Expanding the Map of Sapphic Modernism(s)

A Transnational Approach to Queer Women’s Writings in Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian Literature

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ABSTRACT

Although sapphic modernism is a phenomenon thoroughly examined in Western European cultures, the history of East European sapphic writings remains a relatively neglected area, both in global lesbian and queer studies and in local histories. This article is devoted to nineteenth-century Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian literature. It outlines the complicated emergence of local queer studies and draws attention to the position of women’s writing within it. It also discusses the tools provided by intersectional, transnational approaches. Combined with the extensive knowledge of global lesbian studies, these methods allow for the exploration of local histories of queer women writing, particularly from the Russian Empire’s territories. This article highlights intersections between same-sex desire’s literary expressibility and the writers’ affiliation within the same imperial structure, which forced different strategies of sapphic expressions to emerge from this intersection. To illustrate those strategies, the article discusses examples provided by Narcyza Żmichowska, Lesya Ukrainka, and Lydia Zinovieva-Annibal.

Keywords: history of sexuality, lesbian studies, Polish literature, Russian literature, transnational modernism, Ukrainian literature

As Valerie Traub concluded in 2016, research on the history of female nonheteronormativity “has taken place in almost every historical period, particularly for England, France, and North America.”¹ However, Central and Eastern Europe remains a relatively neglected territory in the vast research within lesbian studies. Diana Burgin pointed to this lacuna as early as 1993, intending to break scholarly silence with her study on women poets of the Silver Age.² Even though the last several decades offer evidence of the undeniable progress of queer history research in the region, the queer history of women’s writing has still not managed to enter the mainstream of general
knowledge. This blind spot is especially puzzling in the case of literatures from the Russian Empire’s territories, which offer both geographical and temporal boundaries. Chronologically, the years of the empire’s existence (1721–1917) approximate the time of the birth, intense development, and advancing professionalization of women’s writing. Simultaneously, it was a time when cultural, medical, and legal frameworks for discourse on nonheteronormativity developed and stabilized. In this article, I focus on three language areas—Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian. Juxtaposed, they create a unique comparative cluster; women writers from each area represent a different variant of locational specifics within the same imperial structure, which, I would argue, interfered with the expressibility of female same-sex desire.

Based on their example, first, I will outline the complicated character of the emergence and development of queer studies in local literary history research, and second, I will draw attention to the specific position of women’s writing within the state of art. The latter aspect is essential. Among the many difficulties that queer histories face in the context of local academia, perhaps queer histories of women, and women writers in particular, are the most vulnerable to marginalization—at least, they remain a peripheral theme in the field, which in the last few decades has concentrated mainly on male writing and men’s experience of nonheteronormativity. There are single works of lesbian themes and threads in the writings of such authors as Nadezhda Durova (1783–1866), Narcyza Żmichowska (1819–1876), Olha Kobylianska (1863–1942), Lydia Zinovieva-Annibal (1866–1907), Poliksena Solovyova (1867–1924), Zinaida Gippius (1869–1945), Lesia Ukrainka (1871–1913), Lyudmila Vil'kina-Minskaya (1873–1920), Sofia Parnok (1885–1933), Aniela Gruszecka (1884–1976), Marina Tsvetaeva (1892–1941), and others. Nevertheless, no attempts have been made to collect these scattered cases and look at them from a distance in order to characterize a larger, transnational phenomenon of sapphic modernism within the Russian Empire’s territory—with its unique conditions, interconnections, tendencies, and tensions, which cross national cultural frameworks and remain invisible within the traditional scope of national literary research. This process of marginalization is based on intersectional mechanisms of exclusion, with trajectories such as gender, sexuality, and national identity (which within the imperial structure both literary production and its reception). Therefore, efforts to broadly reconfigure the state of knowledge should take place from an intersectional perspective, sensitive to geographic and temporal frames, geopolitical interconnections, and tensions, and critical of the category of “queer” itself, which often, under the guise of creating a new, subversive discourse, repeats male-centered narratives.

Below I will focus on the tools provided by transnational approaches to women’s writing and the ways that they can be combined with the extensive knowledge of global lesbian studies to explore the local histories of sapphic modernism. Like Susan Lanser, the author of *The Sexuality of History: Modernity and the Sapphic*, I use the term “sapphic” to “designate discourses, representations, and social phenomena that inscribe preferential desires, behaviours, and affiliations.” In turn, by “sapphic modernism,” I understand such women’s writing in the long nineteenth century that searched for a new language and strategies that would make it possible to express nonheteronormative experiences, desires, and identities in literature. This term also
refers to the writers’ search for the poetic, feminine genealogy (as proposed by Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic*) related to the topoi and the Lesbos poet’s heritage. The sapphic also highlights the critical distinction between queer or homosexual literature (terms often appropriated by the subjects of male nonheteronormativity) and women’s writing on the female expression of nonheteronormativity. In this period—which proved crucial in the context of emerging and developing sapphic modernism in Western literature—Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian women writers used different strategies to express lesbian experiences, desires, and identities through literature. Those strategies, I argue, are linked to the locational coordinates of particular authors, and become visible only from a macro-perspective and through a transnational lens.

