

## Guarding the “Balkan Route” on the postsocialist frontier: revisiting Maja Weiss’ *Varuh meje* (2002)

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### Introduction

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*Varuh meje*, Maja Weiss’ debut film, dates back to 2002 – when Slovenia was soon to join the European Union (EU), when the state was first taking up its role as EU “border guard,” and when Slovenian society was reacting to the first wave of undocumented Asian migrants transiting the country. With elements of postsocialist realism and folk horror, *Varuh meje* was notable on its release for being the first Slovenian feature film for adults directed by a woman, and for what was then the rare presence of lesbian and bisexual themes on screen in a post-Yugoslav film. Its plot follows the protagonist Alja (Tanja Potočnik), the sexually liberated Žana (Pia Zemljič), and the sexually repressed Simona (Iva Krajnc), three students on holiday from university in Ljubljana who are going rafting near Alja’s small riverside hometown. Alja has a boyfriend in Ljubljana, but her family live beside the Kolpa/Kupa River that marks Slovenia’s border with Croatia, symbolically the boundary between Europe and the Balkans in Slovenian national identity discourses. The young women are warned not to cross over to the other wild and dangerous side of the border, but still end up there after losing control of their oars. They find instead that danger awaits them at the heart of their own symbolic community, in the shape of a mysterious fisherman and demagogic local

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politician who preaches a return to traditional values, and of the local men who sympathize with him. This man, the closing credits tell us, is the Guardian of the Frontier.

During the film, the characters witness and take part in multiple episodes of literal and symbolic border crossing. Their time on the supposedly wild Croatian side of the river, where they have been warned disturbed veterans from the 1990s war still roam, ends up becoming an overnight stay in the house of an old Yugoslav actor and his male companion, who throw them a bacchanalian night of Shakespearean performance and (cross-)dressing-up. Alja's attraction to the charismatic, rebelliously styled Žana brews throughout the film, while Simona becomes fascinated with the threatening fisherman (played by a popular television presenter, Jonas Žnidaršič). In his day job, this fisherman turns out to be an ambitious and populist local politician, who strongly resembles Slovenia's Janez Janša. The young women discover this while stumbling back from the Croatian side of the river, when they find him holding a village election rally. His speech denounces both the "foreigners" ("tujci") crossing the Slovenian border as refugees, and also "foreigners ... from our own big cities" ("iz naših velikih mest") who threaten the countryside with liberated and fluid sexual norms (Moss 2016).

Escaping the rally where the speaker had been whipping up hate against women like them galvanizes the sexual tension between Alja and Žana, who commence an erotic episode in their tent. A shocked Simona, simultaneously, is tempted away into a hallucinatory and non-consensual encounter with the Guardian – but her friends refuse to acknowledge the encounter as real once they are safely back home. The backdrop to these personal sexual dramas is the trafficking of undocumented Chinese migrants across the river into Slovenia and toward the EU. Their silent presence appears to represent a novel insecurity on the national border; the Guardian is able to stage their arrest in a border sting, and sometimes, it is implied, they are left to drown in the same rapids that give the students their thrilling holiday.

The three authors of this piece are all feminists whose work aims to connect the politics of gender, nationalism, and belonging in central and southeast Europe with the global context of coloniality and racism that has often been bracketed away from studies of this region. Catherine's research focuses on the aesthetic and embodied politics of nationalism and militarization, though she is an outsider to the post-Yugoslav region, the area that she researches most. She is also the common point of connection between Marianna, a feminist researcher of human–animal relations, and Špela, an anthropologist and sociologist researching memory and post-Yugoslav migration to the United Kingdom (UK). Catherine met Špela at a postgraduate conference on postsocialism and postcoloniality in 2013, and Marianna in 2016 when Catherine gave a masterclass at Central European University (CEU) in which Marianna took part. In June 2019, all three authors met for the first time in Bucharest, when

Catherine co-organized a small academic workshop on “whiteness” in central and eastern Europe in which Marianna and Špela both participated.

Linked to the workshop was a film festival, “Socialist Worlds on Screen: Beyond Black and White,” where Catherine was introducing a screening of *Varuh meje* as part of the program. She had seen it in London soon after it came out and had suggested it as a counterpoint to the festival’s other films, which came from the state socialist period. Špela remembered the film but had not seen it before, and Marianna had never seen it but recognized resonances with contemporary Hungarian and Polish border politics. As we left the auditorium, knowing each other well enough to wonder what each person’s reaction had been, we fell into conversation about the film’s attempts to theorize the gendered and racialized politics of sexuality, borders, and protection on the EU’s Western Balkan border, given how much had changed since the film was made – and how much had not. We continue that conversation here.

