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CULTURAL RACISM, GENDERED OTHERING, AND HATE SPEECH: DISCOURSES, IMAGINARIES, AND EVERYDAY BORDERS IN SLOVENIA

Ana FRANK

Peace Institute, Metelkova ul. 6, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia
e-mail: ana.frank@mirovni-institut.si

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of cultural racism, gendered othering, and hate speech in Slovenia through the lens of postcolonial theory, psychoanalysis, and intersectional feminism. It incorporates the concept of the imaginary as a sociosymbolic structure shaping perceptions of identity and exclusion. Using qualitative data from interviews and focus groups, this study reveals how hate speech functions as a disciplinary mechanism rooted in historical and affective imaginaries. These imaginaries normalize discrimination and project societal anxieties onto marginalized groups. The research highlights the need to address systemic imaginaries to effectively combat hate speech and promote inclusive social transformation.

Keywords: hate speech, othering, racism, imaginary, gender, marginalized groups

RAZZISMO CULTURALE, ALTERITÀ DI GENERE E INCITAMENTO ALL'ODIO: DISCORSI, IMMAGINARI E CONFINI QUOTIDIANI IN SLOVENIA

SINTESI

Questo articolo analizza il ruolo del razzismo culturale, dell'alterità di genere e del discorso d'odio in Slovenia attraverso le prospettive della teoria postcoloniale, della psicoanalisi e del femminismo intersezionale. Incorpora il concetto di immaginario come struttura sociosimbolica che orienta le percezioni dell'identità e dell'esclusione. Utilizzando dati qualitativi provenienti da interviste e gruppi di discussione, la ricerca mostra come il discorso d'odio funzioni come un meccanismo disciplinare radicato in immaginari storici e affettivi. Questi immaginari normalizzano la discriminazione e proiettano ansie sociali sui gruppi marginalizzati. La ricerca evidenzia la necessità di affrontare gli immaginari sistemici per contrastare efficacemente il discorso d'odio e promuovere una trasformazione sociale inclusiva.

Parole chiave: discorso d'odio, alterizzazione, razzismo, immaginario, genere, gruppi marginalizzati

INTRODUCTION¹

In recent decades, Europe has experienced a pronounced intensification of exclusionary practices and hate speech targeting migrants, Muslims, Roma communities, and racialized and gender minorities (cf. Lilleker & Pérez-Escobar, 2023). The continent has witnessed a significant transformation in the expressions of racism, marked by a shift from overt, biological forms of racial exclusion to more insidious, covert expressions of racism anchored in cultural, symbolic, and civilizational differences that have emerged as a dominant way of exclusion (Wodak, 2015). This racism is often justified through the symbolic terrains of lifestyle, belief systems, values, and (perceived) civilizational incompatibility; it functions to naturalize inequality based on a reconfiguration of racial hierarchies without (a need for) reference to biology, as overt racism does. This shift has given rise to what scholars have identified as “modern racism,” “neo-racism,” “differentialist” or “cultural racism” – a form of exclusion that relies not on explicit references to race as biological category, but instead on a problematized difference and incompatibility of cultural values, practices, and social norms, often in relation to *imagined* national or European identities (Balibar, 1991; Goldberg, 2006; Taguieff, 1990; Lentin & Titley, 2011). This form of racism posits that cultural mixing is inherently harmful, promoting the maintenance of cultural purity while stigmatizing the Other through difference (Balibar, 1991, 17–28). Racism thus no longer requires the concept of race to function; covert racism operates through symbolic and institutional mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, and operates through the naturalization of cultural difference and the pathologization of others’ ways of life. Importantly, cultural racism is not grounded in empirical facts, but in hegemonic narratives propagated through media, politics, and everyday discourse (van Dijk, 1991). These narratives invoke cultural incompatibility, security threats, and value gaps to rationalize exclusion and legitimize hate speech. The resurgence of far-right populist movements and nationalist discourses across European nation-states has intensified this trend – political actors instrumentalize anxieties about security, identity, and economic precarity to construct the figure of the “unwanted Other” as point of convergence, threatening the integrity and homogeneity of the imagined national community (Farris, 2017). The discursive production of the dangerous Other is anchored in longstanding

