language. I already knew French, and English, and had taken three years of Spanish in previous years. I wanted something a bit more challenging. Why not Russian? It was not until I spent the summer of 2010 in St-Petersburg taking classes at the State University and interacting with Russians that I truly became attuned to the struggles of queer Russians.

Almost four years after my first adventures in Russia, I found myself back in the city that sparked my interest and in which my experiences became the catalyst to my research in order to conduct my fieldwork. At the age of 26, I am once again experiencing discrimination through a family member's plight. My younger sister, eight years old, is a gender creative child and has identified as a girl since the early age of two despite being

biologically born male. It is my strong belief that complex and nuanced ethnographic work on queer communities and social movements is crucial, particularly in understudied areas such as Eastern Europe, and merging my Russophile, feminist, activist, and queer academic identities to investigate the current situation in St-Petersburg, Russia seemed like the natural and logical step forward.

Background to the Research

Due to a dearth of academic work covering my particular research area and topic of interest, the ethnographic material and literature readily available is scarce. However, there exist other works that lend themselves to my research and from which I extrapolate theoretical frames that are pertinent to my analyses. Past literature that touches upon queerness in Russia informs my second chapter on the history of queer movements, and recent work dealing with queer activism in other regions aides in providing frames through which I analyze the organization and practice of queer activism in St-Petersburg.

The scholarly literature on the subject of queerness in Russia has, more often than not, solely focused historically on the categories of lesbian and homosexual. These categories have been approached as rigid and bounded identities within a particular time frame. Dan Healey (2001, 2002, 2012), Laurie Essig (1999), and David Tuller (1997) have all culled information on different manifestations of queerness in Russia. In addition, Igor Kon (1993, 1995), and Laura Engelstein (1992) provide a substantial history of sex, in general, and the Russian society. Their work fleshes out Russia's queer past and enables me to historically situate my findings. Being cognizant of this history is vital in my aim to develop a new line of inquiry that looks at how queer expression has shifted in the wake of the recent ban. In transitioning from Russia's past, as it pertains to queer identities and

activism, to more present occurrences, the multiplicity of queer activism is better highlighted.

Kon, a Russian philosopher, psychologist and sexologist, compiled a history of sex as it was understood and practiced, starting with the era of tsarist rulers and ending with contemporary times (prior to the 1993 decriminalization of homosexuality). His work provides an informative outlook on Russian discourses and practices surrounding sexuality as a whole and provides possible insights for a greater understanding of the recent events and motivations surrounding queer rights and the roles occupied by the state, church and the Russian public in the current political milieu.

In addition to Kon's work, Healey, a British historian, provides additional historical background. His most recent work looks at forensic medicine's role in the framing of sexual disorders in the early Bolshevik state (Healey 2009). He chronicles the developments and changes implemented by the Bolshevik regime and discusses their impact on sexual beliefs and the regulation of sexuality. In this book, Healey traces the shifting role of sexual experts and sexual science, and of a Russian nation trying to distance themselves from old tsarist beliefs. His earlier work touched on homosexuality and gender dissent in revolutionary Russia. His work and analyses are focused on Russian males and are historically framed but they do provide a solid footing in addition to Kon and Engelstein's work.

Both Essig (1999) and Tuller's (1996) work provide a more historically recent glance at queerness in Russia. Essig, an American sociologist, explored the development of gay identity and community in the former Soviet Union. Starting in the late 1980s and spanning over a decade, she conducted interviews with various Russians, medical experts,

and the like. She also observed and analyzed plays, books, and graffiti. Her work is the first study of its kind to explore how and why no Soviet gay community or identity existed prior to Perestroika which explains the lack of activist organizations prior to the late 1980s and early 1990s. Tuller's work is an intriguing combination of travelogue, social history, and journalistic inquiry. He chronicles his experiences and observations within lesbian and gay spheres as he traveled through Russia. In addition to exploring what it meant to be gay in Russia during the late 1980s and early 1990s, the book also delves into issues surrounding friendship, community, love, and the murky relationship between the public and private spheres of Russian life among many other topics. These two different accounts are grounded in ethnographic observations and inform my historical chapter with a different approach than simply historical and provide a more current portrait of queer identities in the former USSR and Russia.

In addition, I draw on linguistic theory that focuses on the verbalization of words as discourse and on works that look at language through more of a cultural lens to help incorporate another layer of analysis to my research (Bakhtin 1981, 1986). In his explorations of language, Bakhtin underlines that

language must not be understood... in the restricted sense in which it occupies professional linguists... A language is stratified not only into dialects in the strict sense of the word... but is... stratified as well into languages that are socio-ideological: languages belonging to professions, to genres, languages peculiar to particular generations, etc. This stratification and diversity of speech will spread wider and penetrate to ever deeper levels so long as a language is alive and still in the process of becoming. [Bakhtin 1981:xix]

It is for this and his emphasis that there are powerful forces that influence how one makes use of language and experiences it that I interact with his work. Bakhtin also uses

the term heteroglossia to understand language as social life. Heteroglossia is the interaction of the two fundamentals of all communication: (1) the mode of transcription as a fixed system utilized to separate texts; and (2) the context in which an utterance is made. The context can “refract, add to in some cases, even subtract from the amount and kind of meaning the utterance may be said to have when it is conceived” (Bakhtin 1981:xix-xx). In looking at queer activists and the different discursive fields in their everyday lives, I draw from some of Bakhtin’s discussions in order to make sense of everyday language in St-Petersburg. Language as social life is a thread that is woven through my analyses of discourse, activism, identity and citizenship. In conjunction with Bakhtin, I draw on Kulick’s understanding of language, ontology, and performativity (Kulick 1997, 2003) as well as the works of Silverstein (1976, 1988). These works enable me to interact with and understand discourses, specifically activist discourses, as something more than words. Culture and language transgress the borders of discursive practices and can be experienced in embodied practices, visual representations, and gestures, which can reference broader fields or politics of meaning (Mendoza-Denton 2008; Silverstein 1976, 1988).

My engagement with the queer activists and the ways in which they situate themselves vis-à-vis the new legal context includes an analysis of their embodied, non-discursive, practices. The queer activists’ campaigns have included silent kiss-ins in front of the Duma, and silent protests with poignant signs in front of prominent government buildings. Similar to the Latina girl gangs discussed by Mendoza-Denton (2008), queer activists in St-Petersburg are bridging together language and other symbolic and embodied practices in negotiating their place in larger social processes of nationalism, and sexual/gender identities. They are also innovative in organizing touching campaigns,

putting together videos, and utilizing the internet to create new spheres of visibility. In this sense, language is to be understood as more than language, it is a form of public. My work is not only important for queer anthropological studies of and in Russia, it further contributes to anthropological contextualizations and critiques of public sex. In highlighting the queer activist movements and discussing their methods, my work also draws attention to the various instances in which queer activists are attempting to fashion a Russian queer public for themselves in St-Petersburg (Berlant & Warner 1998; Rubin 2011).

Lastly, I bring together works pertaining to the ethnography of activism and queer activism to flesh out my discussion of street and academic activism in St-Petersburg. I draw on the works of Weiss (2008, 2011, 2012), and Rubin (2011) whose works are rooted in the urban spheres and that of Gray's (2009) which provides insights relevant to the activism in St-Petersburg, even though her ethnographic work focuses on rural youth in an American context. *Out in the Country: Youth, Media and Queer Visibility in Rural America* (2009) is an ethnography that looks at the lives of queer youth in rural America. In it, Gray argues that "LGBT-identifying youth and their allies use their status as 'familiar locals' as well as tenuous access to each other, public spaces, and media-circulated representations of LGBT identities to rework the boundaries of public recognition and local belonging" (Gray 2009:4). Due to Gray's analyses, informed through social theories of public spaces, queer studies of community and digital media studies, this ethnographic work provides me with new lenses to look at the queer activist movement in St-Petersburg. The queer rural youth in Gray's ethnography utilize methods such as online discussion lists, monthly meetings, actions letters, listserv, and varying campaigns such as signature drives to help solidify

their presence in their local communities. “These young people’s strategies offer models for rethinking the relationship among visibility, public spaces, and media, particularly in a digital era” (Gray 2009:15). Although situated in rural America and pertaining to queer youth, the instances of activism observed and discussed by Gray share intersections with the queer activist movement in St-Petersburg. The goals, campaigns, and methods of these two different groups of activist are similar and Gray’s ethnography enabled me to be sensitive and aware of how activism manifests itself in unforeseen locations and in unexpected ways. Her work also alerted me to the importance of being cognizant of the cultural and historical specificity of how queer activism is articulated.

This thesis draws from and expands on works that have discussed the making of publics, queer publics specifically, as well as queer world-making (Rubin 2011; Warner and Berlant 1998; Weiss 2008, 2011; Greyser and Weiss 2012). It does so by examining the formation of sexual publics through state, legal, religious, and medical discourses and through activists’ engagements with these discourses. One of the potential limitations of queer scholarship can be found in its tendency to remain at the level of cultural analysis and to focus on queer issues and struggles in the West. Queer anthropology¹ with its focus on the experiential and empirical, open up the possibilities of grasping the ways in which queer struggles are differently experienced and negotiated in diverse places. Another key

¹ By queer anthropology, I am referring to some of the texts that I have read and continue to engage with over the years. These texts and ethnographies address queer issues, identities, and subjectivities to name a few, and point to the importance of locating queer experiences in specific historical, socio-legal, and spatial contexts. These bodies of literature also posit alternate methods to approaching these topics – queering identities, subjectivities, and the like. See Altman (2001), Boellstorff (2005, 2007), Bunzl (1996, 1997, 2004), Cameron and Kulick (2003), Dave (2012), Essig (1999), Gray (2009), Kulick (1998, 1999, 2000, 2003), Livia and Hall (1997), Manalansan (2003), Massad (2002), Morris (1995), Munoz (2009); Padilla (2007), Ortner (1997), Puar (2002, 2012), Rubin (2011), Seizer (1995), Stein (2001), Warner and Berlant (1998); Weiss (2008, 2011); and Weston (1993).

characteristic of queer anthropology is that it does this by focusing on the historicity of queer struggles and the importance of not universalizing all that queer encompasses.

My work follows the recent, yet still very limited, anthropological engagements with queer issues and activism (Dave 2011, 2012; Gray 2009; Manalansan 2003; Padilla 2007) and challenges Western assumptions about queer life in Russia (i.e. as backward, stuck in the past) by exploring the goals, struggles, and forms of resistance of queer activism in Russia. This thesis underscores that while the West is commonly associated with the formation of sexual publics, the non-West, and in this case Russia, is also a site for the development of sexual publics, and further scholarly attention is much needed given that the last written account dates back to more than 15 years ago (Essig 1999). As I emphasize later in my thesis, ethnographic research is what enabled me to grasp and see what was happening in St-Petersburg, Russia. There is tremendous value in conducting ethnographic research on queer activism in Russia as, in my case, it permitted me to attend to the particular ways in which sexual publics are constituted on the ground. Ethnographic research brought me to unexpected places and allowed me to challenge even my own assumptions and theories of what I had expected to find in St-Petersburg. This, I believe, is one of the truly unique and rewarding factors of engaging in ethnographic research. It further grants me the opportunity to continue asking questions, to find new answers, and to completely immerse myself in what I aim to research and am passionate about.

Methodology

My fieldwork took place over the course of two months from September to November and was organized around three principle research aims: (1) to engage with the organization,

‘Vykhod’ (Coming Out), a regional non-profit organization based in St-Petersburg, Russia and to garner some insight into their everyday lived experiences as queer activists in light of this new ban; (2) to explore the discursive practices of state officials, as those are enacted in policies and legislations, especially in relation to the framing of identities and practices as illegal and/or immoral; and (3) to understand the ways in which queer activists situate themselves and organize themselves politically and socially vis-à-vis this new legal context through discursive and embodied practices. In other words, I aimed to understand how the ban affects queer activism and queer identity and subject making, both individually and collectively within St-Petersburg, Russia. Unfortunately, not everything went as planned once I arrived in St-Petersburg. I began experiencing difficulties with the organization and I had to devise a plan B a few weeks after arriving in Russia.

Throughout the first year of my master’s thesis, during which I completed my mandatory coursework, I was in contact with and closely followed the trials and tribulations of the organization *Vykhod*. My intention was to focus on this local St-Petersburg organization and its activists. I had been in touch with their communications manager who expressed willingness to help out with my research and to aide in setting up interviews with staff and volunteers. I had no previous affiliations with the organization but I have and continue to follow their progress via social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as through their official website. Unfortunately, due to unknown reasons, the organization eluded scheduling any concrete interviews throughout my stay in Russia. Several members of the organization agreed to set up interviews, however, none were ever finalized despite my best efforts. Perhaps their evasiveness was due to how the ban escalated over the year. When I originally began conversing with the organization, the law

had yet to be passed nationwide. In September, when I arrived in St-Petersburg, the law had been passed into nationwide legislation. However, as I expressed, no reason was given to me directly. It is possible that their elusiveness might have been linked to the ban officially being brought into federal legislation. It could have also been tied to the organization being targeted by the state to register as a “foreign agent” due to their non-profit identity and ties to non-Russian organizations and funds². My identity as a foreign researcher, possibly also seen as a “foreign agent,” could have played a part in their sudden elusiveness.

Despite this setback, I was familiar with St-Petersburg as a city, having lived there for over two months in the summer of 2010, studying Russian. It was an incredible help in adjusting to my surroundings as I already knew the city, its ebb and flow, its residents, etc. The only aspects of my stay that required some serious acclimation were my living conditions and those were out of my control. In addition, I arrived in the country having studied Russian for four years at Carleton University. Two of my Russian classes focused on Russian for social studies and Russian for research. I was worried at first about my rusty linguistic skills, however, after being immersed for several days, the fluency came back to me rapidly.

I had planned for my two months in St-Petersburg to be spent interviewing individuals affiliated with Vykhod, backfilling my field data with archival material found in online and print newspapers as well as legislations, and engaging in participant observation at any gathering or event that my connections would lead me to. Instead, I

² In early March 2013, the Russian government launched a nationwide “foreign agent” campaign which called for all NGOs receiving foreign funds and with a political agenda to register as “foreign agents.” According to the Human Rights Watch report on June 30th, at least 100 NGOs have been targeted by the state.

chose to spend my time engaging in participant observation at ‘Queerfest,’ an annual festival hosted by Vykhod, as well as at a three day conference on gender and queer theory, ‘At the Crossroads.’ I attended four events throughout the weeklong festivities hosted by Queerfest and two days of the three day conference. I utilized these events as a way to socialize and to inform my research with over a dozen casual discussions as well as three formal interviews. These events are the foundation of chapter three in which I explore street and academic activism.

Due to the climate surrounding the issues my research focuses on, several measures needed to be taken in order to ensure my security as well as that of my potential informants. First, I did not publicly advertise my research in order to seek out willing participants. I attempted to liaise with the organization, Vykhod, and orally seek out participants in order to avoid having any type of written documentation that could be traced back to me or my research. Secondly, I had planned for all interviews to be conducted in private locations and recorded for the purpose of data processing. However, due to the circumstances, the interviews that I managed to collect were done via e-mail after obtaining oral consent from the participant to do so. I did not interview or discuss my research with individuals who were not publicly supportive of the queer activists’ agenda. These interviews were structured to garner information on the subjective experiences of the activists as self-identified queer individuals or allies in relation to St-Petersburg and the recent ban. The interview questions were presented both in Russian and in English. The participant was given the choice to communicate in whichever language they felt most comfortable in. Two of the participants constructed all of their answers in Russian and one answered in English. The answers provided in Russian were translated by myself and the interview excerpts

featured in the following chapters are the translated end result. I recognize that this is a small interview sample and that it limits my ability to speak to the experiences of the queer ‘community’ in St-Petersburg. I have attempted to compensate for this limitation with other methods such as observations, informal conversations, analysis of media and other secondary sources. These interviews, enriched with secondary sources detailing stories of queer Russians (Gessan and Huff-Hannon 2014) serve as the basis for my exploration of the notions of subject-making at the individual level as well as how these activists situate themselves within the bigger structures of their city and country. Lastly, I did not participate in any rallies or street campaigns that could have potentially put me at risk of arrest or physical harm.

In order to provide a well-rounded analysis, and to compensate for not bringing in more interview material pertaining to street activism, I engage with another ethnographic modes of inquiry including an analysis of modes of language and terminology found within activist, and official and non-official governmental discourses. The drafts of the propaganda law, interviews with state officials, and pamphlets from the queer organizations are some of the documents that I looked at and considered for my analyses. This fleshes out the imbricated relationship between the notions of language, identity, power and discursive frames and allows for an inquiry into how officials and municipal/federal laws portray queer culture as propaganda and how queer activists react to these statements. Official discourse has been crucial in queer subject-making, organizing, and everyday life in Russia. In order to conduct this analysis, I look at official legislation such as the recent bill that was passed in the lower Duma banning the “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations” and that of the “foreign agent” law which

forces all politically active NGOs receiving foreign funds to register as ‘foreign agents’ with the government. Expanding on this, the performative aspects of certain utterances are examined in order to probe whether certain discourses have any effect in how queer activists advocate and identify within Russian expectations and global flows.

By analyzing all these sources, I demonstrate how queer activists in St-Petersburg are navigating the boundaries enmeshed in the very fabric of their social texts by plying them, moving them, and sometimes deconstructing them altogether through their advocacy campaigns. Additionally, this highlights how queer activists are engaged in the construction of these boundaries and are not to be seen as existing apart from them. The relationship between citizen and state as it presents itself within the context of St-Petersburg is an underlying constant thread in all my analyses. I illustrate how both actors, state and citizen (more specifically queer Russians and activists), depend on and react to each other. Engaging with official state texts and news reports aide in understanding what the queer activists have dealt and are currently dealing with. The state is actively pushing against these individuals by bringing into legislation bans that impinge on their human rights and further marginalize them. Despite these attempts, the queer activists retaliate in innovative ways, redefining and repositioning themselves within these webs of power.

Significance

The state of Russian affairs surrounding queer rights has been in constant flux since the beginning of my research. Over the past two years, Russia has seen a convergence of regions enacting legislations banning the “propaganda of homosexuality” and last summer, President Putin signed off on a nationwide bill against the “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations.” In light of these recent political changes and the ongoing battle for queer

rights, the research I present here is timely and needed. It brings together queer and linguistic anthropology to explore the new context created following the ban, to understand how multiple discursive fields interact and shape queer identities and subjectivities within St-Petersburg, as well as attempt to regulate the dissemination of knowledge as it pertains to queer desires, individuals, and history. My work aims to shed light on the intersectionality of the various factors possibly affecting and framing the lived experiences of queer activists in St-Petersburg, Russia. In addition, my research focuses on a subject less frequently touched upon in previous anthropological work dealing with sexual and queer studies in Russia. These other works have often focused on sex trafficking/migrant sex work, cyber marriages and international match-making. My thesis contributes to a growing pool of queer anthropological works that have looked at Indonesian gay and lesbian identities in relation to nationalism and globalization (Boellstorff 2005), the emergence of a lesbian identity and activist movements in India (Dave 2012), the experiences of 'gay' Filipino immigrants in New York City (Manalansan 2003), and male sex workers in the Dominican Republic (Padilla 2007) to name but a few. Despite its salience, the topic of queer activism in Russia has received very little scholarly attention, and my ethnographic work provides unique contributions to understanding how activists negotiate, on the ground, the new legislation.

Overview of Chapters

The following thesis has been broken into five chapters. The first being this chapter, the introduction in which I have introduced the current situation in St-Petersburg, Russia. Additionally, I have outlined the theoretical works that helped to inform my research approach and interview questions as well as my subsequent analyses.

The second chapter is a historical overview of the treatment of sex, sexuality, and sexual minorities in Russia. I begin chronicling from the 18th century. It was during this time that the earliest account of same-sex desires and legislation pertaining to these acts in Russia occurred. My focus in this historical chapter is to outline the legal treatment and reception of same-sex desires and desiring individuals in the former USSR and Russia in order to provide a historical and linguistic-discursive context for the following chapters. I believe it to be pertinent to sketch out and understand the genealogy of what is currently taking place in Russia. I wrote and constructed the chapter in such a way that it flows chronologically from the earliest accounts of same-sex desires to end with the most recent campaigns and movements.

The third chapter branches off from the second chapter and focuses on activism in St-Petersburg. This chapter is an ongoing discussion about activism in St-Petersburg and how these activisms are engaging in the reinforcement of older sexual publics as well as the formation of newer sexual publics. The chapter is informed by my participant observation and discussions at a weeklong queer festival in September and an academic conference at the end of October. There are two kinds of activism that I had the opportunity to observe and engage in during my stay – street and academic activism. As previously mentioned, there are various forms of activism in St-Petersburg or ways of describing activism, but I have chosen to discuss these two to contrast what is often commonly assumed as activism (i.e. what I term street activism) and other forms of activists' engagements, such as the activism found at a conference (i.e. what I term academic activism). My engagement with street activism is based on thorough readings of news articles, blogs, and video reports due to my agreement with the ethics board. My

articulations of academic activism are drawn from my own observations, and participation at the two events. I end the chapter with a discussion of Gray's 'boundary publics' (2009) and offer that the academic activism in St-Petersburg can be understood as an altered version of Gray's boundary public. I have termed these instances as 'quasi-boundary publics' because Gray's examples and my own have a few points of convergence but also differ in other ways which I explore in this chapter.