*Varuh meje* made us reflect together that evening, and now, largely because the current “refugee crisis” has made its setting into a site of violent “bordering” on an even greater scale. It shone a spotlight on an earlier moment of post-socialist bordering at the turn of the millennium which seemed to reveal the current crisis as a continuation of border regimes in the region, not an inception of new ones. It also seemed to critique a convergence of xenophobia and anti-gender politics that has now become manifest in populist rhetoric and policy across central Europe and beyond, rather than “withering away” as many hoped it might in the cosmopolitan early 2000s. Catherine questions the temporalities of revisiting the film in today’s political moment; Marianna is interested in how nature, violence, and sexuality work together in *Varuh meje* and other creative works by central European women dramatizing the “ethno-sexual frontier”; and Špela urges us not to displace all of the responsibility for racist border policies on to figures like the Guardian or Janša. Putting these resonances of a film anticipating EU enlargement 20 years ago into words, we suggest, helps to explain the gendered and racialized insecurities of anti-gender populism today, both within and beyond central and southeast Europe.

### **The borders of the gendered nation and the borders of the ethnic community: *Varuh meje* in 2002–2003 and 2020–2021**

Catherine Baker (she/her/hers)

Guardians of the Frontier are all around us now. When *Varuh meje* came out in 2002, or when I saw it at the London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival in 2003, a figure like the Guardian could have (wrongly) been viewed as simply embodying an outdated postsocialist nationalism. By the late 2010s, he had become equally characteristic of the West, amid the so-called

transnational “migrant crisis” or “refugee crisis” – a deeply racialized crisis that has arisen because of how EU border and visa regimes defend the idea of “Europe” as a space of historically white culture that must be protected from almost all migration from the Global South. The configurations of misogyny, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer phobia (LGBTQphobia) and xenophobia dramatized in *Varuh meje* now seem less of a throwback and more of a bellwether, though of course they were never throwbacks in the first place. Weiss’ Guardian simultaneously documents how the gender politics of postsocialist nationalism looked while Slovenia was awaiting its EU accession in 2004, and serves as a reminder that contentions around race, nationhood, and the “Balkan Route” did not just spring into existence overnight in 2015.

What most interested me about *Varuh meje* the first time around was probably its existence as a post-Yugoslav lesbian film, simply because there was not much else. *Varuh meje* was one of several post-Yugoslav films in the early 2000s that used lesbian characters to expose the hypocrisy of patriarchal nationalism after the Yugoslav wars. It and films such as Dalibor Matanić’s *Fine mrtve djevojke* (*Fine Dead Girls*), made the same year in Croatia, were not made to represent lesbian and bisexual women’s experiences, but to present an implicitly straight audience with what Kevin Moss and Mima Simić (2011, 280) called “national allegories.” The films’ protagonists lived outside the boxes of heteronormative nationhood, bringing them into conflict with supporting characters who embodied various dislocations that the nation had been through since the collapse of state socialism.

*Varuh meje* was also one of a cluster of post-Yugoslav films from the early 2000s that, as Sunnie Rucker-Chang (2013, 202–208) has shown, used non-speaking Chinese migrants as a similar form of plot device. These plots highlighted postsocialism as an era defined by neoliberal economic globalization – an era that was so different from the past that migrants who did not belong to the region’s own, knowable systems of ethnic difference were now traveling through it, and sometimes settling in it. Sexual and racial Otherness, therefore, both have allegorical functions in *Varuh meje*. Balkan filmmakers since the late state socialist period have often used Romani characters in similarly allegorical ways.

*Varuh meje*’s themes are fresh from Slovenian headlines between 1999 and 2000, when the number of undocumented migrants coming to the authorities’ attention suddenly doubled, and asylum applications rose from fewer than 1,000 to more than 12,000. As reception centers struggled to cope, the media published alarmist articles that cast the migrants as a risk to public security and health, making Slovenia responsible for protecting Europe by preventing them from coming any further West. The rhetoric perpetuated a narrative of Slovenia standing at the symbolic boundary between West and East, or between “Europe” and “the Balkans.” This narrative had

been widely articulated during the 1987–1991 campaign for Slovenian independence, and then during the Yugoslav Wars, when hundreds of thousands of Croatian and Bosnian refugees fled to Slovenia. Upholding Slovenia's separation from the Yugoslav Balkans, the authorities even denied permanent residence cards to thousands of people from Yugoslavia's poorer southern republics who had moved to Slovenia for work. The logic of early 2000s Slovenian discourses about undocumented migrants extended the "frontier" narrative by recognizing Slovenia as a state on the brink of EU accession and on the periphery of Europe. Such a state would have to play EU border guard against the Far, as well as the Near, East.

