

Master Thesis Gender Studies

Public Queer Trauma in Contemporary Greece
Affective Atmospheres and Queer Public Cultures, the Case
Study of the Murder of Queer Activist Zak Kostopoulos

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15th of August 2019

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“Violence was never my thing”

Zak/Zackie-Oh!

Acknowledgments

This work was possible with the valuable and kind participation of Ilias, Natasha and Andreas. I am grateful and honored that they agreed to open up a window to their world for me. I hope I did justice to their words. I am thankful that I had the chance to embark to this intellectual journey with them. Thank you for that.

My mentors and tutors in the MA program Gender Studies of Utrecht University have created an intellectually challenging and inviting environment that fosters critical thinking and encourages creativity. I am grateful that I was able to complete this project with their help and support. Especially my supervisor Magdalena Górska for her comments and help. I wish to also thank my second reader and teacher Ilse Josepha Lazaroms. Thank you for reading. For her support and insightful comments that were crucial to the formation of this project I would like to thank my internship supervisor, Sofia Varino.

For your help, the laughs and small and big moments in between the writing of this project I would like to thank my chosen family: Tatiana, Gina, Sarah, Katrien, James, Wouter and Christina. My special thanks and all my gratitude to my beloved Eleni Mina for proof-reading my work but mostly for her sole presence and warmth that makes everything worth it!

Finally, I am deeply indebted to figures that have forged my thinking with their stories. Shahzad Luqman, Konstantina Kouneva, Alexandros Grigoropoulos, Pavlos Fyssas, Katerina Topaloudi, Vaggelis Giakoumakis, Zak Kostopoulos you will never be forgotten. This project is for you.

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Introduction

The last decade the west experiences an uncontested feminist revival and a renewed interest in gender and sexuality politics. One could argue that our age finds us in a unique momentum for queer existence, a promising trajectory of visibility, recognition and hope; whatever the investments in this ambiguous concept might be (Ahmed, 2017: 3). A paradox yet remains. Despite what seems to be a 'golden age' for queer and feminist goals, violence against non-normative bodies and others persists. The trauma of structural violence is deep and multilayered leaving the most vulnerable wounded.

Trauma was popularized as a term in psychoanalysis because of the work of Sigmund Freud¹ and his description of trauma as the delayed assimilation and therefore re-experiencing of a shocking event with negative impact to the psychic of the subject (Abraham, Torok & Rand, 1994). Since then the term trauma has expanded and acquired different significations, coming to become a distinct category to analyze social reality. Through theorizations drawing from literary studies, cultural theory, war and genocide studies, trauma came to be the intersection of individual, collective, emotional, literate and political (Seltzer, 1997). Those theorizations have, each one from their own different perspective, deployed the concept of trauma to understand the complexities of collectively experienced negative events, poor conditions of living and cultures around them. That turn has opened the way to understandings of trauma as historical, cultural and intergenerational (Gildersleeve, 2014). Such cultural traumas transgress the individual psychic and affect larger groups threatening their identity and cohesion (Alexander, 2004). Other theorists stretch accounts of trauma even further, describing the complexities and entanglements of traumatic events to politics of the ordinary to the extent that they call us to "think of trauma as a genre for viewing the historical present" (Berlant, 2011: p.9)

This thesis project is inspired by this later perception of trauma and its affinity to the everyday. Where master narratives of destruction and drama fail to utter the nuances

¹ See *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917)

of everyday feeling and living, views on trauma as affective atmospheres of the present day, do not.

This thesis project investigates how trauma that becomes publicized creates specific public queer cultures. In particular I am researching how trauma shapes the realities of gays, lesbians and queers in Athens, Greece. I interview three members of the LGBTQI+ community of Athens about their experiences, feelings and responses after a significant queer death. Public trauma and public cultures are central for the scope of this project which deals with the cultural and political implications of collective trauma rather than psychic manifestations of a traumatized self or psychoanalytical accounts of trauma.

Public Trauma and Queer Cultures

In the post-HIV crisis era, it seems that fighting and dealing with trauma is still a dominant theme in queer lives. That becomes more evident if we come to understand queer as the non-normative, the sexually deviant and a societally non-viable figure². Work on affect theory and queer history suggests that trauma and loss have been fundamental to the queer experience and construction of queer identity. Heather Love argues that “the art of losing is a particularly queer art” and engages with the history of suffering, violence and stigma as affective landscapes for the historicizing of the queer. Her work is critically analyzing early 20th century north-American novels often considered too depressing and dark (Love, 2007). Ann Cvetkovish has worked on archiving HIV crisis trauma in relation to queer and lesbian public cultures in north-America pointing to a particular connection between the two (Cvetkovich, 2003). Heike Bauer, makes a similar point by examining the archives of German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld (1868-1935). Researching how death and anti-gay violence have shaped queer cultures, she argues for their importance in forming a collective understanding of a shared homosexual identity in early 20th century Germany. (Bauer, 2017).

² This is also how I use queer in this text. The terms gay, lesbian and queer are used together and interchangeably to point out either the specificities of gay and lesbian life or to refer to the social processes and further significations of the word queer.

This thesis project relates to the abovementioned body of work in its grappling with trauma against narratives of pathology and medicalization but as accounts of the lived present. Also, on its intention to archive and document the rather difficult to grasp, the intersections of the political and cultural with the emotional. Yet very specific, geographically situated public trauma. It is further, an attempt to investigate the experience of loss and trauma of queers in a social reality that doesn't comfortably fit in the western world and has some interesting particularities, that of Athens, Greece. As trauma is particularly difficult to document and analyze, this thesis is focusing on responses to cultural public trauma, a commonly shared traumatic experience, which creates public cultures, meaning practices and discourses which spread among a community or other larger social group (Cvetkovich, 2003).

In September 2018, queer activist and performer Zak Kostopoulos was murdered in broad day light in the center of Athens. Departing from the traumatic event of the loss of a significant member of the LGBTQI+ community in Greece, I have interviewed three lesbian and gay Athenians about their experiences, feelings and responses after the incident. The interviews are in-depth semi structured interviews conducted between June and July 2019.

My central research question is the following:

How did gays, lesbians and queers from Athens experience and respond to the loss of the murder of Greek queer activist Zak Kostopoulos? How was this incident registered as public trauma for this group?

My sub questions are:

- How did the responses to the murder produce situated public queer cultures?
- In what ways are those public cultures particularly "Greek" and how do they converge or diverge from dominant western culture?

The case

Zak Kostopoulos, also known as Zackie Oh!, was a queer drag performer and activist with a long involvement in anti-hiv stigma activism, community building and queer arts of Athens. On a Friday afternoon at the 21st of September 2018 Zak found himself

in a jewelry shop in the center of Athens. Under unclear circumstances he was beaten to death by the owner of the jewelry shop and a nearby shop owner. Zak had no prior relation with the two or other known rivalries which would put his life in danger. The incident was considered a punitive action of the two men towards a non-normative body that was found in their territory. Their main argument was that Zak tried to steal from the jewelry shop but the brutal footage shows no evidence of that. On the contrary it reveals that deadly unjustified violence was exercised on Zak's body by the two perpetrators. The video also reveals the suspicious role of police who further mistreated half-dying Zak. As a result a broad movement called "Justice for Zak/Zackie" emerged that engulfed multiple practices, methods and aims. A number of demonstrations demanding justice for Zak's murder took place, numerous posters and street art decorated the streets asking for justice or simply putting forward queer and non-normative femme representations as a response to the death of a beloved member of the community.

At the same time an international solidarity movement unfolded mainly within digital spaces with the hashtag #JusticeforZackie scoring numerous hits. Activists and artists around the world released statements demanding justice for Zak and empowering the community while the court case and investigation of his death are ongoing to the present day.

Zak was murdered on a side street of Omonia square in the very center of the Greek capital, Athens. Omonia square is a space of condensed urban activity, a crossroad for various subjectivities and a point of reference of political importance for modern Greece. Built in the end of the 19th century Omonia square was meant to be a central point of high standards serving as a commercial and leisure hub. Mimicking other European capitals of the time the square's planning consists of 4 big avenues intersecting at a round shaped open space making Omonia the junction connecting most major Athenian sites. Its current state is falling short on the aspiration of its planners. Instead of a clinical space reserved for the upper class, Omonia is a vivid area inhabited by locals, migrants, drug users, sex workers and other marginalized groups. However, because of its unique position in the metropolitan web it is also frequented by tourists and other visitors making it a peculiar melting pot where dominant figures

meet Otherness under the light of ever changing, hybridic sociopolitical climates of perpetual crisis (Carastathis, 2018).