colonial imaginaries. As Wekker and Lutz (2001) noted, these categories are embedded in a pre-constructed knowledge, relying on sexist and racist prejudices that developed into a descriptive logic through continuous repetition. The historical sedimentation of orientalist and colonialist discourses continues to animate contemporary political rhetoric, necessitating critical examination. The study of racism and hate speech in contemporary Europe requires a critical engagement with the discursive, affective, phantasmatic, and symbolic dimensions of exclusion in everyday encounters and experiences, as well as a theoretical orientation that captures the complexity of culturalized and covert racial formations. The aim of this article is to analyse how hate speech specifically relates to the subjugation of minorities who are constructed as the Other and to situate hate speech within constructions of reality (imaginaries) within the contemporary phenomena of racism, sexism, hate speech, and intersectional discrimination that accompany discourses and imaginaries on the Other. This study investigates how hate speech operates through the lens of cultural difference, and how it is embedded in the imaginary constructions of societies and subjects. It expands the understanding of hate speech beyond simply a speech act stemming from prejudices, but shows how hate speech is deeply ingrained and embedded in sociopolitical structures, institutions, practices, habits, bodies and affective behaviours reflected in the everyday life of every person, even those who might not seem to be discriminating against the Other. The purpose is twofold: to introduce a theoretical approach that understands the imaginary as a socio-personal phenomenon, and to explore manifestations of imaginaries through hate speech using empirical evidence. Focusing on Slovenia as a case study, the research combines interdisciplinary theoretical analysis with narrative interviews and focus groups to explore how individuals from migrant, Muslim, and other racialized and gendered minority communities, as well as activists and experts, experience, interpret, and respond to hate speech and symbolic exclusion. The Slovenian context is especially revealing due to its geopolitical positioning at the crossroads of East and West, its historical transformation since the creation and fall of Yugoslavia, its subsequent path to the European Union, and its recent encounters with increased migration and populist discourse. The paper contributes to theoretical debates on modern racism, and expands empirical knowledge about racialization in Central and Eastern Europe, i.e., Slovenia.

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A THEORETICAL APPROACH TO THE IMAGINARY

Recent academic research has focused on the interplay between concepts of the imaginary, discourse, and otherness in the context of hate speech. Kinnvall (2017) examined the rise of covert cultural racism in Europe by exploring the emotional and political construction of the *imaginary Other* in right-wing European populism. She suggested that the fear of existential threats is central to the exclusionary logic of hate speech, particularly when targeted at immigrants and Muslims. Baider (2020) argued for understanding online hate speech as a contextualized speech act embedded in social processes of alienation and power dynamics. Vasvári (2013) analysed the use of gendered hate speech to reinforce patriarchal norms. Her study underscores the role of political narratives in shaping societal imaginaries that marginalize women. Mohiuddin (2019) explored how Islamophobic discourse in Europe constructs Muslims as threats to European values, invoking a racialized social imaginary. Richardson-Self (2021) delved into the prevailing social and historical imaginaries to develop a theoretical approach to the encompassing nature of hate speech, exploring the interplay between racially oriented and gendered forms of hate speech.

Hate speech constructs discourses of the other as dangerous, contaminant, and threatening, by articulating and activating the affective and historically sedimented (colonial, Orientalist) imaginary boundaries between “us” and “them” (Ahmed, 2005; Hall, 1997). These borders are articulated discursively (through power), but are mobilized

through the imaginary, which provides the affective and symbolic structure upon which discourses of othering rest. In this context, hate speech becomes a key mechanism of symbolic violence as a discursive practice² that is deeply embedded in broader regimes of othering (Wodak, 2015; van Dijk, 1993), i.e., the creation of imaginaries of Others.

The concept of imaginary has different theoretical backgrounds and emphases, mainly in sociological³ and psychoanalytic theory. In both frameworks, social imaginaries are narratives that construct and determine social meanings about the world and define *belonging* and *identity* for the members of a specific community. Through these terms, imaginaries have a structuring function: they encourage normative behaviours, constrain and guide actions, and establish social norms and practices that become institutionalized and normalized over time in the material world (Richardson-Self, 2021, 5, 13, 28).

Individuals are born engaged with(in) a social imaginary and share dominant spatio-temporal imaginaries. They then take on these pre-existing, sedimented collective imaginaries; these imaginaries settle in us as if they were natural, organic and self-originating (Richardson-Self, 2021, 15). We absorb these norms, narratives, and meanings, often without any real experience or awareness. Imaginary is thus not only systematic and rational but also emotional, affective and an issue of attachment, since it works below the level of conscious awareness and is taken to be “normal” or the norm (Richardson-Self, 2021, 14, 16).