*Varuh meje's* title, which is also the name of its antagonist, thus references a historical mythology of guarding Europe's frontier that has equivalents across central and southeast Europe. This is often known as the "antemurale Christianitatis" myth – that is, the "bulwark" or "bastion" of Christendom. Slovenian audiences in 2002 would have been encouraged to relate Slovenia's current border politics to this myth through the Guardian's resemblance to Janša, a former hero of the student independence movement whose politics had been becoming increasingly xenophobic since the early 1990s.

The film's setting and plot, meanwhile, dramatize another major theme in postsocialist cultural politics throughout southeast Europe: the urban/rural divide. This maps symbolic hierarchies of "cosmopolitanism"/"nationalism," "European"/"Balkan" mentalities, and so forth onto value judgments about taste and consumption. It is evoked when the girls have their unexpectedly cultured cross-border adventure in Croatia and then drift back into the Guardian's rally, where neotraditional entertainment is provided by a polka band. Conversely, the space marked as the girls' "own" is a rock club, where Alja and Žana try to reintegrate their identities at the very end of the film. Sociologists and popular music scholars were observing the everyday politics of this rock/folk divide throughout the post-Yugoslav region at that very time that the film was made, and it was a key theme in the postgraduate research that I was just starting to plan when I first saw it.

The film's use of feminine sexuality is probably what demands most critical distance now. Its voyeuristic cinematic gaze has much in common with the slasher films that were then ubiquitous in Hollywood, and intertextual allusions to John Boorman's *Deliverance* (1972) inevitably seem to emerge from staging folk horror around a canoe holiday.<sup>1</sup> Its female nudity is heavily sexualized, with frequent visual innuendoes on screen, and several scenes near the end depend on sympathetic characters refusing to believe that Simona may have been raped overnight. Its queer representation is instrumentalized. The film still seems to *attempt* a deeper critique of gender relations by hinting that Alja's young, liberal-minded boyfriend is capable of the same misogyny as the populist Guardian – and in connecting

the patriarchal policing of boundaries of sexual morality with the ethno-nationalist policing of the boundaries of (not) belonging to the nation. Here, it dramatizes connections between gender and ethnicity that post-Yugoslav feminists had been discerning in the region's nationalisms throughout the Yugoslav Wars. Moreover, as Doro Wiese (2007, 271) read the film, it "highlights how the myth of a white Christian Europe is maintained" through identifying bodily difference and using it as a sign that someone is on the wrong side of the national or patriarchal border.

This document of the cultural politics of postsocialist EU enlargement seems to explain more about the gendered, sexualized, ethnicized, and racialized politics of borders and nationalism in Europe today than Weiss or her audiences might have hoped would be necessary. Slovenia, an EU member since 2004 and a Schengen Area member since 2007, is still acting as border guard, enforcing the Schengen border's fortification against largely Muslim groups of refugees. The police pushbacks depicted in one scene of the film have become more numerous and arguably more brutal since the current phase of the "refugee crisis" began in 2015. Janša himself has been Slovenian prime minister between 2004 and 2008, between 2012 and 2013, and since March 2020 (and, in 2014, served six months' imprisonment for corruption before his conviction was overturned). He is one of numerous figures whom I avoid mentioning online for fear of swarm harassment, which supporters, bots, or even the very individuals being named can all initiate in today's digital sphere. Traditionalist, racist, and cisheteronormative populism has propelled leaders such as Viktor Orbán, Donald Trump, and those Brexit campaigners who are now in government in the UK to electoral dominance and discursive hegemony. Orbán has instrumentalized the bulwark myth particularly directly into a simultaneous stand against open borders, "Balkan Route" migration, women's/LGBTQ bodily autonomy, and political and intellectual dissent.

All of these developments have had direct consequences for the material conditions in which feminist researchers try to understand and speak about them. In 2017, the Orbán government abolished accreditation for gender studies degrees, and over the next two years forced CEU out of Hungary, where its gender studies department had been a regional center of excellence for critical feminist research on nationalism and postsocialism. (The UK government is now making ominously similar noises about supposedly "low-value" courses.) I met Marianna on my first visit there, in 2016; my second visit in January 2019 – when I gave a guest lecture on the Balkans in global politics of sexuality and race also titled "Guardians of the Frontier," with a brief passage about *Varuh meje* – must have been one of CEU's last gender studies lectures in Budapest.