In the fourth chapter, I take a closer look at the various discursive fields queer activists in St-Petersburg are entangled in on a day to day basis such as nationalist, state, and moral discourses to name a few. I briefly go over the gendered aspect of the Russian language before progressing to lay out several examples of the potential restrictions in the Russian language. Additionally, drawing on several campaign examples, I demonstrate the performative aspects of the slogans, words, and utterances which appear in queer spheres in St-Petersburg. Both positive and negative performative utterances and slogans make up the bulk of this chapter and these examples are compiled from my own personal experiences and observations while in St-Petersburg.

Chapter Two

A Brief History of Queer Identities and Activism in the USSR and Russia.

“We have no sex here” were words uttered by a woman from Leningrad (now St-Petersburg) during one of the first televised American-Soviet debates. The broadcasting occurred in 1986, at the beginning of Perestroika, and it rapidly took on a weighty status, reflecting the enduring and official homophobic stance of the Soviet Regime (Kon 1995:1). This statement all too clearly does not speak to the full truth that is Russia and its people. This chapter illustrates the transformations in the Russian society’s outlook on queerness, from medicalization and social isolation to the emergence of subcultures and the fight for political rights. The sexual and sexual minority histories of Russia are imperative in shedding some light on the current legal developments that have occurred within the past few years. My focus in outlining these histories is on the shifting legal contexts as they relate to sexual minorities. Additionally, this chapter enables me to situate my observations and analyses along these histories and helps to inform my overall analysis of queer activism in relation to the new ban. Certain current sentiments and thoughts shared by many of the anti-queer movement supporters linger from the Bolshevik regime and mentality. In sketching out the following histories, it is easier and clearer to make these links in the following chapters.

In post-perestroika Russia, the first attempts to survey the history and offer an interpretation of “Russian sex” began only in 1991. It is hardly surprising, then, that knowledge of Russian sexuality, despite the existence of no less rich primary sources (chronicles, memoirs by foreign travelers, ethnographic descriptions, etc.) that in the West, remains exceedingly fragmentary and its interpretation superficial. [Kon 1995:12]

Due to this repression of not only Russian sexuality but all texts dealing with it, Kon states that there has been no sociologically sophisticated comparative historical research conducted and as long as there does not exist any such research, any generalizations on the cultural specificity of “the Russian eros will inevitably remain unreliable and speculative” (1995:12). This scarcity of information regarding Russian sexuality is the product of consistent state control over the years. Although it was said two decades ago, this aspect needs to be underscored and kept in mind when compiling the history of sexuality in Russia. In his writings, Kon breaks up Russia’s sexual history into four periods: Revolutionary 1917-1930, Sexophobia 1930-1956, Medicalization 1956-1986 and Glasnost (literal translation – publicity) 1986 – onwards (Kon 1995). The following historical overview will chronicle the political and social changes in Russia’s history and the approach to and understanding of sexual minorities that developed in conjunction. This history has been assembled by drawing on the works of Igor Kon (1993, 1995), Dan Healey (2001, 2002, 2009, 2012), Laurie Essig (1999), Laura Engelstein (1992), and David Tuller (1996) as well as an in-depth historical pamphlet written by art historian and feminist, Nadia Plungian, and published by Vykhod for Queerfest 2013.

The sources used in compiling this historical overview are secondary sources. I have chosen to use them carefully, with the understanding that the histories presented are not without interpretation or bias. Archival material pertaining to the subject of queerness in Russia’s history do exist. However, it is fragmentary and, often times, inaccessible. Russian sexuality as an aspect of everyday life is not something coherent or cohesive, and this is reflected in the works that have compiled it. Furthermore, this chapter follows a

chronological order, for clarity, but is aware of the constructed and partial quality of neatly delineating transformations over time.

Beginnings: 18th to Mid-20th Centuries

It was in the travel diaries of Western diplomats from the early 1700s that the first account of Russian same-sex sexuality was mentioned. These diplomats who travelled to Russia were horrified by the tolerance of male same-sex practices. At the time, the sanctions for such relations were no more severe than for that of infidelity (Engelstein 1992; Kon 1995). The first time male same-sex acts came under legal jurisdiction was as a response to criticism of Russian ways and was an attempt by Peter the Great to westernize Russia. The acts were brought into legislation in the Military Articles of 1716 – also known as Peter’s Code. This code only addressed acts of anal penetration, made no mention of individuals, and only applied to active military men. The act of anal penetration between two men later solidified as an act and was recognized in the term *muzhelozhstvo* (man lying with man). Under Tsar Nicholas I, the code, Article 995, was revised and specifically addressed the act of anal penetration and was punishable by law (Essig 1999:4). No other same sex acts were targeted by this article. “The nineteenth-century codes substituted nouns for verbs but were no more precise in their definition” (Engelstein 1992:59) Men, in general, were scrutinized under the law because they were citizens; “women were treated as less than full legal subjects, weaker and therefore more susceptible both to perverse desire and their necessary correctives” (Essig 1999:4).

In 1917, under the Bolshevik regime and with the Revolution, Russian society endured violent turmoil and transformations. It was the Bolsheviks’ goal to eradicate as

much of traditional Russian society as possible, both through violence and the dissolution of social institutions such as marriage and the family. Within state discourse, male homosexuality was shaped and viewed as pathological and easily discernible by the act of anal penetration. After the Bolsheviks gained state control, the previous law, Article 995, was disbanded and men who had sex with men became criminals, not simply against nature but also against the state. Legal and medical experts in Russia attempted to find “cures” for these “sick” individuals; the Bolshevik State encouraged visibly queer individuals to commit themselves to psychiatric institutions in the West, and forced prominent out homosexual men to marry women. By the end of the 1920s, Russians had experienced both urbanization and the civil war after the Revolution, and their everyday lives drastically changed. Everything from conversations to desire were becoming matters of the state. Shortly after the October Revolution of 1917, Lenin conceived of and enforced communal living. This became known as the *kommunalka* (communal apartment) and the maximum of square metres per capita was calculated – 10 m² per person or 13 m² per family (Boym 1994:124). Not only did privacy become physically difficult to attain with the *kommunalka*, but the very idea of it was questionable. Individuals and families found themselves sharing tiny areas. Under these living conditions, treason, spying, and conflicts arose within Russian society. This could be interpreted and argued as a possible influential and root factor to today’s propaganda and foreign agent laws. Individuals were not only subjected to surveillance from above, the state, but were now also under the constant gaze of their peers – a mutual continuous and lateral surveillance emerged (Boym 1994).

In 1933, ‘sodomy,’ as it was called at the time, resurfaced in legislation when the All-Union Central Executive Committee issued a resolution which became law in 1934.

Once again, consensual sex between men was a criminal offence in all Soviet republics. Under Article 121's first clause (121.1), consensual sex between two men was punishable with up to five years of hard labour. Under the second clause of Article 121 of the Soviet Crime Code (Article 121.2), the use of physical force or the threat of violence by one man onto another, or in relation to a minor, is punishable by up to eight years (Kon 1993:91-92). There is no exact known reason as to why such a law was brought into legislation during this time. However, there have been some hypotheses that it was an attempt by Stalin to increase the birthrate in an attempt to forge a greater relationship with the Eastern Orthodox Church. Another attempt to rationalize Stalin's choice was that it was a political tool to create a scapegoat, a victim, for the state (See Matti Bunzl for Jews and queers in Vienna, 2014; Kinsman and Gentile for Canadian context, 2010). "In Stalinist Russia, the pervert was never a patriot. Queers were fascists, fascists were queers. Good citizens – always straight – must control, punish, and eventually eliminate treasonous desire" (Essig 1999:5). Historians can only offer potential reasons to Article 121. It was certainly in line with the overall repressive Russian state created under his rule (Kon 1993:92).

Under Stalin's first five year plan, a set of state-wide economic plans focused on collectivization, the government ceased paying attention to problems it deemed to not affect the masses. As a result, the homosexual man was no longer considered a state concern and political figures shifted their efforts into rebuilding and refashioning Russian society. The government launched a campaign to politically mobilize women, which eventually helped momentarily redefine gender and sexuality in Russia (Plungian 2013). Women now had access to journals such as *Krest'yanka* (Peasant Woman), *Rabotnista* (Working Woman), and *Kommunistka* (Communist Woman) and all of them depicted

women as masters of “male” professions. There was greater access to education, contraception, and abortion for women, and the divorce process was also simplified. Subsequently, women gained a greater amount of independence, and access into the job market. Additionally, a greater diversity in the expression of the female gender began to emerge and the popularization of masculine behaviours and appearances developed. Due to the glamorization of women in the men’s world, new attitudes began to take shape and it was now understood that “feminine” behaviour was bourgeois.

For men, with traditionally thought of as feminine qualities, who desired other men, however, the development and acceptance of women breaking the mold only strengthened the politics of condemnation towards them. The male homosexual identity was understood as a symbol of inadequate masculinity. Women, long viewed as the inferior sex, were now excelling in domestic and social areas previously attributed only to men. These women exemplified and imbued male characteristics, highlighting the various ways in which same-sex desiring men failed to become and embody the Russian male figure that was expected of them. This was seen as a threat to the nation that could disrupt and destroy the healthy societal elements of Russian everyday life. Masculine Russian women could, eventually, still marry, or were married, and could still produce children. For same-sex desiring men, however, their contribution to the overall Russian population was non-existent. Ultimately, male same-sex sexuality put at risk what the Bolsheviks were attempting to construct and, ultimately, achieve – a strong and prosperous Russia. Maksim Gorky likened male homosexuals to an immoral minority – one equated with the West and capitalism. As it will be highlighted and discussed in upcoming chapters, these anti-West and capitalist sentiments continue to persist to the present day and are yet another precedent for how the

ban and its effects today can be understood. However, this unequal reception of gender deviance among men and women was short lived.

By the end of the 1930s, a societal xenophobia emerged and its target was childless women who were seeking or had sought out careers in the sciences, arts, and labour fields. Those who had once been pushed and encouraged to gain some independence were now perceived as abnormal and deviant because of their lack of husband and children. These independent women were self-sufficient and now found themselves in opposition to what the state wanted – married individuals who would contribute to the Russian population (Plungian 2013). Additionally, changes in regards to the approach to sex in general were implemented in the school system (Kon 1993:10-11, 35). The little sex education that was taught, the basics of reproduction, was removed from the curriculum and parents were advised to ‘tactically avoid’ any questions from their children on the subject. They were encouraged to shift the conversation towards love and morality (Kon 1993:23). This is another moral discursive production and precedent for the recent legislation on the propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations. Sex surveys disappeared, scholars were no longer able to conduct research or access essential materials, and problems with the acquisition of contraceptives and legal abortions rose. The state banned contraceptives and made abortions illegal for several years. During the Stalinist era, the oral tradition of the agrarian culture and the erotic culture of the upper class were erased. In addition, the new Soviet middle class was kept in the dark by strict control of information (Sarajeva 2011). At this time, self-discipline was advocated in regards to sex and it was for the sake of the Soviet State and Communist Party.

The 1940s and 1950s were enshrouded in conservative norms and pre-revolutionary ideas of the family were reconstituted. In 1952, an entry on homosexuality in the “Great Soviet Encyclopedia” described it as an “*unnatural* attraction to persons of the same sex, seen in both women and men” (Essig 1999:6, emphasis added). Furthermore, this entry criticized Western scientists for their approach to same-sex desires as an individual illness, either at the psychological or biological levels (such as hormonal imbalances) while ignoring societal influences. While Soviet medical experts understood homosexuality as an unnatural attraction to persons of the same sex, and thought that certain medical procedures could create natural desires, there also existed a firm belief that societal influences (read the West) were responsible for the unnatural desires surfacing in the USSR. Additionally, male homosexuality, during this time, was considered shameful and criminal (Essig 1999:6). State-administered control slowly began to shift; it morphed from the state interfering with divorce, birth control, and abortion into a moral-administered control with a focus on the stability of marriage and family. This moral-administered control spoke to Russians and instilled in them this sense that to be a good Russian citizen, you would marry, have children, and be a productive citizen to the state, both population and work wise. In Chapter Three, I explore further how this particular state discourse is contiguous with more recent heteronormative sanctions and regulations like the propaganda ban.

As for the accounts of queer Russians in battle, there are no compiled or polished retellings of their experiences. There are, however, numerous files in archives that make reference to transgendered men on the front, and same-sex couples in the army and camps. Additionally, many individuals within the arts (writers, poets, novelists, composers, etc.)

traveled within the same circle of people and many deviated from the expected sexual norms of their time. Their experiences can be deciphered in their published works, or in diaries of their colleagues. Such prolific artists such as Anna Akhmatova, Lydia Ginzburg, and Vadim Kozin, to name a few, are prime examples of individuals' transgressions at this time. As long as these public figures did not become *too* radical, the state left them alone. This was the case simply because they were public figures (Kon 1993:93). However, these individuals were viewed as transgressive due to their sexuality and their art and this is yet another link to the present day and how non-normative art is considered suspect.

One of the interesting characters from this era is that of Anna Akhmatova, a Russian modernist poet. I say interesting due to the fact that when taught Akhmatova's work and personal history in Russian class, both at home in Canada and abroad in Russia, the details of her bisexuality were never touched upon. My literature professor in St-Petersburg spoke at great length of Akhmatova's writing abilities, her inner circle of colleagues, and her romantic trysts with other significant writers (all men) of that time. However, Akhmatova's bisexuality was never mentioned. Her fluid sexuality certainly is not a Russian secret as there exist journal entries written by peers detailing her sexual encounters with women. Her bisexuality was affirmed in the early 1910s when she engaged in a romantic relationship with actress Glebova-Sudeikina. To the general public, Akhmatova adopted and convincingly played the role of widow and mother, having been very cautious that her same-sex desires and actions were well kept from public knowledge. However, an entry in Sophia Ostrovskaya's diary from September, 1946, breaks down Akhmatova's projected public self. "Akhamatova keeps me [up? there?] until 4 in the morning. Drunk, lonely woman. Once again: bisexuality. I pretend to be totally clueless. I feel disgusted, curious,

weird. She bares her breasts, sighs, kisses my lips with sharp, stinging lips – the way she probably used to kiss her lovers. I rush to leave. After all, what can I do with her?” [*sic*] (Plungian 2013; S. Ostrovskaya, Diaries, 2013). These are the type of records that are available for public figures as well as other instances of same-sex desiring. The lack of materials for this time is due to the control of the state in these matters.

“Until the 1960s, sex was practically unmentionable; not a shred of public information was available about it” (Kon 1995:85). Scholarly articles or works were not published within Russia and any kind of source was made extremely difficult to access, even by those in the medical fields. The number of publications touching on sexuality dropped from over 130 in 1917 to 5 between 1937 and 1960. By this decade, scholars were forced to start from scratch and this is evident in the historical data chronicling sexuality and queerness in Russia. It has been increasingly difficult to find any substantive information touching on the years between 1960 and 1970. At first, I thought it was due to poor research skills on my part but as I began to review all of my historical data and works, a pattern emerged. The reason that my own historical timeline originally had a gap was due to the very same gap in all of the works that I have been culling my information from. This is an important aspect to highlight and despite my best efforts, I have only been able to find a few sentences here and there touching on sexuality or queerness in the USSR during these decades. A possible reason for the lack of information for these decades could be due to the political climate, the state’s firm control on publications, and the struggle individuals faced when attempting to access or publish any material pertaining to sexuality and sexual minorities in the USSR.

Experiences under Article 121

The experiences of queer Russians varied during the years under Article 121 which was in effect from 1934 to 1993. The individuals who put together the historical pamphlet and art exhibit for Queerfest 2013 compiled an array of personal statements detailing the various experiences of Russians during these years. There were individuals who were targeted by the state and who were discriminated against under the repressive act. There were others who did not experience any fear, or need to hide.

The first two personal statements are those of Sergey Parajanov, film director, and Zinovy Korogodsky, theatre director, who were affected by Article 121. Korogodsky explained how

they (the province party committee in Kaluga) reproached me for making the theatre more adult, more aestheticized. And then they staged the rape incident. It was a reason to immediately throw me out from everywhere and take away all of my titles. That was in 1986. They fired me and tried me. Of course, the conviction was overthrown due to the absence of any evidence of a crime, but the goal was achieved: I was left without a theatre. [Plungian 2013: Kryschuk interview with Z. Korogodsky]

The authorities were displeased with Korogodsky's changes within the art world and utilized Article 121 to damage his reputation. Despite having been married to his wife for several decades, the tactic still succeeded and Korogodsky suffered a different kind of exile. He was left without his titles and without his theatre. His life was permanently altered.

Similar methods were used by those with authority and power in Parajanov's case also. Similar ends were reached. Parajanov expressed in a 1980 press interview that

To draw me out, they called me a criminal, a thief, an anti-Soviet activist. They even looked for gold on my body. Then they accused me of homosexuality and tried me for this ‘crime.’ Apparently I had raped a party member and seduced a forty-year-old lady with a pornographic pen... To make the crime stick to me they called up six prosecutors. “A year is too little for you,” they said. “You will get five years. It will be enough to destroy you...” Now I am free – but I do not feel safe. I keep living in fear – I am afraid to leave my house... [Plungian 2013; S. Parajanov, Interview/Le Monde, January 27th, 1980]

Accusing a man of homosexuality under Article 121 became a way for the authorities to break down potential threats to the Russian social status quo. Sexuality is also a complex part of citizenship, as ‘sexual aliens’ have a tendency to slip into the category of national aliens in light of the fact that same-sex desires are often perceived as either imported or as a result of foreign (and in Russia, Western) influence (Sarajeva 2011; Graham 2004). Additionally, individuals viewed as sexually transgressive may be perceived as less than citizen like for the same reasons as explored previously – a pervasive normativity built around the heterosex nuclear family. Any person who deviated from the norm, or who held onto reactionary ideals were potential targets and thus homosexuality was utilized as a charge against these individuals. It became connected to backwardness and anti-revolutionary sentiments (Healey 2011). This correlation between homosexuality as backward and anti-revolutionary is not unique to Russia, however (See Matti Bunzl for his work on Austria (2004); Kinsman and Gentile for their work on Canada (2010)). Both Korogodsky and Parajanov did not identify as queer men yet were still labeled as such by the state. If other tactics did not work, such as in Parajanov’s case, the last attempt was to accuse the individual of homosexuality. Authorities did so in an attempt to hinder these men’s activities. Parajanov was convicted with five years in jail. He survived this experience but did not come through it unscathed. As his personal statements highlight, he

was free but he did not feel safe. He could not live his life to its full potential when he feared leaving his own home. He finished his interview by stating that “[his] current life [was] senseless. [He is] not afraid of death, but this life is worse than death” (Plungian 2013; S. Parajanov, Interview/Le Monde, January 27th, 1980).

However, the experiences of individuals were not all engulfed in negativity. Not all individuals hid from the state; not all felt repressed under Article 121; not all were aware of their sexuality at the time. Olga Zhuk, for example, expressed a different kind of experience in her personal statement.

I think that you will be disappointed. I cannot recall any ‘hiding,’ any ‘survivor’ experience, if you are talking about queer identity or some other identity. I don’t think that my case was a special one. Perhaps some couples that were living together were ‘hiding’ by calling themselves sisters or cousins. I found this phenomenon in different generations; I saw such ‘sister’ relationships. Personally, I have never hid anything and didn’t have to survive; I always just lived without hiding and was always in peace with myself. [Plungian 2013]

Zhuk’s experience under Article 121 varied greatly from those of Parajanov and Korogodsky. She did not find herself a target of the state and did not struggle with any legal battles. She mentions couples living together under the guise of being sisters or cousins and this was not uncommon of the day. This method of getting by still occurs to this day throughout Russia. It is plausible that the varying experiences are due to gender, whether one was male or female under Article 121 certainly carries some weight. The law was constructed in such a way that men were its main target. As I explore in more detail below, sexually deviant women, historically, have always been approached through a medical lens in Russia.

“The precise number of victims of Article 121 is unknown. According to calculations made by St. Petersburg gay activist Sergei Shcherbakov, an average of a thousand men a year fell victim to the law. The first official information on the subject was released only after perestroika had begun and refers to 1987, when 831 men were found guilty under Article 121” (Kon 1995:72). In writing, Article 121 only targeted same-sex desiring men. In practice, however, the law was implemented by the state to transform potentially disruptive and dissident citizens into ‘others’ utilizing sexuality to make them so. As demonstrated with the examples of Korogodsky and Parajanov, state officials made use of this law to curtail the activities of those opposing the state and its ideologies rather than using it exclusively to regulate the sexuality of its citizens.