2 The concepts of *discourse* and *imaginary* both address the symbolic organization of meaning and identity within society, i.e., the construction of “the social” and the constitution of “the subject.” However, they diverge in their theoretical lineage and focus. While not possible to delve into detailed analysis, an explanation of ontological differences suffices. In critical theory, discourse, particularly in Foucault’s (1972; 1998) work, refers to the systems of language, representation, and practices through which meaning, knowledge and reality are constituted. Discourse explains power relations: it defines what can be said, who can speak, and under what conditions statements become socially valid; it thus regulates intelligibility, defines regimes of truth, and delineates social norms – what is seen as normal, deviant, dangerous, or legitimate. Discourse theory emphasizes relational structures of meaning and power, often privileging language and text as sites of analysis. The *imaginary*, in contrast, refers to the affective-symbolic domain through which subjects envision and naturalize social orders, identities, and relationships – often without conscious reflection. It focuses more on the affective-symbolic dimension of subjectivity, fantasy, and desire – elements that are not always fully articulable within discourse. Discourse analysis privileges observable language and practices, while imaginary analysis concerns latent, affective structures that shape perception and identity. They are deeply interconnected. Laclau and Mouffe (1985), for instance, integrated both discourse and the imaginary in their theory of political hegemony, arguing that political identities and antagonisms are structured and sustained through discursive formations, but are also supported by affective attachments and fantasies – i.e., imaginaries. As Glynnos and Stavrakakis (2008) argued, discourses often function through affectively charged fantasies that promise wholeness or warn of a collapse of identity. Žižek (1989) bridged Lacanian psychoanalysis and ideology critique by showing how ideological discourse operates at the level of fantasy, enjoyment (*jouissance*), and the imaginary construction of fullness or threat. According to Žižek, the imaginary plays a crucial role in sustaining ideological structures – ideology operates through fantasy, making the imaginary an essential mechanism of political power. In the context of hate speech and cultural racism, the convergence of discourse and the imaginary is particularly salient. Discourse provides the narrative and institutional form through which imaginaries are communicated, reinforced, and contested. The merging of the two concepts allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how power, exclusion, and identity operate in the cultural field. However, it is the imaginary I focus on here.

3 In sociology, the imaginary was theoreticized by scholars such as Anderson (2006), and Taylor (2004), interdisciplinarily by Castoriadis (1987; 1991).

Social imaginaries function to fix borders of acceptable interpretations of reality and delineate who can belong (Richardson-Self, 2021, 11, 15, 21), i.e., who is possible and what is possible. Social imaginaries thus set the parameters of what kind of control is exerted, by whom, and towards who. Therefore, social inequality is performed through the imaginary, as a material practice, which is repetitive and constantly created, including through words and images (Richardson-Self, 2021, 81–83). The attributes of a particular subject/group as well as the rights attributed to them and the type of imaginary that will dominate, pertain to power relations (discourses) that subsequently define which imaginary will dominate. In a specific context and under a dominant imaginary, some groups will be subject to collective systemic discrimination (Gelber, 2019, 15). This is the context in which language oppression – hate speech – occurs.⁴ Language, written words and speech, are part of the social imaginary equipment, absorbed into lived experience, and incorporated in our lived body and everyday experiences (Richardson-Self, 2021, 16–17). The relation of context to speech is important, since it is the context that determines the targets of hate speech. The power dynamics in that context determine who is the deprived group, what constitutes hate speech, and who is its target. In this context, hate speech has a specific normative aim: hate expressions result from and contribute to a group's oppression, based upon an imagined pattern of treatment of that group (Richardson-Self, 2021, 65). In other words, hate speech tracks a group based on identities that have a particular place in the dominant social imaginary, while verbal expressions are intended for and directed to a type of imagined subject possessing traits that are imagined to belong to the collective that subject is part of (Richardson-Self, 2021, 57). The meanings of words are understood and conveyed from a historical and contextual usage, and members of a specific community know what meaning a word conveys; therefore, who says what in what context makes a difference related to the power relations pertaining to that expression, including the harm it does. Speech, therefore, not only says; it is a

conduct, a practice (Butler, 1997; Richardson-Self, 2021, 63) in the sense that something is uttered under circumstances of power (those who have power define the borders of speech) but also in terms of silence (those who are silenced have no power) (cf. Spivak, 1988).⁵