The same week that I introduced our screening of *Varuh meje* in Bucharest, a Croatian neotraditional musician and entrepreneur whose earlier work I had discussed during my PhD announced that he was running for president on a

populist, patriotic, anti-gender ticket. Like the Guardian, he harnesses a position of authenticity grounded in the “village” and set against both the elite cosmopolitan “city” and the “Balkan” East, as well as the threatening “non-European” world. When I was first drafting this piece, his new political party had just come third in Croatia’s parliamentary elections, and he was runner-up in the Zagreb mayoral elections a few weeks ago. The party has since kicked him out, but I have nevertheless avoided naming him here since I still do not know whether or not I am stepping back for good from revisiting that research in the current context. Weiss and her audiences in 2002–2003, myself included, probably hoped that the relevance of figures like the Guardian would wane; instead, they’re still policing us, and it feels as if the frontier is closing in.

### **The uncanny rites of transgression on the borderlands of Europe in *Varuh meje***

Marianna Szczygielska (she/her/hers)

Serving up strong female leads and sexual transgression in an aura of folkish mystery, *Varuh meje* is a real gem of postsocialist cinema. I only discovered it in 2019 at the film festival in Bucharest that accompanied the conference on “Historicizing ‘Whiteness’ in Eastern Europe and Russia,” where I was presenting my research on the entanglements between wildlife and human racial formations. As a feminist researcher of human–animal relations, I focus on their gendered, sexualized, and racialized dimensions that become visible through practices such as collecting and exhibiting animals in zoos, reproducing livestock in agriculture, or hunting wildlife, which in literary and cinematic representations often serve as powerful metaphors for the naturalization of domination, oppression, and social hierarchies. My presentation for the conference concerned zoo elephants as exotic animals that in the context of interwar Poland helped to rekindle colonial longings.

For a better understanding of how nationalism is legitimized through constructing a timeless connection to the land, however, it is important to also look at the fauna, flora, and landscapes that are considered native. Watching *Varuh meje*, I was drawn to the film’s representation of nature as a non-incident setting for a bizarre ethnonationalist seduction. Recognized internationally mostly for its portrayal of budding lesbian desire in the context of post-Yugoslav Slovenia (it won prizes at the Milan and San Francisco lesbian and gay film festivals, and an award at the Berlinale International Film Festival named after the filmmaker who had co-founded the festival’s first LGBTQ film award in 1987), *Varuh meje* captures a broader tension between sexual citizenship and heteropatriarchal nationalism (Bonfiglioli, Kahlina, and

Zaharijević 2015). This tension plays out through the intimate intersection of gender, sexuality, and race on the borderlands of Europe, which itself deserves closer attention given the revival of nationalist sentiments since the first decade of the twenty-first century. *Varuh meje* left me with an unsettling feeling of a throwback to nationalist tropes and figures that still populate the political scene in today's divided Europe and draw from performative discourses on hunting, fishing, and game management that are in sync with border and body politics.

Although the storyline follows three young women who embark on a canoeing trip down the border river Kolpa/Kupa in an atmosphere of impending danger, the eponymous "Guardian of the Frontier," whose haunting presence pushes the narrative into the realm of the uncanny, provides the central arc. Even before the three friends start their adventure, the Guardian captures their attention as the civilian who exchanges handshakes with policemen when their car is stopped at a roadblock. Žana, the most rebellious of the three, jokes that the man must be the killer of a student reported missing, and that he has probably used her cut-up body as fish bait. The missing person trope has been an absent presence since the opening scene, where the serene view of a valley at dawn cuts to the close-up image of a sandal stuck between the rocks in the river. The question of who is or will be missing remains open, making the abandoned shoe a drifting signifier of past tragedy and future danger awaiting those who dare to cross the established boundaries. The mysterious Guardian is an amalgam of several archetypical figures who at first seem disconnected from each other: first, a fisherman symbolically "catching" heterosexual desire; second, a hunter exercising predatory power over racialized and gendered prey; and finally, a local right-wing politician who rejects progress and implements border politics. Together, they make up an eerie personification of the nation as ethnos, complete with mythical attachment to the land and control over nature. This patriarchal control extends to female bodies that remain under the watchful eye of the self-proclaimed protector of national borders and traditional family values. The narrative oscillates around several recurring symbols, such as abandoned shoes or a fishing line, that imply the danger of gendered violence and predatory seduction.

