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## Goran Petrović Lotina in Dialogue with Francesco Della Puppa, Susanne Franco, and Aneta Stojnić: Performances of Identification in the Age of Polarization. Bodies, Affects, Symbols<sup>1</sup>

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Goran: This introductory chapter is structured as a conversation, which I would like to open with a brief overview of the notion of identification, situating it within the shifting landscape of contemporary politics, psychoanalytic political theory, performance studies, and the question of identity.

Over the past decade, far-right politics have been steadily gaining ground across the world. What once seemed like isolated national developments now appears as part of a broader global

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trend. From Hungary and Italy to Belgium, Sweden, Poland, France, and Romania, alongside countries like Israel, the United States, and Argentina, these movements have secured increasing influence in both electoral and public spheres. Their rise is not sudden. It has been shaped by a longer sequence of political and social transformations. In Europe, for example, several turning points have marked this shift: the EU enlargements of 2004 and 2007; the sovereign debt crisis of 2009-2018; the politicisation of immigration from 2015 onward; the COVID-19 pandemic between 2019 and 2023; the energy and security crisis following the escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian war since 2022; and, more recently, the Israeli war on Palestine (7 October 2023). Although these developments differed in character, they collectively intensified disputes over mobility, borders, labour, protection, and national sovereignty, thereby deepening social insecurity, sharpening political polarisation, and reinforcing widespread perceptions of instability.

Far-right parties have positioned themselves as the voice of this discontent, claiming to offer protection in a world perceived as increasingly insecure, unstable, and marked by overlapping crises and threats. Crucially, they have made skilful use of identity politics. Originally emerging from emancipatory struggles, such as the civil rights movement, feminist and queer liberation, and postcolonial resistance, identity politics seeks to foreground the lived experiences and political demands of subordinated groups, whether people of colour, women, LGBTQIA+ individuals, or immigrants (Combahee River Collective 1977, Lorde 1984, hooks 1990). Central to these struggles is the understanding of identity not as an isolate experience, but as intersectional, constructed at the crossing of gender, race, class, and other structures of power, marginalization, and exclusion (Crenshaw 1991). Identity politics aims to make visible how these intersecting categories of discrimination – such as sexism, racism, and classism, as well as exclusions tied to gender, ability, or migration status – shape and limit one's identity and access to rights, recognition, and resources on multiple levels (Crenshaw 1991, Collins 2000). This perspective implies that the struggles led by women confronting gender-based violence, or racialized groups challenging systemic discrimination, or workers resisting exploitation, are not exclusively responding to the concerns of their particular in-group; rather, they contest broader interlocking structures of domination, such as colonialism, patriarchy, capitalism, and extractivism, that co-constitute and constrain diverse groups at the same time, thereby foregrounding the shared terrain of emancipatory struggle that exceeds any single identity. This view indicates that the struggles of various identities against discriminating politics entail the articulation of “ethico-political values” shared among diverse groups through the process of identification – a performative process of forming alliances based on collective principles, demands, and exclusions (Mouffe [1993]: 83-84). The challenge, then, is not to reject identity altogether, but to rearticulate

it within a democratic framework that acknowledges the plural and intersecting positions through which subjects are embodied, enacted, and performed.

Far-right movements have appropriated the language and mechanisms of identity politics, however, by inverting its original aims. Instead of embracing the plurality and intersectionality that defined its emancipatory origins, they rearticulate identity through an antagonistic logic that defines belonging in opposition to a constructed “other”, reinforcing conflict through enmity. Multiculturalism, gender equality, LGBTQAI+ rights, and anti-racism are reframed not as advances in social justice and democracy, but as threats to a traditional, often heteronormative, family driven, and monocultural social order. Through this inversion, European far-right actors construct a nostalgic and idealized image of national identity, often rooted in whiteness, patriarchy, and cultural homogeneity. More importantly, while far-right movements, including right-wing populism, often present identity as fixed and essential, anchored in race, nation, traditional family, or religion, their popular appeal does not rest on these categories alone, but rather on the group process of *identification*. By mobilizing stigmata of otherness such as colour, name, language, religious practice, or even environmentalist beliefs, they cultivate the sense of identification among the people around discourses centred on a singular, monocultural concept of nativist identity. This type of group identification in constructing subjectivity manifests through different affective, symbolic, and performative ties that legitimise gender-based discrimination, xenophobia, cultural racism, neo-imperial violence, and ecophobia, as self-preservative, defensive mechanisms. Consequently, all discontent with the security situation, whether in Europe or elsewhere, becomes embodied in the twin movements of in-group identification and, simultaneously, disidentification from the other.

This raises a crucial question at the heart of this volume: *how can we envisage alternative forms of identification that foster a pluralistic, intercultural, and cosmopolitan sense of belonging that contests antagonistic conflicts of the right?*

Addressing this question requires a deeper understanding of *identification* as a central mechanism in the construction of subjectivity, one that relies on three interrelated dimensions: the symbolic, the affective, and the performative.

### *Identification at the intersection of psychoanalytic, political, and embodied registers*

In broad psychoanalytic terms, identification can be understood as involving symbolic, affective, and bodily ties with another person or group, as individuals internalize meanings and ideals, form emotional attachments, and incorporate and display these relations in embodied ways.

