RESISTING SILENCE, CLAIMING SPACE: LGBTQ+ COUNTERPUBLICS IN KOSOVO

By

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Abstract

This thesis investigates how LGBTQ+ activism in Kosovo—focusing on the work of the organization *Dylberizm*—challenges heteronormative constructions of national identity and creates alternative cultural spaces of belonging. Rather than seeking mere inclusion within dominant frameworks, activists engage in both resistance and reimagining, disrupting narratives that frame queerness as foreign or incompatible with being Kosovar.

Using Foucauldian discourse analysis and grounded in the theory of counterpublics (Fraser; Warner), the research examines how activists reclaim erased histories, language, and rituals while performing queerness in public and symbolic spaces. Drawing on digital texts, cultural events, and a semi-structured interview with one of the founders of Dylberizm, the study highlights two main strategies: resisting heteronormativity through critique and counter-memory, and creating alternative queer spaces through storytelling, ritual, and performance.

The findings show that queer activism in Kosovo is not only a struggle for rights but a cultural and political project that unsettles the normative foundations of the nation. Activists articulate belonging on their own terms, queering both the past and the future. This research contributes to queer theory, nationalism studies, and international relations by showing how queer counterpublics transform the symbolic structure of the nation from within.

Author's Declaration

I, the undersigned, **Vlera Bajraktari**, candidate for the MA degree in International Relations, declare herewith that the present thesis titled "**Resisting Silence, Claiming Space: LGBTQ+ Counterpublics in Kosovo"** is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright.

I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Vienna, 23 May 2025

Vlera Bajraktari

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Introduction

This thesis begins in a moment of political noise and personal clarity. I was in the final year of my undergraduate studies when the Kosovo Assembly debated the Draft Civil Code in March 2022. Though the document spanned over 1,600 articles meant to regulate private and public life, nearly all debate zeroed in on a single paragraph: Article 1,138(2), which stated that "Registered civil unions between persons of the same sex are allowed. Conditions and procedures are regulated by a special law." This brief clause became a lightning rod. Parliamentary sessions that should have been filled with legal nuance were instead dominated by homophobic rhetoric. MPs denounced same-sex unions as a threat to tradition, an erosion of family, and an imposition by the European Union. Some dismissed queer people as morally degenerate; others questioned whether such rights had any place in Kosovar society at all.

I remember reading those speeches, watching the recordings, and feeling two things at once: rage, and recognition. At the time, I started writing my bachelor's thesis on the polarizing impact of Europeanization on LGBTQ+ rights in Kosovo. I examined how the EU's insistence on minority protections functioned both as a progressive force and a point of cultural friction. LGBTQ+ rights were often framed—by both advocates and opponents—not as inherent to human dignity, but as conditions for international legitimacy. Queerness was treated as foreign, European, un-Albanian.

Yet even as I explored those dynamics, something troubled me. I began to realize that my focus on Europeanization, though important, was incomplete. It centered power in Brussels, Strasbourg, and Prishtina, while sidelining the people doing the most radical, creative, and vulnerable work: queer activists themselves. The individuals and collectives who were not only fighting for recognition but reimagining what it means to be Albanian, to belong, to inherit

history differently. I wanted to move closer to their work—to understand how queerness is lived, asserted, remembered, and made visible in a society that so often denies its existence.

That desire became this thesis.

This research explores how LGBTQ+ activists in Kosovo—particularly through the work of the organization Dylberizm—challenge the heteronormative foundations of national identity. The project asks the following research questions: How do queer activists in Kosovo resist the heteronormative underpinnings of national identity? What strategies do they employ—discursively, culturally, spatially—to claim presence and legitimacy within the national imaginary?

Kosovo is often celebrated for its progressive constitution, which includes anti-discrimination protections on the basis of sexual orientation. Yet legal language exists in tension with social reality. Homophobia remains deeply rooted in public discourse, religious institutions, and even in the law itself. Same-sex marriage is constitutionally ambiguous but effectively banned. Public expressions of queer identity are still met with violence, silence, or tokenism. And perhaps most insidiously, the myth persists that to be queer is to be Western, elite, urban—cut off from the soil and soul of the nation.

This myth is what Dylberizm dismantles. Founded in 2018 as an Instagram-based education project, it has grown into a digital archive, cultural hub, and activist platform. Through reclaiming suppressed histories, queering traditional songs and rituals, staging public festivals, and amplifying queer voices in Albanian, Dylberizm insists that queerness is not a foreign contaminant but a buried part of who we are. They do not simply advocate for LGBTQ+ inclusion—they stage a rupture in the very narratives that have historically erased them. Their work is not about assimilation but about transformation.

To understand these transformations, this thesis is grounded in the theoretical framework of counterpublics, drawing on the foundational work of Nancy Fraser (1990) and Michael Warner (2002). Fraser describes counterpublics as alternative discursive spaces where marginalized groups produce their own interpretations of reality and contest dominant narratives. Warner extends this by emphasizing the performative, embodied, and emotional dimensions of queer publics—the way they generate new modes of belonging, intimacy, and visibility. For both, counterpublics are not private retreats but sites of world-making: places where new political imaginaries are forged in defiance of exclusion.

To trace how these counterpublics take shape, this research employs Foucauldian discourse analysis, which views discourse as a field of power relations that defines what can be said, who can speak, and what is rendered visible or intelligible. Foucault teaches us that discourse is not just language, but a mechanism of control—a way of constructing "truth" that upholds dominant institutions and identities (2007). In Kosovo, queerness is often discursively framed as unnatural, foreign, or immoral, and thus excluded from the symbolic body of the nation. Yet as Foucault also reminds us, where there is power, there is resistance. LGBTQ+ activists in Kosovo generate counter-discourses that challenge these dominant regimes of truth by reclaiming erased histories, queering public rituals, and creating symbolic spaces that insist on queer presence.

This research is also relevant to the field of LGBTQ+ rights and activism in the Balkans. While scholarship on LGBTQ+ rights in the Balkans has grown, much of it remains focused on Europeanization, legal reform, or visibility politics. Additionally, a majority of it has turned its attention toward homonormativity and homonationalism—concepts that critique the depoliticized inclusion of queer identities within neoliberal or nationalist agendas. However, I believe that these frameworks are not fully adequate for understanding LGBTQ+ activism in Kosovo. In this context, heteronormativity remains the dominant mode of exclusion, and queer

activism is not primarily about assimilation, but about challenging the symbolic boundaries of the nation itself.

Rather than mirroring Western trajectories, LGBTQ+ movements in Kosovo emerge from local conditions shaped by post-war legacies, patriarchal norms, and contested national identity. Drawing on Kulpa's (2011) work, I argue that queer engagement with the nation should be seen as a strategy of resistance. By reclaiming erased histories, queering national symbols, and asserting LGBTQ+ presence within the national narrative, activists in Kosovo do more than seek inclusion—they actively reshape what it means to belong. As such, this thesis addresses a critical gap by turning attention to the cultural and discursive practices through which queer activists in Kosovo assert belonging. By foregrounding their voices, aesthetics, and interventions, I argue that queer activism in Kosovo is not merely a response to repression, but a creative project of nation-making.

This is, ultimately, a thesis about refusal—the refusal to be erased, to be spoken for, to be sidelined. But it is also a thesis about invention. About the ways queer Kosovars are making space where none was offered, writing themselves into histories that tried to forget them, and insisting, in every act of speech and defiance: we are here, we have always been here, and we belong.

The chapters that follow map the cultural and political terrain of queer resistance in Kosovo through the lens of the organization Dylberizm. Chapter 1 offers a review of relevant literature on national identity, counterpublics, and the resistance to heteronormativity. Chapter 2 situates the research within the sociopolitical context of LGBTQ+ rights in Kosovo, introduces Dylberizm, and elaborates on the methodological framework used. Chapter 3 analyzes how Dylberizm reclaims the term *dylber*, engages in discursive resignification, and archives queer resistance through storytelling, memory work, and performance, thus rewriting collective

belonging. Chapter 4 explores how the organization creates alternative cultural spaces—particularly through the Prishtina Queer Festival and storytelling projects—as forms of discursive and material world-making that disrupt heteronormative nationhood. Finally, the Conclusion reflects on the broader implications of this resistance for both LGBTQ+ rights in Kosovo and for reimagining national identity from the margins.

Chapter 1: Literature Review and Methodology

1.1 National Identity

Far from being a neutral or organic development, national identity is a carefully constructed narrative that defines who belongs and who does not. It is not just about shared culture, language, or history, but about the stories nations tell themselves—stories that shape political boundaries, social hierarchies, and collective memory. A general definition of the nation refers to the collective self-conception of a group of people who share common features such as culture, language, history, and values, often associated with a specific territory (Anderson 2006). As theorized by Anderson, national identity is "imagined" because it exists in the minds of individuals who perceive themselves as part of a wider community, even without direct interaction with all its members (6). The concept of nationhood, or 'nation-building,' entails the creation of a national narrative that constructs both a past and present (Anderson 2006), the invention of traditions (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), and the symbolic formation of a community (Cohen 1985). In this way, national identity functions as a boundary-making mechanism, defining both the inclusion of certain individuals as legitimate members of the national community and the exclusion of others as outsiders.