Once the girls start their carefree holiday away from their families and boyfriends, rafting down the lonely river offers the opportunity for Žana and Alja to engage in romantic flirting. Meanwhile, the timid and naïve Simona strays away and gets lost. She encounters a mysterious fisherman, whom she momentarily mistakes for a rutting stag – an archetype of masculine virility. The scene is built around erotic tension; the man locks eyes with the startled girl while he balances the fishing rod between his legs and provocatively presents his catch at crotch level. When Alja and Žana finally find her, Simona is enchanted by the mysterious man whom she believes to be "the King of the

Forest.” The series of transpositions between human and animal sexualized references offers a magical-realist entry point into the unfolding nationalist seduction. This use of animal metaphors for heterosexual romance brought to my mind Ildikó Enyedi’s *On Body and Soul* (2017), in which the main protagonists share a dream of encountering each other in the forest as a doe and a stag. Whereas Enyedi uses animal metonymy and oneiric wilderness to portray uninhibited desire between two otherwise estranged abattoir workers, in *Varuh meje* the animalized sexual attraction rather contributes to the tribal myth as a fantasy of an ethnonationalist communion with (and in) nature. Simona is ensnared by the ambiguous erotic charm of the fisherman, and later, at night, she discovers a fishing line laid on the ground and decides to follow it into the woods. The plot thickens as Alja and Žana run after her and find an abandoned shoe – a sign of danger lurking in remote wilderness.

The next day, when the three decide to cross over to the Croatian side to find help in a village, they come upon a group of Asian-looking migrants who cross the river in the opposite direction. The encounter revolves around an exchange of gazes while both groups keep themselves at bay. Alja, Žana, and Simona calmly observe the course of events almost as if they were watching a herd of fearful deer crossing the ford. The conversation between the Slovenian girls provides an explanatory narrative for their own story – first recognizing the strangers as “refugees,” and then speculating that one of them must have lost the shoe that they found earlier in the forest. When armed police start to capture the migrants on the other side of the river, the women simply watch the round-up. They know that they are safe because of their own whiteness and national belonging – a stifling safety that curtails any possibility for solidarity with the oppressed. Meanwhile, the racialized Others are not only violently removed from the scene by the police but also animalized via the voyeuristic gaze of the passive bystanders.

The drama unfolds against the backdrop of pristine wilderness that is a holiday destination for the girls and a policed green border for the migrants on their voyage to western Europe. Although rivers act as “natural” borders, it is human control over the wanted and unwanted transgressions that transforms them into national ones. Presently, the increased fortification of the Schengen Area borders turns the issue of naturalness of transit zones into a matter of concern for different groups of interest. On the one hand, environmentalists point out that fences built to cut off the so-called “Balkan Route” have a negative impact on surrounding ecosystems (Linnell 2016), including the recently erected barbed-wire fence between Slovenia and Croatia that threatens “both refugees fleeing war and the local wildlife” (Hubatschke and Barla 2017, 400). On the other, many national hunting associations are largely in favor of such fortified barriers for the sake of safeguarding native game from both human and non-human aliens. In countries such as Slovenia,

Poland, and Hungary, hunting has high stakes within the state apparatus, with top politicians promoting it as a healthy, family-friendly, and appropriate contact with nature. Recently, for example, members of a Hungarian hunting club blamed migrants crossing the border with Romania for littering the forests and disturbing wildlife – human activities that could, according to the hunters, affect animal reproductive capacities (Kiss 2020). Such concern with fertility and natural order accompanying game management practices is deeply rooted in a nationalist moral economy, as vividly shown in Agnieszka Holland's *Spoor* (2017). Her film also uses the postsocialist borderland as a background for what she calls a "feminist-anarchist eco-thriller" that critiques hunting as a primal form of violence crucially linked to regimes of state, religious, and patriarchal power in Poland. When I was writing this commentary, Hungary started preparations for the 2021 International Hunting Exhibition organized on the fiftieth anniversary of the World's Fair also held in Budapest. The largest hunting expo under the slogan "One with Nature" testifies to the deep investment of the political elites in cultivating hunting tradition as an integral part of the national myth.

It should come as no surprise that when Alja, Žana, and Simona stumble upon the Guardian again on the Slovenian side, he is presented as a hunter. This role implicitly includes tracking refugees (another dehumanizing move) and is tied to his political persona, as he appears giving his fervent speech at the village festival about protecting the countryside from both external and internal enemies. The Guardian vilifies refugees as threatening the racial integrity of the national community, while scolding sexually liberated urbanites for endangering its cornerstone: the heterosexual family. Spewing a mixture of xenophobic and misogynist slogans – such as "Slovenia for Slovenians," "The family is sacred," "Homosexuality is unnatural," and "Girls should be mothers and mothers should be at home" – this figure of a radical nationalist politician might seem almost comically exaggerated. However, nearly 20 years after its release, the cinematic "Guardian of the Frontier" is reminiscent of right-wing populist leaders such as Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, Jarosław Kaczyński, or Viktor Orbán, who oppose open borders, criminalize migration, and deny LGBTQ rights and reproductive justice. When watching the film in 2019, I was struck by the resemblance between the cinematic character and the infamous mayor of the village of Ásothalom in southern Hungary, László Toroczkai, who outlawed Muslim religious practices and public displays of same-sex affection (Benke 2017), and is credited with the idea of erecting a fence along the Hungarian–Serbian border at the beginning of the so-called "refugee crisis." In a bizarre self-produced video from 2015, Toroczkai and his homegrown militia patrol the border in jeeps and on horseback, enacting the full "Guardian of the Frontier" fantasy.