For Sigmund Freud ([1921] 1959), identification is a libidinal bond that arises through *conflict*. In the Oedipal phase – typically occurring between the ages of three and six – the child identifies with the father both as a rival who blocks access to the mother and as a model to emulate and eventually replace. Through this process, the ego gradually takes shape as a composite of internalized loves and rivalries, organizing desire and aggression. This psychic dynamic extends to the social field, where shared identification with an idealized leader binds the group together while producing hostility toward those excluded. Melanie Klein ([1955] 1975) relocates identification to earliest infancy, showing how projection and introjection mediate love and hate toward the maternal object, producing *ambivalence* that grounds later emotional life. For Klein, the ego is present from birth as precarious and conflictual, developing through a continual oscillation between destructive and reparative impulses. She thus retains the Oedipal complex, but radically repositions it in early infancy, arguing that Oedipal anxieties and rivalries are already active in pre-Oedipal phantasies and only later assume their classical triangular form: child, mother, and father.<sup>2</sup> For Jacques Lacan ([1949] 2003), identification operates across two registers, the Imaginary and the Symbolic. The ego is formed through imaginary identification in the mirror stage – typically occurring between the months of six and eighteen – as a misrecognized unity, while symbolic identification – typically occurring between the ages of two and four – consolidated though the Oedipal complex, positions the subject within language and law (the Name-of-the-father). Yet this symbolic order is traversed by *jouissance*, a surplus enjoyment produced at its limits, which resists symbolization and *destabilizes* both ego coherence and subjective identity. Extending these dynamics, Frantz Fanon ([1952] 1967) theorises identification under colonial conditions as a coerced, racialised attachment to the white norm. In this view, the ego is not primarily organised through the Oedipal “family romance”, but is formed through the violent encounter with the white gaze and the demand to “become” the ideal imposed by the colonial symbolic order, producing a split, alienated, and bodily overdetermined self (Fanon [1952] 1967). Politically, this makes identification a terrain of *struggle*, where emancipation requires practices of disidentification from the colonial ideal and the creation of new collective forms of agency capable of undoing the colonial order that produced the ego’s fracture (Fanon [1961] 1963). Julia Kristeva (1974; 1982) situates identification within the *tension* between the symbolic order of language and law and the semiotic i.e. the corporeal register of drives, rhythms, tones, and archaic affects rooted in the pre-Oedipal relation to the maternal and crystallized

2 The distinction between “phantasy” and “fantasy” belongs mainly to the Kleinian tradition, where “phantasy” names unconscious psychic activity; by contrast, Lacan and Žižek use “fantasy” for the structuring scene of desire and ideological investment.

in experiences of abjection. For her, the ego is not merely symbolic and affective, but corporeally grounded, continually reconfigured through abjection. Abjection is the process of expulsion and incorporation through which the subject casts off what it cannot assimilate, yet remains bound to it, thereby marking the boundary between self and other (Kristeva [1982]: 1-31). In these border crises, the semiotic “expenditure” of signifying energy can yield moments of *jouissance*, an excessive intensity accompanying the loosening of symbolic constraints and making felt, in and through the body, the fragile limits of the socio-symbolic (Kristeva [1974]: 79-81).

This partial, yet indicative sketch of the psychoanalysis’s development, reveals that identification is not merely an internal psychological mechanism, but a process mediated by loss, desire, projection, and the introjection of others into the self. Rather than positing a unified ego, it conceives subjectivity as a relational and contingent construction sustained through conflict, ambivalence, destabilization, struggle, and the continual tension between symbolic law and corporeal drives. Identification, thus, takes shape through a) structural inscription within *symbolic* and linguistic mediation, b) *affective* cathexis i.e. the libidinal investment of the ego in signifiers, figures, ideals, or others that simultaneously sustain and contest it, and c) *corporeal enactment* through bodily gestures and rhythmic repetitions. This, by extension, suggests that identification in the socio-political realm is twofold: it can foster life-affirming desires for connection, solidarity, and equality among members of an in-group, yet it can also mobilize jealousy, hostility, and envy through acts, actions, and interactions that exaggerate differences with neighbouring communities of (dis)similar cultures, a dynamic Freud famously termed the “narcissism of minor differences” (Freud 1930).

Some of these insights proved pivotal for thinkers of the *Frankfurt School*, such as Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who turned to Freud to critique the ways psychic life is entangled with domination. Marcuse (1955) reinterpreted repression and libidinal energies in relation to the possibility of social liberation, while Adorno and Horkheimer (1944) drew on psychoanalysis to analyse domination, conformity, and mass culture. Parallel to these Frankfurt interventions, thinkers associated with the *poststructuralist and post-foundational turn*, such as Michel Foucault (1976), Jean-François Lyotard (1974), and Jacques Derrida (1967, 1995), developed a critical framework for reconceptualizing subject formation beyond the stable, rational self.

Subsequently, these insights influenced the *post-Marxist, post-foundational thinkers* Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985), who reformulated psychoanalytic categories within a discursive framework of democratic politics encompassing languages, practices, and institutions. This approach enabled them to rethink identity, collective forms of identification, and democratic politics beyond essentialist notions of (class) identity. Political subjectivity, in their account,

emerges through hegemonic articulations, that is, chains of equivalence that unite diverse identities and demands around an empty signifier such as “the people”, or “nation”. As Laclau (2005) argues, “the force” of such signifiers is not reducible to meaning alone, but is sustained by *jouissance*, a libidinal investment that belongs to the order of affects (110-120).<sup>3</sup> This is to say that “the people” is not merely a symbolic placeholder that functions as a nodal point articulating a collective identity out of diverse identities, demands, and grievances; it is also a site of *jouissance*, where heterogeneous claims are, in Freudian terms, sublimated into a shared affective attachment to a joint political horizon. More importantly, since “the people” claims universality, it is both secured and destabilized by the exclusion of particular identities and demands that threaten its stability. Identification is, hence, a contingent construction of collective identity, produced through symbolic articulation and affective attachment, affirming *tension* as constitutive of the social space through an (*ant*)agonistic division between “the people” and “the elite”, or, between “the nation” and “the Other”, or in more general terms, between “us” and “them”. Consequently, Yannis Stavrakakis clarifies this point by insisting that identification always operates on two inseparable levels: the symbolic/discursive, where meanings are articulated, and the affective/libidinal, where enjoyment anchors these articulations. He writes that «the mobilization of symbolic resources must be coupled with affective investment grounded in the body» (Stavrakakis [2005], 76), to ensure that discursive articulations are not only meaningful but also libidinally anchored.