These boundaries, however, are not only defined by political or cultural markers but also by social norms, particularly those governing sexuality. In this context, sexuality has historically played a crucial role in nation-building through two primary mechanisms (Pryke 1998). The first involves establishing boundaries for acceptable sexual behavior among citizens (541). Practices such as masturbation, premarital sex, and homosexuality have often been condemned as harmful to both individuals and the broader health of the nation. Nationalist movements and regimes have frequently targeted sexual minorities, linking their existence to societal decay. For example, Pinochet's Chile and post-Sandinista Nicaragua violently repressed homosexuality, associating it with moral deviance and undermining national strength

(Reinfelder 1996, as cited in Pryke 1998, 542). Similarly, authoritarian regimes like Iran fuse nationalism with religious fundamentalism to enforce severe restrictions on homosexuality, while North Korea's obsession with sexual purity has led to extreme controls over women's sexuality, indirectly reinforcing heterosexual norms (McCormack 1993, as cited in Pryke 1998, 542). Pro-natalist policies further underscore how homosexuality has been marginalized in nation-building efforts (542). These campaigns often promote fertility within specific racial or ethnic groups, sidelining or demonizing non-reproductive relationships. Similarly, anti-imperialist nationalist movements in the Global South have emphasized heterosexual family structures as cornerstones of national identity, framing gay liberation as a corrupting influence tied to Western decadence. Across contexts, the regulation of sexuality—whether through explicit repression or exclusionary pro-natalist rhetoric—has been a tool to consolidate national identity and reinforce heteronormative ideals.

Narratives of belonging and exclusion are also constructed and negotiated within the public sphere, a concept famously theorized by Jürgen Habermas (1989). Habermas conceptualizes the public sphere as a social domain where private individuals come together to discuss matters of common concern, engaging in rational-critical debate (398). The public sphere serves as a bridge between civil society and the state, providing a space where public opinion can be formed through open dialogue. This process of public deliberation is fundamental to how collective identities, including national identity, are continuously shaped and contested. As such, the public sphere becomes not only a medium for discussing political and social issues but also a critical site for constructing the normative boundaries of national belonging.

The public sphere is not merely a physical space but a conceptual one where discourse itself becomes public through its capacity to shape collective understanding. Habermas (1989) draws on classical ideas from the ancient Greek polis and agora to illustrate how public life historically centered around spaces where citizens actively participated in debate (3-4).

However, the public sphere, as conceptualized by Habermas, is not limited to such physical settings. Rather, it encompasses any context where individuals gather to deliberate on matters of public interest, whether in person or through mediated forms such as print media. Publicness, therefore, is not just about physical presence but about visibility and the capacity for collective judgment. Public acts—whether debates, protests, or cultural performances—serve as mechanisms for making societal issues visible and for collectively determining the norms that govern social life.

National identity, therefore, is not only a historical or cultural construct but also a discursive one, shaped through the continuous public articulation of who constitutes the national community. In this context, public discourse serves both as a reflective space—where shared values are reinforced—and as a constitutive process—where new social norms and identities are formulated. Public acts within the public sphere, such as demonstrations, public debates, or cultural events, contribute to the ongoing negotiation of national identity. These acts are not merely symbolic; they performatively assert the presence and legitimacy of specific groups within the national narrative. For instance, public events like national holidays, commemorations, or protests serve as moments where the collective identity of the nation is both displayed and scrutinized.

1.2 Counterpublics

The concept of national identity, just as that of the public sphere, has been criticized for excluding individuals that lacked access to resources, status, and power in the public. Nancy Fraser's (1990, 58) critique of public sphere theory highlights how individuals who seek inclusion within the public sphere are often marginalized within Habermas's original conceptualization. According to Fraser, both formal and informal barriers exist that prevent marginalized groups from fully participating, leading to their exclusion from public discourse and reinforcing broader social inequalities. Habermas's notion of "bracketing"—the idea that

participants should set aside their social status and influence to engage as equals—fails to account for the reality that such bracketing inherently disadvantages those with less social power (Fraser 1990, 63). Rather than leveling the playing field, this expectation serves as a structural barrier that continually reminds less influential participants of their disadvantaged position within spaces of discussion and deliberation. Fraser describes this phenomenon as a characteristic of "stratified societies," where the fundamental institutional structures create unequal social groups embedded in relationships of dominance and subordination (64). She argued that past iterations of the public sphere were not only bourgeois but also masculinist and needed to undergo "some critical interrogation and reconstruction if it is to yield a category capable of theorizing the limits of actually existing democracy" (57).

Fraser (1990) posits that public life is always composed of multiple, often conflicting publics. The notion that there should be one dominant public sphere inherently marginalizes alternative voices, leading to the creation of what Fraser calls subaltern counterpublics (67). These are discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups, such as, women, workers, people of color, gays and lesbians, construct and circulate counter-discourses, formulating oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs. Counterpublics, according to Fraser, function as both spaces of withdrawal and regroupment and as bases for agitational activities aimed at wider publics (68). This dual role is crucial: on one hand, counterpublics provide marginalized individuals a relatively safe space to formulate their perspectives and build solidarity. On the other hand, they serve as launching points for public critique, where alternative discourses can enter the broader public sphere, challenging the dominant narratives that marginalize them.

Michael Warner (2002) further develops the notion of counterpublics by emphasizing their performative and cultural dimensions. Unlike Fraser, who primarily situates counterpublics within a political context, Warner views them as dynamic cultural formations that both produce

and express marginalized identities. Warner (2002) argues that counterpublics are not simply oppositional publics or subaltern groups proposing reform, but rather communities that remain acutely aware—whether consciously or not—of their subordinate status within a larger social hierarchy (86) These counterpublics define themselves in contrast not just to a general public, but specifically to a dominant one. Their conflict with the mainstream extends beyond ideas and policy to encompass the very forms of discourse they use, including speech genres, modes of address, and access to media, which are often viewed as inappropriate or indecorous in dominant contexts. Warner highlights how counterpublics challenge dominant publics through their performative, often stigmatized, discourse practices. Rather than seeking mere inclusion, Warner's counterpublics construct alternative cultural norms that resist and reimagine the foundations of the dominant public sphere.

Warner (2002, 82) also emphasizes the poetic nature of publics, describing them as forms of world-making. Public discourse does not simply reflect a pre-existing social reality but actively shapes how the world is understood and imagined. He argues that public speech is inherently performative, projecting a social reality that participants recognize and engage with. This performative aspect is critical because it means that the act of addressing a public also constitutes it, rather than merely reflecting an already established collective Warner's focus on the performative and poetic dimensions of counterpublics is particularly relevant when considering queer theory and queer activism. He argues that queer counterpublics do not just aim for social acceptance but actively challenge the normative frameworks that render queer lives invisible or deviant. For instance, in "The Trouble with Normal", Warner (1999) critiques the normalization of queer identities within heteronormative frameworks, arguing that queer counterpublics should not merely seek assimilation but should instead subvert and question normative assumptions about sexuality and public life. This critique is evident in how queer

spaces - such as pride parades, community gatherings, or digital activism—serve not just as sites of visibility but as performative acts that redefine public norms.

1.3 Resisting Heteronormativity

Queer theories intersect with Warner's conceptualization of counterpublics by highlighting how marginalized identities and practices inherently challenge dominant social norms. These theories emphasize how non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality generate alternative spaces of belonging and community, positioning them as dynamic sites of resistance. In this way, Warner's framework aligns with queer perspectives that view these spaces not only as reactions to exclusion but as active reconfigurations of social relations and cultural practices. Warner's engagement with heteronormativity as a structuring principle of modern public life is particularly insightful. He defines heteronormativity as the pervasive assumption that heterosexuality is the default or natural sexual orientation, deeply embedded in social institutions and cultural practices (Warner 1991, 4). Warner argued that these norms are not just pervasive but operate as an unchallenged default, shaping social structures and academic discourse alike. To counter this, Warner (1991) called for a critical interrogation of heteronormativity within social theory and advocated for the inclusion of sexuality and "queerness" as fundamental categories of social analysis. Such an engagement is crucial because, as queer theorists emphasize, heteronormativity is not merely a matter of individual bias or homophobia—it is structurally ingrained in national identity, state institutions, and cultural narratives, shaping the very way societies define belonging and legitimacy. Berlant and Warner (1998, 554) explore how heteronormativity is embedded in the public sphere; it is "more than ideology, or prejudice, or phobia against gays and lesbians; it is produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life: nationality, the state, and the law; commerce; medicine; and education; as well as in the conventions and affects of narrativity, romance, and other protected spaces of culture.'