Social representations and cultural inscriptions also *constitute bodies* (cf. Grosz, 1994 – *volatile bodies*; Gatens, 1996 – *imaginary bodies*). Bottici explained that “imagination has a bodily grounding... [since] we constantly meet and recognise or misrecognise ourselves in certain body images, which include images that we have of our bodies and of other bodies” (Bottici, 2019, 7). Therefore, as Kinnvall (2017, 3) put it, “the other is the cultural and religious ‘other’, who is not only blamed for the imagined ills of European society, but who is also the body that European society needs protection from”. Awareness of the perceiving body and the perceived body is a form of collective imagining: “It is through imagination that mind has body as its object in the most immediate way. Here minds are constituted as awareness of bodily modifications – modifications through which we are aware of other bodies as well as our own” (Gatens & Lloyd, 1999, 12). According to this view, the dominant imaginary thus defines subjects as “kinds of people that do and don’t belong” according to recognizable (bodily) features: dress, skin, behaviour, abilities, capacities: “social imaginaries assign differential meaning and value to particular bodies and help to legitimise social practices” (Richardson-Self, 2021, 24). These imagined subjects and their bodies are products of everyday habits and normative practices that condition the type and extent of rights, entitlements, and respect, as well as the mistrust, contempt, or (mal)treatment these subjects receive and are entitled to (Richardson-Self, 2021, 25, 175).

Anchored in bodily practices, subjects act and speak by reiterating implicit norms, habits, and symbols that subordinate a particular group in a specific context. Therefore, hate speech can be performed implicitly, as social (nonverbal) practice, or as habit (Gelber, 2019, 16; Richardson-Self, 2021, 65, 69). In this sense, hate speech is

4 This also means that speech against a socially privileged group cannot be hate speech since this group cannot be harmed by hate speech, because they are at a social advantage vis-à-vis the others who are at a social disadvantage. The socially privileged can be offended or insulted, but not oppressed by hate speech against them (Richardson-Self, 2021).

5 Indeed, also *not* saying something is related to power. For example, not referring to the *genocide* in Gaza as such is also *violence* exerted from the position of power. Not saying something silences other subjects and the norms of human rights – which therefore become not applicable. Refusing to define these atrocities as such (genocide) and therefore to utter the term *genocide* in speech or in writing means not recognizing the act as such. This non-speaking – non-acting – has real material consequences (in terms of obligations to act against genocide, which does not happen if the phenomenon is not uttered). As Butler (1997, 133) noted: “censorship seeks to produce subjects according to explicit and implicit norms, and [...] the production of the subject has everything to do with the regulation of speech.” Foucault (1998, 101) pointed out that “silence and secrecy are a shelter for power.” Thus discourse includes also what is censored, what is silenced.

not necessarily intended or consciously motivated, it can also be implicit and benevolent (often even seemingly complimentary). This unconscious behaviour, speech, and bodily performance stems from habits. *Habits* reside within the body schema and are therefore unconscious, but are imaginarily and culturally shared. Habits are acquired in a collective environment, and represent a tacit knowledge about acceptable norms, actions, and meanings (Richardson-Self, 2021, 72–74, 117).

However, various alternative meaning-generating narratives (e.g. feminism, decolonization movements, etc.) challenge the dominant imaginaries. Castoriadis (1987) viewed the imaginary as radically productive, enabling new historical and institutional formations. Imaginaries are indeed never fixed, but instead are constantly reproduced, changing, and fluid systems. And when dominant imaginaries are challenged, they react with affective resistance, denial, and refusal (Richardson-Self, 2021, 173). Events that challenge a dominant imaginary are subject to exclusions: “Dreams, illnesses, transgressions, and deviance are also explained away. Alien societies and people are posited as strange, savage, impious” (Castoriadis, 1991, 153). In short, these “alien societies and people” become others and are resisted against (e.g., with hate speech) according to the threat they represent. Hate speech is a corrective mechanism, deemed appropriate during a disruption of the status quo, projected toward or against those who challenge the world-organizing narratives and norms.

Thus, by being settled in imaginaries, hate speech operates not only on a linguistic level, but beyond, in material, practical, and institutional, as well as emotional, affective, and unconscious ways. To grasp these levels, I employ an understanding of the imaginary developed from a psychoanalytical perspective by Lacan (2006 [1949]) and modified by Miller’s (1988; 2017) concept of *extimacy*. This allows a dialog between social context and personal emotions.