While Laclau understands *jouissance* as a discursively mediated affective investment that binds subjects to political signifiers, Slavoj Žižek (1989), a Lacanian neo-Marxist thinker, emphasizes its excessive and traumatic character, locating it in the Real as that which continually disrupts every symbolic attempt at closure. Drawing upon Lacan, he describes *jouissance* as a “stream” of libidinal energy, a bodily “substance” of incarnated enjoyment that both precedes symbolic mediation and continually returns to disrupt it. As he writes, the presence of *jouissance* «in the field of the signifier can be detected only through the holes and inconsistencies of this field, so the only possible signifier of enjoyment is the signifier of the lack in the Other, the signifier of its inconsistency» (Žižek [1989]: 137). This means that the big Other is itself structured around an impossible kernel, a central lack that no signifier can fully fill (137). Identification is thus a way subjects bind themselves to this inconsistency, by investing in fantasies that make the social appear whole. In other words, identification is not only organized around signifiers such as “the people” and “the nation”, but is also underpinned by a bodily surplus of *jouissance* that overflows discursive articulation and gives these signifiers their adhesive force. Crucially, Žižek ties

3 “The force” stands in contradiction to “the form”. See: Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 110.



this surplus to antagonism, asserting that society is constitutively split, and that *ideology* works by staging fantasies of a harmonious order that would overcome the split. Yet these fantasies inevitably fail, since *jouissance* returns in the figure of the Other whose excessive enjoyment is imagined as stealing, contaminating, or threatening “ours”. It is at this point, when the fantasmatic cover is traversed, that “going-through-the-fantasy” becomes correlative to identification with the *sinthome* – the subject’s singular knot of enjoyment that persists precisely where the Other is lacking and the symbolic cannot close (139). Politics, in this sense, is not just a hegemonic struggle over signifiers, but a confrontation with irreducible antagonism, the Real that no discourse can domesticate and that fantasy can only ever suture by staging an image of social wholeness.

While these theories demonstrate that libidinal investment is inseparable from the body, since psychic and political attachments are anchored in embodied intensities of drive, affect, and *jouissance*, it is with Julia Kristeva that the bodily, corporeal dimension of identification, and consequently its performative political implications, become more explicitly theorized. Since the semiotic and the symbolic are «two modalities [...] inseparable within the signifying process» (Kristeva [1974]: 24), one may argue, in a manner consistent with Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory, that the semiotic is not a pre-discursive essence, but a corporeal and affective modality of signification on which every symbolic formation depends even as it seeks to regulate it. When semiotic forces disrupt hegemonic discursive norms, that is, linguistic, practical, and institutional constraints, they reappear as reenactments of the signifying process itself. They take gestural, rhythmic, and vocal form, structurally available wherever language is embodied, whether in everyday, civic, or artistic practices. These repetitions expose the instability of meaning and the embodied tensions that sustain it. At such moments, these re-enactments generate an affective excess that may be understood as *jouissance*, a destabilizing *enjoyment* that both animates and threatens the coherence of the subject and the boundaries of the hegemonic socio-symbolic order. From this perspective, identity is continually secured and destabilized by bodily intensities that are both necessary and repellent, generating dynamics of attraction and rejection organised through abjection and capable of taking both antagonistic and agonistic forms. Extending this insight to political signifiers, terms such as “nation” or “people” can be understood not only as discursive constructs sustained by *jouissance*, but also as what I termed “performances of tension” or “choreographies of (ant)agonism” in *Choreographing Agonism* (Petrovic Lotina, 2021), here reconsidered through the corporeal dynamics of abjection, whereby what is excluded and repellent returns as threatening otherness and unsettles the unity these signifiers claim to secure. Kristeva’s work can thus, I would suggest, be read as offering a *performative* account of *signification*, one that structures meaning through *bodily* tensions and *affective* rhythms and inscriptions, thereby extending and complicating psychoanalytic, political, and discourse-theoretical accounts of identification.

The emphasis on *the body* as a site where signification is enacted and reiterated anticipates later theories of performance and performativity. Judith Butler (1990, 1993), for example, reconceives identification as a repeated bodily citation of norms through which gendered and social identities are materialised and contested. For Butler, the body is not a passive surface inscribed by discourse, but an active site where power, desire, and prohibition are reiterated and potentially subverted. In this sense, both Kristeva and Butler situate identification in the tension between the symbolic order and the embodied enactments that both sustain and unsettle it, revealing subjectivity as a contingent choreography of affect, repetition, resistance, and transformation.

Taken together, these thinkers allow us to understand identification not as a merely internal process, but as a symbolic, affective, and performative process through which political subjects are constituted at the intersection of languages, performances, and institutions shaped by socio-political norms. While performance theory has opened important questions concerning the relationship between performance and psychoanalysis (Green 1979; Wright 1986; Diamond 1993; Murray 1997; Campbell and Kear 2001; Page, Koretzky, and Jodeau-Belle, 2016; Turri 2017), the question of identification requires more sustained theoretical attention today, particularly as contemporary conflicts increasingly unfold through embodiment, affect, and contested symbolic forms of belonging.

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This issue of “Aisthesis” explores identification not as an essential identity claim, but as a performative, affective, and symbolic process that structures how political subjectivity is formed, recognized, and contested. In light of the far right’s appropriation of identity politics where identification is mobilized toward regressive ends that favour exclusion, nationalism, and hostility toward the Other, the contributions in this volume aim to reimagine alternative forms of collective identification, at the intersection of diverse democratic subject positions, such as women, gay people, workers, or black people. They seek to foster pluralistic, cosmopolitan, and intercultural relations capable of articulating democratic belonging beyond essentialist closures. For example, Reid Kleinberg shows how the psychoanalytic notion of “traversing the fantasy” helps explain how the 1969 Sir George Williams University protests reworked political identifications by enacting transnational, multi-racial, and cross-ideological left coalition-building. On his part, Thomás Zicman de Barros borrows the psychoanalytic notion of “sublimation” to define populist identification as a performative gesture informed by queer theory, one that shifts affective investment away from fantasies of wholeness toward the affirmation of incompleteness. Christian Frigerio offers an alternative account of identification by shifting the focus away



from psychoanalytic theory and post-foundational political philosophy toward the anti-foundational tradition, emphasizing the capacity of affects to be performatively organised around a shared symbol – Gaia – and thereby hold the ecological movement together through processes of circulation, drawing on Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory. Similarly, Ilia Inishev draws on phenomenology and affect theory to reconceive identification as an enactment emerging through perceptual slowness, hesitation, and layered embodiment, thereby postponing reactive forms of identification and opening more lateral, plural, and affectively sustained spaces of counter-discrimination.