As such, the concept of counterpublics offers a valuable analytical lens. Activists not only resist the dominant heteronormative national identity but also actively create new cultural and social norms through public performances and digital engagement. These counterpublics challenge the assumption that national identity must be heteronormative, proposing instead a vision of the nation that embraces diverse sexual and gender identities. By forming discursive spaces that prioritize queerness and resist normative constraints, LGBTQ+ activists demonstrate how counterpublics can function as transformative agents within the broader social fabric. Their activism exposes how the exclusion of queer identities from national narratives is not an inevitable reality but a historically contingent and politically motivated construction. Through protests, advocacy, community-building, and cultural interventions, they challenge what Berlant and Warner (1995, 345) term the "power-ridden normativities of sex" that sustain heteronormative state structures. By creating alternative spaces of belonging that reject the imposed binary between queerness and national identity, these activists not only resist national heteronormativity but also redefine the very boundaries of the nation itself.

Chapter 2: Context and Methodology

2.1 Sociopolitical Context: LGBTQ+ Rights in Kosovo

Kosovo is a country with favorable constitutional protections for human rights, including LGBTQ+ rights. Article 24(2) on Equality Before the Law guarantees protection against discrimination based on sexual orientation, among other personal statuses (Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo 2008). Furthermore, according to Article 37(1) of the Constitution, "based on free will, everyone enjoys the right to marry and the right to have a family as provided by law" This is particularly noteworthy because it does not use gender-specific language to differentiate between same-sex couples and opposite-sex couples. However, even though the Constitution recognizes same-sex marriages by default, it leaves the institution of marriage to be regulated further by the Kosovo Law on Family – which defines marriage as a union between a man and a woman, and doesn't recognizing same-sex partnerships - making gay marriage illegal. In 2022, an amendment to the Civil Code was proposed. Parliamentary approval of Kosovo's 997-page civil code has been held up over two sentences: "Registered civil unions between persons of the same sex are allowed. Conditions and procedures are regulated by a special law." (Government of the Republic of Kosovo 2021, Article 1,138[2])

These difficulties and contradictions of the law are a reflection of the national scene. The Parliamentary hearing on the Draft Civil Code, on March 16, 2022, was filled with homophobic and discriminatory language. Deputies opposing the proposed civil code cited the preservation of the institution of family as the main reason why they opposed same-sex civil unions. Gramoz Agusholli, MP of the ruling party, Vetëvendosje (VV), expressed concerns that the civil code would "destroy the family," citing specific concerns about same-sex couples and adoption (Kadriu 2022). Other VV members, including Labinote Demi-Murtezi, referred to gay couples as a "moral degeneration," while Burim Karameta argued that discussing such issues is absurd given the more pressing problems such as poverty.

Religion and traditional values were the backbones of these arguments. In explaining her vote against the Civil Code, Duda Balje, a Bosniak representative in the Assembly, stated that she could not go against her religious beliefs and the cultural and traditional values of the country. She also suggested that many MPs may be voting in favor of LGBTQ+ rights only because it is seen as a requirement for EU accession, and not because they genuinely support the issue (Jakupi 2022).

Furthermore, the Kosovar society still maintains deeply conservative values when it comes to gender and sexual norms. A National Democratic Institute (NDI 2015) survey conducted in 2015 put Kosovo as the most homophobic country in the Balkans. In 2015, 45% of respondents believed that being LGBTIQ+ was a sickness. By 2023, this belief had increased significantly to 60%, reflecting a negative shift in perceptions (ERA 2022). Support for same-sex marriage rose slightly, from 9% in 2015 to 19.5% in 2023, though it remains one of the lowest rates in the region. In 2015, 49% of Kosovars said they would not vote for a political party prioritizing LGBTIQ+ rights. This figure rose sharply to 71% in 2023, indicating growing political resistance to LGBTIQ+ advocacy.

According to Michels (2014), traditional and patriarchal societal values continue to hold sway in Kosovo's public discourse, condemning any sexual or gender identities that deviate from what is considered the norm. This narrative connects to notions of religious nationality as well. Although Kosovo is considered a secular country, religion still plays a significant role in the lives of its citizens. While it may not be as deeply ingrained in the national identity as in other Western Balkan countries, the majority of the population in Kosovo identifies as Muslim and holds strong religious convictions. Kosovo 2.0's fourth issue magazine that focuses on sexuality and gender, including LGBT rights, was scheduled to launch in 2012. The launch was interrupted by a group of men who attacked one of the staff and destroyed the stage (Civil Rights Defenders 2012). Additionally, a group of over 100 protesters started to gather outside

the building shouting derogatory remarks, including "Out pederasts!" and "Allahu Akbar!". The organizers blamed patriarchy and its traditional values for the attacks (European Stability Initiative, 2014). Ten years on, in 2022, the heads of four religious communities - Muslim, Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish - issued a joint statement urging lawmakers to oppose the legalization of same-sex marriage (Bashkësia Islame e Kosovës 2022). According to them, Kosovar society is socially and politically conservative, and they unequivocally expressed their support for family values, the sanctity of life, and the traditional family structure.

2.2 Introduction to Dylberizm

Launched on March 19, 2018, by independent queer activists in Kosovo, Dylberizm began as an educational Instagram page and quickly became a pivotal platform for LGBTQ+ content in Albanian (Dylberizm n.d., "Për Dylberizm"). It offered essential educational resources and engaged followers through interactive content, filling a critical gap in queer representation across Albanian-speaking communities. On June 28, 2020, Dylberizm expanded into an online archive at Dylberizm.com, becoming the first dedicated Albanian-language platform to explore queer history, rights, and culture, while, since 2023, it functions as a non-governmental organization. The platform, run entirely by voluntary queer activists, covers global and regional news, cultural events, health information, and educational materials, while sharing personal stories from queer individuals in Kosovo, Albania, and the diaspora (European Endowment for Democracy 2024, "Dylberizm").

The platform seeks to challenge deeply entrenched heterosexist norms in Albanian society, countering discriminatory beliefs that erase queer identities. With historical references to songs and legends about gender nonconformity and same-sex love, Dylberizm asserts that queerness has always been part of Albanian heritage. Its mission is clear: to dismantle damaging myths and affirm that being Albanian and queer are not mutually exclusive identities.

Beyond digital efforts, Dylberizm takes activism to the streets, sparking public debates on LGBTQ+ issues through visibility campaigns. In 2023 they inaugurated the Prishtina Queer Festival, the first festival celebrating queer culture in Kosovo. The festival has become an annual event, featuring workshops, panels, concerts, and various performances from local and regional queer artistes. Conceived as a direct response to the lack of continuous and safe visibility for queer culture in Kosovo outside the temporal confines of Pride Week, PQF exemplifies the strategic creation of alternative queer spaces — not only physically but discursively — within the national and regional context.

As Dan Sokoli, founder of Dylberizm, explains during our interview: "The festival, came out of a lack of a safe space for queer culture, and for the celebration of queer art and culture. Additionally, its aim is to show our historical presence and to celebrate it." (Dan Sokoli, interview with author, February 2025). This lack of visibility beyond the annual Pride Parade became the point of departure for the festival's development. While Pride events in Kosovo are more strongly tied to advocacy, PQF shifts the emphasis toward celebratory expressions of identity. This distinction is not superficial: it signals a reorientation of political strategy from direct advocacy to cultural affirmation and symbolic contestation through space and visibility.

2.3 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to critically examine how LGBTQ+ activism in Kosovo challenges the entrenched association between national identity and heteronormativity. The research is grounded in the counterpublics theory, which serves as the analytical framework to understand how marginalized groups create alternative discursive spaces that challenge dominant societal narratives. This theoretical orientation aligns with the study's objective of analyzing how queer activism in Kosovo not only contests but actively reconfigures normative understandings of national identity through diverse activist practices.

This study focuses exclusively on Dylberizm as its primary site of analysis. The decision to concentrate on this organization stems from its explicit mission to challenge heteronormativity and disrupt the dominant assumption that Kosovar society is and has always been exclusively heterosexual. Unlike broader LGBTQ+ initiatives that may approach activism through legal advocacy, visibility campaigns, or service provision, Dylberizm is primarily discursively driven: it operates as a cultural and linguistic intervention, aiming to reshape how queerness is understood, remembered, and represented within Albanian-speaking communities.

Data collection for this study is based on primary data. This includes one semi-structured interviews with one of the founders of Dylberizm, as well as an extensive analysis of the organization's digital output—articles, campaign materials, and project documentation. These sources offer direct insight into how Dylberizm crafts and disseminates counter-narratives that resist heteronormativity and propose alternative frameworks of national belonging. Rather than treating interviews and digital materials as separate types of data, the research integrates them to highlight how activists articulate resistance, negotiate visibility, and construct counterpublics across different platforms and contexts.

The period under study, from 2018 to 2025, is deliberately chosen to capture a transformative phase in the work of Dylberizm. This timeframe encompasses the organization's founding, the launch of key initiatives such as its online archive, and a series of public interventions and cultural productions that have significantly shaped queer visibility and discourse in Kosovo.

I prioritized materials that explicitly engage with national symbols, cultural memory, and collective identity, as these are the primary sites where dominant discourses of heteronormativity and nationalism intersect. Particular attention was given to texts that use culturally resonant language, imagery, or references—elements that demonstrate how

Dylberizm queers the symbolic frameworks through which belonging is constructed and contested in Kosovar society.