Omonia has historically been a space where systemic violence often unfolded and tensions have been high. Ironically enough, Omonia (concord) took its name after the reconciliation festivities that marked the end of a long standing 19th century conflict of two opposing parties but its further history has been other than peaceful. Protests, clashes with police, pogroms against migrants, illegal trade and drug dealing, prostitution and police raids are often phenomena in and around the square. Phenomena are not the exception but the rule for Athenian metropolitan life and sketch the picture of the political dynamics in the rest of the country.

In this setting, an act of violence was not a surprise. However the intensity, brutality and misanthropy that characterized the murder were shocking. The footage shows a disoriented Zak entering the jewelry shop during opening hours. The shop owner activated the security system that locks the entrance. Zak is found trapped alone inside while the shop owner remained outside. Zak tried to escape using a fire extinguisher in a failed attempt to break open the glass door. He was obviously weak and in a state of panic. In desperation he tried to fit his body through the small display window and as he breaks the glass with a head-hit the shop owner along with another man start to frantically kick his head as it sticks out the window display. Zak manages to exit the shop but is unable to stand up. By that time there's already a mob of middle aged Greek men around him while the two perpetrators beat him to death. After 10 minutes of deadly violence police arrives only to make sure that Zak is on the ground. His lust for life and will to escape made him stand on his feet and walk away only to receive more violence, by police this time. Handcuffed and bleeding he died on his way to the hospital after the ambulance was finally called.

The incident received immediate media attention. The picture that was painted was that of a drug addict thief who threatened the ownership of one of the murderers. In an area like Omonia where "normal" citizens are under terror such act of hideous violence is justified, proclaimed the murder apologists. Media, conservative politicians and public figures joined forces to whitewash the perpetrators finding another chance to capitalize on the public's conservative reflexes that an alleged robbery might evoke.

The broad solidarity movement was the sole responsible to bring attention to the contested sides of the case both on a juridical but also on a discursive level. The interventions of Zak's fellow activists and community were crucial for the build-up of the court case. Pushing the juridical authorities to consider all available footage as part of the evidence and to investigate the role of police to the murder the justice movement that developed created a precedent of a bottom up redefinition of justice. Further international parties were involved in the investigation. In particular, "Forensic-Architecture", an interdisciplinary collective based at Goldsmiths University of London, recreated the crime using 3D modelling revealing important mishandlings from the Greek authorities both at the crime scene and during later phases of the investigation³.

The responses to Zak's death did not only target the juridical course. A rampage of reactions from the LGBTQI+ community transformed the story of Zak's death into demands for more livable lives. Norms and values of Greek society such as private property as the ultimate ideal of human existence, homophobia, sexism, macho culture, gendered violence, queerness, otherness and marginalization of drug users were fiercely attacked.

Motivation and Relevance

My motivation for this thesis project stems from a deep desire to document and account for a social reality I was socialized and politicized in, the one of contemporary Greece, and might not be so well-known or understood in western intellectual circles which is the audience this research project addresses to. My coming of age politically and intellectually has been bound to stories of death –like the one of Zak- and exclusion located in the particular sociopolitical climate of Greece. Sovereign power, in the Foucauldian sense, maintains the monopoly of violence, dictating who may live and who may die with blatant inhumanity (Foucault, 1976). The South East Mediterranean, where I come from, has been a sea graveyard for thousands of bodies. The mainland of the region has been a landmark of life devaluating politics and economic suffocation, characteristic of the situation of the Global South. With queers

³ <https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/the-killing-of-zak-kostopoulos>

next to migrants, drug users, roma, sex workers and the mentally ill being the bottom of the barrel and therefore the receiving end of punitive violence. Trauma has been an inherent part of my world and has left marks to me and my generation that seem –at least so far- hard to unravel.

My goal is to act as an amplifying device for my interviewees' experiences and our shared lived realities to be heard and documented in an attempt to start unravelling what seems impossible, too hard and painful. It is also a small contribution in mapping present situated and embodied social positions in a highly complex world (Braidotti, 2013). It is true that public trauma is a highly situated concept as it is set off by specific traumatic events in a specific cultural context. However work on non-western public trauma and culture is scarce. Regarding queer cultures specifically, the intellectual and cultural heartbeat of public trauma theorizations is gravitating towards north-American and central European discourses and practices⁴. With this thesis project I wish to move away from this gravitation and work on situated knowledge of Greek queer existence and public trauma. Instead of “researching” or “learning” two terms connoting a distance from the observed reality, I view this project as “research from within”. I myself belong to the queer community of Athens and I share affective bonds with my interviewees, common experiences, cultural background and the same label of the no future generation of contemporary crisis-saturated, Greece.

Thesis Overview

This thesis consists of four chapters. In the first chapter I am discussing my methodological approach. After I anchor the project to specific interviewing and methodological traditions which fit its feminist sensitivity, I elaborate on more specific methodological choices. The choice of participants, the power relations and the analysis of the interviews are elaborated upon.

The second chapter, where the interview analysis begins, makes a point on how queer identity is constructed along a specific entanglement to trauma. To do that I explore the testimonies of the interviewees in connection to theorizations of the queer and

⁴ Such examples include previously mentioned works such as Heather Love's *Feeling Backward* and Ann Cvetkovich's : *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* on north-American queer cultures, both very influential for the field of gender and sexuality studies.

its social viability. The third chapter discusses the murder of Zak Kostopoulos as public trauma and researches the queer cultures that came forth after the incident. It also builds a case around how these queer cultures are specifically Greek and situates them in the sociopolitical climate of contemporary Greece. The fourth chapter traces the reverberations of contemporary feminist theory on intersectionality and identity in the lived experience of queers in Greece. Lastly my final argumentation is discussed in the Conclusion.

Chapter One: Methodological accounts in Feminist Research

For this thesis project I engaged in in-depth semi-structured interviews about the experience of the traumatic event of Zak Kostopoulos death from queer subjectivities in Greece. In this chapter I address my methodological choices and how they serve the purposes of the study. The theoretical tradition of interviewing which I am drawing on is elaborated upon. Interview techniques and approaches are presented while power relations, impedes and other limitations are reflected upon.

Interview as Inquiry and Meaning Co-creation

For the purposes of this study, I am interviewing in depth three lesbians and gays from Athens, Greece. Conducting in-depth interviews allows for people's ideas to be communicated in their own words and results in non-standardized information that is more representative of the complexities and differences within social reality (Reinharz, 1992 Hesse-Biber, 2014). Therefore for this thesis project I consider interviewing the most suitable method of data collection. Interviewing is a method of inquiry but also a social interaction. Thus, my analytical approach is based on the tradition of interview-data-as-topic (Rapley 2001). The overarching theme of this approach, despite its many variations, is that it considers information acquired from an interview as a joint co-creation of meaning between interviewer and interviewee during the specific setting of the interview. As opposed to interview-data-as-resource tradition where acquired information is considered to be reflecting the interviewee's ideas as they would be expressed in any given social setting (Rapley, 2001). Further

on this chapter, in my methodological accounts, I reflect upon the ways my interaction with the interviewees has played a crucial role in the study.

Lived experience about public trauma can be found in the way people narrate a story, in the hesitations in their speech, the emphasis they almost reflexively put on what they say. Latent knowledge about the subtle ways in which a traumatic incident engenders public cultures might come forth on the setting of an in-depth interview (Hesse-Biber, 2016). Moreover, public trauma is inscribed in different ways on different people's behaviors and practices and interviewing allows me to trace those differences and at the same time unlock their common grounds. For instance all interviewees reported that they attended the demonstrations against Zak's murder except for one. From the tone of his voice and the side remarks he made I could tell that it was not because he didn't care enough but because of his distrust to such means of protest as effective for LGBTQI+ goals. A concern more interviewees shared on the interviews. Such information would not be available to me if I conducted standardized interview or questionnaires.

Choosing Participants

In order to investigate the public cultures relating to cultural trauma of queer communities in Athens I decided to interview gays and lesbians living there. My interview participants were two gay men and a lesbian woman. Ilias a 34 year old gay man working as a care taker of disabled kids, Natasha a 31 year old physics teacher and Andreas a 26 year old student, currently living in Berlin, Germany. The number of participants might be small but taking into account the restricted length of this project and the type of analysis a larger number did not seem appropriate. Working with small samples does not necessarily undermine the study. Qualitative research is not only interested in supporting an argument by means of data abundance but in understanding situated processes and phenomena in depth instead of generalizing (Hesse-Biber, 2014: 192).

Furthermore I chose my participants to be Greek and having Greek language as their native tongue in order to provide a more detailed description of processing cultural trauma and attaching meaning to it, in the Greek context, considering that processes

of world perception are largely mediated by language (Butler & Spivak, 2005). I hoped to discuss with queers living at the same cultural and sociopolitical context where such incidents of hideous violence can occur and have access to cultural and linguistic devices that could convey meaning around the traumatic event of Zak's murder. Also, as I too am a native Greek speaker the interviews were done in a language we were all very comfortable with and understanding all its nuances. That helped communication flow and very few specification questions were necessary regarding language. Use of colloquial language was not a problem, on the contrary it gave depth and interesting color to what was being said. That said, I need to acknowledge that the population of Athens is multilingual and ethnically non-homogenous. A more extended and inclusive study would take that into account but this is beyond the purposes of this thesis project.