Against the backdrop of rising insecurity and reactionary politics, we ask: *How might the symbolic, affective, and performative processes of identification be rearticulated toward emancipatory, inclusive, and transformative politics? In what ways can alternative forms of identification emerge through embodied gestures, affective attachments, and performative acts that negotiate the contingent limits of subjectivity?*

The following conversation brings these questions from theoretical reflection into the realm of lived experience, cultural practice, and institutional engagement.

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**Goran:** Kristeva’s *Nations Without Nationalism* (1993) remains prescient in diagnosing how identity crises in a globalized world often lead to regressive retreats into origins, whether cultural, ethnic, or religious. Psychoanalysis helps us see how these returns are not innocent but rooted in deeper unconscious dynamics of loss, fear, and disorientation. You are psychoanalyst with a background in performance studies. How might performance through its embodied, affective, and symbolic dimensions offer a unique space for enacting these reconfigurations of belonging? Can the intersection of psychoanalysis and performance help us envision identifications not grounded in purity, but in ambivalence, alterity, ethical cohabitation, or even sameness?

**Aneta:** As suggested by many contributions in this issue, the intersection of psychoanalysis and performance can offer a distinctive space for reconfiguring belonging, one that foregrounds ambivalence, alterity, and ethical cohabitation rather than fantasies of homogeneity. This is the idea of belonging that is never stable or given; it is produced, and continually unsettled, through processes of identification that are themselves divided, ambivalent, and open to the foreign within the self.

Julia Kristeva’s contributions are particularly relevant here for understanding a contradictory pull between national identity and the foreign. National identity corresponds to the symbolic order: the need for a stable, unified, and exclusive

sense of self; while the foreign corresponds to the semiotic / pre-linguistic: the unconscious, abject, unassimilable, fluid, and threatening aspects of otherness. In her book *Nations Without Nationalism* (1993) Kristeva articulates this double movement of identity in a globalized world. This is a simultaneous movement towards a defensive concretisation of imagined original identity, ethnic, religious, linguistic, or cultural, and an expansive opening to transnational, hybrid flows. This retreat to origin is both a psychic defence against the disorientation of modernity and an enactment usually performed through rituals, spectacles, gestures, and narratives. While such regressions into “purity” are typically articulated in historical or political terms, they are in fact always animated by unconscious forces of loss, mourning, and narcissistic injury.

For Freud, the ego is shaped through multiple losses: of the maternal body, of omnipotence, of objects of desire, etc. When a loss is not properly mourned / integrated, i.e. when there was an ambivalent relationship towards the lost object (simultaneous love and hate) then melancholia, or in contemporary terms depression, occurs. In other words, the aggression originally directed towards an ambivalent lost object gets turned inwards (Freud, 1917/1957). Kristeva (1991), elaborates these dynamics through the figure of the stranger within the subject, the internal, disavowed yet constitutive other. Nationalist and fundamentalist retreats frequently externalize this stranger, transforming inner ambivalence into persecutory hostility toward migrants, foreigners, racialized others, religious, sexual, gender minorities, etc. In collective imagination “they” (whoever they are), become scapegoats for the disavowed divisions in ourselves.

Kristeva (1993) points out that nationalist returns often invoke ritual repetition (e.g. anthem, flag, uniform, memorialization, parade) that promises continuity with an imagined past. Her insight is that these rituals attempt to quell the semiotic turmoil (the unassimilable energies) by staging a consistent, stable order (Kristeva, 1993; Kristeva, 1982). Following Kristeva, I would suggest that it is precisely in ritualistic performances that we might discover how one might dwell in this tension (between semiotic and symbolic) without capitulating to closure. We could say that identification, which produces the sense of belonging, is itself performative. We take on gestures, language, styles, even affects of those we love, fear, or wish to emulate. Identification therefore is not a return to “essence” but a continual process of construction and transformation. Pure, original national identity is always already a phantasy: the very process by which we “become” a people is performative.

Yet, performance theory teaches us that every repetition carries a difference (Schechner, 2013). The strictest ritual is never identical to its prior iteration; therein lies a crack, an opening. Performance can subvert the repetition by estranging it: repeating differently, interrupting the ritual with moments of dissonance or silence, thereby exposing the uncanny underside of collective sym-

bol. To perform the difference within the repetition is to stage the uncanny, the very gap that reveals that the origin was never intact. On stage, the ambivalence can be literally embodied. A single actor may carry conflicting lineages, switch languages, or oscillate genders; choreography may reveal vulnerability within martial postures. Such embodied contradictions invite spectators to tolerate ambiguity rather than rush to defensive categorization.

Kristeva's notion of abjection as a confrontation with what disturbs identity, system, or order, can be generative in this regard, and has often fascinated artists. For example, the abject finds theatrical corollaries in grotesque or carnivalesque forms, as well as in body horror movie genre. When performers display the abject body (repulsive, disgusting, unclean, bleeding, hybrid, excessive, transgressive, etc.), they dissolve the illusion of bodily and cultural purity, prompting audiences to renegotiate their relation to identity, vulnerability, human condition and mortality. In a theatre context a stage functions as a literal scene for the phenomena that psychoanalysis recognises as transference<sup>4</sup>: spectators invest performers with parental, ancestral, or antagonistic figures. A performance space becomes a psychic topology where identifications can surface, shift, be unsettled (Phelan, 1993). When performance harnesses that transference, it becomes a space for empathy, vulnerability, and unsettling of the unconscious identifications.

In cultural performances of participatory or improvisational nature – such as public rituals, protest, flash mobs, co-creative community practices – one practices responsiveness to the unexpected other, to the intrusion of difference. That responsiveness is a model of belonging not founded on sameness but on ethical attentiveness to alterity. This kind of ethical performance resonates with Emmanuel Levinas's (1969) notion of responsibility to the Other: the call is not to assimilate difference but to respond to it.

Drawing on my ongoing interest in performance beyond the stage, such as political performance, affective public gestures, digital protocols, border crossings, self-presentation across media, I believe that performance in this broader sense is our perhaps only medium for reconfiguring belonging. The body is both archive and experiment. It carries inscriptions of trauma, colonial pasts, gendered and racialized codes, but it is also porous, capacious, open to re-inscription. Embodied performance gives us the space to "test" new identifications without necessarily consolidating them into rigid forms. I have often been drawn to projects of co-writing and shared performance that do not impose closure but leave the undoing open, most recently in the book *Mourning*

4 Transference is the unconscious process of directing feelings and desires related to an important figure from one's past (usually childhood) to a figure in the present, and in the analytic situation to the analyst. It is a fundamental part of the psychoanalytic process that defines analysands relationship towards the analyst. Through analysis of transference in the present, the past conflicts can be worked through.