In this context, discourse analysis emerges as the most suitable methodological tool, as it facilitates a nuanced examination of how language, symbolism, and rhetoric are strategically employed by LGBTQ+ activists to construct alternative public spheres that challenge entrenched heteronormative assumptions. This study draws specifically on Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) to analyze how LGBTQ+ activists in Kosovo, particularly through the work of Dylberizm, construct counter-discourses that resist normative understandings of identity, belonging, and nationhood.

Michel Foucault's discourse theory offers a critical framework for understanding how language is entangled with power, and how speech, writing, and representation operate not simply to reflect social reality but to shape and govern it. Foucault's approach to discourse centers on how knowledge is historically produced through institutional language, and how this knowledge creates what a society comes to accept as "truth." He introduces the concept of discursive formation, which refers to the network of texts and practices that consistently construct objects, subjects, and relations in particular ways (Foucault 1972). These discursive formations are not static—they emerge through what Foucault calls regimes of truth, meaning that each society defines, through dominant discourse, what is accepted as true at a given historical moment (Foucault 1972, 131).

Foucault's concept of counter-discourse is especially central here. He theorizes that where there is power, there is always resistance—and this resistance often takes the form of new discourses that challenge dominant ways of knowing (Foucault 1990). These counter-discourses do not exist outside the system of power but arise from within it, turning the tools of discourse—language, memory, visibility—against the norms they resist. In "The History of Sexuality",

Foucault (1990) argued that sexuality itself is not a biological truth but a discursive construct shaped by centuries of institutionalized power—religious, medical, and legal. In that sense, the political work of queerness is not only to assert identity, but to destabilize the categories and discursive formations that render certain lives unintelligible or undesirable in the first place.

Foucault provides the methodological foundation for understanding how these counterpublics emerge as discursive resistance, and how their power lies not just in visibility, but in the disruption of normalized truth production. Counterpublics and counter-discourses are thus deeply interconnected: counterpublics are the spaces where counter-discourses take shape, circulate, and accumulate power. By analyzing Dylberizm's interventions through a Foucauldian lens, this study investigates how queer activists in Kosovo create counterpublic spaces by strategically queering language, memory, and national symbols. These practices not only resist the dominant framing of queerness as external to Albanian identity, but also propose alternative truths—ones that reimagine what it means to belong to the nation as a queer subject.

Chapter 3: Edhe shqiptar edhe dylber: Queer Resistance and the Rewriting of Belonging

3.1 Reclaiming History: Dylber as Counterpublic Memory and Method

To say "edhe shqiptar edhe dylber" — "both Albanian and queer" — is not simply to assert coexisting identities, but to rupture the national narrative that has long positioned queerness as foreign to Albanian culture. In reclaiming dylber, a historical term once used to describe men who had sexual and emotional relationships with other men, Dylberizm reactivates a buried cultural memory. This act of linguistic and historical reclamation is not nostalgic, but radical — a direct confrontation with the heteronormative logic that equates national authenticity with patriarchal masculinity and compulsory heterosexuality.

Dan Sokoli, founder of Dylberizm, repeatedly emphasized the importance of history and memory in queer liberation. For Dylberizm, history is not a passive record but a contested terrain—one where queer existence in Kosovo has been systematically erased, pathologized, or reinterpreted through heteronormative lenses. In a post-war society where nationalism, traditionalism, and heteronormativity continue to structure dominant public discourse, queerness is often cast as foreign, deviant, or incompatible with Albanian identity. As Sokoli explained, "There are various factors at play—starting from the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the region… new political systems came into power, [and] began to view homosexuality as a threat to society". These systems deployed sexuality as a site of governance, systematically producing queerness as a social threat and excluding it from the national imaginary.

This erasure is not just a historical issue but a discursive one. As Foucault (1990, 106) argued, "sexuality" is not a pre-existing truth to be regulated, but a discursive construct that emerges through "mobile, polymorphous, and contingent techniques of power." That is, sexuality is both produced and suppressed through institutional discourses—legal, psychiatric, moral—which

determine what can be seen, said, or remembered. As Sokoli recalled, “Historical records, documents, and artifacts that testified to our presence were destroyed.” This destruction was not incidental but structured—a means of erasing queerness from national belonging.

Yet in Foucault’s framework, where there is repression, there is also resistance. He writes, “Homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf... using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified” (Foucault 1990, 101). This is the reverse discourse: the reappropriation of language and symbolism once used to marginalize. In Kosovo, Dylberizm’s reclamation of the term dylber embodies this practice. Once embedded in Ottoman poetic traditions to describe beautiful young men in homoerotic contexts, the term was later sanitized and used euphemistically in folk songs to refer to something simply "beautiful," erasing its queer origins. As Sokoli explained, “Some texts originally had dylber, but later were changed to ylber [rainbow] to remove the original meaning… Even some people were named Dylber thinking it just meant something beautiful”. What we see here is not just linguistic transformation, but deliberate discursive cleansing.

Reclaiming dylber is therefore not just a cultural or linguistic act—it is a strategic formation of a counterpublic. As Warner (2002, 56) writes, counterpublics are formed in “conflictual relation to the dominant public,” marked by an awareness of their subordination and the discursive strategies needed to contest it. Dylberizm’s use of dylber exemplifies what Warner calls “discourse that in other contexts would be regarded with hostility or with a sense of indecorousness” (Warner 2002, 57). In dominant nationalist discourse, queer identities remain unspeakable—except through ridicule, pathology, or silence. Yet in Dylberizm’s work, dylber reemerges as a signifier of identity, resistance, and belonging. Its usage across social media, festival programs, and political campaigns transforms it into a linguistic rallying point, activating what Warner describes as “a relation among strangers brought into temporary alignment by their participation in a common discourse” (2002, 86).

This counterpublic is not confined to private spheres; it is outward-facing, disruptive, and spatially performative. By insisting that dylber belongs not only to the past but to contemporary queer life, Dylberizm contests the heteronormative boundaries of public discourse in Kosovo. It stages what Warner refers to as "a space of circulation in which a public elaborates a discourse" (2002, 90). But this discourse is not merely oppositional; it is generative—it creates visibility where silence reigned and presence where erasure was the rule.

Furthermore, the reclaiming of dylber offers a powerful example of what Warner describes as the performative nature of counterpublic speech. The invocation of dylber does not just describe queer identity; it enacts it. It calls a queer Albanian subject into being—one who resists the historical and institutional forces that have long sought to erase them. This speech act, embedded in public campaigns, cultural productions, and digital circulation, constitutes what Warner terms "poetic world-making"—the creation of a new imaginary through shared language and political alignment (2002, 114).

3.2 Writing Ourselves Back In: Discursive Resignification and Counter-Memory

The "Reclaiming History" text by Dylberizm, published ahead of the 2023 Prishtina Queer Festival, represents a paradigmatic act of counterpublic intervention. It does not merely document exclusion; it performs a discursive strategy that reclaims the power to narrate queer presence on its own terms. In doing so, the text offers a compelling example of what Warner describes as the "world-making" capacity of counterpublics — discursive formations that do not simply oppose dominant publics, but actively imagine and circulate alternative modes of visibility, language, and belonging (Warner 2002, 86). Simultaneously, through a Foucauldian lens, this intervention can be read as a critique of the regimes of truth that have historically delimited queer existence in Kosovo as unspeakable, unintelligible, or foreign. In this sense, the text disrupts the dominant discursive formation that links national identity to compulsory heteronormativity.

The opening lines — “They tried to make us believe that people like us have never existed. That we live only in the West. That the West brought us here.” — enact a Foucauldian rupture in historical discourse by explicitly naming the discursive violence embedded in the production of national memory. These statements do more than express grievance; they contest the very conditions of enunciation — the socially sanctioned frameworks within which subjects can appear as recognizable, legitimate, or historical. This is a classic example of what Foucault (2007) describes as the “politics of truth,” wherein dominant institutions, including the state, education, and media, delimit which narratives are preserved and which are excluded or erased.

The rhetorical device “they tried,” repeated across the text, enacts a genealogical critique in the Foucauldian sense: it traces the historical mechanisms through which queer life was not only excluded from representation but actively disqualified from cultural memory. By juxtaposing this antagonism with the declarative reply — “But they did not succeed. We are here, and we have always been here.” — the text performs what Foucault would call a reverse discourse: it mobilizes the very language of exclusion to assert presence, continuity, and resistance.

This move from erasure to enunciation aligns with Fairclough’s concept of recontextualization (1992), which highlights how marginalized discourses are strategically relocated into new contexts to challenge hegemonic meaning structures. When the text states, “they have taught children… to hate us,” and “they have burned hundreds of songs and love letters,” (Dylberizm 2023, “Reclaiming History”) it is not simply invoking historical violence, but re-inscribing these absences into public consciousness through affectively charged language. In Foucauldian terms, this act of discursive repositioning operates as a form of counter-conduct, whereby the governed contest the normative scripts imposed upon their subjectivities.