From Criminal to Pathological: Mid to Late 20th Century

By 1972, the criminalization of homosexuality seemed to vanish from state concern, while medicalization of queer individuals was still underway well into the late 1980s. Women who desired other women were diagnosed with “sluggishly manifesting schizophrenia” – a term created by Soviet medical experts (Essig 1999:28) and were often times subject to rehabilitative psychiatric therapy as well as forced sexual reassignment surgeries. Although, both female and male same-sex sexuality were both considered to be politically and ideologically dissident, female same-sex sexuality was to a lesser degree. During Soviet times, female sexuality had no other goal other than reproduction and therefore, medical treatment of lesbianism was favoured over incarceration. In addition, female sexuality was understood as weaker than male sexuality and therefore, could be more adaptable, more pliable, and thus cured. Sex reassignment surgeries were the last option if

all other recourses to cure lesbianism failed. If medical experts' attempts to bring out the proper desire in the female body were unsuccessful, the body would be altered to correspond to the desire. At the time and as a result of state campaigns to "cure," the implausibility of female same-sex desire resulted in there being ten times more female-to-male transsexuals as male-to-female in Russia (Sarajeva 2011; Essig 1999). Other extreme measures were used during the summer Olympics of 1980 in an attempt to clean up the city of Moscow prior to the games. Individuals who had the potential to tarnish the overall appeal of Moscow and Russia during the games were moved outside of the city centre. Alcoholics, beggars, prostitutes, as well homosexuals were all displaced to 100 kilometers outside of the Moscow Ring Road (Tétrault-Farber 2013). Once more, this city cleansing is not exclusive to Russia. Similar tactics were utilized by officials prior to the Montreal summer Olympics of 1976 (Kinsman & Gentile 2010:245-246). After the attempts to rid Moscow of these particular individuals, police raids targeting homosexuals began and throughout 1981-1982, approximately 2,000 individuals were convicted under Article 121.

The years of and leading into the 1990s seemed to usher in a new era. In 1987, the film "Risk Group" (Nikishin 1987) was shown on television and in movie theatres across the country. This documentary was commissioned by the state-owned enterprise Videofilm and created with the intention to educate the public on the risks of AIDS. The film touched on issues of AIDS in the USSR and focused on the groups most likely to contract it – prostitutes, drug addicts, and men who were sexually involved with other men. The entirety of the film and its claims were backed by governmental statistics and data. The film featured scenes such as the one at a police station where a prostitute stated without emotion that in over a year her number of customers totaled over two thousand men (Lawton

2002:178-179). In light of the state's history dealing with transgressive sexualities, the fact that the film was made, let alone aired, is a significant event and mile marker in Russian queer history regardless of its funding and sources. The first gay newspaper in the USSR was published in 1989. "Theme" was edited by Roman Kalinin, registered by 1990 and stayed in print until 1993. Other LGBT newspapers surfaced throughout the 90s such as "Risk" and "Argo," both edited by Vlad Ortanov, "1/10" edited by Dmitry Lychev, "Gay Slavyane" edited by Olga Zhuk, and "Island," a feminist journal.

The effervescence of queer publications as well as organizations developed as the USSR began to dissolve and flourished after its complete dissolution by 1991 (Plungian 2013; Essig 1999). In 1990, a group of individuals from the Libertarian Party chose to form the Moscow Association of Sexual Minorities. Headed by the first queers to publicly come out in Russia, Evgeniia Debrianskaia and Roman Kalinin, the Moscow Association of Sexual Minorities began to gain international recognition; the two activists traveled to the United States, having been invited by the Gay and Lesbian Alliance against Defamation and the Stonewall Foundation. Upon their return and after receiving incredible sums of funding from organizations in the West, the organization changed monikers, becoming the Association of Gays and Lesbians, and hosted a Soviet Stonewall. It was not long before the association fizzled out and other activists decided that what was truly needed was a conference by and for Russians. It was in 1991 that the first international gay and lesbian film festival and conference was held. During the time of the conference, the first gay demonstration against criminal persecution took place in *Sovietskaya Ploshchad'* (Sovietskaya Square).

In 1991, the *Krylya* (Wings), Homosexual Defense Association, was the first gay organization to be granted registration in Leningrad (now St-Petersburg) and it was managed by Aleksandr Kukharsky and Olga Krauze. It was originally called *Nevskie Berega* (Neva Shore) then *Nevskaya Perspektiva* (Neva Perspective). However, these names were seen as homosexualizing the neighbourhood and the organization was forced to change their name. Ten women and two men were the driving force behind Wings and their goal was to slowly change the minds of lawmakers and influential members of society (Essig 1999; Kon 1995). In 1992, the first LGBT rights conference was held in Russia. Krauze attended this conference and expressed that “it was just interesting to observe how it was possible to turn this issue [queer identities and rights] into politics. It was amusing. Our gatherings were our gatherings, but how was politics connected with that?” (Plungian 2013). The idea that identity and politics are linked is not a universal concept despite it being a dominant framework in the West. With Russia’s historical focus on collectivism, it is not surprising that identity and politics were at odds and that for some Russians this understanding and negotiation of the two in this manner still persists to this day. In Chapter Four, I look more closely at the tensions and negotiations between of identity and politics.

Moreover, Masha Gessen’s booklet on the situation of gays and lesbians in Russia was also published in conjunction with the conference. The result of this conference was a new organization called *Tregol’nik* (Triangle) which catered to gays, lesbians and bisexuals. Its vision was to be the first organization attempting to connect more than twenty regional LGB organizations across Russia. It was intended to serve as an informational hub for various activist groups, however, it fell short of fully becoming national as it was a de facto Moscow organization – all weekly meetings were held in Moscow and were, for the

most part, by Muscovites. Additionally, the Moscow authorities refused to register the organization on the grounds that it contradicted the public norms of morality. In her ethnography, Essig details her experience in attending nine meetings over six months in 1994. Generally, there were as many Americans as Russians attending these meetings and issues of leadership, goals, and finances were abundant. Throughout these months, Essig witnessed the dissolution of the organization as the lack of strong leadership became evident by the end of the year. “The early leaders [Gessen, Debriansakia, Kalinin] really did seem tired of activism” (Essig 1999:93). After the organization failed to host its second annual conference, it fizzled out.

It was in 1993, under Yeltsin, that the law against consensual sex between adult men was eliminated and only in 1999, after a revision of the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems, that homosexuality was removed from the Russian list of mental illnesses altogether. Homosexuality was decriminalized and de-medicalized yet still viewed in a very negative light by Russians. When polled in 1994, almost half of the population felt that homosexuals deserved to be killed or isolated (Essig 1999: 67). It was after the decriminalization of homosexuality that activism started to make an appearance in Russia and this effervescence of activism followed on the heels of over thirty decades of social movements in the United States. During this time, American queer activists were demanding legitimacy utilizing a mixture of political and social strategies that made use of a variety of media. American activist organizations were fighting against sodomy laws that locked queer desires into a medical discourse of “unnaturalness” and “illness” (Gray 2009:7) which was also what had been occurring in Russia.

Several other activist groups sprung up throughout the country yet they all ultimately fell prey to the same problems – resources and leadership. What needs to be highlighted here is that “the appearance of fissures in the earliest building blocks of queer activism in Russia was the result of serious flaws in a politics based on identity. Common sexual practices do not create common politics/ideologies” (Essig 1999:63). Queer Russians did not believe at the time that their sexual practices defined their identity. The notion that who someone slept with could be an aspect of identity had yet to be discerned within the Russian mindset. Furthermore, it was not until the fall of the USSR that ‘identity’ as a concept, alone, began to surface in the Russian context. Over the past two decades, a gradual shift away from collectivism towards individualism has been underway in the country. Many Russians who desired and engaged in relationships with the same sex simply did not identify with the terms gay or lesbian. Derogatory terms existed such as *pidor*’ (fag) and *pederast* (queer/bugger/pansy) but queer Russian men would not willingly use these terms to self-identify. Slang terminology such as *goluboï* (gay) made reference to men who desired other men but was and still is used to indicate ‘blue’ as in colour. Words such as *geï* (gay), *lesbiyanka* (lesbian), and *gomoseksual*’ (homosexual) were part of their vernacular, however, these terms are merely English terms adapted into Russian.

Contemporary queer organizations in Russia continue to make use of Russianized English terms such as those mentioned above. In addition, *biseksual*’ (bisexual), *transgender* (transgender), *transseksual* (transsexual), and *kvir* (queer) are all terms used by queer and queer positive Russians. The organizations that I will engage with below identify as LGBT organizations, not queer organizations. Unlike those that came before

them, however, they are not molding themselves to Western expectations regardless of their efforts to draw support from outside sources or the history of mutual influences.

I began this chapter by discussing the social and ideological precedents for the recent propaganda ban. Some of the ones I highlighted include state and medical discourses and how these framed queerness as deviant, pathological, and anti-national. Following this discussion, I offered a brief overview of the emergence of queer activism and organizations in order to transition into queer activism in today's Russia. In the case of some contemporary queer Russian activists, I believe that they bring a globally recognizable gay identity into their public discourses mainly for the purposes of calling on the global gay community's support whether that be financially or otherwise. In the case of GayRussia, they have remained financially independent since the day they formed – a fact worth highlighting, as the majority of other organizations have relied on foreign monetary support. These details will be further outlined below as I closely examine three Queer Russian organizations, including their history, goals, and practices, and further set the scene for my analysis of activism in the proceeding chapters.

Queer Russian Organizations Today

Today, there are several queer organizations throughout Russia. There exist smaller regional branches in various *oblasti* (outside city centre regions) of the national Russian LGBT Network, and some urban organizations such as Vykhod, based in St-Petersburg, and GayRussia, in Moscow, to name a few. The Russian LGBT Network has over 16 regional offices and services several outside city centre regions such as Arkhangelsk (Northern Russia), Omsk, Krasnoyarsk, and Novosibirsk (all three in Siberia). The reason

for highlighting these organizations is that they are the three main ones that participate in campaigns, activist movements, and festivals. Additionally, GayRussia and Vykhod participate in both street and academic activism. The following information has been gathered and put together from the organizations' official websites.

Vykhod

Vykhod was founded in 2008 and is a regional non-profit St-Petersburg organization with a head office in the centre of the city, run by staff and volunteers. The organization strives for universal recognition of human dignity and equal rights for all individuals regardless of sexual orientation, and gender identity. It does so through advocacy work, educational and cultural events, and it also doubles as a resource centre, providing queer individuals with psychological and legal services. Their work is founded on the notions of nonviolence, respect for privacy, lawfulness and non-extremism. The workers and volunteers firmly believe that they, as well as any citizen, can work constructively with government officials to help reach an end that suits all those involved.

Overall, the organization strives to make “queer” accessible to Russian society. They wish to demonstrate to and educate individuals that sexual orientations and gender identities go beyond the binary that is commonly accepted. With these endeavours, the organization hopes that this will eventually breakdown the fears and prejudices that have surrounded queer Russians. First, its campaigns aim to mobilize the queer individuals in St-Petersburg in order to establish an open, visible and active community. Second, the organization also seeks to aid authorities in fulfilling their duties while respecting human rights. Vykhod underscores the importance of respecting and protecting all citizens from

violence and discrimination regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or any other personal characteristics.

The organization has been involved in bringing Queerfest to St-Petersburg since 2009. Queerfest is a weeklong event that occurs at the end of September. Its stated goal is to bring together the queer 'community' and to highlight the current issues surrounding equal rights in St-Petersburg, and Russia overall. This will be explored further in depth in the following chapter. Furthermore, it also hosted the first conference on gender and queer theory in St-Petersburg. Vykhod is committed to working with other organizations, both Russian and foreign, in the belief that its mission and goals can be achieved by building strong affiliations and relationships with locals such as the parents of LGBT Russians group, with Russian and foreign rights groups, as well as other activists from the country and abroad.

LGBT Network

In 2006, the Russian LGBT Network was founded. However, it was only after the All-Russian Conference for civic organizations supporting the LGBT movement in Moscow that the network was transformed into an inter-regional public movement. In 2008, its Charter and Strategy were devised and governing positions were elected. The Russian LGBT Network is a NGO (non-governmental organization) which aims, like Vykhod, to promote equal rights and respect for human dignity, regardless of an individual's sexual orientation and gender identity. Its mission is to develop regional initiatives, advocacy groups, both nationally and internationally. Similarly to Vykhod, the NGO also doubled as a resource centre and provides Russians with legal and social services. Its goals are very much in tandem with those of Vykhod in that the LGBT Network aims to bring visibility

to, and ensure the protection of queer Russians. Moreover, it also endeavours to enhance awareness around the potential risks related to homophobia, xenophobia, and transphobia.

Currently, the NGO works alongside and with authorities, political parties, and activists to create nationwide information campaigns. It offers resources to queer individuals, regardless of their nationality, and to their parents and peers also. In its pursuit of its goals, the NGO also engages in research on the socio-legal status of queer Russians, and holds seminars, conferences, workshops, training, and discussions. Within this goal to educate, the LGBT network also publishes informational, educational, and methodological materials to better serve the community. Furthermore, it provides international organizations such as the United Nations, the Council of Europe, and the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe with reports on the situation of queers in Russia.

Since being founded, the NGO has worked extensively to achieve its mission and in the process of doing so now has several LGBT groups and organizations in over 20 regions of Russia. In addition to offering legal and social aide, the NGO also has a national hotline that is accessible in all areas of the country. Consistent and direct contact has been established between the NGO and the Human Rights Commissioner of Russia, the members of the Presidential Council for human rights, and a variety of ministries and authorities of the Russian Federation. Like Vykhod, the Russian LGBT network has its own office and permanent staff in St-Petersburg, and strives for the same goals of visibility and human rights equality.

GayRussia

A small team of Muscovite activists lead by Nikolai Alekseev saw a lack of social movement and progress in regards to queer visibility and the advancement of rights of sexual minorities. They came together and created the “LGBT Human Rights Project GayRussia.ru” in 2005. The project is simply known as GayRussia.ru and it advocates for the rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered Russians. The organization’s slogan, adopted in 2008, is “Equal rights. No compromise!” and it speaks to the lengths the group’s activists are willing to go to in order to attain their objectives. They seek to create and run actions to raise awareness, and in doing so, aim to challenge institutional and state homophobia.

Over the last decade, GayRussia has launched a new campaign every year. The activists focus on putting together movements that touch on: freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, freedom of association, same sex marriage and family rights, hate speech, and MSM (men who have sex with men) blood ban. The organization does not have a bank account, and does not own any property. Furthermore, it does not receive any kind of external funding; all expenses for their campaigns are self-financed by the members of the group. In adopting this policy, the activists preserve their independence, are not indebted to others’ agendas, and are able to remain focused on pushing for social change.

GayRussia’s first campaign for freedom of assembly was the Moscow Gay Pride in 2005. The event was widely covered by media both at home and abroad and helped shine a light on the issues faced by queer Russians. The organization’s activists do not shy away from the public eye, media coverage, or legal sanctions. As previously mentioned, their

slogan is “Equal Rights. No Compromise!” and this is reflected in all of their campaigns. The activists do not compromise for anything or anyone, equality always comes first.

Members of GayRussia are regularly arrested at public actions but the organization does not view this as a negative result of their efforts. GayRussia has taken all its cases to the European Court of Human Rights or the Human Rights Committee of the United Nations. To date, 11 cases were filed against Russia with the European Court and 2 cases with the Human Rights Committee. In 2010, the organization won the first LGBT case against Russia at the European Court of Human Rights (*Alekseev v. Russia*, case of the Moscow Pride bans).

GayRussia continues to have a prominent public presence in Moscow but it also prides itself on its joint campaign in Belarus and its efforts in St-Petersburg. It has helped organize pride events in both regions and has also provided legal aid to the activists when needed. GayRussia’s lawyer Dmitri Bartnev won 3 cases in court against St-Petersburg municipality which banned the Pride March in 2010. These cases were the first of their kind to be won in Russia as their subject matter surrounded the issue of Freedom of Assembly for LGBT people. There exist a strong sense of camaraderie among queer activists in these circles. All of these organizations are putting together campaigns that draw the public’s attention to the issues of homophobia and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in Russia. Common goals unite these organizations, however, they do have points of divergence. Recognition, visibility, and equality are among some of their shared goals yet these organizations vary on their focused reach – some are committed to staying local, while others strive for more of an international/global stage. My impression is that these multiple organizations do not compete for public

recognition or resources (one of the mandates of the LGBT Network is that they are local and do not outsource for funds). From what I have read and heard from others, these organizations come together to host events and rely on each other's support.

The state of affairs surrounding queer rights in Russia escalated when on March 12th, 2012, St-Petersburg became the first urban city to bring into legislation a law banning the "propaganda of homosexuality." Several small regions throughout Russia had brought in similar legislation but no major urban hub had until St-Petersburg. On January 25th, 2013, the lower parliament of the State Duma voted, 388 to 1 (one MP abstained), and the law was granted preliminary approval. On June 13th, 2013, the State Duma officially passed the ban on the "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations" with a vote of 463 to zero and the law was officially signed in by President Putin on June 30th, 2013. Furthermore, a few days later, Putin also signed an adoption ban for queer foreign couples, as well as any couples residing in countries that support same-sex marriage. These two laws combined with the foreign agent law are reflective of a xenophobic state and are rooted in nationalistic sentiments. Additionally, there is a focus on nation-building and an attempt to minimize, even extinguish, Western (read American) influences. Most important, in my opinion, is that through these laws that affect both internal and external relations with other countries, Putin is attempting to establish that Russia is politically and economically independent. The situation seems to have progressed quickly when outlining it in such a fashion. However, when taking into consideration the history of the Russian state and its approach to queer individuals, it does not seem to have materialized so unexpectedly anymore.

The brief history outlined in this chapter illustrates the various ways in which queer individuals have been understood and produced as state and medical subjects since the mid-

20th century. What is innovative and intriguing now is the ways in which queer individuals and allies are reacting to this new ban. The genealogies and discourses outlined in this chapter are important in setting the stage for the upcoming chapter as many of the discursive fields, if not all, that I analyze in it are deeply rooted in Russian history. This chapter highlights that queer desires are not new to Russia and that those who had had queer desires in the past have managed to skirt around legal barriers. It demonstrates the will and tenacity of the budding activists of the late 1980s and 1990s and sets the precedent to the activist movements currently underway. Many of the activists who engaged in the first queer organizations and campaigns still participate in current day campaigns (those who are not deceased).

As for the contemporary activists, their methods vary from those who came before them – they are engaging and utilizing the very same discourses set out by the state to fight against it. The amount of worldwide solidarity movements that emerged leading up to the Sochi Winter Olympics is unprecedented. Masses of individuals gathered in front of Russian consulates in many countries to protest the treatment of Russian queer individuals. During pride marches, people held signs expressing that they stood in solidarity with queer Russians. All of these aspects are factors into the emerging and new modes of activism in St-Petersburg. These groups present different ways of being active/activists in measures both public and private, street and academic, local and global. This will be illustrated and explored further in the following chapter.

Chapter Three

Lived Experiences: Queer Activism in St-Petersburg, Russia

What is activism? This is surely not an unfamiliar question in anthropology and in academia as a whole, as many scholars have tackled it from different angles. There have been discussions about activist research, cultural critique, and activism within academia (Hale 2006; Maxey 1999), a comprehensive anthropology of human rights (Goodale 2006), theorizing activism and feminism (Grewal 2008; Lee 2007), and identity politics as high-risk activism (Taylor and Raeburn 1995). I do not ask the question with the intent of proffering a new definition. I ask the question because the current political and social climate in Russia has and still is shaping the various forms of activism that have, are, and will take place as well as their complex and ambivalent relationship with academia.

Activism also happened to be the main point of contention in the discussion that was happening at the dinner table one evening between a Muscovite, an American professor, a Russian feminist, and myself. All four of us are academics in one way or another. Two engage actively in academic research, and the other two are translators. I'll refer to these individuals as Toma, Sara, and Babka respectively. After a long day at the 'At the Crossroads' conference, we found ourselves at this intriguing restaurant café hybrid masquerading as an open mic just off the main strip of *Nevskii Prospekt*. The décor was an eclectic one, perhaps even a bit kitschy. The walls were for the most part brick and the floors were tiled. There were old vinyl and a variety of abstract paintings adorning the walls. The long wooden poles interspersed throughout the room were reminiscent of totem poles and the area where the band was setting up for their set was psychedelic in design with a black and white checkered floor. The atmosphere was welcoming and it was easily

discernible that everyone was there to relax, enjoy each other's company and have a good night. This was exactly what we were doing as we discussed feminism, academic texts, translations, and the like, over drinks and dinner. Our conversations were for the most part in English and the topic of activism arose as the trio reminisced about a common friend, Elena, and her experience as a public figure and activist. Toma for the most part remained silent as she slowly sipped her brandy. I sat across the table from Babka with Toma to my left, and Sara to my right. Sara held firm to the fact that Elena was an activist despite having left the country in fear that the state would take away her children because she was a publicly out lesbian. On the other hand, Babka retorted that *fleeing* the country was cowardly and proceeded to raise her voice, pointing with her fingers as if to punctuate her words and exclaimed that those who are out on the street, being beaten, harassed, and detained by the police are *real* activists. She highlighted that one of the gentlemen who sat in the middle of the group at Sara's presentation earlier that evening was a real activist because he had had his teeth broken during a public rally. The discussion died out as quickly as it had sparked up but the question of "what is activism in Russia?" lingered in my mind. This question and experience revealed important tensions that I will examine in this chapter.