Lastly, I chose for people who possess more social roles such as student, care taker and educator and are more likely to experience cultural trauma from multiple perspectives. The age group 26-34, on the one hand shows the limitations of access to older queer people. Intergenerational segregation being a wide spread societal phenomenon and the methodological choice of being already familiar with my participants limited the age group. On the other hand it accounts for a very specific social position of queers in Athens, Greece in the late 20s and early 30s, an age group that converses with society the most, is on top of many contemporary debates and ultimately shapes the most responses to cultural trauma.

The Familiarity Dilemma and Power Relations

Having as point of departure the responses of my interviewees to a significant queer death I wanted to trace their dealing with such a traumatic incident and the public cultures created around that. To allow such conversation to occur I decided that me and my interviewees should have some degree of familiarity with one another and that we are not complete strangers. I looked in my networks and friend groups for participants. My initial hesitations about it disappeared when every one of them responded enthusiastically about being interviewed. Knowing the unease and hesitation most subjugated groups have with institutional work, I was expecting at least some reluctance and a fair amount of questions. However being familiar with

each other and knowing my background, that I too belong in the community and have some shared ethical commitments with my participants such as being against exercising power over vulnerable others or making use of people for personal interest, was enough to trust that I would not be distorting their sayings or judge them. Knowing each other in advance worked in this case as a catalyst for the participation in the study. Like other feminist researchers have reported, it is not necessary that distance and estrangement lead to better quality results but this methodological choice depends heavily on the case and type of study. (Reinharz, 1992:27-27).

Nevertheless, I chose explicitly for people outside my feminist and queer activist groups to avoid falling into the trap of habitual communication among activists and the interview therefore becoming an exchange of ideological beliefs or a rigid detached monologue. A phenomenon that often occurs during activist discussions. Instead Ilias, Natasha, Andreas and me know each other from different channels such as studying together, having common friends or coming from the same small hometown.

This thesis project is situated within the field of feminist and gender studies. It therefore pays special attention to issues of power relations between interviewer and interviewee, openness and engagement from the interviewer's behalf as well as validation to interviewees lived experiences (Reinharz, 1992).

Preexisting familiarity despite it facilitating in-depth dialogue and openness does not come without downsides. In this case, my participants being aware of my feminist activist involvement in Athens from 2010 to 2014 and my role as a gender studies student associated with a prestigious western university made them occasionally insecure about the validity of their claims. Possibly making them see themselves as less knowledgeable and sometimes exposed to the eyes of the "expert". Interviewer and participant relations were also in this project subject to power relations present in every human interaction confirming a common problem feminist research encounters (Kirsch, 1999).

That became evident while during the interviews I was asked questions such as "Is that still relevant?" or "Am I off topic here?". I tried to reassure them that they know

best how to describe their world and their experiences. I repeated multiple times that it is “ok” for them to say whatever they wanted and that there are no fixed answers.

Interview structure and questions

The interviews were conducted between June and July 2019. They all were semi-structured in-depth interviews lasting from one to two hours. Due to distance between me and the interviewees the interviews were conducted remotely. We would connect through Skype and have a video call. With the interviewees’ consent I recorded the interviews in audio and video. I was at my home and them at theirs. The distance and the comfort of our own spaces created a less formal interview setting. I had a few standard questions which were general enough to allow multiple responses to come forth. My opening questions were more specific though. I asked where they were when they found out about the murder and what their first response was. My first question’s purpose was to bring my interviewees closer to the moment they first got confronted with the horrific news. It is a preparatory question that sets the tone of the discussion while it gives some space for the interviewees to recall and think about how it was and how they felt. Later on my questions became more general. I would for example ask “How did you feel after you heard of the murder?” and “What did you think of it?”. In the end of the interview I would always ask how my interviewees perceive being queer in Greece today. By asking that I wanted to contextualize their answers in how they perceive contemporary queer existing in Greece. I only did that in the end to make sure I am not directing too much the interview from the beginning⁵.

Mostly I let the interviewees lead and unravel their thoughts without stopping them. Thereby I assumed the role of the “active listener” (Hesse-Biber, 2017: 109). I would ask follow up questions like “What do you mean by that?” or “Could you be more specific?” but I would not interrupt them or intervene in the content, any kind of association brought up by the traumatic event of Zak’s murder was relevant for the study. Occasionally I would nod and use a few words to validate their sayings. Words I used were “Aha”, “I see”, “Right” and “I understand”. I did not set a time limit.

⁵ A list of questions is provided in the appendix.

Analyzing the interviews

The analysis of the interviews started almost simultaneously with the data collection, a common practice among social sciences researchers (Hesse-Biber, 2017:142). During the interviews I would take rough notes on important themes mentioned by the interviewees. Often a small interpretation or analysis of what was said would be part of the notes. I would also write down the exact minute on the recording so I could revisit the audio and video files if necessary.

On a later stage, after the interviews were complete I listened back to the interviews and transcribed them. During the transcription I was simultaneously writing down parts of the analysis. Those drafts formed the backbone of my following analytical chapters. I coded the interview content in major themes that were present in the narratives of all of my interviewees. These were the following:

- Being queer and how this can be perceived as traumatic.
- Indicators of how the story of Zak's murder became public queer trauma.
- Attested queer cultures that emerged in the aftermath of the murder
- Cultures specific to the Greek sociopolitical climate
- Resonances of contemporary feminist theory on the lived experience of Greek queers

Based on those axes I wrote my analytical chapters and I built my argumentation. My final argument and intervention are concisely put together and discussed in the Conclusion of this thesis project.

Chapter two: Lesbian, Gay or Queer, Various Degrees of Hurting

Lesbian, Gay and Queer existence has been historically marked as difficult, unlivable, and inherently traumatic. This embedded trauma is by no means used to describe some kind of default dysfunction of queer subjectivities. It rather accounts for the

production of the queer as a historical figure through processes of exclusion and trauma (Love, 2007). In this chapter I discuss how my interviewees, Ilias, Natasha and Andreas perceive their queerness and its attachments to trauma through the lens of their responses to Zak's death.

Between Lesbian, Gay and Queer Lives; the Embedded Trauma

Trauma is not a very straight forward category. It has been therefore a challenge to code what was shared as a traumatic event or experience. Nevertheless Ilias, Natasha and Andreas seem to all share a similar worry and understanding of queer existence as subject to normalizing violence. As Ann Cvetkovich puts it, "As a name for experiences of socially situated political violence, trauma forges overt connections between politics and emotion" (Cvetkovich, 2003). In explicit or implicit ways the interviewees draw those connections between homophobic violence and emotional responses. This is the topos where their trauma resides, in the uttering of violence as such. The interviewees give name to the experience of generalized fear, that Greece is not a safe place and that they are scared, ashamed or feeling bad in various degrees. Talking about whether there were homophobic motives behind Zak's murder or not Ilias mentions:

"Yeah... I am also scared to walk alone late at night....For an attack... And yeah maybe because when I was little, very young, a kid, I was afraid to leave my home... You know, it shows on me. I was afraid to be exposed through that. An attack... To family, friends." (Ilias, June 2019)

The possibility of the crime having homophobic dimensions evokes to Ilias memories of shame and suffering from his youth. His voice shows sorrow and regret. It suddenly became slower and deeper. Like a realization is hitting in. Being scared to leave his own home in his childhood is a feeling that haunts. A bit later after me asking if he is aware of the new developments regarding the court case of Zak's murder he interrupts me and the same worry reappears. He asks me in an agonizing voice:

“Is there a court verdict that it was a homophobic attack?” (Ilias, June 2019)

Without me mentioning anything about what kind of turn the juridical channels have been taking, he reflexively worries that his fears will come true. That Zak was brutally murdered because he was queer. The trauma of homophobic violence persists and it becomes clear in these moments of fear, doubt and despair. In Ilias narrations, trauma appears to be a condition of being, a state of latent affects able to wake under memories or associations. Or a “persistent presence beyond forgetting” (Gilbersleeve, 2014).

While he also mentions that he has been bullied and that homophobic incidents have happened in the past he doesn’t share much about trauma. Trauma is shield off and well protected, yet always there.