The resemblance might be indeed uncanny, but so is the imaginary from which these real-life and cinematic characters draw: the strangely familiar

founding myth of the nation. In the context of southeast Europe, the process of creating a strong nation-state is historically marked by what Maria Janion (2006, 12) identifies as a “postcolonial mentality,” or the paradoxical juxtaposition of an inferiority complex in relation to the West with messianic pride and moral superiority over it. In *Varuh meje*, the East/West divide drawn between the Balkans and Europe is simultaneously dramatized as the “ethnosexual frontier,” an erotic landscape where “ethnicity is sexualized, and sexuality is racialized, ethnicized, and nationalized” (Nagel 2003, 14). This double process fundamentally shapes the sexual citizenship of the white protagonists. For the Guardian, unspoiled nature is a space in which to exercise and display masculine ideals of physical prowess and sexual virility (see Mosse 1998, 96), but, at the same time, the women’s escapade allows them to transgress gender norms as they “lay claim on a white masculine role” (Wiese 2007, 279).

Oscillating between horror and fantasy, the film offers other points of transgression that defy the rules of both genres. In the scene near the end while Alja and Žana are having sex in their tent, Simona again takes to the woods, where she succumbs to the Guardian and his male followers in an ambiguous act of passion and sacrifice. She finds herself surrounded by fireflies and dressed in a folksy costume, her body the symbolic offering in the hallucinatory primal scene. However, this “affair” culminates in an allegorical rape, revealing sexual violence as the founding trauma of nationhood. As feminist film studies scholar Linda Williams (1991, 8) points out, “even in the most extreme displays of feminine masochistic suffering, there is always a component of either power or pleasure for the woman victim.” Revisiting *Varuh meje* from a feminist perspective poses a challenge of how to interpret Alja’s and Žana’s rejection of Simona’s sexual abuse, which they dismiss as a pure fantasy devised to sabotage their lesbian love. Perhaps this disavowal of the violence of heteropatriarchy serves as a warning that non-heteronormative sexual citizenship is not bullet-proof, and that without feminist solidarity it can silently vindicate exclusions along racial and gendered lines? At the same time, the film’s portrayal of the twisted performativity of heterosexual desire as animalistic and ultimately dangerous for women suggests that the nexus of gender, sexuality, and race realized within the idea of the nation is a violent affair.

### **Still the man who guards us: re-reading *Varuh meje*’s border narratives**

Špela Drnovšek Zorko (she/her/hers)

We are not ashamed to say: the family is sacred! (excerpt from a speech given by the Guardian in *Varuh meje* (2002))

This is the last time that you wore your scarf. Here is not Afghanistan, here is Slovenia. Here is no Islam! (Slovenian police officer quoted in a first-person testimony of border violence appearing in the play *Gejm* (2020), directed by Žiga Divjak and produced by the Mladinsko Theatre, Ljubljana)<sup>2</sup>

Despite its notable status in the history of Slovenian cinema, and although I was familiar with Maja Weiss' later documentary films, I did not see *Varuh meje* until Catherine's screening in Bucharest on June 25, 2019. At the time, the date of the screening struck me as particularly memorable due to its unintentional coincidence with Slovenia's Statehood Day, which is also celebrated in Croatia as its Independence Day; vying to be the first to secede from Yugoslavia in 1991, Croatia and Slovenia have ironically ended up with the same national holiday.

I have an uneasy relationship with most national holidays, and the Slovenian Statehood Day, which celebrates a state several years younger than I am, is no exception. With its hallucinatory riffs and unsubtle attacks on patriarchal nationalism, *Varuh meje* – and Catherine's subsequent invitation to contribute to this piece – provided a welcome site to critically interrogate the homeland that succeeded the socialist Yugoslav federation in which I was born. Since my research focuses on intergenerational memories of socialism among migrants from former Yugoslavia (and other central and east European countries) living in the UK, including the ways in which family and community narratives both attach and disinvest themselves from racialized notions of Europeanness, dwelling on Slovenia's boundary making presented a further opportunity to blur the lines between the personal and the academic.