What *is* activism? What *does* it look like in the context of Russia?

In her book *Words Will Break Cement*, Masha Gessen states that "[t]o create, and to confront, one has to be an outcast. A constant state of discomfort is a necessary but insufficient condition for protest art, however. One also has to possess a sense that one can do something about it, the sense of being entitled to speak and to be heard" (2013:2).

Additionally, Naisargi Dave expresses in *Queer Activism in India: A Story in the Anthropology of Ethics* that

[a]ctivism begins... precisely as the virtual in the actual world, the previously unthinkable that is now a flickering possibility, just on the verge of entering upon the world of norms. To study activism is to study the relationship between the virtual and the actual, the as-yet-inassimilable and the assimilated. [2012:10]

In the previous passages, both authors are arriving at their own definition of activism through different settings. In the excerpts I chose, Gessen is writing about Nadezhda Tolokonnikova of Pussy Riot fame, and exploring what drives an individual to engage in activism. What were the circumstances that brought Nadya to be involved in a Russian punk feminist band? What brought them to Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior? Gessen is attempting to arrive at what makes an activist, an activist. Within the same vein, this is also something that Dave explores, in addition to what activism is, in the opening chapter of her ethnography which explores the lesbian movement in India. I bring attention to both these excerpts because I find them to be poignant and thought provoking. They caused me to pause, once more, and to reflect on what is embodied within the social movements currently underway in Russia.

But, to return to my opening vignette, can activism only be found on the streets? In the spilt blood of those on the front lines? On their bruised bodies? Or can it also be found elsewhere? In small coffee shops? In art galleries? In classrooms? Truthfully, I encountered activism everywhere. I ran into it on the streets; I read about it in newspapers; I streamed videos online. Of course, there are the activists that Babka spoke of. The ones that are out in the streets and in the public parks, protesting. However, I discovered that there also exists another kind of activism in St-Petersburg. I found this kind in a small art

gallery called the ‘Non-Existent floor’ as well as at a Jewish Community Centre in the *Petrogradsky* District. Again, I wish to underscore that redefining or refashioning a new understanding of activism is not my objective in this chapter. Rather, I pose the question ‘what is activism?’ to open up pathways of discussion on how activism is perceived and engaged in within the new legal context in Russia. While we may be tempted to speak of activism in the singular, the opening vignette demonstrates that there are points of contestation. This may very well be a reflection of the various manifestations of queer activism in St-Petersburg and speaks to the variety of goals, tasks and strategies of the queer agenda. I do not aim to conflate all activism into these two categories. The task is not so easily done, defined and distinct. As mentioned in the introduction, academic and street are used in this thesis as merely descriptive terms rather than analytical ones. My intentions are not to frame these as separate entities existing independently from each other nor to say that they are the only ways of describing activism in St-Petersburg and Russia. In light of the recent developments in the country, there has been an increase of international activism as well as virtual (i.e. the social media group ‘404 Not Found’). Street and academic activism co-exist alongside each other, and are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Their manifestations and occurrences are rooted in symbiotic relationships and there are a number of activists who participate in both street and academic activism. By exploring the two kinds of activism, street and academic, I hope to flesh out these points of tension and delve into why this is the case in this Russian city as well as what this suggests about the diversity of Russian (sexual) publics.

Due to the terms upon which I was granted ethical clearance to conduct my fieldwork, I did not attend any public rallies, or partake in any overtly public activities

which nudged me to seek out other avenues due to the risk to my safety and the safety of my participants. This offered me the opportunity to experience other forms of activism and to witness the refashioning of methods in achieving queer visibility. In this chapter, I will first outline the two major events that I attended, the pride festival Queerfest, and the ‘At the Crossroads’ conference. While these events stray from typical street activism, I describe them as forms of academic activism. While these events may be thought of as less visible in the public spheres and less discussed in the scholarship on activism, these sites of queer activism are important to foster temporary queer spaces. Lastly, drawing on Mary Gray’s conceptualization of ‘boundary publics’ (2009), I posit that these events are best understood as ‘quasi-boundary publics’ in that they are not exactly what Gray articulates as ‘boundary publics’ but they share similarities in what they attempt to achieve. Like Gray’s Wal-Mart and skate park examples, the locations which played host to the festival and conference are not readily identifiable and readable as queer spaces. Attempting to negotiate the festival and conference as boundary publics highlighted in what ways the Russian examples diverge from those of Gray’s. However, I believe that formulating a ‘quasi-boundary public’ which stems from Gray’s analyses helps to better understand my ethnographic examples. Additionally, I reflect on how queer activists in St-Petersburg are reshaping and redefining our understanding of activism, in order to create familiar and visible queer identities, safe spaces, and a semblance of ‘community’ for themselves through these events and in these shifting places that they inhabit.

Finding the Familiar in the Unfamiliar: Queerfest 2013

For four years, Queerfest, a uniquely St-Petersburg festival, heralded the end of September in St-Petersburg. I first heard about it in 2012 as it overtook my Facebook feed and I cursed

myself for not being in the right location at the right time. When President Putin officially banned the “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations” (originally titled “propaganda of homosexuality” but was later altered in the guise of being less discriminatory), I feared that if and when I found myself in St-Petersburg, Queerfest would not take place. I arrived in St-Petersburg in early September 2013 and I had yet to see any news pop up on my feed about Queerfest. The organization’s website was still filled with information about the previous year’s festival and I was beginning to worry. I had always intended to be in St-Petersburg throughout September in order to attend Queerfest. In previous years, the festival had always been a great success but there had been no ban on “the propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations.”

Less than a week prior to the festival’s start day, I came across a post advertising the event on Facebook. The website was still under construction and the information was very vague, at best. I knew it was happening but when and where? How would I know where to go? I needed more information. I hurriedly wrote e-mails and made phone calls to no avail. The next day, a link was distributed by the organization, urging individuals who wanted to attend the opening ceremony to register online which I hastily did but was still left with no information. The advertised opening ceremony was fast approaching and I was still miffed about where and when it was happening. Whoever was in charge of promotion was being very secretive and selective as to what information was being distributed which I later discovered was for security reasons. I eventually received an e-mail with some information. It listed the date, time, and “location” – a street address. The opening ceremony, as well as all the workshops hosted throughout the week, were to be held at *Nesushchestvuiushchii etazh*, the ‘Non-Existent floor.’ I had a good chuckle about

that and admired the name of the location. It was ironically fitting and that is what the organizers were aiming for. What better place to host an event celebrating queer individuals whom according to the Russian state, do not exist, than a non-existent floor?

The day of the opening ceremony arrived, and as the sun was setting, I made the hour long journey by bus then metro out from the city center to the circulated address – a journey that would envelope me in a security blanket as the week progressed. I still did not know the exact location. I had some coordinates and I knew the metro station but I predicted that the ‘Non-Existent floor’ would not be advertised. As I rode the metro from *Admiralteiskaya* to *Komendantskii Prospekt*, I began to scan the faces getting onto the train as it crawled closer and closer to my final destination, not searching for anything in particular or familiar, simply soaking in my surroundings. I had a feeling that it would not be like any queer pride event I had attended in Canada because of the difference in the legal context surrounding queer identities and rights in both countries. The events I had attended in Canada were full of festivities and colourful pride parades. Those who participated were allowed to hold pride parades and were not persecuted by the law to the extent that queer Russians are. I knew better than to formulate any kind of assumptions prior to arriving. When I finally arrived at the street address I had saved into my phone for reference, I found myself at the bottom of a seventeen story apartment building in a quaint residential area and I began to worry because my instructions ended here. I did not know how to get to this ‘Non-Existent floor.’ I suddenly became painfully aware of just how much of an outsider I was as I attempted to look as nondescript as possible while scoping out my surroundings for any clue. My fears were quickly alleviated when I spotted a gathering of individuals casually chatting and smoking on the stoop of the apartment building with a nicely dressed

security man guarding the main door. I stuck around long enough to recognize a few faces; I had seen these individuals in photographs attached to news articles over the past year. Amongst all the unknown aspects of this ongoing adventure, their faces, these personalities that I had grown to recognize in the news over the last year, were little morsels of the familiar that I could cling to.

I chose to follow the one woman who stuck out the most, the one face that I recognized the most from the news, into the small lobby where several other guests and volunteers were crowded waiting for the elevator. It did not take very long for me to realize that there was only one elevator out of the two that granted us access to this ‘Non-Existent floor’ and as I began to frequent the location more often throughout the week, I started to notice subtle behavioural patterns amongst the festival goers. There seemed to be an agreed upon elevator etiquette in place. Since the elevator serviced an apartment building, there were often times when individuals living in the building, not attending the festival, would ride the elevator with festival goers and volunteers. The elevator etiquette that I quickly picked up on was that one must wait until the residents of the building disembark from the elevator to press the seventeenth floor button. This etiquette, I argue, did not come to fruition from open discussion but rather from fear of inadvertently inviting anti-queer sentiments onto the ‘Non-Existent floor.’ In addition to this fear, it was a safety precaution. By pressing the seventeenth floor button with strangers in the elevator who are aware of the event, one is aligning themselves with the queer ‘community’ and putting oneself at risk. Early on in the week, I had found myself in the elevator with a resident, and a volunteer. Once the resident disembarked the elevator, the volunteer had waited for me to make the first move. I do not look Russian and she did not recognize me from previous

events. Once I pressed the seventeenth floor button, it was as if there was a silent recognition that passed between us.

Queerfest started in 2009 as a response for the need to discuss the treatment of queer individuals and their visibility in Russia. The organizers, Vykhod, were sensitive to the fact that the wider population was potentially not ready to openly accept and discuss the rights of sexual minorities. They organized a 10-day festival hosted at an old factory, 'Red Banner.' They carefully chose to omit the subject of LGBT in their program and used the acronym *K.B.I.P - Kul'tura vo Imia Raznoobraziia* (Culture in the Name of Diversity) which also spells the word 'kvir' (queer). Despite having welcomed over 350 guests throughout its run, Queerfest remained unnoticed in the media and ultimately did not reach a wider audience than those who attended. The organizers decided that moving forward, Queerfest would not shy from clearly identifying as an LGBT event.

In 2010, the festival's slogan shifted from 'the culture in the name of diversity' to 'the art of being yourself' and the overarching topic was gender according to the pamphlet I collected at Queerfest 2013. What I gather from looking at the archived material provided by the website is that 'gender' as fluid and constructed was the theme of the festival. A queer fashion show and international drag king festival were part of this year's Queerfest. A discussion of activism through art and the place of queer in Russia took place. It also featured invited speakers with forthcoming research on the theme of gender and in conjunction with this, the exhibition center 'Artists Union' had agreed to run a special large-scale 'Queer Space' exhibit. Unfortunately, the night before the opening ceremony, the center withdrew their participation, forcing organizers and volunteers to find a replacement venue. The obstacles did not end there as the organizers reported having

received threats from a group of anti-queer individuals. This group was not identified by the organizers, however, in the past, there have always been an organized body of people who attempt to disrupt and ultimately, shut down queer events. In addition, the festival's banner was also ripped, forcing the organizers to urgently print a new one. This festival marked the first time that the organizers sought out and hired external security for the protection of its volunteers and guests. Even with rising conflicts, the festival was supported by foreign celebrities, diplomats of Western countries and both local and foreign human rights organizations. Once again, the 10 day event did not receive the public media attention the organizers had hoped for. The media only wrote about the high profile guests who supported the festival rather than about the event itself.

The organizers sought to bring the third Queerfest into an open media environment and hoped to reach a wider audience with the theme of feminism in 2011. The overall program was similar to the ones from the previous two years featuring discussion groups, art, and invited guests. 'Queerographia' was an art exhibit that was originally part of the festival. However, it did not take place because a group of parents formally complained and expressed concern for children. After this claim, the exhibit was seen as propagating homosexuality even though it did not actually touch on the theme of homosexuality. The exhibit was a collection of photographs, video montages, collages, and documents which, ironically, spoke to the theme of heterosexuality and the stereotypes of men. In addition to this setback, the venue which hosted the opening ceremony was attacked with firecrackers and watered pepper spray by representatives of radical groups. For the first time in three years, Queerfest received a lot of attention in the media and the organizers finally felt as though they had reached a wider public, breaking through the social indifference that hung

around the previous years. However, two months after Queerfest took place, the St-Petersburg Legislative Assembly submitted the first draft of the ban against the propaganda of homosexuality. This could be a result of the increase in queer visibility in the city but any answer to why would be speculative at best.

Despite the public reception and attitudes surrounding queer rights, Queerfest still took place in 2012. This festival received strong support, once again, from public figures. The opening ceremony featured a supportive video message from British actor, Ian McKellen, while the closing ceremony featured a concert from Lena Katina (once part of the Russian duo TATU). Guests of the festival took part in media installations, social photography projects, workshops on street art, and discussions with invited guests. To the relief of organizers and guests, the growing concerns regarding the possible aggressive reactions of some segments of the Russian society did not come to fruition. A possible explanation for this was the presence of diplomats and ministers of Western countries at virtually every Queerfest event that year. Queerfest's events increasingly became a platform allowing individuals to openly discuss queer issues worldwide.

Queerness, and otherness have been topics woven through Queerfest's history, and they happened to also be some of the topics discussed throughout the festival in 2013. The week featured an array of discussion sessions and workshops which touched on a range of issues and topics such as biphobia within the lesbian community, proud parents, LGBT police in Sweden and Russia, feminist history and if there is a place for women in the Russian LGBT movement, and art activism, to name a few. Ultimately, the 'Non-Existent floor' was transformed, by those who frequented this space over the week, into a safe haven for queer Russians to discuss amongst their peers, for them to learn from others'

experiences, and to celebrate what made them different. The opening ceremony was attended by many from across Russia and abroad as well, as there were many translators who sat nearby their colleagues throughout the week's events. Consulate representatives from four different European countries attended the opening ceremony in a show of support for the queer community and all four made heartfelt speeches. There were also news reporters from France and Canada who circulated after the opening ceremony, asking questions to those gathered in clusters with their friends, happily sipping their drinks, and reveling in the safety this space proffered them.

In 2013 the festival coincided with the 20th anniversary of the decriminalization of male homosexuality and as such, the festival's main theme was a history of LGBT of the 20th century in Russia and Soviet times. In light of this, I discovered the night of the opening ceremony as I stepped off the elevator that the 'Non-Existent Floor' had been turned into an art exhibit. The walls were adorned with both photographic and written historical extracts detailing the queer history of a country that has attempted to erase and negate its very existence.

The main attraction – the art gallery – stretched across three rooms. The 17th floor of this building is what would have been considered a *kommunalka* in its time. Now, it is an open space in which various art exhibits and festivals are held. After stepping off the elevator, I found myself in a small hallway. To the right, the door for the balcony and to the left, another small hallway which led to a kitchen, a bedroom, and a bathroom. Directly in front of the elevators was the door to the main room where the majority of the events unfolded throughout the week. It was in this main room that the opening ceremony took place, bringing together a group of people from St-Petersburg and beyond, and of different

age ranges (all over eighteen due to the recent law). The majority of the attendees were in their 20s and 30s, and there was roughly an equal number of men and women. There were a slew of speeches from this year's organizers, the previous organizers, the European consulate representatives and a surprise video from Stephen Fry which he recorded during his visit to St-Petersburg. After the red ribbon was cut, officially marking the beginning of Queerfest 2013, people dispersed and began to mingle.

At this time, I chose to explore the entirety of the 'Non-existent floor' and began to



Figure 3.1. Timeline on the floor of the third room at Queerfest. (Photo courtesy of Melanie Rickert).

slowly weave my way through the groups of people. There were three rooms in total and all three were decorated with photographs, newspaper clippings, and quotes. The second room had less photographs on the walls and was the heart of the floor as it featured the fireplace where many gathered. It also had, like the other rooms, information

pamphlets and leaflets on the window sills for individuals to peruse and take home. These pamphlets detailed the various groups that were affiliated with Vykhod as well as the booklets featuring the current theme of Queerfest and the history of Queerfest. The last room featured an interesting timeline on the floor (Figure 3.1). Each strip of coloured tape had a country and a year written on it. This was a visual mapping of the chronological order in which LGBT rights were addressed by each country. It also had various timelines on the walls detailing personal stories which were also featured in the Queerfest booklet.

The events or workshops that I attended were heavily knowledge based and were attended by a few regulars that I began to recognize a different audience depending on the focus of the evening. These workshops were geared to provide the audience with specific information as well as address any questions or concerns around the topic at hand. The first event I attended was a question and answer session with LGBT police from Sweden and Russia. There were four LGBT identifying Russian police, a middle-aged man and three women (two younger and one middle-aged), and one Swiss LGBT identifying policeman. The topics discussed ranged from personal life stories, whether or not their coworkers and families knew about their sexual identity to how the recent ban has affected their work lives. The overall consensus was that for the Russian police officers, their sexual identity, when on the job, came in second after their uniform. This opened up the floor for several questions regarding the new legislation and its vagueness. Several individuals in the audience were curious about how the officers made the decision to arrest or not. The officers expressed their own concerns about the legislation and affirmed the vagueness of the law, simply stating that they often made decisions for the better of all individuals involved in any public event. The presence of the Swedish officer was to offer advice and

guidance from a different perspective. The overall atmosphere was one of calmness and receptiveness, granting all gathered in the main room of the 'Non-existent floor' to ask openly questions they might have otherwise shied away from posing. This was the overall mood the entire week.

The second event I attended was an event detailing the history of feminism. There were a greater number of women than there were men in attendance that night but the ages of those gathered were still varied. The title of the workshop posed an interesting and important question – whether there was a place for lesbians in the LGBT movement in Russia. No clear cut answer was given by the end of the night. The workshop had a low-key feminist lecture vibe as slide after slide explained the feminist and queer movements in North America. The guest presenter drew from bell hooks, Eve Sedgwick and Adrienne Rich, to name a few, but did not draw on any Russian scholars or historical events. They framed queer theory within an American historical context which in retrospect seems like a particularly odd approach. Why not draw on Russian queer history? Russian scholars? This may be in part due to the period of silence regarding the subject that was noted earlier in Chapter Two and is a point that I think upon and discuss further below.

The last event was an art activism event hosted by an art activist from Moscow. The group gathered for this workshop was comprised of all young adults, men and women equally. The host briefly showed us a few slides with photos of graffiti while explaining the purpose of art activism. She then taught us how to create our own stencils and underlined that art activism had to be quick and efficient. It was a very casual and spirited evening. The host jumped around to each individual animatedly and would help with specific sections of people's stencil. She cautioned me to be careful of the hands and feet

of the women in my stencil as I began to cut it out. After our stencils were finished, we then had the opportunity to spray paint them on big white Bristol boards. In groups of two or three, we stepped out onto the balcony, gloved up, and attempted to graffiti the Bristol boards. For the



Figure 3.2. Graffiti (Photo courtesy of Melanie Rickert).

most part, everyone was rather quiet as they took their turns on the balcony, only asking for specific colours if they were out of reach. There were creative stencils and messages such as 'Stop Hate,' 'Till the End,' '*Zavtra Uzhe Seichas*' (Tomorrow is Already Now), '*Ya Liubliu Vas*' (I Love You), and many more. I had never done any kind of graffiti or even spray painted before. I chose a rather simple drawing of the silhouette of women holding hands and created my stencil from it (Figure 3.2).

Every year, and this year was no different regardless of the new law, Queerfest brings together queer, queer questioning, and ally Russians, as well as a select number of foreigners. The organizers create a welcoming environment where individuals can gather and learn from their peers. Every night that I frequented the 'Non-existent floor,' I saw the captivated looks on the audience's face. Some faces I recognized, these were the activists

that take to the streets and publicly protest the current political situation surrounding queer rights in Russia. Some other faces, I had never seen but they too by the end of the week became familiar to me. Many of these faces, those who were already familiar, and those who became familiar, I saw again a month later at the ‘At the Crossroads’ conference.

Queerfest has played a significant role in regards to queer visibility and the fight for equality in St-Petersburg in the past. However, where their goals were once cemented in the need for increased visibility, there now lies, in the wake of the new legislation, a need for safe space, community building, and open discussions. This does not mean that Queerfest has abandoned their fight for visibility and equality but rather has expanded their mandate to incorporate more pressing issues created by the recent ban. Equality here is to be understood as social and political equality, not necessarily marriage equality. While many Western liberalist campaigns such as the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), the Gay & Lesbian Alliance against Defamation (GLAAD), and the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC) are driven by and taking place through rights conferred and regulated by the state, this does not seem to be the case in St-Petersburg. The Russian queer movement from my observations and interactions seems to be driven by a want to be seen, accepted, and treated in the same way as any other Russian but the right to same-sex marriage does not seem to be one of the main demands for sameness. Their slogans and campaigns all have a humanizing aspect which strives to demonstrate that queer Russians are just like anyone else. The movement is also propelled by the need to repel the new legislation as it fringes on their right to assemble and their freedom of speech.