A psychoanalytic approach to the imaginary and relations to the Other

Lacan’s theory (2006 [1949]) described three registers of subjectivity. For him, the *Imaginary* is fundamental to subject formation; it operates through identification and differentiation, where the ego forms through a projection of the self, always relationally constituted through the figure of the Other. The imaginary operates through affect and fantasy and is a structural dimension of subjectivity; the self-image is inseparable from the image of the Other. This leads to projection mechanisms

that produce “us” versus “them” through divisions, visible in different markers (such as skin colour). The *Symbolic* register encompasses language, law, institutional practices, and social norms. Language in particular functions as a means of differentiation – not only phonetic but also symbolic, visual, and embodied – playing a crucial role in constructing boundaries between “us” and “them.” It therefore also may stigmatize and exclude Others. The *Real* remains outside the Imaginary and Symbolic orders, and represents the realm that eludes symbolization and the imaginary. Encounters with the Real – moments of encounters with the Other as traumatic experiences, perceived as intruding into symbolic and imaginary spaces – disrupt symbolic and imaginary coherence and provoke anxiety.

Hate speech can be interpreted as an attempt to manage these anxieties between the real and the imaginary, by expelling the disruptive Other through the violence of language. As we will see, the interplay between the real and the imaginary manifests itself powerfully – people ostensibly reject reality when encountering the Other in a highly materialistic, physical (embodied) way. Indeed, “it is the imaginary significations themselves that determine what count as ‘real’ and ‘unreal’ in every society” (Bottici, 2019, 3–4) and “whether a threat is ‘real’ or not seems to be less important than whether something is discursively constructed as a threat” (Kinnvall, 2017, 3). In the European imaginary, the historical racial understanding of the Other “is manifest in European societies to the extent that the perception of racial features of the ‘other’ precedes seeing: the cultural (or postcolonial) order determines what we see” (Kinnvall, 2017, 4).

To describe these encounters with the real world, Lacan coined the term “*extimité*” (sometimes translated as “*extimacy*”) to designate the sharing of intimacy with the outside world, and to investigate the complex relationship between privacy and public identity. *Extimité* blends “exteriority” and “intimacy,” challenging the traditional separation between the inner psychological life and the external social world (Pavón-Cuellar, 2014), highlighting the fundamental tension between internal desires and external social forces. *Extimité* posits that the individual is inseparably linked to the social, and that the innermost dimensions of the self are shaped by external symbolic structures.

Jacques-Alain Miller (1988) revisited Lacan’s concept of imaginary, real, and symbolic within the concept of *extimité* to explore racism, xenophobia, sexism, and hate. He expanded the internal-external notion of *extimité*, showing how core aspects of identity – intimate fears, anxieties, and undesirable aspects of the self – are shaped by and projected

onto racialized external Others – “extimate enemies” (Miller, 2017). For Miller, *racism* reinforces identity by projecting undesirable aspects onto the Other. This projection establishes and reinforces identity by constructing rigid boundaries between the self and the Other. Miller contended that racism rooted itself in the Imaginary register, where the subject defined identity through exclusion: the Other serves as a phantasmatic screen onto which threats and anxieties are projected. According to Miller (2017) *sexism* is also structurally rooted in psychoanalytic dynamics. The imaginary and symbolic orders inherently privilege masculinity as the norm, relegating women and femininity to a position of deficiency or Otherness (cf. de Beauvoir, 1953 [1949]). Women’s personal experiences and bodies are controlled and marginalized by masculine social norms; their bodies, agency, and autonomy are pathologized when they do not fit the dominant social (biologically essentialist, patriarchal, national) imaginary.

Othering has a specific function: displacing internal anxieties onto Others. This process has been well researched in postcolonial as well as critical race theory (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988; McClintock, 1995; Mohanty, 2003), which revealed the dominant discourses and imaginaries of the Oriental Other based on fear and threat; European colonial domination was justified through the construction of the Other as dangerous, threatening, and inferior. Discursively constructed geographies, such as those of the “Orient” (Said, 1978), have served as imaginary spaces laden with exoticism and violence, reinforcing the “need” for Western superiority and domination in correcting these imaginary spaces. Gender theory extended the understanding of the Other in gendered terms, showing the performative construction of gendered bodies under power relations (Butler, 1990; 1993), and how intersections of gender and other personal traits reinforced discrimination of Other women (and men) (Crenshaw, 1991). Yeğenoğlu (1998) combined the two, analysing gendered representations in colonial-orientalist discourse, especially how colonial fantasies project Western anxieties onto Oriental women, constructing the Oriental woman in sexualized terms – as a hypersexual and submissive exotic sexual object. Moreover, Western women participated in racist benevolent missions, seeking to “liberate” colonized women by unveiling them; in the orientalist imaginary the veil has been represented as the ultimate symbol of submission (Scott, 2007; cf. Frank, 2014). Colonized men are depicted as hypermasculine and violent; this depiction serves to construct Western masculinity as rational and controlled, in contrast