The culmination of this process is captured in the assertive call to action: “The time has come to reinstate our position in this society.” Here, the term “reinstate” signals not only reclamation

but also a critique of the regulatory mechanisms that have historically confined queer subjectivity to the margins. As Foucault (1977, 194) argues, "The individual is no doubt the fictitious atom of an 'ideological' representation of society; but he is also a reality fabricated by this specific technology of power that I have called 'discipline.'" Rather than viewing power only as something that represses or censors, Foucault urges us to see how "power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth." To reinstate queer subjectivity, then, is not simply to recover what was erased, but to intervene in these discursive productions — to disrupt the very conditions under which certain lives are made visible, knowable, and legitimate.

The affective layering in "Reclaiming History" — mourning, anger, defiance — function as technologies of the self: practices through which queer subjects construct and affirm their identities in defiance of normative frameworks. In a context where state institutions have failed to preserve queer histories, affect becomes not only testimony but a mode of counter-knowledge — a way of knowing and being that resists institutional epistemologies.

Finally, in Foucauldian terms, "Reclaiming History" participates in a broader subjugated knowledge project — it revives and legitimizes forms of knowing and remembering that have been actively suppressed. The text does not aim merely to supplement the dominant discourse but to destabilize the epistemic conditions that uphold it. As Warner (2002, 122) notes, counterpublics do not replicate the dominant public sphere; they generate new worlds. Through the strategic use of discourse, Dylberizm's intervention thus performs a dual operation: it critiques the discursive regime of heteronormativity and simultaneously produces a new, affirming epistemology of queer belonging in Kosovo.

3.3 The Chronicle of Queer Resistance: Archiving the Intimate as Political

If "Reclaiming History" functions as a declarative reentry of queer subjects into the national narrative, "Kronika e Rezistencës Queer" (The Chronicle of Queer Resistance), takes this intervention a step further by constructing an autonomous archive of queer memory, affect, and resistance (Dylberizm n.d., "Kronika e Rezistencës Queer"). As a living counterpublic document, the Chronicle assembles politically charged, emotionally intimate, and unapologetically personal narratives that confront the epistemic violence of dominant historiographies. It rejects assimilation into heteronormative timelines or nationalist frameworks, instead reimagining queer subjectivity through its own affective and discursive lexicon.

The Chronicle is not merely additive; it is disruptive. It challenges the power/knowledge nexus that governs historical intelligibility — not by opposing discourse from the outside, but by altering its conditions from within. Foucault emphasizes that discourse is a historically specific system of rules that governs what can be said, by whom, and with what effects (Foucault 1972, 49). The nationalist historical field, often treated as neutral, is exposed here as a regime of truth (Foucault 2007, 131): a mechanism that legitimizes particular knowledges while rendering others unspeakable. Through its fragmented, affectively charged narratives, Kronika interrupts this regime by producing what Foucault calls subjugated knowledges — those forms of experience and understanding that dominant systems have disqualified or rendered invisible (Foucault 2007, 81).

This dynamic is evident in the way queer memory is articulated as both epistemic and political. Sokoli's reflection – "It was always through intermediaries - either the mainstream media or media that dealt with human rights, but these were still heterosexual media. They weren't queer media." - underscores how queer subjects have been forced to speak through frameworks that deny their agency and affective complexity. The Chronicle reclaims the authority to narrate

queer life on its own terms, enacting a shift from object to subject in the field of discourse. This is a performative refusal of the discursive rules that historically shaped queerness as pathological, abject, or peripheral — a reconstitution of subjectivity through the act of speech itself.

This project exemplifies what Warner (2002, 56-60) refers to as the formation of counterpublics through "stratified spaces of circulation" in which discourse otherwise excluded from dominant publics becomes possible. Rather than seeking legitimation through dominant memory regimes, the Chronicle builds its own epistemic space where queerness is not explained, excused, or sanitized (Dylberizm n.d., "Kronika e Rezistencës Queer"). It is lived, mourned, celebrated, and theorized. In this sense, each piece in the Chronicle becomes part of a discursive infrastructure that fosters what Warner calls "poetic world-making" — not simply the critique of dominant representations, but the invention of alternative histories, affects, and ways of being.

The texts included in the Chronicle are varied in form — essays, letters, personal reflections, poetic prose — but unified in their refusal to conform to the genre expectations of national history (Dylberizm n.d., "Kronika e Rezistencës Queer"). They do not provide a linear or teleological narrative. Instead, they fragment and reassemble queer pasts through disidentification with dominant temporalities. As Muñoz (1999, 4-5) theorizes, disidentification is not a rejection of public discourse but a remaking of it — a strategy for "survival for the subordinated" through partial engagement and radical reconfiguration.

The queer feminist letters — "My letter to Igballe Rogova" and "Love beyond borders" — exemplify this practice. These are not mere testimonials; they are interventions that mobilize intimacy as a form of political critique. In the former, Rogova is not simply invoked as a national feminist icon but reframed as a symbolic interlocutor in queer resistance, disrupting

the heteronormative terms through which feminist legacies are often remembered (Dylberizm 2023b). The letter foregrounds the systemic marginalization of lesbian subjectivities — scattered across heteronational states that claim to represent them but in fact silence them. Here, memory functions as what Foucault (2007) might call a counter-memory: a resistant reactivation of suppressed histories and identities.

Likewise, “Love beyond borders” collapses the binary between private feeling and public discourse. The author's assertion — “Our bodies are political. Our sexuality is political whether we want it or not.” (Dylberizm 2023a) — enacts what Berlant and Warner (1998, 561) call a queer world-making project, in which the affective textures of queer life (grief, desire, vulnerability) become the foundation for collective political imaginaries. The letter defies the sanitized scripts often required by donor-driven or conservative media contexts, embracing instead a raw, confessional, and insurgent mode of address. This disrupts the normative temporality of nationalist belonging, where political legibility is contingent on heteronormative intimacy and decorum.

The Chronicle, then, is not merely an archive of exclusion but a site of queer cultural production that insists on the legitimacy of unruly affects and dissonant voices. In Berlant and Warner’s (1998) terms, it embodies the radical work of counterpublic formation: challenging the hegemony of the heterosexual couple as the organizing principle of social and sexual life. The texts’ unapologetic tone — whether confessional, erotic, furious, or mournful — rejects the pressure to be respectable or palatable. In doing so, the Chronicle makes clear that queer survival is not just about visibility, but about claiming space for the full range of queer affect — including what is messy, explicit, and politically inconvenient.

By offering not only historicized biographies but also love letters, artistic reflections, and personal testimonies, The Chronicle performs what Berlant and Warner (1998) describe as

"transgressive worldmaking" — the deliberate foregrounding of queer modes of intimacy, affect, and desire that dominant culture renders indecorous. This is not incidental. As Warner (2002, 57) argues, "the discourse that constitutes [a counterpublic]... in other contexts would be regarded with hostility or with a sense of indecorousness." The power of the Chronicle lies in exactly this: its refusal to translate queer life into the sanitized terms of mainstream respectability. Instead, it reclaims the very textures of queer existence — desire, grief, disidentification — as constitutive of national memory and political futurity.

3.4 Performing the Nation Otherwise: Drag, Tradition, and Cultural Reclamation

Building on these discursive strategies, queer activists in Kosovo also resist heteronormativity by reclaiming and resignifying the very cultural rituals most associated with its reproduction. Rather than positioning queerness as external to national tradition, artists and performers at the Prishtina Queer Festival challenged that binary, enacting a version of Albanian culture that centers queer life without disavowing its symbolic forms.

In Ilir Hasanaj's documentary, screened during the festival, a young woman articulates this complex relationship: "I really like marriage as a concept, especially the Albanian, traditional one… they're patriarchal, so it feels like a guilty pleasure to enjoy it." (Dylberizm 2023d, "Krijuesit nga Prishtina"). Her reflection captures a central tension experienced by many queer individuals — the emotional attachment to cultural practices saturated with heteronormative values, and the simultaneous guilt or alienation in desiring them. From a discourse-analytic perspective, this moment underscores what Foucault describes as the emotional and discursive contradictions that arise when one's desires are formed within normative systems of power (Foucault 1972, 50–55).

Rather than resolve this contradiction through rejection, the festival's opening performance embraced it as a site of resistance. Qerkica, a transgender Ashkali woman and prominent

activist, led a reimagined wedding ceremony that centered queer experience through the very aesthetics of tradition (Dylberizm 2023d, “Krijuesit nga Prishtina”). Performing Albanian folk songs typically sung at heterosexual weddings, and joined by drag artists dressed in traditional bridal clothing — white skirts, embroidered vests, dimija — Qerkica transformed a familiar ritual into a celebration of queer community. The rhythmic beat of the def (tambourine) conjured the sonic memory of weddings past, yet now animated a radically different social imaginary. This act exemplifies the resignification of cultural codes — not through ironic detachment, but through affective and embodied transformation, a process that aligns with Fraser’s theory of counterpublics reclaiming cultural space from differential positions (Fraser 1990, 67).