**A Masculine Tradition? Queer Studies on Poland, Russia, and Ukraine**

In the selected language areas, the development of queer studies varies according to the region. Nevertheless, what they all have in common are specific sociopolitical obstacles in the development of the field. To start with the Polish case, despite many difficulties, it is impossible to miss the dynamic development of queer studies in literary research, where the impressive uncovering and decoding of the “secret signs” of nonheteronormative desire in the national canon of literature is taking place. This process can be traced to the late 1990s, when Maria Janion asserted the potential for developing local queer studies in Polish literature and culture. Since then, thanks to pioneering works of scholars such as German Ritz, Błażej Warkocki, Alessandro Amenta, Tomasz Kaliściak, Wojciech Śmieja, and Piotr Sobolczyk, as well as several smaller and more extensive studies devoted strictly to homosexual literature in Poland, queer studies has become noticeable. Unquestionably, a landmark event in this context was the recent publication of the monumental book, over nine hundred pages, *Dezorientacje: Antologia polskiej literatury queer* (Disorientations: An anthology of Polish queer literature), edited by Warkocki, Kaliściak, and Amenta. The anthology collects fragments of Polish queer texts from the last two centuries and offers an extensive introduction outlining the current state of art.

These are only selected works from Polish queer studies. Their number alone is already significant enough to perhaps validate Śmieja’s assertion from 2012: “All that is homosexual in Polish literature (works, themes, characters, authors) has already been discussed by researchers quite exhaustively.” However, it must be noted that although Śmieja makes this statement confidently, he fails to mention the fact that the “all” that is homosexual and is “exhaustively” discussed by researchers on Polish literature is limited almost without exception to literature written by men and concerning masculine experiences of nonheteronormativity.

In any case, representatives of Polish queer studies are usually aware of their omissions. Occasionally, they try to justify them. For example, in the introduction to *Queerowe subwersje* (Queer subversions), Sobolczyk stressed that “In the foreword, there is also space for anticipating possible objections. Now, contrary to its inclusive title, the sexuality with which this work is concerned is mainly male homosexuality. . . . Moreover,
homotextual literature . . . in Poland is mostly a masculine tradition.” Nevertheless, the thesis on the “masculine” character of the Polish tradition of queer literature thus argued seems false due to the fact that it is based on the “high canon.” Homotextual literature researchers seem interested almost exclusively in canonical, renowned male writers, whereas the works of female writers (in Polish literature as well, as multiple critical feminist studies have shown) did not enjoy equal access to the canon. Therefore, the marginalization of women from the “canon” of Polish queer literature repeats the mechanisms of marginalization found within classical literary history, which lauded works by men and used categories such as “universal” or “artistically valuable” to secretly mean “masculine.” Thus, Sobolczyk’s argument could be paraphrased as such: homosexual literature in Poland is mostly a masculine tradition because the feminine has never been thoroughly explored. Or it has not been noticed, remaining scattered among single works of such scholars as Ewa Kraskowska, Tomasz Kaliściak and Agnieszka Nęcka, or Izabela Filipiak.

Russian queer studies have had a different trajectory of development. Speaking of the local history of studies on homosexuality, in 2007 Nadya Nartova argued that the number of publications on this subject attests to a lack of interest rather than the birth of a field of research. She also offered reasons for this neglect of the subject of nonheteronormativity, pointing to the legal and political conditions of the Soviet era: male homosexuality was criminalized until 1993, which led not only to the state controlling its citizens’ sexuality, but also to an informal taboo on homosexuality and homoeroticism, which was evident in scientific discourse (even in works devoted to ancient cultures).

Other researchers find sources for this scholarly silence in the distinct character of the Soviet Union and its prevailing homophobic legacy. In his text “Queer in Russia: Othering the Other of the West,” Brian James Baer emphasizes the significance of the persecution of homosexuals in the 1930s and concludes: “In any case, the combination of criminalization and silence produced a deep-seated homophobia on the part of many Russians and a deeply closeted homosexual subculture, which was difficult for researchers to penetrate.” As Natalia Khodyreva shows, what was celebrated by the West as the fall of Communism and the birth of a modern, capitalist democracy was felt by insiders as a renaissance of patriarchy, “which would see many Russian women return to the kitchen and gays and lesbians, after a brief hiatus, to the closet.”

Recently, Connor Doak summarized the challenges the discipline now faces as a result of the current sociopolitical situation and homophobic legislation of the Putin era. In these circumstances, local works of LGBTQ+ history studies—such as Olga Zhuk’s Russkie amazonki (Russian Amazons) from 1998 or the more recent studies on homosexual identities in Russia by Irina Roldugina, Alexander Kondakov, Marianna Muravyeva, and others—are still the exception rather than the rule.

However, despite those difficulties, Russian queer research has an even longer history than in the Polish context, primarily due to the greater interest of Western scholars in its history and culture. As Baer noticed, the end of the Cold War and the opening of Russian archives led to a number of pioneering work by scholars such as Simon Karlinsky, Laura Engelstein, and Dan Healey. Western academics’ engagement in investigating Russian queer history led to the unquestionable development of the field.
At the same time, occasionally, it created circumstances for a tendency to exoticize Russian queer history and portray Russia as “the sexual other of the West.”25

In contrast to Polish queer studies, more emphasis has been placed on women in research on Russia. Nonetheless, despite scholarly attention to lesbian history, this focus has had its limitations. First, with some exceptions, researchers have concentrated mainly on Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, only occasionally extending their interest to the late Tsarist period (see the chapter on female same-sex desire in the pioneering work by historian Dan Healey, who admits that the existence of texts on female nonheteronormativity in earlier historical periods “cannot be ruled out,” but designates the 1880s to be the lower limit of his interpretations26). Second, studies tend to focus either on medical and legal discourse or, in the case of literary studies, on a fixed set of names—particularly Silver Age-era poets.28 The latter are often paired with an analysis of Sappho’s influence on Russian culture.29 Thus, progress is unquestionable, yet histories of Russian lesbian literatures that are broader in chronological and thematic scope nonetheless have yet to be written.