In order to tease out both the continuities and the new inflections of Slovenia's border and its racialized, patriarchal exclusions, my contribution re-visits *Varuh meje* in tandem with a recent theater production, director Žiga Divjak's play *Gejm* (*The Game*), which ran in Ljubljana in the summer of 2020. A stark and forensic staging of first-hand testimonies of migrant pushbacks collected by the Border Violence Monitoring Network – pushbacks that predate, but have continued under, Janez Janša's current leadership – the play provides a valuable vantage point on the enactment of the border almost 20 years after *Varuh meje's* ambivalent yet excoriating attack on Slovenia's parochial nationalisms. As Slovenia triumphantly marks 30 years of statehood in 2021, revisiting the 2002 film alongside the 2020 play sounds a much more somber note, highlighting the durability of exclusions in a country once held up as the ideal of postsocialist sovereignty and "new Europe." These representations of bordering practices on the Schengen border, in a "peripheral" region where questions of belonging to the European project often turn uneasily on racialized gradations of Europeanness, also reveal much about the realities and complicities of "Fortress Europe"

at a time when the right to seek sanctuary is being systematically eroded and denied across the globe.

Catherine's 2019 screening of *Varuh meje*, and our subsequent conversation with Marianna, appeared to gain an all too contemporary overtone in the year that followed. In 2020, I unexpectedly found myself back in Slovenia at a time when Janša, who had built his political myth as a national liberator, had just returned to power. Janša immediately anchored his leadership in the metaphor of war, militarizing the fight against the pandemic to, as in other national contexts, "reinforce aggressive heteropatriarchal and racialized discourses" (Pandit 2020). His appointment of Jelko Kacin, who was media liaison during Slovenia's short-lived independence war in 1991, as the government spokesperson on the pandemic magnified the surreal sense of time-warp as the same names and the same voices narrated a new crisis. As Janša's government turned on its internal critics, including bicycle-mounted protesters voicing their opposition to alleged endemic corruption and unprecedented restrictions on public space, the issue of internal policing seemed inextricable from the question of the national border with Croatia, as illustrated by the government's repeated attempts to grant the military new legal powers to prevent irregular border crossings.

In its portrayal of the Kolpa/Kupa River as a porous boundary between insiders and outsiders, *Varuh meje* was thus in many ways prophetic about the river's present-day role as a symbolic delineation of national belonging as well as a militarized border zone. In fall 2015, Slovenia was briefly catapulted into the international headlines when it became a part of the so-called "Balkan Route" following Hungary's closure of its border with Croatia. It did not take long for the Slovenian government to install its own razor-wire fencing, euphemistically referred to as a "temporary technical obstacle" to avoid accusations of having reneged on earlier promises that no border fence would be built. This has proven neither temporary nor an obstacle; as Maja Ava Žiberna points out in the *Gejm* show notes, by December 2019, 189,835 meters of fencing had been erected, while irregular migrants continue to cross, and risk their lives on, Slovenia's border with Croatia – including the Kolpa/Kupa.

*Gejm* does not shy away from these realities. Over the course of two hours in a small, claustrophobic studio, the cast narrates story after story of illegal pushbacks carried out by the Slovenian police in collaboration with their counterparts in Croatia.<sup>3</sup> The formulaic recitation of facts – the precise location of each incident, how many minors were present, whether the principals had stated their intention to seek asylum – contrasts with the monumental, at times almost fantastical, nature of the collected stories, which one could easily if erroneously ascribe to Weiss' film script. In the woods near the Kolpa/Kupa, a man with a broken foot encounters a bear. A hunter with a feathered cap calls the police on a group of travelers. Deprived

of water, another group is forced to drink from a police station toilet bowl. A teenager who asks a police officer why his family will not be allowed to stay in Slovenia is told simply: "I don't know." Then come variations on the same story of Croatian pushbacks into Bosnia: of black-clad and masked police units deliberately holding people in freezing vans in winter, of beatings and torture, of near-drownings, of being forced to run a gauntlet of batons across the EU border back into Bosnia, of endlessly repeated roars of "Go, go, go!" Each retelling concludes with a symbolic object being placed on a crudely marked map on the stage floor, a growing accumulation of humans treated as detritus.

The significance of the Slovenian–Croatian border looms large in *Gejm*'s staging of these testimonies, as it does in *Varuh meje*, whose initially clunky dialogue gradually morphs into more deliberate artifice. In 2002, before Slovenia and Croatia joined the EU, *Varuh meje*'s depiction of the Kolpa/Kupa turned on gradations of Europeanness represented by relative proximity to the unruly Balkans, symbolizing the disruptive porosity of both internal and external borders. In a classic illustration of Milica Bakić-Hayden's (1995) famous concept of "nesting Orientalisms," the film's protagonists are preoccupied with the Croatian side of the river, which they perceive as a dangerous if tantalizing hinterland. *Varuh meje*'s foray to the Croatian side overshadows the voiceless Chinese migrants apprehended by the Slovenian police, who leave little lasting trace on the young protagonists' journey. When Alja, Žana, and Simona end up on the wrong side of the border (without their passports, no less), the film tilts the nesting Orientalism narrative as well as the conventions of the thriller genre by having its young protagonists encounter queerness and recognition rather than war-crazed veterans, while sexual and patriarchal violence await them on their "own" side of the river.