From a critical discourse perspective, this moment exemplified what Fraser (1990) describes as discursive resignification: the reinterpretation of dominant cultural forms by those historically excluded from their symbolic structure. Rather than rejecting national traditions outright, the performers and organizers inhabited them differently, transforming rituals of heteronormative union into affirmations of queer presence. In this context, national dress, folk instruments, and wedding songs are not merely decorative — they become semiotic tools for disrupting the boundaries of belonging.

Qerkica’s presence further deepens this intervention. As a transgender woman from the Ashkali community, she embodies a form of visibility that challenges not only heteronormativity but also ethnic marginalization and class-based exclusion. Her leading role in the performance underscores the intersectional nature of queer activism in Kosovo, demonstrating that counterpublics are not homogeneous but formed through overlapping identities and experiences of precarity. This layering of identities — gender, ethnicity, class — speaks directly to Fraser’s understanding of subaltern counterpublics, in which marginalized groups articulate new discourses precisely from their differential positions (Fraser 1990, 67).

The performance also enacted what Warner (2002) terms poetic world-making: the creation of counterpublics not simply through critique, but through the imaginative and affective construction of new forms of social life (Warner 2002, 114). Here, the staging of a queer wedding celebration, rooted in traditional form but radically queered, offers a vision of belonging that is both culturally legible and radically inclusive. The celebration's tone — described as festive and gazmore — makes space for pleasure, humor, and collectivity. In Berlant and Warner's (1998, 558) terms, this was also an affective counterpublic, one in which joy and shared emotion function as political resistance.

These performances were not isolated symbolic gestures. They were situated within a broader effort to reinsert queer and trans lives into Kosovo's cultural and historical consciousness. During a presentation at the National Library, Lura Limani emphasized that "there is no history or knowledge of what it means to be and live as a transgender person in Kosovo" — not because such lives never existed, but because they have been systematically erased from institutional memory (Dylberizm 2023d, "Krijuesit nga Prishtina"). The festival, then, functioned as a form of counterpublic historiography: making visible that which has been rendered invisible, and expanding the limits of what national culture can contain. This aligns with Foucault's (1972) notion that historical knowledge is shaped by systems of power that determine which narratives are preserved and which are silenced (27–30).

In reappropriating rituals historically tied to heteronormative reproduction, the Prishtina Queer Festival did not merely critique dominant narratives — it remade them. It staged a Kosovo in which queer life is not only possible, but culturally legible and historically rooted. By performing the nation otherwise, queer activists disrupted the very terms of national belonging and insisted on their place within it.

Chapter 4. Creating Alternative Spaces

4.1 Share Your Story: Narratives as Counterpublic Discourse and Alternative Space

The Ndaje Storien Tone (Share your story) initiative by Dylberizm functions as a distinctly queer counterpublic — a mediated and affective space where marginalized voices intervene in dominant narratives through personal storytelling (Dylberizm n.d., "Storie"). Drawing from Michael Warner's (2002) concept of counterpublics as discursive arenas formed in opposition to a dominant public, "Share your story" exemplifies how personal narrative becomes political resistance and an act of world-making. The stories collected and shared through this initiative are not simply expressions of identity; they are performative disruptions of heteronormative hegemony in Kosovo's social and political spheres.

During our interview, Sokoli emphasized that the platform emerged from a critical absence: "the absence of an overreaching queer space or platform for all LGBTQ+ people in Kosovo." The existing queer spaces, he explained, are concentrated in the capital, Prishtina, excluding those in smaller cities and rural areas. Share your story was born out of a collective need — "a need to express our lives, to release what we were carrying, to tell each other how we live." Through discourse, the platform sought to decentralize queer existence and push back against the urban-rural divide that shapes access to visibility, safety, and community (Dylberizm n.d., "Storie").

Importantly, "Share your story" also contests spatialized assumptions about where and how queer people exist. As Sokoli emphasized in the interview, one of the aims was to counter the reductive idea that queerness in Kosovo is confined to "gatherings, pride parades, or specific safe cafes or pubs." In his words, "…we're also people who work in public positions, who work the land, who are involved in culture, agriculture, and so much more." This statement unsettles dominant spatial imaginaries of queerness as urban, elitist, or subcultural by asserting the

everyday presence of queer people across diverse sectors and geographies — from rural fields to state institutions.

This discursive move expands the contours of the queer counterpublic by refusing both invisibility and confinement. It also speaks directly to Fraser's (1990) critique of the "public sphere" as one that historically marginalizes subaltern voices. Rather than appealing to the dominant public for recognition, "Share your story" creates a space where queer life is not exceptional but integrated — grounded in labor, culture, and the ordinary. The initiative thus becomes a space not only for expression but for rearticulation — challenging hegemonic representations and reclaiming social subjectivity on queer terms. In doing so, Dylberizm's project reframes queerness from a spectacle of visibility (as in Pride) to a lived presence — dispersed, rooted, and political in its mere endurance.

From a Foucauldian perspective, this initiative can be understood as a site where power/knowledge relations are actively contested and reconfigured. By centering personal storytelling, "Share your story" destabilizes dominant regimes of truth that have historically defined queer existence in Kosovo through silence or stigma (Dylberizm n.d., "Storie"). The act of narrating queer lives constitutes a counter-discursive practice that refuses the disciplining gaze of normative institutions — medical, legal, social — which have controlled and marginalized queer bodies and identities. The platform becomes a space where subjugated knowledges emerge, revealing alternative genealogies of queer experience that resist the "regimes of truth" that sustain heteronormativity and nationalistic moral orders (Foucault 2007, 81).

The stories shared span a wide spectrum of queer experience: "from street harassment, parental abuse, and school bullying, to secret kisses in high school bathrooms, coming out to friends and family, and intimate encounters." (Dylberizm n.d., "Storie"). These narratives constitute a

queer epistemology — a knowledge practice grounded in embodied experience and affective truth. The recurring affirmation that "the existence of every queer person is resistance" frames queerness not just as an identity, but as an oppositional mode of being that defies silencing, marginalization, and erasure.

Crucially, the discourse here positions storytelling itself as an act of resistance. Unlike traditional activist interventions that rely on visibility politics through protest or lobbying, "Share your story" enacts resistance through intimate vulnerability. Sokoli emphasized that stories are published "exactly as received," saving authenticity and honoring the storyteller's voice without modification. Importantly, the stories preserve the Kosovar dialect, slang, and informal linguistic registers through which everyday queer life is lived and expressed. This choice refuses the standardization or sanitization of queer voices, asserting instead that local language — often devalued or dismissed — is itself a site of resistance and authenticity. The platform, therefore, redefines legibility — allowing stories to exist on their own terms, without needing to conform to dominant norms of coherence, trauma, or respectability.

Moreover, the spontaneous and organic growth of the initiative — "we made one call and stories just kept coming" — reveals the latent need for such a counterpublic (Sokoli 2025). As queer people across Kosovo, Albania, and the diaspora responded, a distributed network of affective solidarity emerged. Online comment threads became sites of recognition: "Hey, I'm going through the same thing," users wrote. These micro-interactions not only generated relationality but began to constitute an alternative space of belonging — one that transcends geographic and social isolation.

"Share your story" also explicitly frames itself as a safe space — a discursive strategy that asserts the existence of queer community despite its marginalization. In doing so, it challenges the dominant discourse that renders queerness invisible or pathological in many Albanian-

speaking contexts. The invitation to submit stories in Albanian, and the publication of stories from across Kosovo, Albania, and the diaspora, constructs a translocal queer counterpublic rooted in shared language, affect, and resistance.

While the platform's primary function is storytelling, its broader sociopolitical significance lies in the way it remaps the terrain of queer existence. It blurs the line between the private and the political, the intimate and the collective. In a society where queerness is often relegated to silence or subtext, Share your story offers not only a voice, but a chorus — one that reshapes what it means to be queer, visible, and connected in Kosovo and beyond.

The publication of "Stories of Resistance", a printed volume compiling personal narratives from the "Share your story" initiative, marks a significant transition from digital counterpublic to a more publicly institutionalized queer presence in Kosovo's cultural sphere. What began in 2018 as an Instagram-based storytelling project has evolved into a printed archive of queer experience, signaling not only the durability of the platform but also the political weight of narrative accumulation. As Dylberizm (2024, "Storie Të Rezistencës") describes it: "a response to the need to show the daily experiences of queer people, to not deny our collective existence, writing with great pride about who we are, as we are."

The publication of these stories — now reframed as "stories of resistance" — materializes what Warner (2002) describes as the circulation of counterpublic discourse: ephemeral affective exchanges solidify into texts, artifacts, and cultural memory. In a context where queer lives are routinely erased or marginalized, the decision to print these stories and present them at a public institution — the National Museum of Kosovo — marks a radical occupation of space. It shifts queer discourse from the margins of social media into the symbolic center of national culture. The very act of inviting the public to engage with these narratives in the Lapidarium — a space

often reserved for historical memory — reclaims history for those whose lives are frequently deemed ahistorical, apolitical, or private.