*the Ends: Collaborative Writing and Performance* (Stojnić et.al, 2025), that was developed as a performative practice of shared mourning through collective writing process across geographic distances.

In reimagining belonging, performance teaches us that belonging is not a thing we possess but something we do. Butler's (1993) notion of performativity helps here: belonging is a repeated act produced by complex processes of identification. National subject, religious self, ethnic identity – all are roles learned, rehearsed, and sustained by repetition. But when performances crack, slip, or falter, new identifications flicker into being. So, the question is not whether identity can be stabilized, but whether we can learn to dwell with its instability. Freud's differentiation between "acting out" and "working through" can help us illuminate different kinds of repetition in performance. "Acting out" corresponds with the unconscious repetition of past conflicts or trauma through actions in the present, while "working through" corresponds with making the unconscious conscious through the process of analysing and understanding the repetition of conflicts (a.k.a. patterns) and their effects on present behaviours (Freud [1914] 1958). Populist spectacles (both rightwing/nationalist and leftwing) often act out unprocessed collective trauma, re-enacting injuries through scapegoating. Performance, however, can also be curated to facilitate working through: revisiting wounds in symbolic form that allows recognition, mourning, and re-signification. In its best moments, it wrests the fantasy of purity and reveals how identity is always provisional, relational, and haunted by the foreign. The paradox is instructive: performance can either cement identitarian closure or crack it open.

Kristeva warned that nationalism's lure lies in the promise of a completed identity: a fantasy of returning to an intact origin that never truly existed (Kristeva, 1993). Psychoanalysis unmasks that lure as a defence against what Kristeva calls the constitutive foreignness within; performance invites us to resist it, to rehearse identifications that are ceaselessly reworked, always partial, always haunted by alterity.

I would venture, then, that performance offers a praxis for a new belonging, one that sheds a light on the internal splitting, recognizes the stranger within not as a threat but as a basis for ethical relationality, and aims to sustain togetherness without demand for assimilation. If I, as both a psychoanalyst and a performance scholar, have tried over the years to trace this fragile border, it is because I believe that in our disoriented times, performance may not only diagnose our crises but also incite the possibility of cohabitation in the shadow of loss. To imagine identifications not grounded in purity but in shared finitude and ethical responsiveness is to inhabit the performative nature of identity: always in process, never secured. The task for artists, psychoanalysts, and publics alike is to keep this process open-ended. In that sense, performance becomes our fragile ethics, our rehearsal of new relational forms in a wounded world.

**Goran:** Psychoanalytic theory plays an important role in understanding political phenomena beyond their surface rhetoric. With the resurgence of far-right discourses, how might we revisit key psychoanalytic concepts, such as projection, melancholia, *jouissance*, or abjection, to understand the symbolic, affective, and performative dynamics underpinning nationalism and xenophobia?

**Aneta:** Psychoanalysis offers us apparatus to understand far-right nationalism and xenophobia not simply as ideological positions but as formations saturated with unconscious conflict. For example, in this issue, Laura Álvarez Garro, elaborates this in terms of *jouissance* and denial.

More broadly psychoanalytic concepts are useful in understanding that far-right nationalism functions as a kind of social symptom: a repetitive formation that attempts to resolve underlying contradictions without ever fully succeeding. The insistence and escalation of xenophobic rhetoric can be understood as a compulsion to repeat, driven by unresolved conflict. Of course, xenophobia is only one realm on which the questions of identification, belonging and identity get played out. In this issue, Isak de Vries explores the topic of gender identity and rise in violence against transgender people through Lacan's concept of imaginary and Gerard's mimetic desire.

The resurgence of far-right discourse is not simply a regression or a failure of rationality, but a complex psychic response to perceived loss, anxiety, and fragmentation. It organizes subjectivity and collective life through defence, identification, and affective investment, producing forms of belonging that are sustained precisely through exclusion. In nationalist discourse, the foreigner or migrant often becomes the repository of disowned aggression, dependency, or perceived moral corruption. What cannot be tolerated within the ego, or within the imagined coherence of the national body, is expelled and re-encountered as threat.

**Goran:** Immigration has long shaped European societies, from the rise of nation-states to post-WWII reconstruction, and today in response to climate change and geopolitical instability. Yet it continues to provoke anxieties around national identity, integration, and belonging. What explains this persistence? How do current narratives on immigration mobilize symbolic boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, and what does this reveal about collective identification today?

**Francesco:** The world is currently experiencing a historic and unprecedented crisis of the capitalist mode of production. Wars, economic and financial crises, the Great Recession, the COVID-19 pandemic, and increasingly frequent ecological disasters are all symptomatic of the contradictions inherent in the dominant socio-economic system and a mode of production that is now in irreversible decline. The inter-imperialistic war in Ukraine framed as a confrontation

between NATO and Russia and the ongoing genocide of the Palestinian people, the imperialist aggression against Cuba carried out by the United States and the equally imperialist military aggression against Iran, carried out by Israel, and the United States, with the support of Western democracies, are only the most recent in a series of ensuing traumatic events. Historically, the major crises of the capitalist system have been (temporarily) overcome by dominant state formations—most notably the United States, its European allies, and NATO countries—through aggressive foreign policies involving war. Domestically, these crises have been managed through a combination of ultra-liberalism and turbo-capitalism in the economic sphere, which entails the reduction of social spending and the erosion of workers' rights, and through fascism in the political sphere, which serves to suppress dissent and class struggle. External warfare, internal repression, austerity measures, and the devaluation of labour have consistently been the mechanisms through which capitalist accumulation has attempted to reassert itself during periods of systemic crisis. Just as the First and Second World Wars were responses to global capitalist crises, so too was the rise of fascism in Europe a reaction to the challenges faced by the European bourgeoisie, which turned to authoritarian forms of governance for support.