to the supposedly uncontrollable sexuality of the colonized Other (Yeğenoğlu, 1998). Indeed, the prevalent European imaginary of the Other, including in Slovenia, is a sexual one – women are sexualized, eroticized subordinate objects; while (white) men are agents who dominate and protect (Richardson-Self, 2021, 45–46); in colonial imaginary, Other men represent a threat to “our” (European) women. This colonial Othering imaginary persists in contemporary representations of Muslim, Roma, Bosnian, Ukrainian, Albanian, etc. women and men. At the same time, other gender minorities are represented as threats to the patriarchal, binary, essentialist sexual status quo of acceptable femininity and masculinity bodies in dominant European imaginaries. The construction of the imaginary of the Other is thus profoundly racialized, ethnicized, and gendered.

In this context, hate speech (verbalizing hate) exemplifies the process of projection of internal conflicts (fears and undesired aspects of the self) onto Others, providing a rapid, instantaneous outlet, especially in online environments. The collision of dominant imaginary with different subjects of a marginal imaginary reflects deep anxieties about preserving an uncontaminated and unified self. Differences such as skin colour, religious practices, language, bodies, and sexual practices are perceived as intrusions, threatening the dominant orders of the imaginary on a social and personal level. Subjects attempt to resolve these internal conflicts and insecurities by displacing negative attributes onto vilified targets, to defend a coherent self-image and identity in opposition to the threatening Other.

However, feelings of threat or fear do not emanate from a personal or individual level – at least not the fear of the Other. Fear is predominantly social and socially learned (Olsson & Phelps, 2007). It is precisely through the transposition of imaginary fear from social imaginaries to the personal level – through constant reproduction and reinforcement in everyday narratives and power discourses (politics, media, education, family environment) – that social fear becomes personal. This is observable in the fact that, although there are no Real experiences or encounters with the Other (e.g., the Roma or the Turk), people often express a socially imposed fear of the imaginary Other. The empirical section below reveals how fear, as part of the dominant imaginary, often guides the practice and conduct of ordinary people, especially in gendered terms. “The ‘other’ becomes the source of anxiety and fear, but also of anger, revulsion and hate.... This longing for pure identities cannot be divorced from Europe’s imperial past” (Kinnvall, 2017, 3).

The three registers of subjectivity (the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real) and *extimité* are useful concepts for understanding how colonial and postcolonial, as well as essentialist and patriarchal social structures and imaginaries intertwine with individual psychologies to produce racist attitudes and hate manifestations. This framework provides a powerful socio-psychoanalytic framework for understanding how racism, sexism, and hate are not merely social phenomena but are deeply ingrained in the psychological life of individuals, continually reinforced by collective imaginaries and symbolic structures. Viewed this way, hate speech is a symptomatic response to these larger social dynamics, reflecting psychosocial tensions and anxieties.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive approach, focusing on the discursive construction of the Other in relation to hate speech targeting migrants, ethnic and religious, as well as racialized and gendered minorities. Methodologically, the study employs narrative interviews and focus group discussions to comprehend the lived experiences of discrimination, hate speech, and social exclusion. These methods enable an exploration of identity, subjectivity, and resistance as situated within dominant imaginaries and contested discourses. The narrative interviews were designed to elicit personal accounts of symbolic and institutional violence, with open-ended prompts allowing participants to narrate experiences of verbal hostility, cultural exclusion, and systemic marginalization. Complementing this, focus groups generated collective dialogues, enabling participants to negotiate meanings and challenge dominant representations. These discussions illuminated how imaginaries of belonging, security, and threat are performatively produced and resisted. The affective dynamics of fantasy and jouissance – particularly the pleasures and anxieties associated with identity and exclusion – were central to understanding how hate speech functions as more than rational discourse. Both methods were conducted with strict adherence to ethical principles of informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality, and participant safety, especially considering the potential vulnerability of the target populations. Participants thus had space to pause, redirect, or withdraw at any point. During the research project, a total of 35 participants (members of different minority groups, activists and experts) took part in individual interviews (22 participants) and four focus groups (totaling 13 participants) in 2024. Interviews lasted