As demonstrated in the festival’s brief history outlined above, the media exposure has certainly increased over the years and their efforts have progressively reached more

and more individuals in Russia and abroad. The festival has explored timely, sensitive, and crucial topics throughout its run and its expanding reach over the years has aided in the increased visibility of queer Russians. The ongoing support of European consulate representatives, foreign celebrities, and foreign media is a reflection of the continuing and growing foreign support the queer activists receive. Despite this growing foreign support, Queerfest still lacks local support, both politically and from the media. There were no identifiable Russian media personnel at any of the Queerfest events that I attended. The majority of media reports that surfaced following the festival were written by the host organization and its affiliates. The general sense that I get reading some of the brief new pieces from Russian correspondences is that they were not physically present at the festival but conducted interviews via e-mail with some of the organizers to get their general impressions. It is highly possible that there were reporters and journalists who simply attended events without openly declaring their affiliations. It is also plausible that journalists were instructed and cautioned on what they could report and write about due to the new legislation.

Lastly, the organizers in attempting to not engage in activities that could be seen as illegal within the new legal frame, also unknowingly and unintentionally created limits in regards to the overall accessibility of the festival. The mere fact that the organizers decided to host Queerfest in spite of the ban is commendable. However, my feelings are that in being overly cautious with their advertising, they limited their reach. Unfortunately, this is one of the major ramifications of the new and vague legislation. Queer individuals, organizers, and allies are forced to gather behind closed doors in order to not violate the law. I have not attended any other Queerfests prior to the enactment of this new legislation

and have no personal observations for comparison purposes. My statements and conclusions are formulated in what I did experience and observe at this year's festival in comparison to what I have read about the previous years' festivals. As a foreigner, I experienced difficulty in acquiring information about the festival, however, there were foreign media and European consulate representatives in attendance. The organizers may have been incredibly selective in putting together their audience in order to create and maintain a safe space and to help cultivate a sense of intimacy and community throughout the weeklong activities.

Another necessary point to highlight is the use of 'Western' histories, materials, scholars, workshop leaders, and special guests, and how this usage can be problematic within the Russian queer movement. Queer Russians have been associated with the West since the Bolshevik era as it was indicative of treason against the state. This is also a reality that has been observed and discussed by others in regards to similar historical patterns in the co-production of sexual and national others in Canada (Kinsman & Gentile 2010) and Austria (Bunzl 2004). This 'othering' was a tactic utilized by those in power to deal with political and ideological dissidents. Queer and dissident Russians were turned into a scapegoat – a menace that the state could point the finger at for all of its wrongdoing. Many of the anti-queer advocacy groups hold firmly to the idea that queerness is a Western import and the constant outpour of foreign support may fuel these sentiments. Queer Russians have received an incredible amount of foreign support from regions all over the world who have engaged in support campaigns, and have publicly expressed their grievances with the ban. There was a group of individuals who stood in solidarity outside of the Russian

consulate last summer during Ottawa's Pride Week. Several of these types of actions took place in other cities around the world.

This is a site of tension in the Russian contemporary queer movement. Queer issues are often times portrayed as backward in Russia, while being progressive and morally superior in the West. By drawing on Western events and histories, queer activists are inadvertently perpetuating this link between queerness and the West. It is not as though Western history is less lackluster than the Russian. The queer Russian history may be fragmented and difficult to piece together but it is existent as demonstrated in Queerfest's theme and art exhibit, and my previous chapter. This same point of friction between Russia and the West played out with the Swedish police officer's participation in an evening event.

Why was it that the organizers felt the need to have a Western presence on the panel? Was he there as a voice of reason? As an indicator that it is possible to be a police officer and queer? Did the workshop leader choose to highlight queer American triumphs to instill hope? Was it because these events are proven to have been successful? Was it because there were more events? The reasons behind the workshop leader's decision to create an entire workshop drawing on Western narratives as well as the Swedish police officer's presence are unknown. I did not have the opportunity to pose such questions as the peculiarities only came to me after stepping back and having the opportunity to reflect and discuss the events. The police officer question and answer evening was the last formal event that I attended as part of Queerfest. I attended the 'Art as Activism' workshop later that week, however, the other events were later at night or in a club setting. I chose to not attend order to avoid commuting in the middle of the night. My next opportunity to engage

with activism was at the conference at the end of October which I discuss in the subsequent section.

At the Crossroads: A Conference on Methodology, Theory, and Practice in LGBT and Queer Research

The ‘At the Crossroads’ conference was a three-day conference held at a Jewish community center at the end of October. The organizers of this year’s conference were Misha and Sergey whom I met at the same time as Sara when we all met up in her hotel in the Petrogradsky District for dinner. We ended up at a Georgian restaurant and despite meeting for the first time, the atmosphere was not thick with the awkwardness that usually accompanies first encounters. We all had at least one thing in common – queerness. This was something that was lightheartedly joked about at the table. Sara pointed out that we were two Russians, an American, and a Canadian, publicly talking in English about homosexuality when, for all that we knew, the individuals at the table next to us could be incredibly homophobic. It was a risk that had not crossed my mind at that exact moment but that had definitely been prominent in previous interactions with some of my English speaking colleagues during my stay. The fact that I rarely gave it a second thought while in Russia speaks volumes to my privilege as a Canadian and not having to constantly worry about who is within earshot when I openly discuss my sexuality or queer issues back home.

The dinner proved to be far more reflexive than I could have anticipated. I owe many thanks to Sergey for speaking of the conference in terms of academic activism. It had not crossed my mind to reflect and analyze the types of activism that I had encountered in St-Petersburg with such a lens. It also opened up paths of self-reflexivity that I had yet fully to consider. The dinner, being just that, was a turning point in my fieldwork. Although

it happened only a few days prior to my departure, it occurred nonetheless and it shifted my position vis-à-vis the activism that I had had access to.

Over dinner, we discussed how the previous organizers had been the same organization that has been hosting Queerfest for the past 4 years, Vykhod. However, Vykhod had not wanted to undertake it for the second time around. Misha and Sergey had seen this as their opportunity to turn the conference into more of an academic forum for researchers from Russia and abroad to present their work as it pertained to gender and queer theory in Russia, or countries that had once belonged to the former USSR. Whether the participants presenting at the conference saw their work as such or not, Sergey and Misha certainly saw the overall conference as academic activism. They viewed their work as well as those of their colleagues as crucial and incredibly important. One participant in particular definitely did not see herself as an activist. When asked whether the state or church had influenced the ways in which she now supports queer rights, she briefly discussed that by enacting this law, she has become more radical and has increased her interest in politics.

I have always been apolitical person, with the attitude like “who you are – is not a political matter.” Well, the “don’t say gay”-law made me see, that it actually **is** a political matter, so I might as well do something. I am too much of a coward to be an activist, so I hardly ever go to LGBT-actions, but I try to do some little things here and there. [Interview with Nina, Jan 27th, 2014]

It is striking that for this academic, she does not consider her work as activism. In her words, she is too cowardly to go to any queer actions and does not view herself as an activist. It is interesting to note, however, that she does follow up with the fact that she tries to do some little things here and there. There exists an underlying motivation to do *something*. It does not matter what but one cannot simply be passive, one must do, even if

it is only little things here and there. Nina was not explicit in outlining what these little things here and there are. In casual conversations throughout the weekend though, she did divulge that her ultimate goal is to teach and educate individuals on gender and queer theory in Russia.

Certainly, Nina is not alone in viewing herself as too cowardly to be an activist but there are several researchers who presented at the conference who view their work as activism and there are some who are also out on the streets. When asked whether the conference could be understood as a type of academic activism, Misha replied with “for me, academia without activism does not make sense. I think researchers are engaged politically, even when they believe that they are engaged exclusively in 'objective' science” (Interview with Misha, Jan 24th, 2014). This political engagement was witnessed and experienced in many of the paper presentations and discussions following them at the conference. The topics ranged from the role of gender and race in Russian postcoloniality, queer pedagogy and education in Russia, promotions and strategies of resistance, to the production of normativity in the discourse of the propaganda ban. It was through casual discussions with many of the presenters, and interactions on Academia.edu that I learned about their activist efforts as well as some of their other research interests. One of the panelists’ photos on social media showcase her in rallies and picket lines, and Misha was photographed attending Queerfest. I had not met Misha yet when Queerfest took place but I did recognize him when browsing photographs at a later date.

The conference was an overall success according to the organizers despite having received threats of disruption. Misha expressed to me that all panels and keynotes ran smoothly. There were over 150 guests who attended the conference throughout the

weekend. Two of the keynotes were presented by Dan Healey and Laurie Essig; Brian Baer was originally scheduled to present also, however, due to unforeseen circumstances, he was unable to do so. Interestingly, Healey presented his keynote via Skype from England (there were rumours floating about as to why but no solid confirmation was ever expressed). Many presenters came from outside of Russia to deliver their papers; some were from Germany, Ukraine, and Poland to name a few. Despite the variety of nationalities present, the working language of the conference was Russian and the majority of the attendees were Russian. There were a few faces that I recognized from Queerfest but none presented. These also happened to be the same individuals who I recognized at Queerfest from having seen them in news articles prior to my arrival. There were a few, not many, street activists in attendance.

In terms of visibility, the conference reached a targeted audience and I am uncertain of how widespread its reach actually was. The attendees, presenters, and organizers promoted the event on social media platforms after the conference had come to a close. The Centre for Independent Social Research uploaded videos of the various panels throughout the following months, providing those who were unable to physically attend the conference the opportunity to engage with the material. They also put together a printed version of the polished papers in the winter of this year and plan to host a workshop this summer. Their hope is that more conferences will be planned and that in doing so, they endeavour to slowly break down the stigma that surrounds queer issues in Russia. These academics aspire to create, through their work, a queer-friendly space and to develop a queer academic and academic-friendly 'community' in St-Petersburg. Although attempting to achieve this goal through different means, Queerfest and the conference both

endeavoured to create these queer-friendly spaces and ‘community.’ In Misha’s own words, the conference’s main goal was “to create a common language for expressing sexuality - general terms, vocabulary, approach, methodology. We are trying to create a block of scientific work which could be strong enough to resist the repressive actions of the state” (Interview with Misha, Jan 24th, 2014). Here, the conference as academic activism operates to open and express dialogue outside of state rights such as autonomous science and art (as discussed in the previous section). I would argue that art as explored within the context of graffiti finds itself within both street and academic activism. Graffiti aims to shock yet educate and is more often than not in public places frequented by many people. Ultimately, this conference functions as and creates a space of open dialogue characterized by the panel presentations, discussions, and open forums. This in turn contributes to the building and shaping of new sexual publics in which queer Russians, activists, and allies have the opportunity to speak freely among peers. In the end, all these efforts bulk up what Misha referred to as a block of scientific work which could one day resist the repressive actions of the state much like what street activism attempts to achieve with their campaigns.

‘Out’ in the Streets: Street Activism in St-Petersburg

By bringing this new ban into legislation, the state and church are attempting, in my perspective, to equally control both public and private spheres as well as the information that is passed within them – dissemination of knowledge (Foucault 1990:17-18; 34-35). Queer activists in St-Petersburg are now faced with new hurdles as they continue to fight for visibility, and equality, as well as attempt to create safe and shared spaces in which they

can openly discuss their current struggles and forge social bonds. They are forced to rethink their campaigns and make use of places in creative ways. Through adapting to the new law, queer activists are innovatively using common places such as apartments, coffee shops, outdoor squares, and community centres, as well as online networks (i.e. Facebook and Vkontakte's group '404 Not Found') to create spaces (both physical and virtual) in which they can engage with peers. In charting out street activism along with academic activism, my aim is to set the stage for the upcoming discursive discussion in Chapter Four. This mapping out is essential in order to outline how both state and queer discursive practices are producing knowledge about (queer) sexualities.

Activism in St-Petersburg, and more recently across Russia has become an illegal act since President Putin signed off on a nationwide bill banning the “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations” on June 26th, 2013. This legislation effectively prohibits all public events in support of queer rights anywhere where minors may be present. The law is structured in such a way that what is deemed illegal is extremely vague and potentially any type of advocacy for queer or equal rights can be and has been perceived as a violation of Article 6.21. The bill prohibits

distributing information among minors that 1) is aimed at... creating nontraditional sexual attitudes, 2) makes nontraditional sexual relations attractive, 3) equates the social value of traditional and nontraditional sexual relations, 4) creates an interest in nontraditional relations. [Grekov 2013]

This law clearly limits the possible ways queer activists and allies can protest and express their discontent with the current state of affairs in St-Petersburg, and across Russia. A decrease in the number of public rallies, demonstrations, and participation in marches would be what most would expect as a result of this legislation. However, this is not the

case. Activists have and continue to publicly gather in city squares, in open fields, and even in front of the Duma in Moscow to protest the current state of affairs for queer identifying Russians.

In the following discussion, the information that I am drawing from does not come from firsthand experience. As previously mentioned, due to agreements with the ethics board for my safety, that of the activists and of my research, my statements and conclusions in this section come from newspaper reports, video clips, and the publications of queer and ally organizations in St-Petersburg. In the city, there have been at least six public demonstrations since the beginning of May 2013.

On May 1st, 2013, the ‘Straight Alliance for LGBT Equality’ and Vykhod, joined by many supporters, took part in the May Day (or Labour Day) March (Figure 3.3). This colourful section of the march was part of a bigger grouping of various democratic parties



Figure 3.3. May Day Parade/March on May 1st, 2013. (Photo courtesy of ‘Vykhod’).

and groups in St-Petersburg. The participants held signs protesting the citywide law, yet to be nationwide, and waved rainbow flags which were originally denied as they made their way down one of the city’s

most historical strips, Nevsky Prospekt. The front of the section held a rainbow banner

with the slogan *'trebuyet otmeny pozornovo gomofobnovo zakona'* (We demand the cancellation of the infamous homophobic law). I highlight this event not only for its success but also because it is potentially the only public event during which physical harm and no arrests or detentions of activists occurred. Olga Lenkova, a member of Vykhod, had this to say when reflecting on the rally and its significance

Many people think that the problems of LGBT people are private issues. But this is not true. In a society that is ready to discriminate one, no one is safe from discrimination. We are being set against each other by our government, under the guise of concern for the morals of children, and myths about "foreign agents." But I want to remind all of us: solidarity is stronger than repression! [Vykhod 2013]

Another advocacy and visibility event worth highlighting is the one that took place on May 17th, 2013. May 17th is known as the International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHOT) and the activists in St-Petersburg are no strangers to recognizing and participating in international days such as this one. The event took place in one of the city's main parks, *Marsovo Pole* (Field of Mars) and was organized by the same two groups previously mentioned. It was also an event to commemorate the death of 23 year old gay activist, Vladislav Tornovoi, who was the victim of a hate crime on May 9th (Blyth 2013). Those who gathered in the park that day released multi-coloured balloons up into the sky in his memory. Despite lasting merely a dozen of minutes, this commemorative event happens to be one of the largest public demonstrations for queer issues in Russia (Reid-Smith 2013). This event demonstrates that after the implementation of the citywide legislation, anti-gay sentiments are on the rise. Those who are firmly against queer rights are becoming braver, bolder, and certainly better organized. However, in spite of the law,

the homophobic groups and the increase in violence, queer activists and allies are finding a voice and speaking up for their rights.

Continuing with this trend, a mere two days after the ban on the “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations” was brought into legislation, five same-sex couples applied for marriage licenses on June 28th, 2013. They did so despite it evidently not being sanctioned by the state. These couples were also part of the attempted gay pride parade that took place the following day on the 29th in a public park. All those who participated were arrested and detained, including the organizer of the parade, Yury Gavrikov, and his partner. They also happened to also be one of the couples who had applied for the marriage license the previous day. At this point, it is necessary to highlight that pro-gay participants were detained, some even kept overnight, while anti-gay protesters, who far outnumbered pro-gay protesters, were released shortly after the altercation was broken up by police officers.

The one-man protest which took place in Palace Square on August 2nd, 2013, is a perfect example of the unexpected onus police officers have been saddled with in lieu of the ban. Kirill Kalugin, a young activist, stood in the middle of Palace Square, bravely holding a rainbow banner with “*Eto propaganda tolerantnosti*” (This is propagating tolerance) written across it. His choice of location could not have been more ideal. Palace Square is an extremely public and symbolic location which is flooded by Russians and foreigners alike on a daily basis. It is the home of the world renowned Hermitage State Museum, the Winter Palace, and has also played host to Bloody Sunday of 1905 and the October Revolution of 1917. His choice of day during which to hold a one-man picket may not have been the best. August 2nd happens to be the Russian Airborne Troops Day; an

annual military pride celebration which often turns into drunken public debauchery. Unfortunately for Kalugin, a group of inebriated paratroopers were making their way through Palace Square when they spotted his one-man picket and began to harass him. The incident quickly turned violent when police attempted to interfere and the drunken men formed a human barricade as they continued to physically and verbally torment Kalugin. Eventually, the police were able to pull Kalugin free and placed him inside the back of their vehicle. Russian Special Forces (OMOH) arrived later on the scene and wrestled the paratroopers into the Special Forces' truck (Galperina 2013; Gold 2013).

There are two other public activist events that occurred in October and January. I will not delve into these as I have with the previous examples but I believe it crucial to mention them regardless. A small group of activists gathered, once again, at Marsovo Pole on October 12th, 2013, in recognition of National Coming Out Day. They were faced with a large group of nationalists, conservatives, and members of the Orthodox Church. The last event happened the eve of the opening ceremonies for the Sochi 2014 Olympic Games. A number of activists from the 'Straight Alliance for LGBT Equality,' secretly planned to release balloons inside metro stations throughout the city to raise awareness of the bigotry hidden by the Olympic Games. They had signs that were equating Sochi 2014 with the Berlin summer Olympics of 1936. They were unsuccessful in the overall completion of their coup as police officers were waiting for them at the entrances to the metro stations. Despite their efforts in keeping all information off the internet, and only disclosing the details to those involved, information somehow leaked to officials and their attempts were thwarted.

There are multiple reasons why I have chosen to document the recent history of queer activist endeavours. By offering a short recent timeline, the commonalities between public advocacy demonstrations or rallies become evident. All these events took place in outdoor spaces such as parks, city squares, or metro stations. These events were part of public (read accessible to all) knowledge which offered the opportunity to those who are against queer rights to assemble and protest. All but one event ended with individuals, from both sides, to be arrested or detained for a certain amount of time. In St-Petersburg, it would seem that hatred and violence are intrinsic to public advocacy and, unfortunately, are expected and are an unavoidable factor of street activism. These acts demonstrate how activists are co-opting state terminology (i.e. propagate, propaganda, non-traditional) and subverting it into queer activist rhetoric to further their goals which will be discussed further in Chapter Four.

Quasi-Boundary Publics: Queer Visibility and Identity Work

The current state of affairs surrounding queer rights and individuals in Russia has without a doubt contributed to the effervescence of queer studies and activism across the country. It is through their engagement in public spaces, and with peers, that queer Russians are able to negotiate and explore their sexual and gender identities. Their activism defines the spaces they occupy and it is through their activism that queer activists are able to transform everyday places into spaces of visibility and equality, if but for fleeting moments. These locations, be they streets, public squares, fields, or art galleries, are, ultimately, momentarily changed through activist practices (Pandya 1990). I will engage and explore Gray's articulation of 'boundary publics' and how the events that took place in her

fieldwork are best understood as ‘boundary publics’ rather than static and bounded. In doing so, I will be weighing the usefulness of ‘boundary publics’ as a lens for my own ethnographic experience and observations, as well as demonstrating the multiple points of contact between Gray’s ‘boundary publics’ and my understanding of my field sites and events. Her articulation and exploration of ‘boundary publics,’ despite being applied in a different context, provides a useful lens through which to think about the kind of space that is created by activists in St-Petersburg.

Out in the Country: Youth, Media and Queer Visibility in Rural America (Gray 2009) is an ethnography that looks at the lives of queer youth in rural America. In it, Gray argues that “LGBT-identifying youth and their allies use their status as ‘familiar locals’ as well as tenuous access to each other, public spaces, and media-circulated representations of LGBT identities to rework the boundaries of public recognition and local belonging” (Gray 2009:4). Due to Gray’s analyses, informed through social theories of public spaces, queer studies of community and digital media studies, this ethnographic work has provided me with new lenses to look at the queer activist movement as it unravels in St-Petersburg. The queer rural youth in Gray’s ethnography utilize methods such as online discussion lists, monthly meetings, actions letters, listserv, and varying campaigns such as signature drives to help solidify their presence in their local communities. “These young people’s strategies offer models for rethinking the relationship among visibility, public spaces, and media, particularly in a digital era” (Gray 2009:15).