Today, many Western governments are responding in a similar way: internationally, they align with militaristic propaganda, sending weapons, troops, and specialized personnel to Ukraine, Israel, and other conflict zones; domestically, they privatize welfare systems and cut public spending. At the same time, they issue increasingly repressive laws aimed at silencing dissent, particularly that which emerges from the organized working class. This repressive turn is bolstered by a racist ideological campaign, initiated by hegemonic institutions and amplified by controlled mass media, aimed at the general population. Western governments actively foment racism and hatred toward immigrants – constructed as “internal enemies” – to separate them from native working-class populations and prevent solidarity. This ideological manoeuvre distracts from the material convergence of interests between native and immigrant workers.

Indeed, we are currently witnessing, on the one hand, the emergence of a war economy characterized by cuts to social spending, healthcare, and wages, alongside rising inflation and increased military expenditure, and, on the other hand, the emergence of a war politics, marked by laws aimed at repressing dissent, and a war propaganda that targets both external enemies, such as Russia, China, Iran, and India, and internal ones, namely immigrants. And every war, inevitably, requires its own propaganda. The internal war against immigrants serves a dual purpose: it distracts native workers from identifying their true (class) enemy, and it disciplines immigrant labour, forcing them to accept exploitative labour conditions. The goal of anti-immigrant policy is not to prevent migration, but to render immigrants more exploitable by eliminating their rights and, by extension,



undermining the rights of the working class as a whole. Immigrants are used as a lever to blackmail native workers and to depress general working conditions.

This strategy includes various mechanisms of coercion, such as threats of deportation, protracted stays in so-called “reception” centres, and other forms of pre-emptive subjugation. They are intended to “break in” a future labour force that fuels the economies of agribusiness, the hospitality sector, and both small- and large-scale manufacturing. These practices aim to demonstrate to immigrants the power and arrogance of their new masters and to discourage any potential resistance. Such repressive measures also target long-settled immigrant workers in the Global North. When the supposed threat to national security, identity, and social cohesion is perceived to come from the outside, then all those who have crossed national borders become potential enemies, to be surveilled and controlled. This division or dissidentification ensures that immigrant and native workers remain separated, while native workers are lulled into believing that they are not themselves under observation or discipline. Nonetheless, while this propaganda has successfully produced a hegemonic racist discourse, cracks are beginning to emerge. In factories, warehouses, and other workplaces, we witness signs of unity, protest, and solidarity between native and immigrant workers.

Indeed, the only way to overcome this deepening crisis, one that is rapidly leading us toward broader conflict, is to transform the divisions between immigrants and natives, and among workers from different countries, into new forms of identification that will unify class struggle. The first step toward this is the rational and emotional deconstruction of the dominant ideology that obscures the shared material interests of native and immigrant workers alike. In this process, the cultural field, including the arts play a crucial role in exposing the ideological mechanisms at work, both intellectually and affectively.

**Goran:** Indeed, the politics of immigration extend beyond state policy into the cultural field, where museums, festivals, and theatres negotiate contested terrains of identity, belonging, and memory. With far-right politics gaining ground and targeting these institutions, can they still sustain critical reflection and foster inclusive, cosmopolitan forms of community, or are they being reshaped by exclusionary logics? Taking the Venice Biennale as an example, how might we understand this platform as an intervention into identity politics and a tool for new models of identification?

**Susanne:** We are living in a post-globalised era marked by transnational capitalism, large-scale migration, the ongoing effects of colonialism, and the persistence of patriarchal and heteronormative norms. In such a political and cultural context, the role of cultural institutions, such as museums, theatres, and art festivals, is undergoing transformation. However, while public funding systems

often reflect governmental orientations and require at least partial alignment with curatorial, artistic, and educational objectives and strategies, directors, curators, and artists still retain the capacity to imagine and realise projects that challenge these constraints. For example, in her contribution to this volume, Helena Botto demonstrates how her own performance practice, articulated through strategies of over-identification, operate as a critical dispositive for deconstructing and destabilizing discriminatory right-wing narratives.

The Venice Biennale, particularly the Contemporary Art sector, which attracts an increasingly large and international, albeit essentially elite, audience, is certainly an interesting observatory for focusing on these dynamics. The temple-like architectural models of the Biennale pavilions, each tied to a specific nation, function as cultural and political embassies as much as temporary national museums. While the pavilions are owned by the respective states, the land on which they are built belongs to the city of Venice. This delicate balance underpins crucial political decisions. The recent concession granted to Qatar to erect the first new pavilion since 1995 – when there were only 30 in total, compared to today's 66 – underscores a growing economic significance of this relationship. Altogether, the pavilions bear witness to the enduring importance of nationalism, the shifting dynamics of contemporary geopolitics, and the persistent tensions between wealthier nations often housed in prestigious palazzos, galleries, or foundations, and poorer nations relegated to less prominent locations. This very political, economic, and logistical structure turns the Biennial into a platform that exposes the enduring impact of these issues, while also revealing how each nation grapples with the legacies of capitalism, nationalism, and colonialism, and their lasting effects on knowledge, power, and culture.

For instance, in the 1990s, some national pavilions swapped their venues to experiment with forms of transnational hospitality (Vettese 2014). Since the Biennale's regulations recognises only official nation-states, other critiques of nationalism have emerged through collateral exhibitions organised by culturally autonomous territories, such as Catalonia or Wales, or by stateless nations, such as Palestine. In the more recent editions of the Biennial, curators have also selected artists from marginalised communities and encouraged new narratives based on experiences, histories, and memories of colonised environments, to inquiry into how art can counter the perpetuation of colonial and gender structures. The performative works and installations presented in the pavilions have proven particularly effective in this regard (Franco 2026). A remarkable example is the exhibition *Paradise Camp* presented at the 59th International Art Exhibition of *La Biennale di Venezia* (2022) by the Japanese-Sāmoan interdisciplinary artist, researcher, and curator Yuki Kihara, whose work challenges dominant and singular historical narratives and identity issues, and curated by Natalie King. Kihara is a dual citizen of Aotearoa New Zealand (as Kihara likes to name it