In the case of other interviewees emotions were communicated more openly. Natasha, although she composed herself as confident and rationalizing she doesn’t fail to name her trauma. She seems to point to it and its entanglements with the present in a sharp way. Andreas reports the same connections with a similar calmness. When asked about their feelings after the death of Zak they mention:

“This is being projected to my personality and my problems... It is more complicated ... If we only take into account that Zak was gay... It is a kind of violence that exists out there. I haven’t directly received it. I have seen it happening. I have only been bullied.” (Natasha, July 2019)

And:

“You have a great sorrow that works accumulatively... Because you’re sad about your family, for chances in life that might have been lost... But eventually it is up to you how you’re gonna deal with it. I have spent time in my childhood bedroom with coming out only to my mother and having about 1200 fears. My only consolation was not to becoming passive” (Natasha, July 2019)

While Andreas said:

“I was projecting a lot as a queer person. I was feeling very scared the first days. The identifications we were all making were many...” (Andreas, July 2019)

For Natasha the name of her trauma is sorrow and shame. Fear and the knowledge of violence that queer people can receive out there. It is a set of feelings well documented in queer studies and an analytical entry point for many feminist scholars and cultural analysts (Meyer, 2015). For Andreas, identifying with those receiving such violence is able to cause great fear. On the attachment of queerness to trauma, Heather Love writes “The experience of queer historical subjects is not at a safe distance from contemporary experience; rather, their social marginality and abjection mirror our own. The relation to the queer past is suffused not only by feelings of regret, despair and loss but also the shame of identification” (Love, 2007: 32)

This shame of identification I argue, is another side of the embedded trauma attached to queer existence. Again not as a pathological category but a lived condition of existence. Operating in the very close everyday and not only in the queer past as Love suggests, the shame of identification and its other affective counterparts –sorrow, fear, distress- seem to form the canvas on which trauma, across different temporalities, can comfortably nest.

The space of knowing communicated as trauma, comes forth in the narrations of all the interviewees. In the agonizing question of Ilias, the fact that Natasha connects her accumulating sorrow to the feelings evoked from Zak’s murder and Andreas attesting the fear of identifying himself with a victim of homophobic violence. It is the knowledge of stories of violence, more or less visible, and their deep consolidation as possible occurrences in one’s life, another name for what I call embedded queer trauma. It is after all that bearing witness to another’s trauma, being in the position of knowing and identifying that trauma is assumed as one’s own (Caruth, 1996: 9).

Queer Living and the Negative

Another association that can be registered as traumatic is the one of queer as society’s pariah. Being an outcast, a figure excluded from dominant public sphere is what has created the queer during the historical progression of the modern world. Exclusion

takes many forms, with violence being the most extreme one. Denied access to institutions, distrust, marked as impure, control and oppression of feeling and desire are a few of those ways.

How could one undo those associations and escape the faith of a traumatized existence? Association and traumas deeply rooted in queer past but also evident in the present.

Ilias said, without being asked that he found the videos of Zak's murder disturbing. I asked why and he responded:

"I was confused with the lifestyle and gay community and its habits... I was flirting with STDs back then... I was unsure...I really wonder, I wonder how things can go well and without problems for gays..." (Ilias, June 2019)

His voice, slow and serious, showing a long-standing worry. For a bit we were both uncomfortable and silent. Ilias found the video of the murder disturbing for unexpected reasons. How the habits of the gay community related to the video that circulated broadly and was the proof of the committed murder, was to me unclear.

I asked, probably out of my own unease, again, if finding the videos disturbing had to do with the depicted level of violence. And he responds in an intense way, his voice almost apologetic:

"No... I was thinking, ok, you need to have a normal life and not deviate. Otherwise you're screwed. I was bullied in the past because it showed" (Ilias, June 2019)

Ilias initial question and its connection to the video seemed to me unrelated at first. Only after analyzing the interviews I realized it was at the core of what I am actually discussing. How things can go well, how can one live the promised good life when queerness is marked as unworthy of being lived out? The video, affectively received, encapsulates for Ilias the impossibility of queer existence in macho, homophobic Greek reality. A deeply disturbing thought indeed. How much reverse discourse and reclaiming can undo this kind of embedded trauma? Both of us stayed numb for a couple of seconds, holding that thought. Ilias answers to himself, and ultimately to

me, the only way not to be punished is not to be what one is, to not deviate and to conform to the norm. To be cruelly optimistic, as Lauren Berlant would put it, and aspire to a future that is meant to be oppositional to one's existence. Ilias attests, the connection of queer to the negative in a simple but uncontested manner.

More recently the queer, albeit a product processes of exclusion, came to signify the resistance against violence faced by sexual deviants and ultimately the political stance of negation of any form of structural violence/inequality and this world (Rand, 2014). An empowering figure with agency that inspires across geographical borders. However the queer remains existentially oppositional to society's norms and values. It is the embedded trauma of incompatibility with this world, the contradistinction of queer and the normal that imbues every social setting.

Queer studies have extensively elaborated on the opposition of the queer to the world. On the association of the queer with the negative, Lee Edelman, conversing with psychoanalytic tradition, in his book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* deals with exactly this ascribed negativity and questions narratives of queer upward mobility. The queer, theorized as the figure that negates any prospect of social viability is constructed as inherently antisocial and the counter figuration to society's aspirations to the future (Edelman, 2004).

The way the thoughts of my interviewees unravel during our interview interaction shows no association of the queer to symbols of resistance and empowerment, interestingly enough, Ilias, Natasha and Andreas seem to understand their queerness in closer connection to Lee Edelman's theorization.

Ilias says again in another point in the interview:

"If you want to be accepted as gay you need to achieve, you need to be very high... You need to be perfect... Only then maybe" (Ilias, June 2019)

While Andreas says:

"One way or another, in Greece, you know that you belong to the margins" (Andreas, July 2019)

Their language is revealing and invaluable to unlock the embedded trauma in queer existence. Again, the narratives of knowing are stronger than the states of being. My interviewees do not refer to oppressive conditions and traumatic experiences in the first person. They use phrases like 'knowing' or 'you need to be' to describe something on the verges of knowledge and feeling (Cvetkovich, 2003). I argue, that this kind of description palpates the deeply embedded comprehension of the incompatibility of queer existence to societal imperatives and ultimately opens the way to the intelligibility of trauma embedded to queer life in Greece.

Final Remarks

Queerness for my interviewees is attached to a certain degree to stories of hurting. Homophobic violence and trauma seem to be themes that play an important role in their lives. Regardless if they are the victims of that violence themselves. The chance of being subject to anti-gay, violence that aims to normalize a very narrow way of existing is understood as embedded to queer life in Greece. That makes Greek queerness tightly interwoven to affective landscapes of trauma.

Lastly, the irreconcilable between queerness and dominant societal norms and values is shown through the narratives of Ilias, Natasha and Andreas. This existential opposition is, I argue in itself traumatic and along with confrontation of violence and exclusion being constant themes for queer life, they form the basis through which public trauma and public cultures can emerge.

Trauma during the interviews was often brought up as a feeling, a situation and an impossibility. Despite I am mostly interested in public trauma, a collectively experienced form of trauma, I do believe that traumatic experiences which are at the crossroad of personal and public -such as the burden of being queer in an openly homophobic society- become the vectors through which collective public trauma about the similar oppressive conditions can eventually emerge. This chapter has traced in the narratives of the interviewees this dynamic and shows the connections between trauma embedded in queer existence and public trauma experienced by queer people in Athens, Greece. In the following chapter specificities of queer public trauma and queer cultures will be discussed in detail.

Chapter three: Public Trauma and Greek Queer Cultures

This chapter explores how the traumatic event of Zak's death transforms into public trauma. Special attention is paid into publicizing trauma by means of claiming the narrative, establishing one's accepted 'truth' and the sociopolitical dynamics therein. I provide a more detailed account of queer public cultures in the Greek context in the setting of political instability that among other cultural and historical factors constitute Greekness as a potentially traumatic experience.

Possessing public trauma narrative representation in the Greek context

In trauma theory the concept of *knowing* has been central. Cathy Caruth in her influential work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, critically reading Freud's work on trauma, writes: "The accident, that is, as it emerges in Freud and is passed on in other trauma narratives, does not simply represent the violence of a collision but also conveys the impact of its very incomprehensibility. What returns to haunt the victim, these stories tell us, is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known" (Caruth, 1996: p. 6).

Ilias, Natasha and Andreas provided similar information about the collectively received trauma of Zak's death. Entangled with the particularities of knowing and searching for the truth in Greek reality, registering public trauma and creating one's one narrative seems to go through culturally situated processes (Mohatt et al. 2013).

Ilias mentioned:

"When I first heard of it I was on the phone with another gay friend. He told me. I got stressed because there was lack of information... I didn't know what was happening and I was confused by the contradictory information, the media were saying it was a murder and a robbery.... I didn't know... I thought ok it is a robbery that ended up wrong" (Ilias, June 2019)

And:

“I wanted to know the state he was in... If he used drugs. It would help me understand...I wanted the truth (emphasized). I missed information. I didn’t know where to look for the right information” (Ilias, June 2019)

While the original profiling of Zak from the media as an intoxicated thief soon collapsed, the confusion that it brought to Athenian queers was great. Ilias stressed multiple times during the interview that he was confused. He also clearly stated that knowing the exact circumstances that allowed the deadly violence to occur, would help him understand, possibly process the trauma. What makes the –so called- truth so important to Ilias? Natasha’s and Andreas responses shed some light to this question.