The queer activists in St-Petersburg have and still are utilizing similar methods as the queer youth in Gray’s work. They participate in online discussions, some attend meetings, and they organize various campaigns throughout the year. They do not, however,

rely on their statuses as ‘familiar locals’ to help create a place for themselves in their communities. Such a position is difficult to negotiate in Russia as many non-queer Russians firmly believe they have never encountered a queer individual. Some of these individuals even hold to the notion that there are no queer individuals at all in Russia. In this sense, the American rural setting of Gray’s work, like Russia, is understood and seen as antithetical to being queer. Individuals have a difficult time accepting that queer individuals do inhabit rural spaces, just like queer individuals do live in Russia. I did not encounter queer Russians relying on their statuses as familiar locals to help establish recognizable queer spaces and to foster acceptance. The events of Queerfest and the conference evoke a different kind of politics, one based in belonging, solidarity, the creation of safe, queer-friendly spaces and is potentially more underground than the rural queer movements in Gray’s work. The street activist campaigns, for their part, are more in line with those described by Gray. The street activists practice a politics of presence, and of visibility by being out (possibly in more ways than one) on the streets.

In her ethnography, Gray posits boundary publics as “iterative, ephemeral experiences of belonging that circulate across the outskirts and through the center(s) of a more recognized and validated public sphere” (Gray 2009:92-93). One example in Gray’s work is the Wal-Mart, a validated public sphere, through which young queer men gather and put on drag shows in the aisles of the department store. It is referred to by one of her informants as a rite of passage through which queer youth come to belong to the queer rural community. However, these boundary publics are fragile and can easily be broken down. As was the case with the Wal-Mart, the youth relied on their friend who worked cash to look out for them in case any customers confronted them. It only took one incident when

there was nobody there to stand up for them for this boundary public to crumble. The youth stopped frequenting the Wal-Mart and ceased to conduct drag sessions there. This demonstrates the fragile and ephemeral quality of the Wal-Mart as a public space for them to conduct their queer identity work and highlights the ways in which they relied on familiar locals to do so. In addition, one of the most important characteristics for Gray's boundary publics is that they are not identified, defined, or identifiable as queer spaces. As demonstrated with the Wal-Mart example, being queer is possible in these spaces but these spaces are not known as queer spaces.

Understanding Queerfest and the 'At the Crossroads' conference through the notion of boundary publics allows for more of an adaptable interpretation of these events to take place and this is due to the "permeable and malleable" quality of these publics (Gray 2009:95). Most importantly, it provides me with a distinctive lens to demonstrate how these events are moments through which queer activists are able to negotiate and articulate their own kind of belonging, and through which they are able to fashion a 'community,' and queer identities. For some, this may be their first foray into exploring their queer identity or their first time interacting with other queer individuals. For others, this may be the only occasion during which they can embody their queer identity without persecution. Queerfest departs from Gray's boundary publics in the sense that the festival is identifiable as queer and for its duration, the 'Non-Existent Floor' also was, unlike the skate park or Wal-Mart which are not identifiable as queer spaces. Despite being identified as queer, however, there are aspects of the festival that emit a certain underground quality and reflect Gray's articulation of permeability and malleability distinct to boundary publics.

Within informal conversations, both Queerfest and the conference were talked of as ‘private’ events. They both took place in spaces that were not the street, an art gallery and a community center respectively. However, this did not make them inherently private. Additionally, they were also promoted in such a way that the information was available to only a certain group of chosen individuals but in the end, these events were accessible to all who really sought to attend them as is indicative of the public media in attendance. These spaces were not previously designated queer, nor were they recognized as such after the events had concluded. Their lack of specificity, their vagueness, is what makes them so viable to the queer activists in Russia. This is also applicable to all the locations that previously played host to Queerfest. It was only throughout the *moments* that were Queerfest and the conference that these spaces were transformed by and for the people temporarily inhabiting them. As Gray posits in her work, “in principle, these spaces [in rural America] are open to all on a first-come, first-serve basis. In practice, however, there is a local reckoning for allocating affordable or free gathering space, a limited resource. At the same time, conventions of public access and acceptance opened these sites to queer visibility” (Gray 2009:100).

Queerfest, over the years, has been created and offered in such ways that it grants individuals an outlet to discuss and explore sexuality, as well as any timely topics the queer community may be dealing with. The festival provides individuals, who may not be “out” publicly, the opportunity to gather with peers and to be “out” momentarily. This was the case with several individuals that I briefly conversed with throughout the week. Many queer Russians live with or have families with their partners but they do so only in the “privacy” of their own homes. Queerfest is often times one of the few opportunities they

have to be “out” beyond being “out” with a few individuals. This was also one of the main reasons certain people requested specifically not to have their photograph taken during workshops or discussions as these photos were later posted on the official website and Queerfest’s Facebook page. Therein lies one of the key differences between participating in queer protests and rallies, and attending Queerfest for queer Russians – the level of “outing.” This does not mean to say that Queerfest and the conference do not contribute or aim to achieve visibility of queer Russians. Regardless of their underground nature, these events do receive some media attention and in doing so, they solidify their place within Russian society and culture. As I just mentioned though, academic activist events offer more “privacy” than participating in a street rally or protest and as such offers a sense of safety and belonging to those who take part in them. This is reflected in Nina’s earlier comment and perception of herself as being too cowardly to participate in any queer actions. On the other hand, there are individuals such as Toma who simply do not feel the need or drive to engage in any sort of advocacy activities.

Throughout the five years of its existence, Queerfest has never once been hosted at the same venue, and has always featured a new theme and focus. These venues, also, are not queer spaces. Similar to pride parades, these spaces become queer only for the duration of the festival and through the presence of queer and queer friendly individuals. Every year, the organizers demonstrate an understanding of the demand from the public Queerfest aims to reach, and its success only continues to grow. The festival’s unpredictability, and malleability, paired with its overall goal, are what make it viable as a quasi-boundary public. However, these characteristics are also what make it easy to disrupt as was experienced repeatedly when venues would pull back unexpectedly, forcing the festival’s

organizers to scramble at the last minute. The overall lack of queer designated spaces in St-Petersburg also weighs in significantly on the fragility of Queerfest as a quasi-boundary public. Additionally, as was the case in Gray's examples, local "elites" in St-Petersburg (such as Vitaly Milonov) are pushing to maintain a certain image of what it means to be Russian. These individuals are able to regulate spaces in which individuals are struggling for recognition and legitimacy and this is highly reflected in the propaganda law.

It is in light of this new propaganda law that Queerfest and the conference are both so fascinating. They have repeatedly demonstrated the capability of bringing together queer and ally Russians for the purposes of queer visibility and exploration. Seeing and understanding these events as a quasi-boundary public, as moments in flux, blurs the divide between public and private, allowing for a greater exploration of the various ways queer activists, particularly in St-Petersburg, are able to carve out spaces for themselves. In doing so, boundary publics also highlight the different ways through which visibility can be achieved. Queer visibility in St-Petersburg is not only attained through brandishing a sign in the middle of a public square, or by being photographed by the media. As Queerfest and the conference demonstrate, it can be obtained in less overtly visible venues, through queer festivals, discussions, workshops, and academic conferences. Similarly to some of my informants, I first began to approach these activist events as private versus public. However, I realized that in doing so, I am cutting myself off from viewing how they are utilizing spaces to express their private selves (Gray 2009:116). These individuals are commandeering spaces, and working within the boundaries of the new legislation in order to find a place for themselves as both queer and Russian within St-Petersburg. These activists are in the process of what Berlant and Warner discuss as queer world-making

(1998:558-559) and as a result, are making queer publics despite the ban. Through both street and academic activisms, these individuals are carving out a world for themselves in a city (and country) that continues to systematically attempt to eliminate all knowledge pertaining to them. In other words, these individuals are in an ongoing struggle against a state that is essentially attempting to eradicate their very queerness.

Chapter Four

Discourse, Identity, and Activism

“*Ty normal’naia?*” (Are you normal?) Two seemingly harmless words strung together to create a sentence – a question. A sentence that when originally uttered, its *true* meaning completely evaded me. I will always remember that afternoon outside of the Evropeysky Mall with Tamara and Vlad, two of my Muscovite friends, who were showing me around Moscow during my three day visit in 2010. It was early July and we had decided to beat the heat by sitting along the massive water fountain and enjoy a few locally brewed beers. The exact nature of our light afternoon banter escapes me but I vividly remember when Vlad nonchalantly asked me “*Ty normal’naia?*” as if he were inquiring about something as inconsequential as the weather. I should emphasize that at the time, I had only two years of Russian language training under my belt and the only native speaker I had had any significant kind of interaction with was my university professor in Canada. The direct translation was not what baffled me. What slipped through the cracks was what Vlad was seeking by asking that question. Of course, I am normal. It seemed like a ridiculous question as I had never viewed myself otherwise. However, what Vlad had been inquiring about had not been whether I was deviant or not, but rather what my sexual orientation was. This only occurred to me well after the exchange had taken place and in its aftermath, I began to consider whether language, Russian in particular, had the potential to play a key role in mediating identities, queer identities specifically.

It was during this trip, and through this very interaction that some semblance of a thesis question began to take shape. The interaction between Vlad and myself prompted me to begin asking questions about language and identity within the Russian context. My

focus has been refined over the past four years. It has transformed from a language centric interest to a broader interest in queer activism and discursive politics in St-Petersburg, Russia. This chapter draws on personal experiences and observations as well as media based examples to explore the ways various discourses have the potential to be productive of queer subjectivities and identities in St-Petersburg, Russia. In exploring these discursive fields, I engage with notions of gender, performativity, and queer performativity and unpack how these discourses are negotiated and resisted by Russian queer activists.

My focus on language emanates from an understanding that language is a lens through which one comes to understand a culture. “‘Culture’ exists only by virtue of its being invoked – indexically called into being – primarily in discursive interaction, the kind of social action that occurs through the use of language and its dependent sign systems” (Silverstein 1998:266). Furthermore, Silverstein posits that language, when in use, embodies sociohistorically-located phenomena of the existing social order (Silverstein 1998:266). By engaging with and understanding language, one not only glimpses a culture as it presents itself in the present-day but one can also gather information of its historicity and the potential ways language affects its present expression. It does so by providing genealogical reasoning behind why certain cultural acts and sentiments are the way they are. My discussion of the various discursive fields in St-Petersburg, Russia, focuses on understanding how these fields are representative of the wider culture(s) and the multiple methods through which discursive acts accomplish or ‘perform’ something (Butler 1988; Silverstein 1976).

In this chapter, I briefly outline the gendered aspects of the Russian language in order to provide context to the examples given further in the chapter. Second, I delve into

the multiple discursive spheres found at play in activist circles. I examine state-based, medical, nationalist, moral, and global gay discourses. To start, I unpack the two legislations (the propaganda and foreign agent laws) and sketch how these are part of larger state-based discourses. The ways in which queer activists respond to these state-based discourses are in innovative and embodied practices. These practices are outlined while discussing the larger frames within which they operate. I then delve into the link between queerness, un-Russianness, and illness narratives drawing from an interaction I witnessed at the Queerfest opening ceremonies and a public event in Marsovo Pole. I end the chapter by engaging with external influences and factor in ways these have been significant in shaping queerness in St-Petersburg. Additionally, I consider the weight of moralizing discourses along with the notion of moral panics as it pertains to the Russian context (Cohen 1972). This focus on moralizing discourses and moral panics is influenced by analysis of state-based discourses. These discursive fields shape queer identities in the public's eye and influence how these individuals are perceived and received by the majority of society.

Why is 'stol' masculine?: A Short Introduction to Russian Language

I find it necessary at this point to briefly go over a few linguistic rules of the Russian language. This is crucial moving forward to demonstrate how the Russian language can regulate the identities plausible and possible to Russian individuals in general, let alone Russian queer individuals. It is a gendered Slavic language which is structured by six different cases (nominative, accusative, dative, prepositional, genitive, and instrumental). Similar to other languages, like German, words will decline according to both gender and case. Everything from adjectives to verb endings agree with the subject of the sentence.

Cases are imperative in the Russian language as nouns will vary in case depending on their role in the sentence (i.e. a subject will always be in nominative and the object will decline depending on its purpose).

An individual is very much limited in expressing themselves when it comes to navigating the gendered linguistic parameters set out by the Russian language if they are to identify outside of the male/female binary. These gendered linguistics parameters are not unique to the Russian language. There exist potential ramifications with serious undertones in identifying with the third gender, that of neuter, since this gender is more often than not associated with inanimate objects. Make no mistake, this is the correct wording for this gender. I, too, found it odd and thought perhaps my professor was saying ‘neuter’ instead of ‘neutral’ but that was not the case. The third gender is ‘neuter.’ I will be drawing from a gender fluid example provided by Dan Healey later on in this chapter to illustrate how the gendered characteristic of the Russian language can be ‘played’ with for purposes of gender expression.

The gendered aspect of the Russian language, which it shares with many other languages, was something that tripped up many of my peers in my first level university courses and it is something that raises a problem for foreigners using online translators when reading online interactions. Many online translators will, by default, translate into masculine endings and so it is easy to discern whether someone is using a translator if you happen to know the gender they identify with. The concept of a gendered language such as Russian did not strike me as odd or difficult being fluently bilingual in French and English. However, I can acknowledge the difficulties of grasping gendered nouns as I witnessed my father’s frustrations when he unsuccessfully tackled French. Similar to my father’s

question of ‘why is the table feminine?’ (*la table*) in French, many of my colleagues asked ‘why is the table masculine?’ (*stol*) in Russian. It simply is; there really is no answer that will adequately address these questions. As an example of gender deviance, Dan Healey provides the case of Kiselev, an effeminate male who fell victim to murder. Kiselev would say *ya poshla* or *ya poguliala* (I went or I went out) rather than the correct masculine formation of the same verb, *ya poshel* or *ya pogulial* (Healey 2012:517). The verb endings clearly highlight the gendered identity of the speaking subject. By adopting the feminine conjugation of the verb, Kiselev automatically identified himself outside of the expected male identity. This is an exceptional example to highlight due to how heavily rooted the Russian populous is in gendered norms and is an ideal segue into the following section.

Gender Ideology in St-Petersburg, Russia

Sexual and gender identities are not always mutually dependent but they are often taken as such. The prevailing sex-gender ideology in Russia is that individuals who are biologically male and identify as men should desire the opposite sex and gender and the same applies to women. However, this is not always so clear cut or the case as there are same-sex desiring individuals, as well as trans* individuals, gender non-conforming people to name a few examples. The ways in which gender and sex are socially constructed and reinforced through their construction is tied to sexual discourse and sexual desires. To put it succinctly, how one relates with their gender *may* be reflective of how they sexually desire or identify. “Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” [sic] (Butler 1988:519). This unquestioned knowledge

of male and female gender roles is certainly not innate; it is not inscribed on our behavioral slates at birth. It is reinforced by institutions and individuals through every day practices as well as discursive ones and is omnipresent in every facet of everyday life. This is not respective of one location but speaks to gender roles in any culture. I bring attention to these words because as outlined in my historical chapter, state, medical and religious institutions have had their hands in shaping hegemonic heteronormative standards and these continue to persist in present day Russia. However, these words also mean that gender identities are culturally and locally variable, and although they are taken as truths, they are not. The extensive and persistent association of same-sex desires with gender deviance indicates the power of a heteronormative principle which naturalizes heterosexuality and the gender difference it requires (Cameron 2005:495).

Sexual identities, like gender identities, are also culturally and locally mutable. These identities may be established through one's desires as well as actions or inactions. However, sexuality like gender is also to be understood as fluid and to be found within a spectrum, not a binary. Along these lines, sexual identities may conform or may be outside of what is socially and culturally expected and accepted. In speaking with Misha, an independent social science research, he highlighted that the very notion that one could have an identity, that it is something someone could possess, to be an individual, does not have the same historicity in Russia as it does in the West. As demonstrated in my historical chapter, the Russian state focused historically on collectivization, the state as a whole, being part of something greater than the individual. Heterosexuality was the unquestioned and undisputed norm. This is certainly not Russia centric; however, heteronormativity was differently negotiated by Russians, including queer Russians. Heterosexuality simply was

what was expected of good Russian citizens and those who found themselves on the periphery of the good Russian society felt at odds. Many have reported struggles in accepting their desires and some even tell anecdotes of trying to fit in by having relationships with the opposite sex (Gessen and Huff-Hannon 2014).

Past generations of Russians did not ‘identify’ on the basis of their sexual activities. In the 1990s, the majority of ‘queer’ Russians interviewed by Essig expressed that their identities were not indicative of what they did in bed or who they engaged with in these activities (Essig 1999:126-127). Interestingly, many of the ‘queer’ Russians in Essig’s work stated a want, even a need, to marry the opposite sex and to establish a ‘normal’ family. Some even divulged that they would continue to engage in sexual activities with the same sex without informing their spouses. This highlights how pervasive the discourses surrounding the ‘normal’ family and the ‘exemplary’ Russian citizen have and continue to be in the everyday lives of Russian individuals. As demonstrated in my historical chapter, the Russian state, as well as the church, have had a tenacious presence in sexual discourses over the years. In all of my formal interviews and informal conversations, individuals identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. In all informal conversations, I did not encounter any Russians who expressed any sentiments along the lines of what Essig came across during the period of her fieldwork in the late 80s and early 90s. Additionally, I did not speak with any Russians who opted to identify as ‘queer.’ As mentioned elsewhere in my thesis, the term ‘queer’ in Russian context seems to be utilized more within academic settings rather than for identity purposes. There is one emerging trend and that is of being out which is something that coincides with broader historical changes in Russia. These are linked to the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 and the slow yet progressive breakdown of

the 'collective' project. As the ideology of collectivization crumbled, a focus on the individual began to crystalize and a politics of identity began to emerge. These politics take on its own local shape in contemporary Russia as my introductory vignette affirms.

'Ty normal'naia' then as a performative demonstrates how utterances can be both generative and dissimulative. Their effect compels certain types of behaviour by camouflaging the very fact that there is no essential, natural sex to which gender can refer as its origin. This can be seen, as previously discussed, in the various ways Russians have felt compelled and some to this day feel compelled to marry and establish a family despite their queer desires. How are queer activists navigating these discourses now? What practices are they engaging in to potentially break through this hegemonic heterosexuality in St-Petersburg? How are they pushing back against a legislation that is attempting to silence them?

State-Based Discourses: I Am a Human Being, Not Propaganda

Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. [Foucault 1990:100-1]

Through the exploration of discourse, it is possible to arrive at a multitude of relations and manifestations of power. In Russia, it is through various discourses that power, language, and identity coalesce. With the recent ban of the propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations, the state and church are creating national and political discourses that frame

relations as traditional and non-traditional. A very distinctive separation of traditional and non-traditional has been created and this legislation does not allow for a liminal grey zone between the two. In enacting this law, and by legislating it, the state is producing and reinforcing power over the queer minority by creating these very spheres of traditional and non-traditional identities. However, as Foucault articulates, power, due to the ways in which it is transmitted in discourse, is not merely consolidated but is also unstable, fragile, and even capable of being circumvented. It is in these instances that activism can be seen as more than reactive. It is participating in similar modes and methods of discourse as the state (i.e. body, symbols, art, and science) but with different effects. This is important to keep in mind as it plays into how we may understand activists' challenges to the ban.

The information that I am using that pertains with the written legislation is drawn from an unofficial translation done by the Russian LGBT Network. It is stated at the beginning that what has now been commonly referred to as the ban on the 'propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations' were amendments to Article 5 of the Federal Law 'On Protection of Children from Information that is Harmful to their Health and Development.' Additionally, it is mentioned that these additions were implemented with the aim of protecting children from information which refutes traditional family values. In this draft, Article 6.21 reads as follows.

Propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations among minors expressed in distribution of information that is aimed at the formation among minors of non-traditional sexual attitudes, attractiveness of non-traditional sexual relations, misperceptions of the social equivalence of traditional and non-traditional sexual relations, or enforcing information about non-traditional sexual relations that evokes interest to such relations, if these actions do not constitute a criminal offence is punishable by an administrative fine for citizens in the amount of four thousand to five thousand

rubles; for officials – forty thousand to fifty thousand rubles; for legal entities – from eight hundred thousand to one million rubles, or administrative suspension of activities for the period of up to ninety days.

It continues to list the other penalties depending on the medium utilized and individual propagating these non-traditional values. These new additions, Article 6.21, have stirred up quite a lot of confusion among the queer ‘community’ in St-Petersburg. What is considered propaganda? And more importantly, what are non-traditional sexual relations? Are traditional sexual relations only those that may produce children? If that is the case then anal, oral sex as well as sex with any form of contraception would be considered non-traditional sexual relations and these sexual activities are not engaged in only by queer individuals.

When asked about the phrasing of the new legislation, Vera mirrored these sentiments.

As far as I know, lawyers do not feel very confident in this terminology. Especially for "non-traditional sexual relations" and the relationship between man and woman, if they accept "unconventional" forms (eg, oral sex). Overall, it just provides the police and the courts broad interpretation, so that more people can be fined. [Interview with Vera, October 30th, 2013]

This uncertainty about the legislation and its wording was a topic of discussion during several of the workshops I attended during Queerfest. Many individuals expressed being uncomfortable with the law’s vagueness and with not knowing exactly what activities could be considered as propaganda and thus illegal. These concerns were brought up during the feminist workshop and during the evening with the invited LGBT identifying policemen and women.