Yet the border functions differently for the film's protagonists than it does for the people at the center of *Gejm*. From today's perspective, one of the most startling aspects of the film's long shots of the scenic riverbank is the lack of fencing. The tension in the film surrounding a shoe found in the forest only hints at the pile of discarded belongings that accumulates in the play – material evidence of the quotidian cooperation between Slovenia and the EU's newest member state, its former Yugoslav neighbor. As in other European peripheries, the Schengen border unequally distributes freedom of movement between the former republics of a socialist federation and those who seek to pass through them, with Slovenian and Croatian police joining forces in a postsocialist riff on the Yugoslav slogan "brotherhood and unity" in their efforts to "protect" the EU from predominantly Muslim migrants.

Since the release of *Varuh meje*, the figure of the Chinese migrant as the emblematic racialized foreigner in early post-Yugoslav cinema

(Rucker-Chang 2013) has, as elsewhere, been replaced in the public imagination by the figure of the Muslim refugee. If, in 2002, representations of Chinese migrants served to highlight the reterritorialization of the postsocialist Yugoslav region in relation to global migration flows, then today the figure of the Muslim embodies the varying degrees of inadmissible racial difference in the EU's peripheries and "neighborhoods." Piro Rexhepi's research in (what is now North) Macedonia has highlighted "the intersection of local, national and transnational politics that juxtapose local Balkan Muslims with foreign migrant Muslims" (Rexhepi 2018, 2216), underpinned by the Islamophobic tenets of the EU's Western Balkans policy (Rexhepi 2015). If, in Macedonia, the state-sanctioned Islamic association seeks to maintain the boundaries between "European" and "foreign" Islam, in Slovenia, with its claim to being Europe "proper," Islam appears entirely inadmissible. This distinction is embedded in the ethno-religious nationalism espoused by *Varuh meje's* titular character; the family may be sacred, the Guardian reminds us, but this is true only of Christian, and implicitly Catholic, families. While today's guardians claim to patrol the boundaries of an "enlightened" Europe rather than a "God-illuminated" Slovenia, to quote from the Guardian's political speech, the underlying message remains the same. Welcome to Slovenia: "This is the last time that you wore your scarf."

It is precisely this continuity of exclusion that should give us some pause when tempted to re-read *Varuh meje* as evidence of a nightmarish Groundhog Day scenario, in which the same right-wing politician enacts the same racialized patriarchal exclusions in the name of protecting the nation. There is no doubt that Janša's present-day politics mirror and even exceed those espoused by Weiss' fictional Guardian. Garnering comparisons with Orbán (Walker 2020), Janša has since March 2020 swiftly reoriented Slovenia's policy priorities, protesting the inclusion of rule of law provisions in the EU budget mechanism (Dragojlovic 2020), launching institutional attacks on the media (Bayer 2021), and causing increasing unease in Brussels about Slovenia's presidency of the Council of the EU (Esih 2021). "Slovenia for Slovenians," the Guardian's electoral slogan, maps easily onto Janša's politics of division, in which being the *right* kind of Slovenian excludes internal as well as proximate strangers. Yet it was not Janša who first erected the razor wire lining the Kolpa/Kupa. The testimonies on which *Gejm* is based were largely gathered during the rule of successive centrist and center-left Slovenian governments. And the EU remains complicit, as it does on its other deadly borders. The violent exclusions playing out on Slovenia's external border may be an integral part of the Guardian's politics of division, but they are neither solely Slovenian, nor solely "Balkan" – and in no way peripheral to the global fight against racial patriarchal nationalisms.

## Notes

1. *Deliverance* is a well-known Hollywood film about city businessmen on a canoeing trip in rural Georgia, USA, who are taken prisoner and subjected to sexual violence by a pair of local men.
2. For the full original testimony, see Border Violence Monitoring Network (2018).
3. These practices have been challenged in the courts, and a recent ruling found that Slovenia had violated the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights when removing a man to Croatia (from where he was further deported to Bosnia) according to a Readmission Agreement between Slovenia and Croatia (Border Violence Monitoring Network 2020). See *The Black Book of Pushbacks: Volumes 1 & 2* compiled by the Border Violence Monitoring Network and supported by Left Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) (Barker and Zajović 2020) or a report by the non-governmental organization (NGO) Info Kolpa (2020) for further details about pushbacks in the EU, including Slovenia.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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