The development of Ukrainian queer studies reveals similar historical and socio-political difficulties. These difficulties are compounded by additional factors. It is certainly significant that Ukrainian culture and literature have not met with as much interest from Western Slavists, including those who assume the perspective of queer studies or gender studies. In addition, the source material (or lack of it) was affected by the particular geopolitical situation that gave birth to modern Ukrainian culture. Vitaly Chernetsky recently discussed this in his essay “Ukrainian Queer Culture: The Difficult Birth,” where he argued that the Ukrainian case perfectly illustrates the “complexities of the development of a queer culture during the shaping of a modern national culture . . . as the quest for queer self-expression intersects with, and often comes into conflict with, the construction of dominant cultural paradigms.”30 These paradigms were primarily burdened with nation-building tasks, within which the possibility of expressing nonheteronormative desire became an enterprise radically more challenging to undertake than from the perspective of a noncolonized imperial center. This burden impacted women’s literature in a particular way. At the time when modern nationalisms developed, women writers had to take on the role of building national culture and tradition in order to gain recognition—at the cost of limiting their self-expression.31 I therefore hypothesize that not only is the subject of female nonheteronormativity more coded or hidden from historical analysis in the Ukrainian context, but that it also provokes more resistance against attempts to redefine the narrative or to indicate a sole “suggestibility” of queerness.

A Possibility of Sapphism: A Transnational Approach to Reclaiming Lesbian History

It must be emphasized that the marginalization of female homosexuality in the field of cultural, literary, and historical studies on nonheteronormativity is not a tendency typical of Slavic studies exclusively. For years, this mechanism of double marginalization was laid bare by feminist researchers such as Emma Donoghue, who argued that “gay
men’s histories tend to treat lesbian culture as a pale shadow of the gay prototype, reducing us to a couple of token paragraphs or footnotes.” In the global context, thanks to the enormous work done by such researchers as Lilian Faderman, Terry Castle, Valerie Traub, Martha Vicinus, Bonnie Zimmerman and George Haggerty, Shari Benstock, Nicole Albert, Jodie Medd, Laura Doan, Jane Garrity, and many others, the very field of the history of sexuality was reshaped, and the area of lesbian studies became impossible to miss. The vast library of such studies is an invaluable source of the inspiration and experience necessary to overcome the field’s fundamental research obstacles—such as the “hidden nature of this population of writers,” to name one. In the introduction to their volume *Sapphic Modernities: Sexuality, Woman and National Culture*, Laura Doan and Joan Garrity present an especially inspiring approach. Referring to Jodie Medd’s work, they write: “while we cannot reach firm conclusions without evidence, it might be productive to speculate on the cultural effects of sapphism’s ‘suggestibility’ . . . instead of charting lesbianism’s visibility or lamenting its invisibility, we might consider hermeneutic, epistemological, and functional questions about lesbianism’s (mis)interpretability and cultural deployment.” Rather than searching for “firm conclusions” and historical evidence, the researchers emphasize the value of merely seeing “a possibility (a suggestibility) of sapphism . . . and [speculation] on what that might mean.”

Following this approach, I would like to speculate on the interconnected, transnational phenomenon of sapphic modernism in the territories of the Russian Empire. In light of the deficiencies and problems within Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian studies outlined above, combining the state of knowledge and experience of Western European lesbian and, more broadly, queer studies with a transnational and localizing approach seems particularly promising. Primarily it frees the scholar from the tight frame of classical comparative studies (which focus, for example, on the question of influence) and brings new analytical strategies. One of these is the strategy of interpreting texts within “cultural parataxis,” as defined by Susan Stanford Friedman. Like in modernist poetics, the strategy of parataxis allows the researcher to juxtapose disparate elements in a nonhierarchical way in order to shed light on what is nonnormative, hidden, or marginalized by the canonical vision of literature (in this context, one should add: within the traditional vision of sexuality). Thus, instead of analyzing cases of single authors separately or referencing a single national literary tradition, Friedman proposes the analysis of combinations of writers and the observation of multiple identities, which are more difficult to notice in isolation.

Selecting female writers from particular regions within the Russian Empire creates a unique comparative area for research like this. Geographically, this formula allows us to ask questions about the relationship between literary works, the conditions for expressing nonheteronormative experiences and identities, and the variation of the writers’ locations within the same imperial structure, along with the consequences that followed. On the one hand, these conditions included access to shared print culture and functioning within the same system of state regulation of literary production (censorship). On the other hand, they included differences in the authors’ positions in the prestige hierarchy in the “world republic of letters,” which stemmed from their belonging to a given linguistic region and the intrinsically tense relationships between the hegemonic and colonized areas.
The selection of the three cultural spaces is not accidental: each of them represents a different variant of locational specifics within the same imperial structure. That is: hegemonic Russia; Poland, which despite being colonized has a long literary tradition and memory of its own imperial past; and colonized Ukraine, a territory which at the time was beginning to formulate its national demands and modern national identity, for which the key factors were language and developing a national literature. Juxtaposing these factors highlights the relationships between the literary expressibility of female same-sex desire and the demands put on literary domains in the period when modern cultures and national identities were shaped (especially when it came to colonized territories). This relationship had several different levels. It was no accident that only in Russia did lesbian literary culture appear at the turn of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries in a visible manner. This fact may indicate that this type of explicit expression was possible only from the position of the imperial, dominant center, while writing from the perspective of subjected, colonized territories demanded different strategies. To illustrate them, I present examples of sapphic writing by Narcyza Żmichowska, Lesya Ukrainka, and Lydia Zinovieva-Annibal as representatives of each of the three selected language areas.