Andreas, was explaining to me that a part of the queer community, the one that has politicized their queerness as part of broader emancipatory struggles, held daily meetings after the murder in order to keep each other informed. The meetings were held in Polytechnic University, not far from where the murder took place. The commonly known as “the Polytechnic” is a public space, a university building, often used for political events and meetings from the extra parliamentary left and the anarchist milieu. Describing the situation there he mentioned:

“The first two days, many... But many, people not even from the scene, people with no political reflexes, not involved in political groups, were coming to the Polytechnic. It was the only source of information... People you never saw before... Like this guy who came to me asking information and said ‘I need to know man, Zak diagnosed my boyfriend as HIV-positive’... There was this need from everyone to reach some kind of truth, something to make them understand the incident” (Andreas, July 2019)

And Natasha when asked what she and her friends mostly talked about regarding the murder said:

⁶ Zak Kostopoulos was an active member of anti-HIV stigma movement in Athens. He was a volunteer in the NGO Check-Point. Check-Point has offices in Athens city center, with physical offices where free HIV tests to everyone and information about sexually transmitted diseases are provided.

"I don't know, we were trying to explain Zak's behavior and the incident...

We were trying to find out the truth" (Natasha, July 2019)

Theorizations on public trauma deal with trauma as narrative representation (Young, 1997) That is, a psychological process independent of the traumatic event itself which transforms the event into a time-proof narrative, possessed and reproduced by a certain group. These narratives are transmitted in the form of various representations⁷. Especially for Greek sociopolitical climate where common public discourses are openly attacking non-normative others the demand for a counter-narrative was of vital importance. The "truth" sought by the Greek queer community was nothing but the need to establish that narrative. A narrative straight from the guts of the queer experience. Not the truth of the media or police. This is evident by Andreas' testimony of the numbers of people considering their fellow queers and their sharing of information way more reliable than news reports and police announcements.

I would argue, that claiming the narrative and defending the representation of the public trauma of Zak's loss was an intrinsic process of registering a traumatic event as publicly queer in Greece. Dominant narratives would do no justice to mourning queers and allies but would dismiss the death of Zak as an individual case. To resist that the LGBTQI+ community and its allies needed a full arsenal. Who does the traumatic event address to? What kind of corollaries does it have to the psychic and lived reality of the group identifying with it? How is this another incident of structural violence faced by non-normative subjects and not an exception? What kind of associations does it evoke and to whom? And finally which narrative dominates the public sphere? These are the key questions queer subjects needed to contemplate to process trauma and build their own narrative. Hence the urgent need for "truth" that either collectively or individually needed to be discovered.

⁷ Such examples are a mural of Zak as half Zak half Zackie-oh! in the center of Athens made by activists, drag performances in public spaces as ways of queer mourning and various other artistic responses.

Emerging Greek Queer Public Cultures

On the political and cultural implications of those processes, claiming the narrative became a strong weapon for Greek queer subjectivities against the attempted whitewashing of the murder and subsequently turned against overall oppression and discrimination. Possessing the narrative around Zak's murder and trauma allowed for a mass movement to emerge and produce situated public Greek queer cultures of struggling and resisting structural violence. Marches in drag, performance protests, art projects and books were a few of the cultural responses of resistance. Denying oppression, patriarchy, homophobia and their investments on nationalism and the capitalist organization of society was strongly voiced in the aftermath of the murder.

Andreas provided some insight in the ways queers from Athens did that:

“The first thing we did was to have a very fist impulsive march. It was like a mournful walk. It was very quiet and calm but you could feel that something was boiling underneath. I left earlier from work because I wanted to go to the first gatherings, I didn't know what it was, we were mostly talking about what happened and then we went out on the streets to march, you know impulsively” (Andreas, July 2019)

An initial response to the tragic news was to get together and discuss the tragic event. According to Andreas they first met each other to talk and then to walk a mournful walk, together. Queers in Athens mourned their dead by coming together. They also mourned by walking quietly the streets of Athens. Their bodies on the street became the signifiers of the message, specifically initiated by the murder but open to interpretation. Just a mournful walk. This response was possible in the Greek context. Public spaces are not as surveilled as in other metropolitan centers and demonstrating does not require a special permit which would have suppressed such immediate response. In that sense, the LGBTQI+ community and allies in Athens were able to create a de novo way of dealing with queer loss. Walking in the streets one next to another, forming a collective body that moves in public space, they made what was

previously hidden and personal, public and visible. Violence against queer bodies went finally public in Athens.

Those initial responses led to further togetherness. Andreas' narration continues:

"We later formed the group 'Priestesses of the Obscene'. We sat down and had endless meetings. It was a marathon of discussing, sharing our feelings and experiences. Talking for 3, 4, 5 hours... There was no limit. We were there for one another giving space and listening to each other. We were trying to understand." (Andreas, July 2019)

I asked if all those people knew each other beforehand. Andreas responded:

"Some of us did, some others not. A lot of us met each other through that process. Of course as time went by we became fewer and fewer. But we didn't have a common ground besides being queer or feminist..." (Andreas, July 2019)

Cultures of building community emerged as Andreas narration indicates. On the basis of a traumatic event queer subjects and allies came together and shared information, thoughts and feelings. They built bonds and created the prerequisites of a solid, visible public queer culture. Such responses from Andreas' group, but also the ones of other formations worked together and managed to create a precedent of increased representation and visibility impossible to be ignored. Small but important steps for further imprinting and enhancing Greek queer culture in the mainstream sphere.

Natasha provides some more information about such imprints:

"My friends are not all from the community. Regardless, they support. It wasn't like I had to convince them to come along (to the protests)... We were just asking each other: when and where?"

Those marches were so different... The most peaceful I have been, although there was rage. The only demonstrations where there was glitter everywhere. Do you have any idea how it is to see Stadiou street purple, green, pink (laughs)?" (Natasha, July 2019)

And:

“I expected Pride this year to be more political, especially after Zak’s death. Ok, this year it lasted a whole week with a lot of art and events and stuff...but yeah same happy vibes. On the other hand there were 100.000 people and 60% of them were gender fluid! (laughs)” (Natasha, July 2019)

Natasha recalls the protests with joy. She was surprised the protests were peaceful probably because Greek modern history is full of moments of political violence and protests often turn violent and aggressive. In this setting queers and allies break the norm of protest culture in Greece and create their own public cultures of struggle and resistance. In a society where the figure of the able-bodied, rational, politically informed and aware Greek man prevails as the one navigating and forming the political arena, queers and allies create ruptures in the traditional forms of doing politics, organizing grass-root movements and protesting Zak’s murder. Natasha further connects those responses to the Pride in Athens. Despite being critical about it finding Pride too “happy” she remains amazed by the number of people attending. In her narration a possible connection could be drawn on the publication of Zak’s murder and the success of that year’s Pride week suggesting more visibility and representation for the community.

However the public queer cultures emerging after Zak’s murder are not only restricted in protest culture and claiming visibility. Andreas discussed how Zak’s profiling as an addict thief was received and illuminates some of the least evident cultural responses of the Greek queer community:

“The thing with the drugs was something important, I believe. It made me a bit happy. For the first time- well not extensively- but still, many of us talked about being “toxic-phobic” and “soberism” (Andreas, July 2019)

I asked Andreas to specify what he meant and he replied:

“A lot of people processed the thing about drugs, people were talking in the beginning about Zak as ‘the junkie’... How should I put it... I saw it a lot

happening, and dope the way it is in Athens, it is a taboo for many of us... a very negative thing compared to other more normalized drugs. I don't think this has happened before. People were wondering how essentialist their ideas about drugs might be, at a gay party people would use other drugs but you know dope is the devil" (Andreas, July 2019)

I asked again for clarification:

"You mean that it is depended on who the user is? That dope is for the really poor and marginalized?" (Interviewer)

And he responded:

"Yes exactly. That is what started cracking a bit..." (Andreas, July 2019)

Andreas' voice sounded confused and it was hard for him to find the right words. He was talking slow as if he was trying to think while talking, something that did not happen during the rest of the interview. According to Andreas a part of the queer community of Athens was renegotiating its views on drug use in the aftermath of the murder. For Athenians coming in contact with heroin addicts is an often phenomenon. The city center has a few drug hubs and the heroin problem is very visible. Despite the visibility of one of society's most marginal groups, drug users remain stigmatized and segregated from the rest. The queer community not only touches upon a subject that most progressive milieus in Greece and abroad comfortably avoid but invent their own vocabulary to resist the generalized attack against drug users. Andreas mentions two terms, "toxic-phobic" and "soberism". Unfortunately his difficulty in articulating a more precise explanation of the processes that radicalize discourses about drug use in his community did not allow him to further explain his use of those terms. It is impossible to claim with any degree of certainty the directions this debate is/will be taking. It is in any case interesting to document that the LGBTQI+ community is coming closer to another marginalized group while rethinking its own assumptions, prejudices and privilege around drugs. Public debates of that sort can potentially create cultures of connectedness and solidarity among otherwise disconnected social actors and put

forward progressive agendas of inclusivity and mutual aid while expanding the meaning of being queer for Athenian queer subjectivities⁸.