Asked the same question as Vera, Misha, had this to say

Both terms... have no meaning. "Propaganda" is handy for an arbitrary term, used for stigmatization and this is not the first time (in Russia there is a ban on drug propaganda, extremism, terrorism). "Unconventional sexual relations" is most likely a modified term of "non-traditional sexual orientation," which was popular in the 1990s to refer to homosexuality in the media and everyday conversations. It is also used in the courts as a euphemism. [Interview with Misha, Jan, 2014]

A prominent theme surrounding this legislation and choice of words is that of purposeful vagueness. The interpretation of the law is subjective and varies from individual to individual which creates an atmosphere in which any action could potentially be against Article 6.21 and that anyone could potentially be fined or arrested. Furthermore, the 'Foreign Agents' act was brought into legislation in July 2012. These amendments require any non-government organization, or non-profit organizations, engaging in political activities and receiving funds from outside of Russia to register as 'foreign agents.' Many queer organizations were targeted and fined for not registering as 'foreign agents' due to the fact that some receive external funds to help support their causes and campaigns. The term 'foreign agent' itself holds heavy negative connotations in the Russian context and is rooted in Cold War ideologies of espionage and treason against the state (Karasova 2012).

The Russian State and Orthodox Church have in the past, and are currently once again, attempting to eliminate the dissemination of knowledge in regards to non-traditional ways of life (according to their definition of what is 'traditional'). As in the past, there is an attempt to make non-traditional sex irrelevant, and personal. In doing so, these two influential structures are enabling heteronormative conventions which ultimately work to hinder, and most certainly, make invisible the building and acceptance of nonnormative

public sexual cultures (Berlant & Warner 1998:553). However, this does not mean that the minority is powerless. Queer activists and allies have and are retaliating by utilizing humanizing discourses.

What is of particular interest to me is how specific forms of knowledge such as art, and speech, become discursive, sanctioned and legitimate, and in what way are these discourses internalized, processed, and even contested through queer activism. Through the lens of performativity, it is possible to observe and explore the productive force of activist and state discourses rather than their meaning or their assumed intention (Butler 1993). In order for something to be productive, it must have an effect – it must produce something in its performance or utterance. The following campaigns put forth by various organizations include productive performances despite the absence of vocalized utterances.

Queer activist protests have featured phrases that highlight equality, individuality, and personhood. These are articulated within a Western framework of individualized person, with inalienable rights. This steps away from the Soviet collectivized



Figure 4.1. Two Russians participating in the 'I am a human, not propaganda' campaign. Sign reads 'Мы люди, а не пропаганда' (We are human, not propaganda). (Photo courtesy of 'Vykhod').

individual when identity was understood as a common collective one. One campaign was titled '*Ia chelovek, a ne propaganda*' (I am a human being, not propaganda) and individuals were encouraged to take photographs of themselves holding various signs up as shown in Figure 4.1. Variations emerged such as 'my friend is a human being, not propaganda' and 'my sister/brother is a human being, not propaganda' as well as other creative formulations of this message. The campaign began by calling out for Russians to participate but the gallery of photographs on Vykhod's Facebook page speaks to the far reaching capacity of the campaign. There are numerous photographs of non-Russian individuals supporting the cause.

Another powerful campaign was the International Day against Homophobia and



Figure 4.2. Balloons released at the IDAHOT Flashmob at Marsovo Pole
(Photo courtesy of Kseniya Kirichenko via 'Vykhod')

Transphobia (IDAHOT) Flashmob event held at Marsovo Pole in St-Petersburg on May 17th, 2014. This was the 5th year that St-Petersburg has participated in the worldwide rainbow flashmob event where rainbow coloured balloons are released into the sky (shown in Figure 4.2). It was in 2009 that German artist, Wanja Kilber

conceived of rainbow flashmobs. Russia has participated in the event every May 17th since 2009 (Queer Russia Info 2014). An estimated 200 individuals showed up to participate in this year's flashmob and the event featured placards with the phrases such as '*My za lyubov*' (We are for love), '*Lyubov' delaet schastlivymi svekh*' (Love makes everyone happy), and '*Rebiata, davajte zhit' druzhno!*' (Guys (colloquial term for everybody), let's live together!).

These campaigns unify queer activists and allies through their very occurrence. They do not discriminate or marginalize specific individuals and they make use of discourse in such a way that their cause and the individuals involved are grounded in frames of familiarity and personhood. As briefly mentioned earlier, this notion of personhood breaks away from the vestiges of collectivized ideology from the socialist period and takes on more of a Western understanding of individualized persons. The younger generations, as well as those with higher education, seem to be the driving force behind this relatively recent conception of the individualized person. These campaigns' slogans and signage are created in such a way to draw in all queer, queer questioning, and ally support. They must be relatable in order to garner support which is easier said than done. As with all cities, a queer 'community' is never a seamless unification of likeminded individuals with no fissures. Unifying and being in accord has been a persistent obstacle Russian queer campaigns have faced in the past.

One of my informants, Misha, explained that, for him, there are three different groupings (he is careful in avoiding using the term 'community') of queer individuals in St-Petersburg. He lists them as such: (1) the political unification around queer official slogans; (2) the commercial community (much bigger than the other two) formed due to

the operation of commercial sites for queers (i.e. gay and lesbian clubs, bars, discos, cafes, shops, etc.); and (3) the urban community formed by the existence of certain places in the urban space which have a history as meeting grounds for casual gay sex ("cruising areas") (Interview with Misha, January 24th, 2014). The difficulties then do not only lie in countering state discourses that frame queerness as non-traditional but also lie in unifying queer Russians who have varying personal politics and goals. The campaigns outlined above are unifying in that they do not highlight specific demands. They are not geared towards one specific goal, such as the legalization of same-sex marriage, which has the possibility of alienating certain queer individuals who do not align themselves with that political endeavour. To conclude this discussion on state-based discourse, I bring attention to what Rubin discussed in her article "Thinking Sex" when she underscored that the laws and policies aimed at curtailing the activities of sexual deviants embody and maintain the social relations of sexuality. "The law buttresses structures of power, codes of behavior and forms of prejudice. At their worst, sex law and sex regulations are simply sexual apartheid" (Rubin 2011:163).

Medical Discourse: What is so 'sick' about Queerness?

As I discussed in Chapter Two, same-sex desires as well as queer identities were rooted in spheres of medicalization and deviance by authority figures such as the state and medical system. These frames of thought are still prominent in contemporary Russia as my opening vignette demonstrates. Heterosexuality is framed in 'normality' while desiring otherwise is understood as 'abnormal.' Vlad did not formulate his question in a way that asked whether I identified as queer or a lesbian. His question was specific in that it framed my

desires in a normal/abnormal binary, forcing me to identify with one or the other. During a small rally on National Coming Out Day in October 2013, queer activists and allies were outnumbered by religious Orthodox representatives and anti-queer movement supporters. One man in particular was shown in a YouTube video speaking to a queer activist and shouting at them that they were *bol'noi* (sick) and required medical intervention (Volokhonsky 2013). These words (*bol'noi*, *netraditsionnyi* (non-traditional)) carry a similar performative effect as the derogatory usage of 'queer' in Western discourses. The meaning has shifted from the British usage to designate something as 'different' or 'odd' to a derogatory slang for same-sex desiring individuals. The repetition of these words gain the power to marginalize the subject they were directed at through their very repetitive utterance (Butler 1993). No utterance can properly function as a performative without the accumulation of force which occurs over time. By acknowledging that discourses then have a history, it is rather clear how their histories are both rooted in their previous usages but also condition their present ones.

Returning to my opening narrative, "ty normal'naia?" automatically creates a normal/abnormal binary in relation to sexual identity. In the same way that the law creates traditional and non-traditional categories, the structure and utterance of this question creates another similar divide. To say "*Ia ne normal'naia*" (I am not normal/I am abnormal) does not hold the same equivalent as subverting the term queer and utilizing it as a way to identify. By answering 'yes,' you are inevitably assigning yourself a label of normalcy and lumping yourself with the hegemonic heteronormative majority, and if you answer 'no,' you are immediately adopting the label of abnormal, or deviant, even un-Russian. How do individuals navigate this linguistic trap if they do not self-identify as heterosexual but do

not view themselves as abnormal? This discursive production puts the person in a bind and has the potential to wreak havoc on individuals' overall wellbeing. Some individuals find themselves restricted discursively and attempt to push the boundaries by creating new forms of identities for themselves, in turn forcing discursive practices to adapt. Others appropriate terminology from another language, one that allows for a more inclusive approach to the various ways individuals identify. I have witnessed this with the emergence of the word *kvir* among many Russians. This, to me, seems to be a recent development. However, it is possible that due to the nature of my first visit in 2010, I was not paying close attention to the terminology used among my friends and did not register if the term was used or not. Furthermore, the term seems to be used more in conjunction with theory rather than identity. All participants when asked their sexual identity chose terms that were part of the LGBT acronym rather than identifying with the umbrella term 'queer.' Additionally, some individuals simply concede to the hegemonic discourses and force themselves into an identity that does not necessarily suit them.

Nationalist Discourse: The Milonov Factor

In the previous chapter, I detailed how I arrived to the 'Non-existent floor' for Queerfest 2013. I omitted one interaction that I had the opportunity to witness and I did so purposefully, as this particular exchange is significant for the themes I discuss here. This absent moment occurred while I began to take in my surroundings on the stoop of the apartment building and to take inventory of the faces around me. I disclosed previously that many faces became familiar the longer I stood on the stoop, calculating my next move, attempting to narrow in on which individual to follow inside.

I expressed that amongst all the unknown aspects of this ongoing adventure, the faces of particular activists were little morsels of the familiar that I could cling to. One particular face, however, was unfamiliar to me when it should have been imprinted in my memory. It belonged to Vitaly Milonov. Honestly, I had heard of Milonov and I am certain that at that time I had seen his photograph once or twice but his features were not etched in my mind. Prior to this encounter, I could not have picked him out of a crowd and now the author of the propaganda law was standing mere feet away from me. He stood, feet firmly planted, shoulders broad, flanked by a few of his friends. I overheard him uttering derogatory slang towards the individuals who walked by him to enter the apartment building.

I entered the building just as a French journalist began talking in French to a woman about the recent law. This man later became known to me as Julien Pain and I also later discovered his short videos in which he approached Milonov and asked him pointed questions about his motives and ban. When asked by Pain what he was doing there, Milonov expressed that he was looking at how foreign, European, representatives are supporting those who rape kids, sodomists (Aravosis 2013). I was told later in a casual conversation with one of the European consulate representatives that he had been warned not to attend the festivities by Milonov as it would put him in danger. Milonov was unsuccessful in dissuading any of them not to attend as all representatives partook in the opening ceremony and remained afterwards to casually mingle with others.

Part of Milonov's tactics, as stated, were derogatory utterances. *Pidor'* (Fag) and *Ne russkii* (un-Russian) were among his chosen vocabulary. This struck me as peculiar and interesting at the moment and became an exchange that I have returned to in my mind

numerous times throughout the months that followed. Several questions came from witnessing this incident. One being what is the relationship between identifying as non-heterosexual and being un-Russian? When asked, one of my acquaintances, Vera, a 54 year old self-identified Russian lesbian, expressed that to say “*Ia russkii*” (I am Russian) is a nationalist statement and that those who equate same-sex desires with an un-Russian identity have arrogated to themselves this status. She went on to say “*mne teper’ stydno...* Now, I am ashamed to be Russian. I do not want to be associated with them” (Interview with Vera, October 30th, 2013). This association of queerness and un-Russianness is reminiscent of the Bolshevik era and is, in my opinion, a lingering legacy in the association of queer desires with Western ideologies and identities. This sentiment that to be Russian is to be heterosexual and heteronormative has persisted through the years and is strongly believed by Russian nationalists and many others. Therefore, in their view, any behaviours or individuals that deviate from the ‘traditional norm’ are seen and understood as un-Russian. Queer individuals in Russia are, in this frame of thought, not up to the Russian code – they ‘fail’ at being the ideal Russian citizen in that their desires do not fulfil the state’s expectations and needs. The model of good citizenship is founded in heterosexual marriage and the traditional nuclear family in order to ensure national security and a stable social order (Richardson 1998:92).

This ‘othering’ which occurs along the lines of sexuality is not specific to Russia. Attempts to deny queer individuals inclusion within national boundaries include the efforts of the United States government after World War II. “Those efforts responded to the widespread perception of gay sexuality as an alien infestation, an unnatural because un-American practice, resulting from entanglement with foreign countries – and foreign

nationals – during the war (Edelman 1992:269; Richardson 1998:91-92). In 1995, queer Irish-Americans were banned from marching in the St-Patrick's Day Parade in Boston. In previous years, queer Irish-Americans were also denied the right to march in the St-Patrick's Day Parade in New York City. These incidents are reflective of the struggles in defining what it is to be Irish-American. Those who opposed queer identifying Irish-Americans' participation felt that these individuals threatened their own identity and what they understood to be Irish, American, Catholic, and heterosexual (Richardson 1998; Davis 1995). Additionally in 1995, the then President of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, while giving an opening ceremony speech attacked gays and lesbians by stating that their practices were 'unAfrican.' This equating queer desires and actions as 'unAfrican' was also expressed in newspaper reports which emphasized that "homosexuality was a 'foreign idea' and that those who engaged in these practices were the victims of cultural imperialism" (Richardson 1998:91; War on Want 1996:9). No state wished to claim queer desires as their own and constructed them to be a product of external influences – external threats. By framing same-sex desiring individuals in this way, the state strips them from being recognized and accepted as legitimate members of the nation-state (Richardson 1998).

There are various interpretations and approaches to the connections between sexuality and citizenship. In a broader sense, sexual citizenship has been explored generally in terms of access to rights. That is, to what extent does a person's sexuality limit their access to citizenship in terms of social, civil, political and other rights (Herman 1994; Phelan 1995)? Others have delved into rights acquisition of certain forms of citizenship with institutionalized heterosexuality (Giddens 1992; Richardson 1996). Citizenship has been explored through a Marshallian lens in the past: civil or legal rights, political rights,

and social rights (Marshall 1950). Within this frame, civil and legal rights are founded in the law and include rights such as owning property, freedom of speech, right to fair trial, etc. Political rights are institutionalized in the parliamentary system and are comprised of the right to vote. Social rights, depending on location, are made up of the right to a level of economic welfare and security, the right to social recognition and acceptance, and the right to experience and participate in social heritage (Marshall 1950).

There have been several critiques of the Marshallian approach to citizenship including such claims that it is a ‘gender-blind’ approach (Ellis 1991; Lister 1990, 1996, 1997; Phillips 1991; Walby 1994) as well as being too simplistic of a method (Richardson 1998). With growing changes to the notions of family and economy, citizenship has also been explored in terms of social membership – a common membership in a shared community (Turner 1993). For the purposes of my analysis within the context of Russia, citizenship is a combination of the above: a common membership and the three tiers of rights. This enables a layered exploration of the various ways in which citizenship is experienced and understood. In what ways are queer Russians being transformed into non-citizens (read un-Russian)?

As with many countries, queer Russians have been granted ‘partial citizenship’ in that they are given certain rights founded in the condition that they keep to the private and do not seek public recognition. Especially now with the new legislation, any type of queer rally, demonstration, or gathering could potentially be read as propaganda. Queer Russians “are granted the right to be tolerated as long as they stay within the boundaries of that tolerance, whose borders are maintained through a heterosexist public/private divide” (Richardson 1998:89). Not only have they been denied their right to live as they are

publicly, their right to freedom of speech and the freedom to gather has been revoked also. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, numerous attempts for peaceful silent protests in St-Petersburg have ended in arrests and violence. In the past, queer Russians were made into criminals that were denied the privileges of full citizenship on the bases of their sexual activities (Rubin 2011:162). As outlined above, in contemporary Russia, queer Russians are still not viewed as full citizens and are, once again, turned into criminals.

Putin has been quoted expressing that what is vital for Russia's development is population growth and that queer individuals do not contribute to the depleting population (Berry 2014). In an interview prior to the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics, Putin was careful to highlight that Russia is one of the few countries in which homosexuality (his words) is not persecuted. He expressed that there is a new law that has been put in place that bans the propaganda of homosexuality but that individuals in Russia are not being persecuted for their sexual orientation. He said that it seems to him that the recently adopted law does not harm anyone and that queer individuals in Russia cannot feel inferior because there is no professional (job related) or social discrimination against them. Furthermore, he detailed that protest actions and propaganda are two slightly different things. They are similar but from a legal point of view, protesting against the law is not the same as propagating homosexuality (BBC1, January 19th, 2014). Many Russians would argue with Putin in regards to not being persecuted for their sexual desires or beliefs. Ilya Kolmanovsky, a high school teacher, was 'fired' last year after standing outside of Russia's lower house parliament along with others who were protesting the propaganda bill. Kolmanovsky, who has a wife and two children, expressed that he attended the protest in order to provide a scientific reasoning for queer desires. He witnessed others being arrested and pulled away

but was able to evade arrest. In the days that followed the protest, Kolmanovsky's school was bombarded with threats and the principal fired him. After Kolmanovsky posted publicly about the incident, he was reinstated the next day (Lally 2013).

Another colleague, Misha, Sergey's partner and organizer of the 'At the Crossroads' conference, when asked the same question regarding the association of being queer and un-Russian had this to say

I think the Russian language in any given historical period is weak, and therefore easily accepts foreign words in all areas - not only about homosexuality. But homosexuality is called a foreign phenomenon, although such a relationship in Russia is more than traditional. [Interview with Misha, January 24th, 2014]

I do not wish to project that there exists one, and only one, correct answer to what the relationship between Russianness and sexual desire is. Evidently, with this encounter, there are numerous layers of interpretation which require unpacking and which can, in the end, be extended to many of the Russian discursive practices in relation to queerness. The common reoccurring notion is that of 'homosexuality as foreign.' Historically, queer desires were associated with the West and were seen as a Western import as if these desires and acts did not occur prior to acquiring the Western term 'homosexuality.' This is exactly what Misha is highlighting in the above interview excerpt that such relationships are more than traditional. As an interesting addendum, foreigners (my knowledge extends to Americans and Canadians) must submit an HIV test when applying for their Russian visas. According to the Global Database on HIV-Specific Travel & Residence Restrictions, a negative HIV test must be submitted in order to be granted a visa to enter the country. The database lists that no HIV testing is require for short-term tourist stays (up to three months). However, multiple entry visas require test results. Speaking from my own experiences, this

has certainly not been the case. Furthermore, the database details that if an infection is diagnosed (after entry), the foreigner has 3 months to exit the country (Global Database on HIV-Specific Travel & Residence Restrictions, 2011).

In the 1980s when the AIDS virus first surfaced in Russia, the disease was linked to Western gay men as if they were the only way it could spread. The regularity of this required HIV test is uncertain. The first time I applied for a Russian visa, I was not required to provide the consulate with an HIV test because my stay in Russia was less than three months. The second time I applied, at the very same consulate, 3 years later, I was required to provide the test despite my stay being less than three months again. Despite its inconsistent application, the required HIV test is a vestige of anti-Western sentiments from the past which linger into the present day. The law regarding mandatory HIV tests for foreigners' entry into Russia was signed in by President Yeltsin on April 4th, 1995 and officially came into effect on August 1st, 1995 (Stanley 1995). "AIDS [was] still relatively rare in Russia, but in a country with an antiquated and collapsing health care system, the disease [was] desperately feared. The new law, which was drafted by a Parliament that [was] dominated by nationalists, [was] viewed by many Russian AIDS experts and civil rights groups as a sign of growing xenophobia and intolerance" (Stanley 1995).

Moral Discourse: Shame by Association and by Failure

To return to Milonov's derogatory remarks at the opening of Queerfest, my interpretation is that he was hailing individuals into the roles and identities he had deemed appropriate for them with an attempt to shame them (Sedgwick 1993). Despite not using the words 'shame,' his chosen words and actions created two states of being. The first state being that of shame by association as is the case with Vera. Queer Russians are ashamed to share a

citizenship with conservative nationalists. The second state being that of shame by failure. Queer Russians struggle with being seen as un-Russian merely because of their sexual desires. These associations create a sense of turmoil for many who love their country, their home, but do not feel that they have a place within it. The individuals that I had the opportunity to talk with did not express this particular desire to leave their country, however, they knew of others who had. There are several personal stories of queer Russians leaving the country to be with their partner or to start a family with their same-sex partners. Tatiana Ermakova expressed that “[she] had a career in Russia, a nice apartment, friends, family. [She] sacrificed all that to be with Ana” (Gessen and Huff-Hannon 2014:101-105). Tatiana’s story shares many commonalities with other queer Russians who sought love beyond Russia or have relocated in fear of being discovered and being discriminated against for their sexual desires. At the time of the compilation of love stories, Alexander and Mikhail had recently relocated to the United States but their hope is that they never have to return to Russia. They filed for asylum and requested permanent residency in the United States (Gessen and Huff-Hannon 2014:97).