“If I Were a Man . . .”

Narcyza Żmichowska’s case is particularly interesting, especially because her name is often used as a “fig leaf” to conceal the absence of women in narratives on queer literary history. This is evident, for example, in Śmieja’s monograph from 2010, in which the author mentions Żmichowska one single time, commenting that women’s writing researchers have discovered the “vestigial presence of female homosexuality” in her texts. Choosing “vestigial” as an adjective to describe the queerness of her works is quite surprising, yet symptomatic. Żmichowska is one of the most interesting female writers in Polish literary history. During the second half of the nineteenth century, she wrote peculiar, multilayered (and often incomplete) novels with experimental narratives. Some of her literary strategies could be compared to those employed by Virginia Woolf half a century later. Żmichowska was also quite a controversial figure according to the standards of her times: she never married and supported women’s freedom of choice in that regard. She formed an informal group consisting of women brought together by friendship and mutual support in self-realization, who called themselves “Enthusiasts.” Moreover, Żmichowska herself was a nonheteronormative woman who had romantic relationships with other women and was possibly the first female Polish writer to attempt to express women’s nonheteronormative experiences through literature. Were those attempts vestigial, as Śmieja claimed? To answer the question, one must mention the most notable example of Żmichowska’s queer writings: her epistolary novel Biała Róża (The White Rose), published in 1855.

To summarize the plot, the letters that constitute the novel tell the story of a ball, more specifically an encounter that takes place during a ball. The main character of the novel is Kazimiera—an intelligent, well-read woman from the countryside, persuaded
by her friend to go to a refined ball in Warsaw. During the event, she meets Augusta, a beautiful maiden and heiress to a fortune of several million, and names her a “White Rose” at first sight, unambiguously. Kazimiera confesses: “I felt my thoughts disperse as though dawn was breaking over darkness; I could not even imagine that such a beautiful creature would exist. . . . I’ve always liked women more when I looked at them longer and more carefully; when I start to understand the play of their physiognomy, the meaning of their gaze, the charm of their smiles. Here, a light dazzled me instantly—at first glance I had the impression of looking at a masterpiece as if carved in wood.” Later, she shares in confidence with her friend: “If I were a man, I would think I was madly in love with her.” Further correspondence suggests that the fascination was mutual. Although the two women exchanged only a few words, the brief encounter becomes the basis for many pages of letters, in which they analyze each other, recall every detail of their first encounter, and try to explain falsely interpreted words and gestures.

Homoerotic fascination is encoded in the novel in an interesting way (both at the level of content and at that of signals sent by the characters). It turns out that Augusta had heard about Kazimiera before. She knew about her education and intellectual interests; she also treats the fact that the provincial intellectual is a translator of classical Greek poetry as a kind of a secret signal. To attract Kazimiera’s attention, Augusta comes to the ball dressed in a classical Greek dress with a styled coiffure decorated with a white rose, one of the most obvious sapphic symbols. Scholar Izabela Filipiak claims that the Greek styling worn by the young woman is meant to convey a secret message that Kazimiera is supposed to understand, since according to nineteenth-century manners, the Greek language was seen as a code used to express homoerotic interest. Unfortunately, during their conversation, Kazimiera admits that she “does not speak Greek” and therefore rejects Augusta’s invitation (despite her homoerotic attraction toward the young girl, evidenced by previous quotations). As Renata Lis notes: “Kazimiera does not hear the plea, and her conversation with the White Rose turns out to be a complete misunderstanding; after the ball, the girl feels obliged to write a long letter to her, which becomes something between a confession and a declaration of love.” In her letter, Augusta openly writes about her romantic feelings and asks the addressee: “Tell me now: will you stay with me?” In the end, Kazimiera does not accept this offer and Augusta has to come to terms with her disappointment and the fact that Kazimiera “doesn’t speak Greek.”

It is worth noting, however, that the work eventually published in 1855 under the title “The White Rose” was in fact the second version of the novel. The original manuscript, entitled Dwoiste życie (The Double Life), had been lost. Żmichowska explained that the manuscript was confiscated and that she had to recreate the entire novel from memory. It was only discovered in the interwar period, many decades after the author’s death. What is interesting about the first version of the novel (confiscated or—perhaps—deliberately hidden) is that the relationship between Kazimiera and Augusta was described even more unambiguously. Biała Róża is not the only one of Żmichowska’s novels that could be described as queer literature. In this context, it is worth mentioning Poganka (The Heathen), possibly the most acclaimed novel by the author—recently translated into English by
Ursula Philips—which tells the story of a fatal affair between Benjamin and the diabolical Aspazja. Numerous interpretations of the novel suggest that the character of Benjamin was Żmichowska’s alter ego, while the novel was supposed to be a coded history of her turbulent relationship with Paulina Zbyszewska. The genre of the novel is also significant: *The Heathen* is a Gothic novel, so it employs conventions that Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick described as “one of the first social phenomena and modes of expression in European history in which homosexuality—suppressed, kept secret and pushed aside—could finally be voiced.”