Political Instability, an Unescapable Landscape

Public trauma emerges in specific cultural and political contexts. Like any other social phenomenon, it cannot be studied outside the sociopolitical circumstances around it. Greece as a modern state oscillates between western attachments, eastern belongings, financial dependency and more recently a state of constant crisis (Herzfeld, 2002). Structural violence in Greece manifests more often than not in the form of nationalism and anti-migrant sentiment, financial exploitation of the working class, devaluation of lives of most vulnerable others, femicides and police violence to name a few (Carastathis, 2015).

In the case of the public trauma of the murder of Zak Kostopoulos and the queer public cultures it engendered, the interviewees draw overt or covert connections to the overall Greek political landscape.

Natasha when discussing her response to Zak's murder said:

"I don't believe in justice, or police, I don't think they will be punished or that the case will be handled properly. In Zak's case I was shocked by the images, I was scared but also happy to see such broad support on the street. People who had nothing to do with the community... But yeah I was holding my horses... You know how it is, politics and justice, zero trust" (Natasha, July 2019)

⁸ Characteristic of such expansion of the notion of queer in Athens as a result of the aftermath of the murder were germinal and dispersed responses found in posters, chants and online discussions. Those responses connected bodily self-determination and drug use along more common associations such as sexual freedom and freedom of movement. One chant during the demonstrations was: "Faggots, Junkies with HIV, we party on bosses' grief" and "It was not self-defense, their hands were armed by toxic-phobia".

And later on when discussing some institutional responses to the incident she mentioned Zak brother's speech during Pride week in Athens, 9 months after the murder:

"I was moved when I saw Zak's brother, a kid from the province, giving a speech during Pride about acceptance and love. A kid from the province wanting recognition and justice. Such a strong figure. It reminded me of Fyssas mother... But you get your hopes up... Then you look around and again constrain" (Natasha, July 2019)

Both these quotes from Natasha show the distrust to the political and juridical system, painting the picture of a feeling many Greeks share. Natasha's voice conveys disappointment and describes the abovementioned distrust as an obstacle to investing in hope and future change towards the better for gays and lesbians. Natasha says that her hopes might be getting up but a look around is enough to constrain her. The sociopolitical climate is an unescapable reality for queers in Athens.

Another interesting association Natasha makes is the comparison of Zak's brother figure to the one of the mother of an anti-fascist hip-hop artist Pavlos Fyssas who was murdered from neo-Nazis in Athens in September 2013. The registering of the public trauma of Zak's death is not independent from other shocking political murders and incidents of violence. A queer death, my interviewees know all too well, did not occur in a social vacuum but in an environment where death and violence repeatedly target oppressed groups. A social reality where necropolitics is not just a mere theorization of operation of power but the paradigm of everyday living. (Mbembe, 2003)

Political instability except for a dynamic between various social groups attacking each other is also perceived as a problematic of the central political scene. Both Ilias and Andreas comment on the outcome of the national elections of 7th July 2019 as potentially dangerous for queer political goals.

Ilias mentions:

“To be honest, I am not expecting much from the community. If there is no political will...Syriza⁹ tried to change something for us, they went against the public opinion not only for gays, for migrants too...Now if Koulis¹⁰ is elected... Homophobes are gonna throw a party (laughs)” (Ilias, June 2019)

Andreas mentioned while explaining to me why he decided to move in March 2019 to Berlin, Germany:

“Yeah... I was saying, if Koulis is elected I am scared to go back to Athens, Exarchia is full of police they tell me, and they started attacking demos again... Let alone they treat women as childbearing machines!!” (Andreas, July 2019)

What both my interviewees humorously describe is the impact of the parliamentary and central governance political landscape in queer existence in Greece. Ilias specifically thinks that positive change is a matter of political will and relatively independent from the actions of the queer community. He also implies that a change of government could bring gays and lesbians in a worse position. Following his train of thought one could assume that queer investments, at least for a part of the community, are attached to the vicissitudes of the political system. A more conservative set of power relations is to adversely affect the quality of life of queers in Athens, Andreas also seems to believe. He mentions a few actions of the newly elected government. Increased police presence in Exarchia -an Athenian neighborhood frequented by youth and an important landmark for social movements-, police intervention during a demonstration against gentrification and lastly proclaiming that young mothers below thirty will be awarded with financial benefits¹¹. Targeting civil rights such as demonstrating and promoting conservative agendas on

⁹ Syriza is the name of the former ruling party in Greece. A collision of smaller left wing parties, Syriza gained power after the rest of political system was collapsing under the weight of the unprecedented financial debt crisis of 2008. Syriza has been heavily criticized from the left of being unable to keep promises of financial recovery and from the right about progressive politics on the field of civil rights.

¹⁰ Koulis is the deprecating, yet commonly used, nickname of the current Prime minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis. Leader of the right wing party New Democracy is known for his controversial comments about labor rights, migration and civil rights.

¹¹ Author’s knowledge prior to the interviews.

reproductive norms and values does not go unnoticed by Andreas making him as a queer person not wanting to return to Athens.

Homosexuality and queerness, or just being non-normative, are being considered in the narratives of the interviewees as subject to domino effects initiated from an unstable and fluid political system. Ilias, Andreas and Natasha do not perceive their interests as homosexuals to be independent and compartmentalized but view them as a whole and connected to the struggles and oppression of other social groups. This is important to better understand accounts of how a culturally and geographically specific group deals with public trauma and produces cultural responses. Not detached but largely intertwined and rooted to the cultural experience. As Lauren Berlant writes: “The present moment increasingly imposes itself on consciousness as a moment in extended crisis with one happening piling up on another” (Berlant, 2011) Overall insecurity, precariousness, political distrust, financial impoverishment constitute, I argue, one of the many piling up layers of the present on which public trauma for queer subjectivities in modern Greece unfolds.

Greekness as Trauma

Political instability is an important facet of contemporary Greece that contributes to the creation of public trauma for queer subjectivities. However considering that political instability is answered in many places across the globe, I argue that specific aspects of Greekness as lived experience give a special texture to what can be collectively experienced as traumatic for Greek queers. Greekness is used here on the one hand to resist narratives of linear/ancient Greek descent of contemporary Greek identity. It rather defends Greek identity as a non-unitary amalgam of various population shifts of the past and the erased history of ethnic minorities residing in the Greek peninsula. On the other hand Greekness points to the cultural experience of being socialized in Greece and not just being granted membership to the Greek nation as an imagined community (Anderson, 1983). It works in this way antagonistically to nationalist and right-wing claims to being Greek.

Andreas, Ilias and Natasha bring up the Greek experience in multiple occasions. Analyzing the interviews a common theme came up. Greek experience can in itself be traumatic or work as trauma enhancing condition. In the case of the murder of Zak, Andreas felt the weight of the Greek public opinion heavy on his shoulders. When asked about how he feels now, in the aftermath of the murder, he responded:

“I feel more grounded and fortified against public opinion, personally and collectively” (Andreas, July 2019)

I asked what he meant by fortified and he replied:

“I have better reflexes and arguments to reject public opinion, so that it cannot touch me and I don’t feel guilty at all about it. After Zak there was this open front, us against Greek society. Since then I am way more fortified against that. I mean it positively. It has been positive for me and my close ones. In Athens you need to be fortified against public opinion in order to survive... Maybe that’s why here we form such strong communities. In order to cope, to survive” (Andreas, July 2019)

Later on he mentions again:

“Look Athens is definitely not a safe place. About Greece? Don’t even get me started. I became so fed up with all the shit of Greece... Every piece that’s keeping the thing together, all of it (stressing) I can’t stand it! (emphatic)” (Andreas, July 2019)

Andreas is very vocal about experiencing Greekness as oppressive and unbearable. The public opinion, a dominant narrative in the public sphere seems to be for him an assault. He mentions that he needs to be fortified against it. That he needs to protect himself so that he and his community can survive. If trauma is the crisis of surviving as Cathy Caruth has suggested, surviving in Athens as a sexual deviant is in itself a trauma that is impossible to not take into account in when talking about other traumatic events in the Greek capital. Andreas and his close ones seem to experience Greekness as a continuous crisis of survival, a trauma shared and omnipresent (Gildersleeve, 2014), (Caruth, 1996).