stressing both the Indigenous and the colonisers' name for the same island) and Sāmoa, and was also the first non-Indigenous Pacific Islander to represent New Zealand. Kihara is also a member of the minority community of Fa'afafine, a term meaning "in the manner of a woman" and identifying people who are assigned male at birth and who express their gender in a feminine way. Fa'afafine encompasses (but not entirely coincides with) the LGBTIQ+, describing those identifying with a third gender or a non-binary identity. Through her performances, photographic reenactments, and video works, Kihara invited visitors to critically rethink culturally constructed binary categories such as male and female, European (Western) and Oceanic, cultural and natural, and material and immaterial culture – topics addressed from indigenous perspective by Amanda Piña in her contribution to this issue of *Aisthesis*. One way this was demonstrated was by showing that Paul Gauguin's paintings created during his stays in Tahiti and Marquesas Islands were in fact stereotyped and exotic representations based on ethnographic pictures of some Sāmoan Fa'afafine, who he never met in person. Another was by providing evidence that Fa'afafine were central to the Sāmoan social fabric and came to be seen as problematic only after the arrival of colonisers. Paradise Camp witnessed how Venice Biennale can serve as a cultural and political epicentre for the arts, providing a space for epistemological reflection on our present and future, whilst fostering alternative forms of identification.

**Goran:** Since 2015, the EU has seen an intensification of migration alongside the rise of increasingly restrictive asylum regimes. Immigrants are often placed in administrative limbo, their futures indefinitely suspended by bureaucratic delays. You have powerfully theorized 'waiting' not simply a passive condition, but as a form of state violence, a temporal technique of control that renders migrants exploitable and invisible. How do you understand this temporality of suspended life in relation to broader capitalist and state interests? And can this waiting, though deeply ambivalent, also be reimagined as a site of political agency, counter-identification, or even solidarity? How might this temporality be reconfigured or resisted?

**Francesco:** «Waiting is one of the privileged ways of experiencing power», as Pierre Bourdieu (1997) reminds us. In the specific case of waiting imposed by a state on subaltern subjects – immigrants and, above all, asylum seekers and refugees – it constitutes a form of state violence. This violence takes shape in the state's capacity to control time and, ultimately, the life of these specific categories of immigrants. It manifests through the waiting times imposed by state apparatuses – specifically through confinement in various forms of administrative detention – where systematic violations of the most basic human rights

occur. To these waiting times are adjoined the in(de)finite delays for interviews with territorial commissions, for decisions on international protection status, for the issuance of documents, for obtaining a tax code, and more – thus amplifying a pervasive sense of uncertainty and existential precarity. Kate Katafiasz's contribution examines how theatre affects audiences by indexing traces of such migrant trauma and exclusion.

The performance of waiting, imposed on immigrants, functions as a temporal border, emerging alongside the physical and political borders that obstruct, filter, and govern spatial mobility. These temporal borders trap immigrants in a temporal immobility produced and maintained by national and supranational policies, as described by Stephen Elliot Wilmer in this paper, that impose prolonged stagnation as a device of governance.

This ideological, political, and institutional disciplining of immigrants and migratory movements is legitimized through a discourse of “permanent emergency”, which, paradoxically, fuels a pathological “fetish of speed”. In fact, European migration policies, historically and at present, have been enacted under the logic of urgency, shaping a contingent, reactive structure embedded in a present-oriented temporality that lacks long-term vision or sustainability. Therefore, waiting becomes both a key lived experience and a crucial analytical category for the study of immigrants' temporalities and spatialities.

Waiting operates as a “temporal governance mechanism”, implemented in a discretionary and arbitrary manner. It is often a costly process that depletes immigrants' financial and emotional resources. It operates as a mechanism of dispossession and existential precarization, aimed at extracting value from the labour power of immigrant populations, who are disciplined, among other means, through waiting itself. Refugees and asylum seekers find themselves both spatially and temporally immobilized, trapped within the legal and social limbo of the European asylum system. While waiting for a status, and thus a residence permit, they are forced to comply with severely restricted opportunities for mobility, employment, and social integration. Understood in these terms, waiting becomes a form of entrapment that extends both inside and outside the reception system. Mirroring, in many respects and contexts, the “camp form”, the European reception model foresees both physical and juridical confinement of asylum seekers. It is no coincidence that many asylum seekers refer to reception centres as “camps”, echoing the traumatic memory of the camps they transited, particularly in Libya, where they were subjected to torture, rape, and unspeakable violence. The space of the camp thus becomes a space “outside of time” – a space in which time is slowed, marked by prolonged waiting that may, however, abruptly end at any moment. The camp becomes a place where people “hold their breath”, caught in the unpredictable and often arbitrary rhythm of asylum decisions-positive or negative.

In fact, the entire journey of migrants, seen as a performance of waiting, begins well before they even reach the European reception centres. This waiting is not neutral, but a deliberate mechanism imposed by state policies that extends the journey's duration, making it increasingly dangerous and costly. European agreements with countries like Libya and Turkey have not only prolonged the asylum seekers' journey but also intensified its peril, positioning these waiting periods as part of a larger strategy of control and selection. The longer and more treacherous the journey, the more vulnerable immigrants become upon arrival in Europe, making them more likely to accept exploitative labour and social conditions. These state-imposed temporal regimes are not about closing borders entirely but about disciplining immigrants to tolerate degrading conditions, eroding their rights and freedoms. Policies such as assigning "safe ports" far from rescue locations, and enforcing pushbacks along the Balkan route, extend the journey and intensify the hardships, further breaking down the migrants' resistance.

For those who survive the journey, new forms of pressure await: the looming threat of deportation, long stays in reception centres, and the continuous, exhausting waiting that defines their lives in Europe. These prolonged times, both before and after arrival, lead to physical and mental deterioration, making immigrants more docile and compliant, hence, ready to enter a labour force that fuels Europe's economy.