Employing strategies such as gothic convention or allusions to ancient Greek culture was Żmichowska’s attempt to express nonheteronormative experiences under challenging circumstances. As a Polish female author living and creating at the colonized margins of the Russian Empire, she faced additional obstacles. She was aware of them and felt stifled by the demands of her era. She complained to a friend in one of her letters: “In general, we are under a shackle that is more terrible than censorship: it is a certain necessity of our position, a firm demand of general opinion, to write only highly virtuous romances, comedy-operas. Nobody would dare, even if they wanted to . . . originally announce anything ‘immoral.’” Perhaps this “shackle” worse than Tsarist censorship that Żmichowska wrote about referred precisely to the circumstances of a colonized nation, which demanded that every aspect of public life and activities (literature included) be politicized and directed at the conservation about national identity and the fight for independence.

**An Epistolary Affair**

The conditions faced by Ukrainian women writers were similar. Here, the case of Lesya Ukrainka is crucial. In her pioneering works, Solomia Pavlychko shed light on correspondence between Ukrainka and Olha Kobylianska, and hypothesized an epistolary love affair between the writers (adding that “bisexual affections of the women writers and corresponding depictions of lesbian caresses were not exceptional for early modernist culture”). In the context of difficulties expressing nonheteronormative desire during the time of shaping modern national identity, the case of Ukrainka and her position in national literary history is particularly revealing.

Ukrainka is one of the most visible women writers in Ukrainian literature. She debuted at the age of thirteen with the poems “Konvalija” (Lily of the Valley) and “Sappho” (1884). In 1901 she met Kobylianska, her previously epistolary friend and another rising literary star. After the first in-person meeting in Chernivtysi, the tone of Ukrainka’s letters changed significantly—they progressed from the semiformal exchange of two colleagues to something considerably more intimate. Around that time, Kobylianska was recovering from a breakup with Osip Makovyev. When Ukrainka comforted her, she called Kobylianska a “happiness” for which there was “no name in human language.” She shared dreams and fantasies with her friend, and in those fantasies, both lived together, shared a bedroom, and before falling asleep, half-undressed, would have long conversations with each other. As scholars such as Tamara Gundorova and Pavlychko stress, Ukrainka and Kobylianska developed their
own grammar for this intimate correspondence. Changing the rules of the Ukrainian language, they wrote about themselves in the third person, using the gender-ambiguous term “htos’” which could be translated as “someone,” as in this passage:

Now and as always, someone still loves someone just like before, and if they could they would even “make the sky bow down” for someone else, but sometimes they cannot write how they’d like: a limp, a headache, or various unnecessary thoughts might interfere with them so someone ends up writing something pale, apathetic and not at all like how they feel about someone, not in the way they love someone! And if they were with someone now, they would not need to sit and smear their pen upon the paper, instead they’d lie down next to someone, they would soothe and caress them, without saying much, perhaps, but they’d say more than in this unintelligible letter!

Gundorova argues that this invention of an affectionate diminutive reserved only for themselves is a sign of “wordless language,” a way to communicate with each other without words. More importantly, this “wordless communication” also points to one of the most common queer tropes, “love that dares not speak its name.” This strategy also resembles various examples of sapphic language inventions, reminiscent of Anne Lister’s diary’s cipher, which would make queer expression possible.

Despite the writings of scholars such as Pavlychko and Gundorova mentioned above, this sapphic thread escaped wider recognition and did not manage to undermine either writer’s monolithic patriotic legend. It is thus not surprising that queer interpretations of Ukrainka’s and Kobylianska’s relationship became a target of homophobic backlash. At the same time, it was a subject of “straightwashing.” The latter can be seen in Oksana Zabuzhko’s Notre Dame d’Ukraine, where she complains that this topic was “usurped” by “young and energetic gay culture not only in Ukraine, but in the whole post-soviet territory.” She also downplays signs of an intimate and affectionate relationship in the correspondence as merely a showcase of an epistolary convention of the period, and the young maiden’s exaltation as similar to phrases used by women from France, Germany, and the United States in the nineteenth century, which for the modern and “unprepared” reader could sound like a lesbian affair. Between the lines of these somewhat patronizing statements, she calls for reading the letters in a “proper” context. Simultaneously, she ignores the meaning of these conventions from the perspective of lesbian studies and their multiple reinterpretations by Western scholars, which shed light on the history of nonheteronormative sexualities. In light of Chernetsky’s argument, I hypothesize that in the case of Ukraine and other “small literatures,” the subject of queerness is not only more coded and hidden from historical analysis, it also provokes more resistance against attempts to redefine the narrative or to indicate “suggestibility” of queer desires and experiences. Similar mechanisms can be observed in the Polish case, in the context of such writers as Żmichowska or Maria Konopnicka.

In supporting this argument, the works of Ukrainian writers may prove to be especially telling, as their country was divided between the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires. For writers under Russian rule, like Lesya Ukrainka, literature’s
nation-building or identity-building tasks were a priority (as “mothers of the nation,” they participated in creating the Ukrainian literary tradition). However, modernist Ukrainian writers from the Austro-Hungarian Empire belonged (or aspired) to the domain of German-language literature, whose high position on the market of the world republic of letters (like that of Russian literature) freed them from national commitments in favor of individual artistic expression. The case of Olha Kobylianska is especially revealing. She lived and wrote in Austro-Hungarian Bukovina, and debuted with pieces written in German, later collected in *Kleinrussische Novellen* (Little Russian Novellas) in 1901. In one of her early works, *Valse Melancolique* (Melancholy Waltz, published in 1894 and translated into Ukrainian only four years later), Kobylianska expresses sapphic affections explicitly, while Lesya Ukrainka, from the Russian-controlled Volhynian Governorate, had to develop a new grammar to express the same affections.