Despite Andreas was the only one who openly expressed such negative feelings about Greekness similar evidence are to be traced in Natasha's narratives. Talking about how she has experienced being a lesbian in Greek reality she says:

"As soon as I figured things out about my sexuality, I got desperate about Greece. We were probably one of the few countries in the EU which had done nothing about homosexuals. In Greek law there was nowhere the word 'homosexual' to be found. Simply because we didn't exist according to the legislators...." (Natasha, July 2019)

Natasha's despair regarding the institutionalized invisibility of homosexuals speaks to Andreas' explosion and tactics of survival. Both wounded by the Greek state of things. On a different phase of the interview Natasha was explaining to me that many of her queer circles have left Greece. She mentions:

"I have noticed that everyone (gay and lesbians) from my generation has left abroad. From the group 'Good as Youth' I used to be part of, 80% has moved abroad. People from the community who were very visible moved massively to Sweden, England, the Netherlands... It is not a coincidence" (Natasha, July 2109)

Indeed, it could be that the crisis of survival against Greek experience and its often homophobic outbursts is too traumatic. Traumatic enough to make part of the community migrate to the Global North. I suggest that the need to move away as survival tactic, to form community as self-protection and constantly being in opposing camps with dominant national narratives are a few of the conveyances of Greekness as trauma. Greekness constitutes one of the interlocking elements of the situated public trauma of queer loss witnessed in the case of Zak's murder.

Final remarks

Public trauma in the case of Zak's brutal murder was transmitted as an affective landscape of mourning. A generalized feeling of grief and identification emerged only after queer subjectivities created their narrative around the traumatic event and spread representations of it to multiple directions. On the aftermath of the murder situated Greek queer cultures emerged. New groups were formed, queer subjectivities reclaimed the political and organized themselves in agential political formations. Queer cultures of resistance came forth giving life to new alliances and internal redefinitions. Undoubtedly those processes were heavily marked by stories of trauma and exclusion consistently present in the Greek social and political reality. A reality where cultural and historical impasses converge with global economies of austerity and impoverishment. Public trauma of Zak's death is particularly situated in this reality and inextricably bound to its impossibilities. However cultures of resistance and hopeful movements travelling across borders and cultural contexts also leave their mark on public trauma. The following chapter traces exactly the imprint emancipatory discourses can have on the publication of trauma. Feminism and Intersectionality are discussed through the narratives of the interviewees.

Chapter Four: Feminist Theories in Context

In recent years, feminist debates about gender oppression and inequality have hit the mainstream. Feminist theory has broadened the analytical scope of oppression, pointing out its co-constitution from different but interlocking elements. Concepts such as intersectionality have popularized the understanding of oppression as multi-axial and multi-dimensional advancing radical political aims. In this chapter I discuss the resonances of contemporary feminist debates on public trauma and cultures in the narratives of my interviewees.

Feminism and Narratives of Trauma

Stories of trauma and loss, next to the deep desire to overcome them, have been the animating force of feminism. Feminism, the geographically dispersed and historically

always present moments of resistance to the patriarchal order of things, runs through stories of gendered violence and oppression as a red thread. Connecting past and present while at the same time fiercely opposing them. Sarah Ahmed in her book *Living a Feminist Life* argues that what brings us closer to feminism is the stories that leave us most fragile. She also views feminism as the force that “might pick up (or more hopefully pick us up from) the experiences that leave us vulnerable and exposed” and as “the dynamism of connecting stories” (Ahmed, 2017:22). The murder of Zak occurred in a moment that the feminist movement in Greece has been slowly getting off the ground after a long silence of almost 30 years (Marinouidi, 2018) and started dwelling on contemporary debates on queerness and structural oppression from a unique non-western position (Athanasidou, 2018). Natasha and Andreas provide some information on how feminist discourses have influenced the surfacing of Zak’s death as public trauma.

Natasha while she was unfolding her thoughts about the murder said:

“I was expecting all the reactions to stop eventually. Of course at some point all of these stop. But unexpected support came up. Every one became anti-sexist, a feminist and pro-gay rights. Elena Akrita (journalist of mainstream media) was writing raging posts about Zak every day. I think the LGBTQI+ community came closer to society. I felt that someone was hearing. It was violent and horrible but it was not the first time. But now it reached more people.... You see before no one knew what drag is, what queer is. There was no name for us. Now if I ask my students what’s non-binary they all know! And have an opinion about it!” (Natasha, July 2019)

And Andreas’ response when I asked how being queer in Athens today feels like he said:

“Where I live now queerness is way more normalized and institutionalized.... But ok, in Athens it is getting off too. At first I thought that the community would become divided between those who wanted to make Zak’s death more political and those who see their queerness more

colorful and proud... I am not into this whole pride thing... But anyway, most circles got empowered and more in contact, started communicating more. Of course a lot of work has been done the previous years. We have talked so much about gender... Everywhere really.” (Andreas, July 2019)

What both Andreas and Natasha point to is that the renewed interest in gender and sexuality politics, which has clearly populated the public sphere the past years, has been an important factor in how the traumatic event of Zak’s death was received. That interest, as Natasha mentions, has left an imprint in more social groups who now have entered and normalized the language around feminist/ queer discourses. Words like queer and non-binary are not strange anymore and with familiarity comes normalization. The words reveal a number of significations. Along with the words their history and connection to stories of exclusion and violence but also struggle and community building become known. This kind of visibility and recognition permits stories to circulate, to be publicized and eventually to be claimed as one’s own antagonizing dominant narratives. As I showed in chapter one of this thesis project, possessing the narrative around a traumatic event is essential in its publication as commonly shared trauma. Moreover such publication exposes its deeper causes in structural inequality. Natasha also mentions the widespread support from unexpected parts of society who the last years came closer to feminist/queer agendas such as putting an end to forms of oppression based on gender/sexuality race and class, violence and anti-gay sentiment. Such support undoubtedly publicized the murder beyond just a news report which usually appears as fast as it disappears from the screens. But more as a strong affective landscape of hurting and mourning transmitted by a broader social dynamic that could reach multiple receivers, the story of the mainstream journalist’s daily online posts alludes.

Andreas shares through his thoughts on the LGBTQI+ community another angle of the impact of feminist pervasiveness. Andreas believed that LGBTQI+ circles would dissolve under the pressure of choosing the political characteristics the responses to Zak’s murder should have. Approaching the murder with pride and happiness could potentially repel people who “are not into this whole pride thing” as himself. He saw

that as a danger in the cohesion of the community but relieved he lets me know that something like that did not happen. The reason he provides is that “a lot of work had been done the previous years” and that queer circles and “everywhere”, probably meaning the rest of society, have “talked so much about gender”. The contemporary discussion around gender and oppression has brought LGBTQI+ community to a better understanding of each other which ultimately leads to less friction, Andrea’s narrative suggests. Such a development blows wind in the sails of public queer cultures, especially the ones that emerge as responses to a traumatic event that shook the community and require community bonds and connectedness to overcome forces of dissociation to trauma and crippling collective melancholia.

Seeking information from one another instead of official authorities, creating their own protest culture and doubting cultural accounts of drug use and profiling of drug users would not have happened –at least to the extent that those responses could be registered as public-, if discussions rooting in feminist tradition had not already dialectically created a certain commonality within the LGBTQI+ world in Greece. This commonality is indebted I argue to the recent feminist/queer revival witnessed in Greece and expressed by various social actors and collectivities that “situate their critical interventions beyond (and despite) the boundaries between academic and political engagement”¹² (Athanasίου, 2018)

Public Trauma and Intersectionality

Many of these critical interventions echo discourses of intersectional feminism as the study of Anna Carastathis, who interviewed twenty-two members of LGBTQ collectives and organizations in Greece, suggests (Carastathis, 2018). Intersectional feminism has the last decade gained currency among theory and politics and the concept of intersectionality has travelled across geographical contexts and has been taken up by theorists and activists alike. Intersectionality’s multi-axial character has

¹² Athanasίου in this article shares an enlightening discussion with members of the Greek academic diaspora (Kolocotroni, Papanikolaou) about what they call the *New Queer Greece* critically engaging with the idea of new perspectives on the queer stemming for the Greek sociopolitical context. They elaborate on the role of the autonomous feminist movement in bridging theory and politics while producing situated knowledge.

provided a useful framework where gender, class, race, sexuality, (dis-)ability etc. are analyzed as entangled and mutually constitutive parts of oppression. Such interventions in Greece, brought on by a spectrum of social positions affiliating with feminist and queer purposes, have increased the recent years. One could think of the solidarity movement around the hunger strike of the migrant, working class woman Sanaa Taleb who was protesting her illegal detention¹³, the movement against rape culture and femicides that has raised a number of issues about the threats and various vulnerabilities femininities face in public space, the transgender rights movement that fought for legal recognition of gender identity¹⁴ and many more.