The daily lives of immigrants and their families are deeply affected by waiting, as it creates a sense of suspended existence. Immigrants face economic setbacks due to their inability to send remittances, delaying debt repayment and limiting financial support to families back home. Additionally, waiting disrupts their social integration, marginalizing them in the marriage market and hindering their entry into adult life. This prolonged waiting, a form of permanent suspension, isolates immigrants socially and emotionally, while life continues to evolve for their families in the country of origin. Thus, waiting could be understood as a temporal dimension that fosters discriminatory identification among immigrants. Abdelmalek Sayad (1999) had already described the lives of Algerian immigrants as suspended in perpetual waiting – where the temporary, whether waiting to return or for something to happen, becomes permanent and is crystallized "here", in "exile", in the materiality of daily life and social isolation, while "there", in the country of origin, life continues to unfold, reimagined in the immigrant's absence.

However, waiting is not always empty or passive. It is experienced differently depending on how each individual lives their 'being-in-time' within the camp – developing personal tactics of resistance. Indeed, the time of waiting is not necessarily wasted or vacant; it can be a "productive" time, imbued with meaning: a time to learn the social maps of the new context, to understand the asylum system, to learn the language, to build social networks and establish daily routines.

Waiting becomes a spatio-temporal dimension in which affects of uncertainty and frustration coexist with hope and aspiration. In this regard, the use of smartphones becomes a tool, an antidote to the void of waiting time. Smartphones allow immigrants to engage in networking, entertainment, and the construction of collective and individual memory – filling temporal gaps and functioning as a “miniature time capsule” capable of containing, compressing, and expanding time. So, we can imagine a “positive” dimension of waiting in the camp: waiting as a counter-identification practice, a resisting and subverting performance through which new processes of identification can emerge.

**Goran:** Your work, including the European action research project *Dancing Museums* (2018-2023), highlights the transformative potential of cultural institutions. How can participatory artistic practices in these spaces challenge dominant national narratives while also cultivating alternative forms of identification and belonging?

**Susanne:** Museums play a strategic role in shaping our understanding of the world we live in and our complex identities. They also serve as sites where we can imagine how to transform both the world and us. One of the most effective ways to foster such critical reflection on the transmission of cultural and artistic legacies, and rethink our individual and collective identities – whether national, ethnic, gendered, linguistic, religious, and so on – is through collaborative and participatory practices. Many museums are increasingly incorporating these kinds of projects into their programming to challenge the traditional hierarchical structure of management and curatorship, suggesting a more fluid distribution of roles to unsettle the museological apparatus. This shift involves engaging visitors more directly in deciding what should be displayed in the galleries, and in some cases in co-curating exhibitions and events, starting from everyday objects and artefacts connected to ephemeral or intangible cultural practices. Similarly, curatorial projects sometimes extend beyond museum walls into other spaces, where collections are exhibited in temporal dialogue with selected communities or representatives of marginalised or underrepresented or disadvantaged groups, who would rarely set foot in the museum.

In this context, the first quarter of the 21st century has witnessed the growing presence of dance and performance within museum programmes. This phenomenon is an integral part of the “experiential turn” that characterises some of the contemporary art today and signals the shift from a fundamentally contemplative and ocular-centric to a multi-sensory aesthetic. Moreover, inhabiting museum and exhibition spaces by attending performances that unfold differently in space than the predetermined routes mapped along linear chronologies for visitors, fosters an experience of time – and consequently of the organization of knowl-



edge – that questions the very concept of cultural and social progress. Dance and performance in museum spaces invite visitors to engage with the complexity of historical temporalities and spatial configurations. Within these redefined spatio-temporal dimensions, the museum emerges as a crossroads of embodied knowledge and lived experience – a site where the memories and voices of those excluded, ignored, or silenced by official historiography may be articulated, shared, and preserved.

The direct participation of visitors in performance and dance pieces add to this potential the opportunity of experiencing alternative senses of belonging and innovative modes of building and transmitting knowledge. In such cases, the concept of choreography means more than simply a way of organizing bodies in space; it becomes a tool for aggregating and exploring different sociological, political, and economic models, as well as for mediating embodied investigations of troubled heritage and traumatic pasts, inscribing them into renewed (museological) narratives.

A striking example is Tanya Bruguera's performance *10.144.083*, presented in 2018, in London, in the frame of Hyundai Commission, a series of new and site-specific installations by international artists for the iconic Turbine Hall at Tate Modern. This project brings together many of the concerns of contemporary museology, integrating them into a coherent framework. The title of the exhibition corresponded to the number of people who had migrated from one country to another, combined with the number of migrant deaths recorded up to that moment, according to data from the IOM's (International Organization for Migration) Missing Migrants Project. A group of 21 people – selected by the artist and living or working in the area surrounding Tate Modern – shared reflections on the civic role of the museum and the concept of cultural heritage, and collaborated in shaping the exhibition. More specifically, they have discussed how Tate could approach the local community more closely and involve the neighbourhood residents in its cultural and educational strategies. At the end of the process, the participants drafted a manifesto, which appeared on visitors' mobile phones as soon as they connected to the museum's free wi-fi, to present the outcomes of their work. Visitors entered the hall, where the entire floor was coated with a thermosensitive anthracite-grey paint. Invited to sit or lie down, they gradually released warmth through their bodies, which revealed traces of a hidden portrait: the face of Yousef, a young Syrian who had left his country in 2011, to reach London. However, the entire portrait appeared only when at least three hundred visitors were present simultaneously.

In another room of the museum, fully illuminated by an intense white light, visitors entered and, within seconds, began to cry because of an organic menthol compound diffused in the air. This physical reaction induced a form of "forced empathy" with one of the greatest tragedies of our time: the journeys of migrants

and refugees. Although constantly before our eyes in the mediated dimension of news and images, these stories often go unseen, rendering migrants and refugees invisible. Finally, the project's participants named a hall of the museum after Natalie Bell, an activist chosen for her work with charitable organisations providing housing and social support for both residents and recent immigrants. The project has demonstrated how museums can create situations in which the public undergoes a direct (and often participatory) encounter with other people and stories, becoming an indispensable presence for the very existence of the work, and this includes the limited possibility of activating Yousef's portrait with a large number of visitors. In this sense, Bruguera's activism does not aim to replace political experience with an emotional response that is as immediate as it is simplified; rather, it creates a device that truly functions only if its effects endure over time through a sensibility enriched by art. Performative and participatory art inside museums can support self-reflection, deepening the recognition of others' experiences, and opening the possibility of transformation for both individual and collective identities through new forms of identification.

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