approximately one hour, and focus groups two hours. Participants were selected according to their different status as a (religious, ethnic, language, gender, migrant) minority, while activist and experts were selected from civil society organizations and the academic sphere. Interviews and focus groups were conducted online or in person with semistructured introductory questions about understandings of hate speech and personal experiences for minority groups, while a more nuanced questionnaire was developed for activist and experts asking about understandings, reasons, targets, and effects of hate speech, and countermeasures against it. For this specific article, excerpts from three focus groups (FG1 and FG4 with activists and experts, FG2 with minority participants) and five interviews (anonymised as INT J, INT K, INT L, INT U5, INT U7) were used. FG1 took place at the Peace Institute's Library on 18 January 2024, FG2 took place online on 25 January 2024, and FG4 took place online on 6 February 2024. Interviews were conducted either online or in person at various locations and dates in 2024. All the materials (signed informed consents, audio recordings and transcripts) are stored in the Peace Institute's internal archive. The analysis of interviews was done with manual coding, where six main dominant imaginary themes and functions were identified: the rejection of reality, perceptions of truth and normalization of hate speech, historical continuity and fear, gendered fear, imaginary borders, and performative aspects of hate speech in context. These are presented in the following section.

THE IMAGINARY OF THE OTHER IN SLOVENIAN SOCIAL AND POLITICAL HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

The (historical) imaginary of the Other, pertaining to Slovenia, has been extensively presented in literature, e.g., the imaginary of the Muslim/Turk (Jezernik, 2010) and the imaginary of the Balkans (Todorova, 1997). This imaginary of the Other produces the core cultural basis for Othering, with hate speech emerging as one of its effects. National imaginaries and the invention of "Slovene-ness" also manifest themselves in more recent events in Slovenia: migrants transiting the Balkan route revived the Slovenian imaginary of historically constructed external "Others" (Velikonja, 2017). In Slovenian public space, media, and politics, the recurring image of the "dangerous migrant" (cf. Pajnik, 2018) as patriarchal and violent not only constructs gendered and racialized Others, but also reaffirms a fantasy of liberal, progressive, and gender-equal Slovenian identity. The symbolic construction of "Slovene-ness" relies on

cultural imaginaries of linguistic purity, Christian-European heritage, and territorial continuity. These imaginaries are affectively potent: they mobilize an idealized community under threat of dilution or contamination by foreign cultures – especially Islam, Roma traditions, migrant/refugee movements, and gender minorities. Hate speech directed at these groups can thus be understood as the discursive eruption of anxieties embedded in the national imaginary, often taking the form of “defensive nationalism”, which defines who does not belong (Bajt, 2016). The imaginary here operates as an affective-symbolic framework; the Other’s bodies are not merely different, but existentially threatening and fear-producing.

Empirical findings: The functions and mechanisms of the imaginary in hate speech

In this section, I present key findings from interviews and focus groups with different minority communities, activists and experts; I will present six dominant imaginary themes and functions revealing the interaction of imaginaries with realities.

The rejection of reality

One of the main mechanisms and functions of the imaginary is to prevent people from seeing reality, i.e., denying reality and rejecting the “real” other. Whenever new imaginaries, or realities, emerge and challenge the dominant imaginaries, hate speech functions against these disruptions as a justification and defence of the imaginary status quo in terms of denial, punishment, and disciplining. As one participant expressed:

Because hate speech appears at the moment there is a disruption of the balance, when one group, it doesn’t matter which one, tries to step out of the shadows and demands something more, or does something that doesn’t fit into some established way of life [...]. And it doesn’t have to be just women or migrants, it can be your neighbour or citizens of the Republic of Slovenia who dare to change their environment [...] and can therefore be targets of hate speech because they dare to ignore some patriarchal patterns [...]. And this is something that will always be present in hate speech, discrimination, racism and so on, everywhere where there is oppression. (FG1)

Hate speech comes in as a mechanism of punishment and discipline for those challenging this imaginary status quo:

The impact of hate speech varies [...]. Broadly speaking, the basic purpose is to discipline, not only a particular group, but also more broadly – if this hate speech is directed at migrants, the LGBT community, or women – when it is uttered in public, this function is also disciplinary [...] in the sense of: “Look what happens if you speak up about this.” There is a threat that if you publicly support the human rights of these people, you will also be targeted by hate speech. (FG1)

Participants reported the difficulties in presenting evidence, since the public is not eager to accept or even mentally process it: “Of course, you don’t say everything [...] because people are not ready for these truths” (FG4).