### Lesbos on the Neva

In contrast, Russian literature provides a case of unprecedented lesbian visibility. The turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is critical in this context. In Western Europe, the years between 1880 and 1917/18 were a period of the dynamic development and popularization of scientific discourse on nonheteronormativity, which impacted the shaping of modern minority sexual identities. Discussions of homosexual themes in Sappho’s poetry that dominated European classical philology in the late nineteenth century as a result of new archeological findings also played a role. They became an impulse to create “a modern Lesbos” and to formulate the literary self-definition of feminine, homosexual subjectivity, especially in the milieu of modernist Paris. Although the Russian development of this sapphic awakening differed from the French one, Imperial Russia created similar circumstances. The last decades of the empire constituted an exceptional period of liberalization, a moment of “unprecedented freedom of expression unique in Russian history, [in which] gay writers could step out of their closets.”

Perhaps one of the most discussed cases in this context is the novel *Tridsat’ tri uroda* (Thirty-Three Abominations) by Lydia Zinovieva-Annibal, published in 1907, which is believed to be the first lesbian novel in Russian literature. The novel is a diary written by a nameless heroine, who is romantically involved with another woman. Their relationship begins on the eve of the narrator’s wedding when she abandons her fiancé for Vera, an actress. At first glance, the relationship between the women seems almost exclusively toxic, and the protagonist’s narrative shows the image of an innocent girl locked in a golden cage by the dominant and controlling Vera, for whom only the superficial bodily beauty of her mistress matters. On the other hand, the role of a nearly passive being seems comfortable for the narrator, saving her from ostracism in reaction to the transgression she makes by entering into a relationship with another woman. Moreover, the very appearance of Vera can be seen as an escape route, allowing the girl to flee from her family’s power and the fate established for her by patriarchal society, a path that she chooses without hesitation. The relationship with Vera also offers the
young girl space for self-discovery. She has a chance to come into contact with her own body and sexuality and search for creative self-realization.

Despite the toxicity of the relations between the women, whose relationship is marked by clearly disturbing power dynamics and the possessiveness and chimerism of Vera, there is also tenderness and sensuality expressed explicitly between them. Depictions of corporal and sensual love between the heroines break not only the taboo of homosexuality but also the taboo of the woman as an active lover-admirer whereby she is also the subject of a loving gaze, not only an object. The novel briefly outlines a future that could be a happy ending to this lesbian story, with the prospect of a joint journey and a theatrical tour—first to Paris, then to America. However, these plans do not come to fruition. This is precisely the moment in the novel when Vera breaks down, as if she is sabotaging their relationship and working for the self-fulfilling prophecy that she would lose her beloved. The breakthrough comes when Vera decides to “hand over” the narrator to the destructive influence of the male gaze. She arranges a painting session, during which the girl is meant to pose for artists from the Association of Thirty-Three. The painting session presented in the novel is a grotesque description of male symbolic violence—in contrast to the tenderness and sensuality of lesbian intimacy—to which the heroine is exposed by her partner.

The first drawing session is evidently traumatic for the narrator, resembling literal sexual assault rather than symbolic violence. Weeks of painting result in the titular thirty-three abominations, as the protagonist calls the portraits. The experience of posing and the encounter with the male “perpetuation” of her essence are a profound psychological shock to the girl. However, it is an ambivalent experience since with violence comes recognition from men. She is invited to meet one of the group’s founders, portrayed as a caricatural, ghastly figure “with a huge head and sparkling, childish eyes.” He lives in Paris, to which he invites the heroine, promising to show her the world and take her to America. As she is faced with the feeling of being trapped in a deteriorating relationship with the increasingly distant and closed Vera, the promise of tasting the world—this time as an achievable promise—becomes highly tempting to the girl. It is Vera, however, who ends the protagonist’s dilemmas. She commits suicide, leaving her lover alone. And at the end, the narrator is even deprived of the right to bury her partner by Vera’s family.

The ending of Annibal’s novel is a classic example of the “bury your gays” trope (or as it’s also called: Dead Lesbian Syndrome). In this context, it is puzzling that the main character survives—almost as if the seduced girl was finally “rescued” from a toxic lesbian relationship by the male protectorate of the Thirty-Three Association’s founder. Vera suffers the consequences, having previously been portrayed as emotionally unstable and abusive. Some feminist researchers accused Annibal of duplicating pathological and pornographic narratives about lesbian love. However, I assert that the novel offers more than that. One should instead ask if Vera’s behavior was solely the result of her character flaws and destructive nature, or perhaps evidence of a failure of attempts to navigate queer life in a homophobic, patriarchal society.