Furthermore, the framing of the book as a "tribute to all queer lives that resist oppression in every corner of society" reinforces the project's ideological grounding in resistance and inclusivity (Dylberizm 2024, "Storie Të Rezistencës"). It emphasizes not only the diversity of queer experiences — from self-discovery to love, from the "usual to the unusual" — but also the right of queer people to narrate their lives on their own terms, through their own language and epistemologies.

This move from digital intimacy to printed permanence demonstrates how queer counterpublics can evolve: from transient, affective communities into enduring cultural and political interventions. Share your story thus becomes more than a platform — it is an alternative archive, a mode of public-making that resists erasure and challenges heteronormative boundaries of visibility, memory, and legitimacy.

4.2 Prishtina Queer Festival as a Discursive and Spatial World-Making

4.2.1 Stranger Intimacies and Queer Relationality at the Prishtina Queer Festival

PQF is an embodiment of queer counterpublics in action, challenging both hegemonic structures of national belonging and the private sphere of intimacy. In framing the PQF within the theoretical scope of counterpublics as outlined by Warner (2002), it becomes clear that the festival functions as an alternative space where queer and non-queer subjects converge, establish relational bonds, and imagine new possibilities for collective existence. As Warner states, counterpublics "fashion their own subjectivities around the requirements of public circulation and stranger sociability" (2002, 121), and this is precisely what PQF achieves: the festival carves out a public space for strangers to encounter each other, where shared vulnerability and solidarity are performed and lived.

The festival's public discourse frames this relationality as intentional and transgressive. "The festival became a meeting point for queer identities, fostering unity through the showcase of art, music, and activism," states one of its reflective summaries (Dylberizm 2025). What is critical here is the reframing of "unity" — not as sameness or shared origin, but as the temporary and affective cohesion of strangers who may not share kinship, language, or nationhood, but who align in desire, vulnerability, and refusal. The event becomes what Warner would call an intimate public, where strangers recognize each other through shared marginality and queer affect.

The phrase "a place for us", used by Dylberizm in describing the festival, signals both exclusion from dominant public space and the creation of alternative belonging. "Us" here is not a nationally circumscribed collectivity but a queer one: dynamic, diasporic, and resistant to fixed identity categories. This articulation is particularly important in the Kosovar context, where national belonging is tightly bound to heteronormative scripts of family, masculinity, and reproductive futurism. The PQF contests these associations by curating a space in which queerness is not merely tolerated but celebrated as central to cultural life.

This reimagination of belonging is also geographic and transnational. As the organizers explain, "Prishtina Queer Festival welcomed over 3,000 visitors from Kosovo, the region, the diaspora, and the EU." (Dylberizm 2025). The festival is thus not only a local intervention but a nodal point in a transnational queer counterpublic, wherein individuals and collectives who are often isolated in their respective contexts come together in shared acts of witnessing, celebration, and resistance. "Prishtina Queer Festival welcomed queer Albanian diaspora artists to perform in Kosovo for the first time, creating a space for connection, healing, and celebration." This quote emphasizes not just visibility but the therapeutic and reparative dimensions of such visibility — a recognition that queer trauma is often spatially and historically dislocated, and that festivals like PQF offer moments of collective reconstitution.

The festival's role in the distribution of intimacy (Race 2015) is central to its operation as a queer counterpublic. Rather than adhering to the privatized, individualistic forms of intimacy that are often associated with heteronormative relationships, the PQF opens up intimate spaces for collective engagement. Through the exhibition of queer art and film, for instance, the festival facilitates a form of public intimacy that disrupts conventional divisions between private and public spheres. As one of the festival's organizers notes, "It became a meeting point for queer identities, fostering unity through the showcase of art, music, and activism." (Dylberizm 2025). This public intimacy is not restricted by conventional notions of family or kinship but is instead rooted in shared queer experiences, emotions, and cultural production.

Further, PQF challenges the idea of intimacy as something that must be confined to national or ethnic boundaries. In the words of journalist Noor Evers, the festival's events — from art performances to film screenings — demonstrate that it is possible to be both queer and culturally connected to one's heritage: "Prishtina Queer Festival presented films, discussions, and art performances that show that actually, it's entirely possible to be dylber (queer) and embody one's culture and heritage." (Dylberizm 2025). This reframing of culture and heritage through a queer lens serves as a direct challenge to nationalistic and heteronormative ideologies that often seek to displace or erase queer cultural expressions. By hosting Albanian diaspora artists and providing a platform for cultural dialogue, the PQF insists on the possibility of queer cultural production that does not require assimilation into dominant national or ethnic narratives.

The PQF's impact is not confined to local boundaries but extends into the transnational, demonstrating the porous nature of queer counterpublics. As the festival expands its reach, it engages new audiences across Europe, from Zurich to Tirana, with queer artists making their international debuts at solidarity events. As one statement from the festival's organizers puts it: "Prishtina Queer Festival extended Kosovo's queer culture beyond Prishtina, reaching new

audiences in Tirana, Zurich, and Lisbon." (Dylberizm 2025) This transnational outreach is crucial to the festival's operation as a queer counterpublic. It is not merely about expanding the festival's brand but about building a global network of queer solidarity and artistic expression. Here, the PQF demonstrates its capacity to form a queer infrastructure that transcends national borders, creating networks of connection and resistance.

Through its programming, PQF embraces the concept of transformative circulation, a key feature of counterpublics as described by Warner (2002). He notes that counterpublics are not static but dynamic spaces in which "the poesis of scenemaking will be transformative, not replicative merely" (122). PQF's integration of film screenings, performances, and workshops enables a discursive engagement that allows participants — both queer and heterosexual — to critically interrogate queer images and narratives. The screening of films and the discussions that followed provided an opportunity for transformative encounters, facilitating exchanges between queer and non-queer participants and offering a space where different conceptions of intimacy, culture, and belonging could be articulated and debated.

In addition to its transformative function, PQF also operates as a space for the collective re-distribution of intimacy. The festival's deliberate focus on public visibility through diverse artistic forms directly challenges the privatization of intimacy, which is often linked to heteronormative frameworks that emphasize personal, familial, and national sovereignty. As Race (2015) points out, the privatization of intimacy has been historically used to regulate sexual practices and desires, funneling them into spaces of privatized personhood. PQF pushes back against this model by creating a public space where intimacy is shared, not hidden, and where queer individuals can publicly affirm their identities without the constraints imposed by heteronormativity.

Ultimately, the PQF's operation as a queer counterpublic creates new forms of kinship, intimacy, and social connectivity. By rejecting the logic of privatized intimacy and instead emphasizing public performances of solidarity, the festival provides a powerful model for how queer communities can create spaces of belonging that are not reliant on normative or nationalized definitions of identity. It is through these forms of stranger sociability that PQF allows for the creation of alternative spaces where intimacy, resistance, and solidarity are not only possible but actively performed and made visible.

4.2.2 Discursive Space-Making in the Prishtina Queer Festival: Symbolism, Narrative, and Visibility

The Space Expanse campaign, launched as part of the Prishtina Queer Festival, exemplifies how queer activists in Kosovo do not merely seek inclusion within existing public spaces but actively reshape and reimagine those spaces through strategic language, affect, and performance. The campaign's manifesto operates as both a poetic intervention and a political declaration — transforming public discourse into a space of queer world-making.

The text opens with a refusal: "We've had enough of hearing absurd requests from others — to keep our love hidden..." (Dylberizm 2023c, "Space Expanse"). This line immediately situates queer love as not simply invisible but actively suppressed by heteronormative demands. It exposes the social and spatial constraints placed on queer life — what Warner (2002) identifies as the condition of counterpublics: the continual negotiation with dominant norms that misrecognize themselves as universal. In such a context, counterpublics do not only emerge in opposition but are driven by the need to invent new modes of being, visibility, and belonging.

In Space Expanse, space becomes both metaphor and material condition — a demand for discursive and embodied presence in a national imaginary that has long excluded queer

subjectivities. The repetition of spatial metaphors — ngushtu (narrowed), tkurrë (shrunk), hapësinë (space), dollap (closet) — indexes the violence of heteronormative compression and the yearning for liberation (Dylberizm 2023c, “Space Expanse”). These words evoke what Warner describes as “scene making” — the deliberate construction of counterpublic lifeworlds that imagine stranger sociability in alternative terms (2002, 88).

This linguistic resistance reaches its crescendo in the statement:

“We don’t intend to stay in the closet anymore. We’ve emptied the closets and are bringing ourselves out."

Here, the familiar global metaphor of “the closet” is localized and pluralized. “Closets” become material and symbolic spaces of collective containment, and the verb “to empty” signifies not only personal revelation but a radical expulsion — a purging of internalized oppression and social erasure. Coming out is no longer an individual act of confession, but a shared political project of spatial transformation. This aligns with Giwa and Greensmith’s (2012) and Ware’s (2010) observations that the queer community is often excluded from dominant publics or granted only conditional membership. In response, Space Expanse articulates a refusal to remain provisional. Its linguistic field does not seek mere tolerance or inclusion — it demands occupation and redefinition. This is not about asking for space; it is about reclaiming it.