This precedent, that so emphatically pushes the palpable on the edge of the rhetorical, resonates discourses of intersectionality and has been significantly formative to the response of the LGBTQI+ community to Zak's murder. Ilias, Andreas and Natasha's narratives attest to that. Ilias and Natasha both seem to understand the threats and difficulties trans people are facing in Greece and that the violence exercised on Zak's body is the same kind of violence they are far more often confronted with.

When I asked Ilias whether he feels stronger or weaker after everything that happened around Zak's case he mentioned:

"No, I don't feel stronger. These things happened and will keep on happening. A trans whore might disappear and be murdered in the streets and no one will ever know. Just like that...She might not be educated enough to be queer." (Ilias, June 2019)

¹³ For more information on Sanaa Taleb's case: [Sanaa Taleb Detention](#)

¹⁴ The transgender community struggle has been a very important one, the Greek government was forced to change the law and recognize gender identity without asking for proof of prior medical interventions. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/10/greece-vote-on-legal-gender-recognition-is-an-historic-step-forward-for-transgender-rights/>

The debates and actions against gendered violence and femicides in Greece have significantly increased the last years for more information look: <https://tomov.gr/en/2019/01/06/greece-violence-against-women-an-overview/>

And <https://newsmavens.com/special-review/1015/the-word-femicide-does-not-dehumanize-women-killing-them-does>

Ilias expects that a trans whore from an underprivileged background would not receive as much support. He believes that identifying as queer –and therefore receiving acceptance and solidarity from the community- is to an extent a matter of education and class. An uneducated working class trans person, working in a very undervalued profession such as sex-work is doomed to fewer chances of support and recognition. Such knowledge is impossible not to come forth when thinking of violence against a member of the community who enjoyed recognition and love by his community and had publicly talked about queerness and stigma during his life. The way that other members, less privileged, are subjected to violence makes Ilias not particularly hopeful. Intersectional thinking, in a crude form as Ilias quotation shows, shapes the cultural and political implications of public trauma.

Natasha gives further insights while explain her joy about recent developments in gender and sexuality politics in Greece:

“I didn’t expect the law about gender identity to be passed... No matter what I say as a lesbian, trans people are in the worst position in society. When a trans woman is being attacked no one mentions...I know that if Zak was Zackie the day of the murder, we wouldn’t have the same reactions. And that’s emotionally charged what I am saying now...I believe this inside me. You see this generation (of trans people) has some basic support from the family. Not acceptance, of course, I mean to say that throwing you out of the house is not the one and only response anymore. The agony about trans people is great. No matter what I will never have the same difficulties as a trans” (Natasha, July 2019)

And further on during the interview she mentions:

“I will never forget when Aris¹⁵ came to the swimming pool I used to work. After his breast removal operation. It was his first time swimming after seven years. He was so happy. I wonder if all those transphobic idiots out there saw Aris’ face that day would still insist he is a woman...I mean ok I

¹⁵ The original name mentioned in the interview is the real name of the person. For privacy reasons I use the nickname Aris.

also understand more the last years, I had never met a trans person before, Aris was the first.... They didn't exist (out there)" (Natasha, 2019)

Natasha is fully aware of the struggles of the trans community and how they are different from her own. She knows that no matter what she will not face transphobia. She mentions that the last years she understands more because she came more in contact with this community. Regarding the reception of the trauma of Zak's death the concept of knowing returns to haunt. Natasha says that she knows that if Zak was Zackie, his feminine alter-ego, support would not come as easy and that this makes her emotional. She knows that femininities of all sorts are more vulnerable in public space. Something that intersectional feminism has been pointing out extensively. Even though that was not the case and Zak was then indeed Zak and not Zackie the imprint the critical intersectional interventions of the feminist movement in Greece allows connections to be made. Those connections are the dynamism of public trauma and its potency in operating in unexpected ways, upon multiple subjects and for unpredicted times. These interconnections, the micro-associations, the habits of the mind so much conditioned by racialized, gendered and heteronormative imperatives are what makes Natasha feel emotional and ultimately become the connective tissue between trauma and intersectional thinking/knowing/acting. The connective tissue between the violence that is not equally distributed and the violence that can affect everyone in more or less direct ways¹⁶.

Final Remarks

This chapter underlines the connection between recent developments in feminist theory and public trauma about the queer death of Zak Kostopoulos. It is evident that the pervasiveness of feminism as political movement, scholarly theories and way of living (Ahmed, 2017) the past years has been very influential to receiving public

¹⁶ A similar argument is made by scholar Dimitris Papanikolaou in his article: "*Racism, Homophobia and Thanatopolitics Again*" published in the Greek online magazine Feministika in August 2019. Available unfortunately only in Greek here: <http://feministika.net/ratsismow-omofovia-thanatopolitiki-pali/>

trauma. It is feminism's powerful tradition in connecting dots, unearthing the unseen and representing the underrepresented that shakes power relations every time again. In such a historical moment, where feminism is popular again, public trauma is constructed and defended through and along feminist debates. With intersectionality being the most prominent one, as the narratives of Ilias, Natasha and Andreas show, various accounts of how power, vulnerability and oppression operate intertwine with perceptions of public trauma and the affective public cultures around it.

Conclusion

This thesis project has been a small contribution to better understanding Greek social reality and its trauma producing mechanisms. Through the words of Ilias, Natasha and Andreas I tried to locate the emergence of the murder of queer activist Zak Kostopoulos as a publicly felt and commonly dealt trauma.

In the first chapter I discussed the methodological choices I made and how they helped my study. Knowing my interviewees in advance helped communication flow and leaving both parties feeling comfortable with the interview arrangement and the purposes of my work. Considerations about power relations were unavoidable and the limitations of the study are acknowledged.

To address queer public trauma I first provided some insights in how trauma is embedded in the lives of the interviewees as sexual deviants. The first chapter demonstrates that queer public trauma builds its foundations in traumatic experiences and impasses that are existentially bound to queer subjectivities. That the residues of embedded trauma form the primary material of public queer trauma.

The third chapter discusses the specific ways through which the shocking death of Zak turned into public trauma. I suggest that this happened in a two-fold way. Firstly a broad front of LGBTQI+ community members and allies claimed the narrative around

the crime in a hostile environment that tried to cover-up the murder. Secondly trauma as narrative representation became the vehicle for a series of responses that were registered as new Greek queer cultures. Spontaneous mournful walks, drag performances, and other artistic responses as means of protest but the deepening of the sense of community and communication are some of those queer public cultures. The cultural responses and the processes that generated them are some of the expressions of public trauma of Zak's death. Lastly in this chapter I situate public trauma in the broader Greek context and highlight the ways in which Greekness and the politically unstable sociopolitical landscape contribute to creating the premises upon which trauma unfolds and generates cultural response.

Lastly the fourth chapter deals with how feminist discourses and the recent popularity of terms like intersectionality become the frameworks through which my interviewees process and register trauma. In more or less explicit ways their saying resonate intersectional thinking and the pervasiveness of feminist agendas.

Progressive, emancipatory theory and politics have only partly dealt with public trauma and its ability to co-constitute subjectivities, form political cultures and be a crucial part of social reality. Most responses to public trauma have to do with claims for justice and calls to end oppression and violence. However, I suggest that public trauma operates in a far more pervasive way that no promise for a better future can simply erase. Traumas of the past haunt us until today. The brutal murder of a queer activist in Greece or other moments of violence and death across cultural and geographical contexts, are stories that stay with us. Following non-linear temporalities past trauma, present oppression and future promises are far more entangled than theory and activism has treated them. I argue that the category of public trauma in the case of the murder of Zak Kostopoulos is a powerful analytical tool that provides insights in the past –the Greek past but also the queer past in Greece-, accounts of the present as a lived experience of multiple ways of hurting in the everyday but also an important heritage for the future. For all those sexual racial and ethnical others who will refer to, rethink and honor the public trauma of Zak's death in relation to their own struggles.

Public trauma has been an underestimated factor in the way oppression is constituted and subjugated groups are formed. Next to traditional axes of difference such as gender, ethnicity, class and ability, public trauma in all its historicity is a potent actor in, if not shaping, at least giving a certain texture to the complexities of oppression occurring in contemporary societies. A factor that deserves special attention and rigorous scholarship if we are to truly account for how oppression occurs and is resisted in the present day.

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Appendix

List of Questions:

Where were you when you first learned about the incident?

Did you contact your circle about it?

Can you describe your feelings as the case progressed?

Did you participate in the demonstrations? In what way?

How did your immediate queer circle respond?

Do you still talk about Zak's loss?

Do you feel stronger or weaker after everything that has happened?

What do you think of the LGBTQI+ community today in Greece?

These were the main questions I had prepared for the interviews. Each individual interview contained follow-up questions and some comments.