Regardless of how different scholars read Annibal’s novel, her case was by no means an exception on the sapphic map of the Silver Age literary scene. As Simon Karlinsky has shown, two lesbian couples took to the literary stage of that period: Anna
Yevreinova and Maria Fedorova coedited the paper the *Northern Herald*, while Polyksena Soloviova shared her life with Natalia Manaseina.\(^7\) Sapphic themes appeared in Soloviova’s works, and she can be treated as “a typical turn-of-the-century example of a culturally active lesbian.”\(^8\) Such themes were also present in the 1906 volume of poetry and short stories *Moj sad* (My Garden) by Liudmila Vilkina-Minskaya. Sofia Parnok, to whom Marina Tsvetaeva dedicated her 1916 volume of poetry *Podruga* (Girlfriend), lived an open life as a lesbian. It would not be an overstatement to suggest that Russian modernist women writers participated in that “formative moment of lesbian visibility.”\(^8\)

**Pushing Against the Boundaries**

These numerous examples of lesbian studies research prove that in investigating the history of women’s nonheteronormativity, one must find a third, perhaps less obvious path to make the invisible visible. This path could be investigating Eastern European sapphic writings from a macro-perspective in a transnational cluster, constructing a cultural parataxis that includes Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian women writers from the Russian Empire’s territories—writers representing three different variants of location, simultaneously creating within the same imperial structure (and all the consequences that follow). Pursuing this path already raises questions that have never been asked in the context of particular “presences” and “absences”\(^8\) in the region’s literature. While the Polish and Ukrainian cases provide examples of more or less discreet strategies of queer expression—discreet enough that in literary history, they could be presented as marginal threads or straightwashed in both writers’ biographies—this is not the case for Russian literature. This unprecedented participation and the fact that Russian literature is the only clear field in which lesbian literary culture appeared at the turn of the centuries in such a visible manner is no accident. The transnational perspective reveals that this type of explicit expression was possible only from the position of the imperial, colonizing, politically and culturally dominant center. While writers representing “small literatures” were burdened with nation-building tasks, women writers from Moscow or Saint Petersburg could allow themselves freedom similar to that enjoyed by women who lived and wrote in Paris, London, or Berlin.

The selected cluster thus sheds light on the relationships between female same-sex desire’s expressibility and location within the Russian Empire. Nevertheless, to fully address local variants and conditions of sapphic modernism, it is crucial to undertake and promote the essential work of recovering forgotten texts and writers from the local literary field. As Joanne Winnig argued, in order to understand the relationship between lesbian sexuality and textuality in the modernist period, one must engage in the “process of recovery of female writing from the ‘canonical wilderness.’”\(^8\) Jehanne Gheith argued that such works of Russian literature were forgotten because “there is a long-standing tradition of Russian literary critics using double assessment standards depending on the author’s gender. . . . The contemptuous belittling of the vast majority of women’s works by Russian critics and the particular way in which these
judgements were expressed paved the way for the later omission of that literature."\textsuperscript{84} To see the bigger picture, we must be interested not only in the works of renowned female writers and ones already associated with nonheteronormativity, but also those entirely pushed to the margin of the male-centric “high” canon. In this context, analyzing works of \textit{minorum gentium}, most frequently left out of classic literary-historical narratives, and especially popular literature is essential. Investigating this area will not only fill the gaps in local queer studies and pose unique questions about the expressibility of queer women’s experience, but will answer the most crucial challenge of contemporary global lesbian studies: “pushing against the analytical paradigms and geographic boundaries of the Anglo-European West.”\textsuperscript{85}

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\textbf{Notes}


5. Chronological frames of the “long nineteenth century” are constantly shifting. To map the phenomenon of “sapphic modernism,” I focus on the second half of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century.


7. Including recurring waves of homophobic backlash—for instance, for the last three years Poland has been ranked the most homophobic country in the European Union by ILGA Europe, an organization that monitors and issues yearly reports on the human rights situation of LGBTI people in Europe and Central Asia (see “Rainbow Europe Map and Index,” *ILGA Europe*, 12 May 2022, https://www.ilga-europe.org/report/rainbow-europe-2022/; reports on previous years are also available).


12. Even in the most inclusive research project in this respect so far—the *Disorientations* anthology—women writers constitute only about 33 percent of all authors. These statistics appear even worse in the sections covering the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth. Here female authors account for 17 percent (six out of thirty-six) of all writers. Even though at first glance this disparity might seem to result from the disparity of men and women writing in that period, that is actually not the case for Polish literature. Many studies have shown that the number of active women writers in the period was much larger than tends to be presented in literary history; see for example Dale Spender, *Mothers of the Novel* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 1988). In the nineteenth century there were more than five hundred female authors on the Polish literary scene (see Grażyna Borkowska, *Cudzoziemki: Studia o polskiej prozie kobiecej* [Foreign women: Studies on Polish women’s prose] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IBL, 1996), 22), and from the beginning of the twentieth century this number rose exponentially.


16. There is also a common misconception that female homosexuality was never subjected to criminalization, which has been corrected by Marianna Muravyeva, “Legal Definitions of Sex Crimes in the Laws and Commentaries of Russian Lawyers (1860s–1910),” in *Women’s History in Russia: (Re)Establishing the Field*, ed. N. Novikova and M. Muravyeva (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2014), 28–49, here 43.


25. This was Baer’s accusation against, among others, Laurie Essig’s book Queer in Russia: A Story of Sex, Self, and the Other (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999). The monograph resulted from Essig’s travels to Russia in the last decades of the twentieth century. It provides historical insight into the development of Russian queer identity. However, primarily, it offers observations with anecdotal comments drawn from the author’s experiences among Russian queer communities. Baer sees it as a “prime example of the difficulties faced by the observer attempting to ‘read’ the Russian gay and lesbian scene through the prism of Western queer theory and its critique of sexual identities.” Brian James Baer, “Queer in Russia: A Story of Sex, Self, and the Other, and: Perevernutyi mir, and: Cracks in the Iron Closet: Travels in Gay and Lesbian Russia (review),” Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History 1, no. 3 (2000): 611–619, here 613.