FDA helps us see how this refusal functions not just as resistance but as a new discursive formation — what Foucault would call a “dispositif” or apparatus that links language, knowledge, space, and the body (Foucault 2007). The festival becomes a space where bodies, affect, and discourse converge to produce new truths about queer life. Through the repetition and circulation of counter-discourses, Space Expanse breaks the monopoly of heteronormative national imaginaries and introduces alternative logics of belonging (Dylberizm 2023c).

“All the streets and spaces of this country are ours too. We belong here as well."

This statement refuses the logic of marginality. It does not negotiate for legitimacy but asserts ontological belonging. As Judith Butler (2015) argues, the act of bodies assembling — whether in public squares or through performative texts — is itself a political claim: a right to appear, to be recognized, and to be spatially integrated into the terrain of national life. In this sense, the Prishtina Queer Festival becomes more than an event; it becomes a counterpublic space where queer existence is both lived and staged as political action.

By centering the language of refusal and spatial reclamation, Space Expanse illustrates how Dylberizm constructs alternative queer spaces that challenge and reconfigure the normative architecture of public life in Kosovo. These are not spaces offered by the dominant public but claimed through counterpublic assertion — poetic, political, and embodied.

4.2.3 Material Space-Making in the Prishtina Queer Festival: Infrastructures of Belonging

PQF acts as a profound act of spatial resistance, queering urban spaces in ways that challenge the heteronormative geography of Kosovo. Queer counterpublics, as theorized by Berlant and Warner (1998), require the materialization of shared imaginaries—spaces where marginalized identities can gather, create, and resist the dominant public discourse. PQF's spatial interventions exemplify this, where queer presence disrupts and queers traditional spaces not necessarily designated as queer. As Oswin (2008) argues, spaces are never inherently "straight" or "queer" but are actively produced through social practices that often render them heteronormative. PQF's appropriation of cultural institutions like Kino Armata, Pallati i Kulturës, and Biblioteka Kombëtare turns these historically heterosexualized spaces into counterspaces, queering them through the actions and presence of queer individuals.

By occupying these key sites of national culture, the PQF does not simply borrow space—it redefines it. These spaces, from cultural venues to libraries, are typically organized to privilege certain bodies and cultural narratives. As Ahmed (2006) highlights, spaces are structured to

favor certain bodies—heteronormative, white, and able-bodied—and queer bodies often experience a disorienting estrangement in such spaces. The PQF reorients these sites by inserting queer bodies into the national cultural narrative, offering a spatial disruption that makes visible a queer counterpublic. In doing so, it shifts the dominant spatial orientation of Kosovo, offering an embodied challenge to the state's heteronormative infrastructure.

This spatial reorientation, through a Foucauldian lens, is not merely symbolic—it is a material contestation of biopolitical control. As Foucault (1977) details in Discipline and Punish, public institutions play a central role in the normalization and surveillance of bodies. By placing queer bodies and narratives at the heart of these institutions, PQF subverts their disciplinary function and enacts a counter-conduct—one that resists the normalization of heterosexuality as the invisible center.

The PQF's activities, such as drag performances, queer cinema screenings, and cultural panels, are not just symbolic gestures but deeply political acts that reorient the space they occupy. The festival's use of everyday objects—such as rainbow flags, queer art, and performance props—plays a crucial role in this reorientation. These objects, which might seem mundane in their ordinary contexts, acquire new political significance within the PQF. They are not only aesthetic but material forms of resistance, helping to transform institutional spaces into places that affirm and support queer expressions. In a sense, these objects disrupt the normative expectations embodied by the spaces, signaling a new direction for cultural and social orientation.

By queering these spaces, PQF participates in a broader practice of activism where visibility and presence are acts of political resistance. The festival's engagements with institutional spaces that are not traditionally associated with queerness—such as the Biblioteka Kombëtare, a symbol of knowledge and national memory—transform them into spaces where previously

silenced or invisible queer histories and experiences are brought to the forefront. This aligns with the notion of counterpublics, where spaces are created for collective expression and resistance, offering a platform for queer individuals to assert their existence against the backdrop of dominant political discourses.

As Binnie and Klesse (2007) argue, queer film festivals and other similar cultural interventions provide a crucial space for embodied political action, where LGBTIQ+ people publicly demonstrate their existence as a political statement. PQF's spatial interventions are therefore not just a celebration of queer identity but a necessary, active disruption of the heteronormative status quo. By claiming these public spaces—historically coded as heteronormative—the festival reimagines what these spaces are for and who can inhabit them.

Ultimately, PQF's spatial disobedience highlights how queer bodies and objects can reorient and redefine public space. Through these material and embodied practices, the festival transforms traditional, state-sanctioned spaces into sites of political resistance and affirmation, queering not only the physical space but also the broader social order. It is within these contested spaces, where heteronormative power dynamics are both challenged and redefined, that queer counterpublics materialize and assert their place in the national conversation.

Conclusion

To say “edhe shqiptar edhe dylber”—to claim oneself as both Albanian and queer—is more than a declaration of identity. It is an act of resistance, a refusal of erasure, and a radical redefinition of national belonging. This thesis has explored how LGBTQ+ activism in Kosovo, particularly through the work of Dylberizm, challenges entrenched heteronormative narratives that position queerness as incompatible with the nation. Rather than seeking simple inclusion into existing structures, queer activists construct counterpublics—cultural, discursive, and spatial arenas—where they reclaim suppressed histories, perform alternative traditions, and assert their presence as central to, not outside of, Kosovar identity.

Guided by the theoretical framework of counterpublics, as articulated by Nancy Fraser and Michael Warner, and grounded in Foucauldian discourse analysis, this study traced the ways queer activists resist heteronormative nation-making and cultivate spaces where alternative forms of community, memory, and identity can flourish. Heteronormativity in Kosovo operates not only through legal exclusions or social stigma—it is encoded in cultural narratives, historical silence, spatial arrangements, and the very grammar of national discourse. The activism explored here does not simply confront this system; it reconfigures it.

A central focus of this research has been on resistance—how queer activists in Kosovo confront and disrupt the heteronormative foundations of national identity. Through the reappropriation of the term dylber, Dylberizm challenges the framing of queerness as foreign or incompatible with Albanian culture. This act is not nostalgic, but political: a reclaiming of erased language to assert historical continuity and presence. Resistance also emerges through storytelling, where essays, oral histories, and digital narratives serve as tools of counter-memory. These interventions destabilize national myths and expose heterosexuality as a constructed norm tied to morality and tradition. Informed by Foucault, this analysis reveals how such discourses

operate as disciplinary power, and how activists reframe queerness not as deviation but as knowledge rooted in survival, intimacy, and historical presence.

Equally important is the creation of alternative spaces—discursive, symbolic, and embodied realms where heteronormativity is not only challenged but made irrelevant. Projects like "Share Your Story" invite queer Kosovars and diaspora voices to narrate experiences in colloquial Albanian, mapping a queer presence across cities, villages, and borders. The Prishtina Queer Festival similarly queers space through ritual and performance, generating its own symbols, ceremonies, and aesthetics of belonging. These acts reflect Warner's notion of counterpublics as performative and affective, illustrating that queer activism in Kosovo is not only oppositional but deeply imaginative and world-making.

This approach also has implications for how we understand the role of sexuality in international relations. As queer international theorists argue, states often regulate and weaponize sexuality to project power, signal modernity, or assert legitimacy. In Kosovo, LGBTQ+ rights have been instrumentalized in this way—framed as requirements for EU accession or signs of democratic progress. But as this thesis shows, activists are not merely reacting to geopolitical pressures. They are making claims based on their own histories, communities, and cultural imaginaries. By examining these local, grassroots interventions, the thesis contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how nationalism and queer resistance interact—and how activism challenges both domestic and global structures of power.

That said, this research has several limitations. While the case study of Dylberizm provided a rich and multifaceted example of queer counterpublic formation, it cannot fully represent the diverse spectrum of queer experiences in Kosovo. Rural queer voices, trans and non-binary activists, Roma LGBTQ+ individuals, and those disconnected from formal activism were not adequately included in the data set. Moreover, the focus on digital discourse and curated events,

while illuminating, leaves out more informal, everyday acts of resistance that also shape queer life.

Additionally, the temporal scope of the research is relatively narrow, focused on recent years and specific moments of activism. A longitudinal approach could provide deeper insight into how counterpublics evolve over time, especially in response to political backlash, co-optation, or generational shifts within the queer community. Future research could also examine how queer resistance in Kosovo interacts with other movements—feminist, anti-capitalist, or decolonial—to build broader coalitions of transformative politics.

Ultimately, this thesis has sought to make one thing clear: that queer activism in Kosovo is not simply about inclusion—it is about redefinition. It does not ask the nation for tolerance; it demands that the nation account for the lives it has tried to erase. It does not seek to mimic heterosexual norms; it imagines something freer, stranger, and more expansive. To be dylber in Kosovo today is to stand at the fault lines of tradition and transformation. It is to say: we exist, we resist, and we belong—not in spite of who we are, but because of it.

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