Persons who self-identify as queer... will be those whose subjectivity is lodged in refusals or deflections of (or by) the logic of the heterosexual supplement; in far less simple associations attaching to state authority; in far less complacent relation to the witness of others. The emergence of the first person, of the singular, of the present, of the active, and of the indicative are all questions, rather than presumptions, for queer performativity. [Sedgwick 1993:4]

Although, Sedgwick is speaking of the literal utterance of the words “shame on you,” and how this performative shares many commonalities with J. L. Austin’s “I do” (1962), her articulation and arguments are still relevant to my analysis of Milonov’s utterances. When speaking of Sedgwick’s “shame on you” and Austin’s “I do”, they both name themselves,

they both have illocutionary force, and they both are dependent on the interpellation of the witness (Sedgwick 1993:4). Interpellation, borrowing from Althusser, is the process “by which agents (individuals) acquire their self-awareness as subjects, and the skills and attributes necessary for their social placement” (Scott and Marshall 2005). Why this emphasis on shame? In addition to interfering with identity, shame, as an emotional experience, also creates it. The use of looking at shame in relation to queer performativity lies in the fact that it potentially offers some “psychological, phenomenological, thematic density and motivation to... aberrances between reference and performativity, or indeed between queerness and other ways of experiencing identity and desire” (Sedgwick 1993:12).

To look at queer performativity from the perspective of shaming and to ask good questions about shame and shame/performativity opens new avenues for conceptualizing identity politics. Shame, in contrast to guilt, attaches itself to what one is rather than what one does (Sedgwick 1993:12).

Shame, like other affects, is not a discrete intrapsychic structure, but a kind of free radical that... attaches to and permanently intensifies or alters the meaning of – of almost anything: a zone of the body, a sensory system, a prohibited or indeed a permitted behavior, another affect such as anger or arousal, a named identity, a script for interpreting other people’s behavior toward oneself. [1993:12]

In addition to this, shame is as individualistic as any other manifestation of culture, or any other ‘emotion.’ The materialization of shame will not only vary greatly across cultures, throughout time periods, and between different forms of politics, but it will also occur differently from one individual to the other within a particular culture, and even time period. For a number of queer people, shame is, perhaps, the first and lasting structuring

aspect of identity: “one that has its own, powerfully productive and powerfully social metamorphic possibilities” (Sedgwick 1993:14).

Returning to Vera’s earlier statement of how she now feels ashamed to be Russian due to the nationalists’ statements, her shame is not directly linked to her identifying as a lesbian but more rooted in her identity as a Russian lesbian. Other experiences with the sentiment of shame were not candidly expressed as such. The multiple ways in which queer Russians negotiate publicly their sexuality can be read as possible shame. Some lead double lives like Anton and Georgy who expressed that “[they are] not lying, [they are] just not telling them [family members] everything” (Gessen and Huff-Hannon 2014: 77).

There are multiple constituents to take into account that may play a role in the various ways in which queer individuals in Russia embody their identities, as there are also numerous ways in which North Americans self-identify. The state, the language, and the Church all play major roles in shaping the ‘Russian citizen,’ queer or not. Despite repetitive statements that the Russian Orthodox Church and Russian State are separate entities, the constant presence of Orthodox priests, icons, and religious hymns as part of the anti-movement and as a very prominent entity at queer protests speaks otherwise. However, the Russian Orthodox Church, according to my informants, has played a smaller role, if not no role at all, in their lives. I had anticipated that the far reaching grasp of the Church would have had some sort of influence, however, all those I questioned answered that they were either agnostic, or non-believers and therefore the Church has had no influence in their lives and in the way they negotiate their identities. Despite being informed that the Russian Orthodox Church has played little to no role in my participants’ lives, the Church certainly has had an influence in shaping the field of power in which these individuals operate. The

Church's presence is felt in the discourses of heterosexuality, traditional marriage, and traditional families. The wording of the new legislation – “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations” – is reflective of the weight the Orthodox Church possesses in influencing state based legislation. As mentioned above, the presence of Church officials and the incorporation of religious icons and hymns in the anti-movement demonstrates to what extent “religious discourses” influence these anti-queer sentiments.

Misha and Sergey jokingly made a comment that they have seen Russians cross themselves on their bus ride home whenever they drive by a church, any church. They remarked that the people who cross themselves do not even know what kind of church they are passing by but that these individuals are compelled, by what I am not sure, to engage in this religious ritual regardless of the church's denomination. This ingrained tradition of crossing oneself when passing a church is not questioned by those who perform these acts, they simply do them. During my stay in St-Petersburg, I frequented a few churches with a practicing Orthodox friend of mine and in the same vein as the crossing, I curiously questioned her as to the reason why women are required to cover their head with a scarf or shawl when inside. At first, she simply shrugged and could not provide me with an immediate answer. A few minutes passed and she decided to venture a guess and offered that it must be a remnant from years ago when women were thought to distract men during mass. After discussing these traditions with colleagues, and asking my informants about the role of the Church, it is my opinion that the Church has more influence in forming anti-queer sentiments than influencing how queer Russians identify.

The Russian State and Orthodox Church have both had a hand in shaping the queer minority into an undesirable identity. These desires have been molded into ones that

“should not be had” and “should not be associated with.” The State and Church’s tactics have structured same-sex desires into realms of traditional/non-traditional as well as normal/abnormal. As previously mentioned, queers have been made into Russia’s contemporary scapegoat in order to divert the attention away from the corrupt government and the economic struggles of the majority of Russians. The focus on queer rights, or lack of rights, in the media has deflected from potential other problems in Russia and has given the Russian people a targeted group to hate. What is currently underway in Russia is undoubtedly a moral panic. The State and the Church have gained support for this propaganda ban to be legislated by bringing up traditional ideas of the family and by calling out for the protection of minors from queer lifestyles. Over the last year, we have seen “the media become ablaze with indignation, the public [behave] like a rabid mob, the police [be] activated, and the state [enact] new laws and regulations (Rubin 2011:168). As a result, the State and Church are indefinitely and surreptitiously extending their power into new social and political areas.

Global Gay Discourse: the West’s Influence

Prior to my engagement in the field, I assumed from my past experiences with Russians and in Russia, that in my exploration of the discursive practices of queer activists, a look at Western ideologies and the weight of globalization would be needed in addition to the factors already explored. As Leap and Boellstorff state in the introduction to *Speaking in Queer Tongues*, “however one classifies text-making practices and the linguistic frameworks underlying them, the fact remains that ways of talking about the everyday experiences of same-sex desire have been caught up in the transnational interchange of

material and intellectual commodities associated with the condition of late modernity” (Leap & Boellstorff 2004:1-2; Harvey 1989; Ong 1999). As previously mentioned, the ‘Russia vs. West’ narrative has been featured prominently in the shaping of queerness as other and un-Russian. Have Western narratives influenced queer Russians, however? When asked, Misha expressed that “Russia is not in a vacuum. I think all of the country's culture influence each other, and the intensity of this effect depends on the availability of power in the framework of discourse in which the influence occurs” (Interview with Misha, January 24th, 2014). There certainly are external influences as Misha pointed out – Russia is not in a vacuum. However, this does not mean that all or any of the Russian queer experiences mirror that of in the West. For those that I spoke with, outside sources did not factor into how they experienced or made sense of their sexual desires or gender identity. By the time that they began accessing non-Russian sources, they had already come to understand their identities as different from the ‘norm.’

In the 1990s, there was clearly an awareness around the lack of expressive freedom provided by the Russian language by queer Russians if they transgressed gender in their everyday discursive practices. Perhaps, the very nature of the gendered and restrictive structure of the Russian language emanated from a genuine lack for the need for such expansive terminology in the past. The emergence of terms that better fit the lived experiences of queer Russians might be due to the acts of transgression by individuals. Language in this instance is not to be taken as deterministic of the queer experiences since these individuals pushed the boundaries and did not allow for their modes of expression to be restricted by their language.

In his ethnography *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* (2003), Manalansan refutes a global gay identity and posits that not everyone embodies or experiences same-sex relations and desires in the same way. He explains that the very notion of the closet and coming out is part of a Western narrative and stresses that not all individuals who would be labeled as gay within that narrative identify as such. In other words, the closet and coming out are tied to an identity, 'gay,' which is globalized and in turn, adopted in various places with similar narratives of same-sex desires as a locus of identification. While this identity may be becoming more globally recognized, accepted, and adopted, it is a historically-situated identity and we must be careful not to blanket all same-sex desires with it. Various other ways of relating to same-sex desires exist in multiple cultural and social contexts such as is demonstrated in Manalansan and Padilla's ethnographies. In Padilla's ethnography *Caribbean Pleasure Industry: Tourism, Sexuality, and AIDS in the Dominican Republic* (2007); he clearly delineates the differences between *bugarrones* and *sanky pankies* and emphasizes that not all male-sex workers identify as gay, some are even heterosexually married and their identity lies more within the roles of *pasivo* [passive] or *activo* [active]. These are but a few examples of the different ways in which individuals conceptualize of and embody same-sex relationships. Discourses that homogenize individuals with non-normative lifestyles into the same category "[produce] homosexuals, as well as gays and lesbians, where they do not exist, and represses same-sex desires and practices that refuse to be assimilated into [their] sexual epistemolog[ies]" (Massad 2002:363). Altman (1997, 2002), Grewal and Kaplan (2001) along with Padilla and Manalansan are but a few of those who have brought attention to and discussed the global gay. In my interviews, I made the error of using the term 'queer' for the purposes of

inclusivity which I discovered forced my informants to do so also. This is how I came to acknowledge that within these spheres, one may identify as gay or lesbian but this does not automatically mean that they would identify as queer, and vice versa. I bring attention to these two ethnographies in particular because they aided me in seeing how queer desires in St-Petersburg are also not always negotiated along the axes of identity/practice. As mentioned above, there is a growing trend in identifying as 'gay' and in the coming out convention, however, as Essig found of queer Russians during her fieldwork, what they do or with whom they do it is not always in correlation with how they identify (1999:126-127).

Lastly, a 'global gay discourse' does have its positives within a Russian context. Queer organizations and queer activist organizations benefit from a global gay discourse in that they are able to make use of a readily identifiable and relatable identity to draw support from beyond Russia's borders. This discourse allows for Russian queer struggles to be globally recognized resulting in solidarity movements such as the vodka boycotts in Vancouver which were accompanied with 'dumpstoli' hashtags on social media (CBC July 26th, 2013), and the dumping of Russian vodka into the streets in New York City (Huffington Post August 5th, 2013). During the Olympics, I attended a drag show in Montreal hosted at 'Chez Mado' called 'Mado-Olympics' and the entire show was a parody of the Olympics. The performers, however, did take the time to highlight the struggles of queer individuals in Russia with a poignant and heartfelt slide show. Again, this demonstrates the power of the global gay discourse in bringing together individuals with different backgrounds, in different countries, and with different experiences, on the common ground of queer hardship and struggle. I also previously mentioned that the

organizations websites are accessible in multiple languages, including English, and this underscores that their politics of visibility are not limited to Russia and its local context and allows them to speak and engage with a common, global language. This occurs in spite of differences in language, legislative context, aims, and experiences.

Before my stay in St-Petersburg, from a distance, I was only able to formulate educated guesses as to what extent the various discourses in St-Petersburg mediated the identities of queer Russian activists, if it informed them at all. Despite the lack of solid formal interviews and insider perspective touching on the influence of discourses, I am comfortable, however, at this juncture, in suggesting that Russian queer subjectivities are influenced by many societal fields such as those discussed above. They are also very much influenced by Western narratives of queerness and the global gay movement, and these ultimately fuel their identities as Russians, queer Russians, and activists. Despite all this, their identities are still inherently permeated by a certain Russian-ness regardless of what Milonov may say to the contrary.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

So much can happen in the span of three years. Three years may seem like quite a big chunk of time but it is a blip on an overall timeline. This does not mean to say that this blip is insignificant. Quite the contrary, my hope is that the upcoming generations of queer Russians will look back on these fraught times and recognize, as well as appreciate, the endeavours of the current activists. When I first conceived of a master's thesis project, my trajectory was to look, in general, at queer subjectivities in Russia. As mentioned previously, this interest stems from my earlier experiences in St-Petersburg and Moscow as well as my own experiences within my local queer community. No federal legislation existed during my first visit to Russia, and no federal legislation had yet been drafted when I began my graduate studies. Over the course of eight months, the situation in Russia changed drastically. By the time that I was preparing to defend my thesis proposal and apply for ethics clearance with the Research Ethics Board, the legislation had been drafted and had been unanimously passed in the lower Duma. All that remained was for President Putin to sign off and the amendments would be brought into federal law. This happened in June 2013 and I landed in St-Petersburg on September 9th, 2013. I had originally anticipated to spend the summer in St-Petersburg, however, as I look back, I ended up, it seems serendipitously, being in the country during Fall 2013 which allowed me to attend Queerfest and the 'At the Crossroads' conference.

As mentioned in the opening chapter, my research took a different path because I had to fall back on a Plan B. Instead of developing what could be considered a case study of one specific organization, I had the opportunity to participate in and observe Queerfest

and the conference. I cannot say what my thesis would have looked like otherwise but what has emerged from my experiences, conversations (formal and informal), and observations is very much a current view of queer activist experiences in a turbulent political time in St-Petersburg. My research adds to the current existing body of work that has been compiled by other individuals fueled, like myself, by an interest in Russian queer identities and subjectivities. It not only complements these works but expands on them by looking at queer subjectivities, identities, and activism in St-Petersburg through innovative lenses such as the notion of quasi-boundary publics.

This thesis has been grounded in and explored two spheres of activism that are currently underway in St-Petersburg, academic and street activism. I examined and considered both with extreme caution as to not favour one over the other as both contribute equally to the overall fight for equality and visibility. I have drawn links between these diverse and flexible activisms – street and academic – and demonstrated how these activisms through their deployment of discursive strategies similar to the state’s own use, fashion a public queerness at the very moment when the Russian state is seeking to void that public. My analyses underscore the importance of viewing these fields as both productive and reflective of the identities and subjectivities engaging with them. Additionally, my work and subsequent discussions illuminate how activism in St-Petersburg is currently shifting alongside the new legislation and demonstrate how new goals have emerged within these new contexts.

Chapter Two demonstrated how same-sex desires were perceived and received throughout Soviet and post-Soviet times. The approaches to same-sex desires shifted as the overall situation in Russia changed, however, these desires remained rooted within

medical, and criminal discourses. The ‘homosexual man’ was viewed as a criminal and persecuted by the law while the ‘lesbian woman’ was subjected to psychotherapy and medical treatments. Same-sex desiring individuals were made into scapegoats during crucial times and were depicted as anti-communist, fascist, and Western/decadent. Soviet leaders linked same-sex desires with the West and framed them as Western imports. During this time, queer activist organizations did emerge but ultimately disintegrated due to personal conflicts and differences in goals among leaders. As established in Chapter Three, and some of Chapter Four, queer organizations and activists today are utilizing innovative ways to protest and band together despite the recent legislation that impinges on their freedom of speech and freedom to gather. Rather than drawing on successful same-sex rights campaigns such as the right to equal marriage, Russian queer campaigns are grounded in visibility and equality in that queer activists are striving to be seen and treated as any other Russian would be. They are also attempting to create safe and shared spaces in which they can openly discuss and socialize amongst each other. The queer movement in St-Petersburg is rooted in visibility, equality, knowledge accessibility, and community building.

In these chapters I also addressed several of my opening questions. Why the word ‘propaganda?’ My informants addressed this question quite well in that the term has negative connotations, certainly for Russians who grew up under the Soviet regime, and the state is relying on these sentiments to portray queer desires as anti-Russian and non-traditional. Does the usage of the word ‘propaganda’ and the law affect the way queer Russians make sense of themselves and their campaigns? My findings demonstrate that the state’s choice of wording has not altered the way in which queer Russians self-identify.

Queer activists have actually appropriated the word propaganda and utilize it for their own means (such was the case with Kirill Kalugin). I addressed how the ban frames queer Russians through my analysis of the various discursive fields at play in the Russian context. I believe that despite not answering these questions through a case study of Vykhod, the answers that I was able to gather provide a unique and important understanding of the contemporary struggles of queer Russians.

Prior to my fieldwork, my knowledge was informed by what I was reading in and viewing on the news. What was being publicized made it seem as though it was incredibly dangerous to identify as queer or ally yourself with queer individuals in Russia. I also hypothesized that queer activism had and continued to be squelched by the ban and that the ban was a result of a growing state homophobia. What I quickly discovered was that as a cis queer woman, I could pass in St-Petersburg and not be discriminated against by appearance alone. The only time that I felt unsafe was traveling back home late at night after attending Queerfest and this feeling was not due to the fact that I am queer or that I had just attended a workshop pertaining to queer issues, it was due to being a young foreign woman traveling the streets alone at night. I also never attended any of the street actions and cannot speak to the level of (un)safety these would create. Furthermore, I cannot speak to the experiences of those whose gender expression does not align with their gender identity and I do not wish to attempt to piece together a plausible experience.

My fieldwork on queer activism granted me the opportunity to see beyond what is published in the media and to engage with activism on the ground in the city. It enabled me to experience and understand a different kind of activism. It offered me a glimpse at how queer activists in St-Petersburg are approaching the ban, and working with and around

it to continue in their advocacy campaigns. My fieldwork was crucial in proving my own assumptions about the ban wrong on many grounds. The state homophobia which I thought was the driving force behind the ban happens to be much more complex. It is tied up in greater webs of state xenophobia and my stay in St-Petersburg enabled me to arrive at this realization. Prior to fieldwork, I believed the ban hindered activist efforts, and it certainly does in various ways. However, I discovered that it also provides activists with new opportunities and spheres to work with and within. The relationship between the ban and the queer activists is a complex and mutually constitutive one in that the legislation has created new discursive fields for queer activist efforts yet at the same time, it also depends on their efforts to have any kind of power and authority. Furthermore, this thesis demonstrates how the Russian state seems to produce and incite propaganda more than it regulates and outlaws it. Activists can be resistant to the ban and at the same time also make use of hegemonic terms such as “normal/abnormal.” These ambiguities do not so much deny what queer activists in St-Petersburg are doing but point to the instability and contradictions of language and discourse.

The Future for Queers and Queer Activism in Russia

The futures of queer activism as well as that of queer individuals in Russia are uncertain. The situation regarding the ban is recent and my time spent in the field followed closely on the heels of the ban being legislated. Its long-term effects have yet to be fully determined. There are many factors to take into consideration when weighing the potential paths queer activism, queer reception, and treatment, may take: publicity, presidency, generational gaps, to name but a few.

The occurrence of the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics played a major role in the widespread publicity Russia received on its ‘treatment’ of their queer minority. All eyes were on Russia due to the Olympics and now that they have come and gone, the amount of publicity that Russia receives has diminished. The spotlight momentarily stayed on Russia during its occupation of Crimea and Putin’s name was on the lips of many people. It is difficult to keep track as the amount of attention Russia receives continues to fluctuate greatly and as the international attention is once more focused on Russia and its potential role in the deadly missile attack on flight M-17. However, as I write this conclusion, the attention on queer issues has faded away. Perhaps the light will swing back to queer issues when Russia host the FIFA World Cup and the next presidential elections take place in 2018. Given the commotion and social uprising which occurred during the 2012 presidential elections, the upcoming ones should prove to be yet another fascinating event in Russia’s history.

Over the last year, individuals from every corner of the globe called for boycotts of the Olympics, for athletes to stand in solidarity, for rainbow t-shirts, and for vodka to be poured down the gutters. Celebrities such as Tilda Swinton have been photographed holding rainbow flags in the middle of Red Square. Stephen Fry paid several visits to Russia and spoke openly about the situation on his social media feeds. Numerous protests were held in several cities in front of Russian embassies and consulates. There certainly was an outcry and Russia’s treatment of queer individuals did not go unnoticed. However, the situation for queer Russians has not changed simply because the Olympics have come to an end.

This thesis has explored some aspects of the recent nationwide bill against the “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations.” Through my fieldwork, I have learned that faced with new hurdles as they continue to struggle for visibility and equality, queer activists are forced to rethink their campaigns and make use of places like parks, restaurants, apartments, coffee shops, outdoor squares, and community centres, as well as online networks (i.e. Facebook and Vkontakte’s group ‘404 Not Found’) to create spaces (both physical and virtual) in which they can engage with peers. The activism currently underway in St-Petersburg provides an ideal site to explore the complex dynamic between different types of queer activism and different uses and designations of “public” and “private” space.” Additionally, with the emergence of groups such as ‘404 Not Found,’ the impact that media and technological advances have on these queer activist movements and their queer epistemologies calls for further engagement from social theorists.

In today’s Russia, queer activists are speaking out because they wish to problematize the current social norms while pushing for visibility and equality. In order for change to occur, they are resourcefully organizing campaigns such as silent kiss-ins, marches, and festivals. An understanding of queer activists’ agencies is crucial in moving forward. This ban, along with others, may appear on the surface to encroach on human rights, however, it is essential to recognize that the subjective experiences of queer Russians and activists vary and as a result, the effects of and responses to the ban are complex. Often times, the negative outcomes inundate our field of vision to the point that positive effects almost seem impossible. Russian queer activist efforts disprove this and demonstrate how it is possible to continue with their advocacy campaigns despite

repressive legislation. These individuals have created ripples that will, hopefully and eventually, turn into waves.

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