26. Healey, Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia, 51.


36. Ibid., 6.


39. Karolina Krasuska has emphasized that in the case of research on Central and Eastern Europe, one must remember especially Poland’s ambiguous, ambivalent location, as it is often perceived within postcolonial studies only as a postcolonial country processing its trauma rather than seen “through its history as an imperial periphery and a peripheral empire at the same time” (Krasuska, *Płeć i naród*, 18).


44. Ibid., 23.
47. Żmichowska, *Biała Róża*, 102.

50. Notably, the first allusions to the fact that the eponymous pagan—the vampiric Aspasia—was modeled after Zbyszewska appeared already in the early twentieth century. Such a reading was proposed, for example, by Mauryce Mann in 1916. See his *Poganka Narcyzy Żmichowskiej: Geneza, źródła, artyzmy i idea utworu* [Narcyza Żmichowska’s pagan: The genesis, sources, artistry, and idea of the piece] (Warsaw: Towarzystwo Naukowe Warszawskie, 1916). In the interwar period Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński wrote about the passionate friendship and “excruciating love” that became the origin of the novel; Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, “Wstęp” [Introduction], in Narcyza Żmichowska, *Poganka* [The heathen] (Warsaw: Ossolineum, 1950), ix, xxiii–xxvi. Boy-Żeleński also published letters between his mother Wanda Grabowska (Żmichowska’s pupil) and Żmichowska herself. In the foreword to that publication, he suggested that a platonic-romantic feeling is present in that correspondence (recently, Natalie Cornett discussed this in her text “‘Amongst Affectionate Female Friends’: Same-Sex Intimacy in Nineteenth-Century Polish Correspondence,” *Aspasia: The International Yearbook of Central, Eastern, and Southeastern European Women’s and Gender History* 13 (2019), 135–146, https://doi.org/10.3167/asp.2019.130109).


53. As Ewa Serafin-Prusator wrote, symbolic citizenship was granted to Polish women on the condition of their total sacrifice to a national cause. She also shows that in literary history, Żmichowska’s biography was constantly subjected to efforts to create a patriotic myth around it, despite considerable evidence of the writer’s criticism of conspiracy actions. Ewa Serafin-Prusator, “Narcyza Żmichowska—między Matką Polką a kobietą-rycerzem” [Narcyza Żmichowska—between Polish Mother and woman-knight], *Białostockie Studia Literaturoznawcze* [Białystok literary studies] 10 (2017), 7–21, here 8, 17–18, https://doi.org/10.15290/bsl.2017.10.01.

54. Pavlychko, “Modernism vs. Populism in Fin-de-Siècle Ukrainian Literature,” 149.
55. Ibid., 98.
57. Ibid., 66.
58. Pavlychko, “Modernism vs. Populism in Fin-de-Siècle Ukrainian Literature,” 100.
60. Gundorova, *Feminca Melancholica*, 65
63. Ibid.
64. Ibid., 119.
65. Ibid., 122.
66. For example: Vicinus, *Intimate Friends*.
68. Queer interpretations of Konopnicka’s relationship with painter Maria Dulębianka were dubbed a “Konopnicka lie” at one point. See Zuzanna Berendt, “O czym milczy pieśniarka narodu?” [What is the nation’s singer silent about?] *Didaskalia* [Stage directions] 148 (2018), 70–72, here 72.
69. The situation of Polish literature seems to be similarly complicated. Although the Polish territories were divided between three powers (Russia, Prussia, and Austria-Hungary), simultaneously between them and the most important artistic centers, namely Warsaw and Krakow, there was a lively exchange and the “constant transfer of people and publishing, not allowing [one] to draw sharp separation” (Magnone, “Ruch ‘młodych kobiet’? Transnarodowy kobiecy modernizm w Europie Środkowej na przełomie XIX i XX wieku,” 196). Meanwhile, in the case of Ukrainian literature, this division was of fundamental importance, significantly affecting two parallel trajectories for the development of the literary tradition. See Agnieszka Korniejenko, *Ukraiński modernizm: Próba periodyzacji procesu historyczno-literackiego* [Ukrainian modernism: An attempt at periodization of the historical and literary process] (Kraków: Universitas, 2004), 42.
71. It is worth mentioning that more direct words of affection in this correspondence were written in German as well—as in a letter in which Ukraine addresses Kobylianska, “Liebe, liebste Wunderblume” [Dear, dearest miracle flower]. Ibid., 98–99.
80. Christa Binswanger, “Lesbijnja-intelektualistka jako ‘miejsce fantazmatyczne’: Symboliśka Poliksenia Solowiova (Allegro) w odbiorze współczesnych” [The lesbian intellectual as a “phantasmic place”: The symbolist Poliksenia Solowiova (Allegro) as perceived by her contemporaries], in Nowa świadomość płci w modernizmie: Studia spod znaku gender w kulturze polskiej i rosyjskiej u schyłku stulecia [New gender awareness in modernism: Gender studies in Polish and Russian culture at the turn of the century], ed. German Ritz, Christa Binswanger, and Carmen Scheide (Kraków: Universitas, 2000), 270.
81. Doan and Garrity, Sapphic Modernities, 8.
85. Traub, Thinking Sex with Early Moderns, 86.