Reality and facts also do not matter:

You can scream as long as you have a voice that they only get €18 in pocket money per month, and there will still be a million right-wing publications that write how much they [migrants] actually get from the state, and a certain percentage of people will always have that number in their heads instead of the one that is true and represents the fact [...]. Because they don’t even care about the truth. (FG1)

Perceptions of truth and the normalization of hate speech

On the other side, the imaginary is stronger than reality about the Othered community and this imaginary is perceived as The Truth; hate speech becomes normalized to the point that it represents the norm, expressed in language, practices, and bodily attributions, as one activist sarcastically commented:

In the cradle of hate speech, when it comes to Roma, here we don’t even perceive it as hate speech anymore, but it’s normal speech, because it’s normal to say everything we know about Roma, and it’s a fact. This is not hate speech. These are facts. The fact is that they stink, the fact is that they steal, the fact is that there are only problems with them [...]. Here it’s really obvious, because people really don’t choose their words. Here they feel really, really relaxed, as far as terminology goes. They are also very cruel and everything is allowed [...]. When you talk about Roma, you calmly say things that you wouldn’t say about anyone else, because this same terminology, certain

designations, attributions, references comes from all levels. (FG4)

The social imaginary and fear become personal “reality”, “the truth,” and substitutes the experience of the real, as one activist expressed: “When you try to respond to this, you always have in mind that you have people in front of you who can’t really think differently, because they don’t have different experiences. They actually don’t have any experiences, and it often turns out that very few people speak from their own experiences” (FG4).

People thus speak from an imaginary position, not from real experience. However, it would not make any difference anyway, since when the imaginary encounters reality, it presents itself as a false reality, as an unintelligible collision. The reaction is a categorical rejection of the REAL Other to prevent the dismantling of the imaginary, as the case of a trans person illustrates:

So, when I get sick as a trans person. [...] For example, I had appendicitis [...] and they sent me for an ultrasound scan. [...] Before they operated on my appendix and I got to the surgeon who looked at my stomach [...]. Like, he looked at me, well, it was a long time [...]. And at the end he says “Okay, this is inflamed, this needs to be operated on, otherwise your uterus is okay, it’s a little hidden behind the gases, but everything is okay.” That was like, what? What kind of uterus, right? I don’t have one. I didn’t say anything, but at that moment I felt so unsafe, because the guy, despite having an objective device that tells him exactly what’s inside, it’s just based on the assumption that a person who comes with a skirt must have a uterus, if not, [then the person] doesn’t wear a skirt. (INT L)

Here the projection of the imaginary is stronger than the encounter with the reality, even for a physician who was unable to look at real empirical bodily experience and evidence (ultrasound) but employed his imaginary regarding essentialist women’s bodies. The way the imaginary interferes in practical, even medical practices and perceptions of bodies, is very well expressed in this experience:

People don’t see us because they’re blinded by their own [ideas] [...] and that puts me in danger because I must be careful, so they don’t screw up. I once went to the emergency room because I was urinating blood. They didn’t even examine me and the doctors wanted to [...] “Okay we’ll give you something [...]

we’ll do a smear” blah, blah, blah and then I say, “Doctor, but you know I’m trans” and he “Yeah, it doesn’t matter” blah, blah, blah, and in ten minutes he comes back... and says that “Being trans means it’s possible that you have a penis?” and then I’m like “Yeah penis yeah.” “Aah, because then there are other tests” and I said “Yeah, I thought so.” And it’s terrible when you see that people who should know [...] the different bodies that nature creates are completely unaware of this. Which then means that I don’t have normal access to services. (INT L)

Reality represents also a shock, revealing the denial of historical reality (facts) versus the historical construction of the imaginary, in this case of Muslims in Slovenia: “This “Islamophobia” [...] started to spread on our soil. I will never forget from 2014, 2015 onwards, when the first refugees started to arrive. It was always fascinating to me how you think [...] as if you had just seen a Muslim for the first time [...]. As if Muslims came for the first time” (FG2).

It’s actually interesting to watch people and groups [...] we also give this historical context and of course we start with the mosque in Log pod Mangartom, when their eyes first pop out. I’m actually surprised how few people know about it. They come with the belief that this is actually the first mosque in Slovenia, and when you mention Log pod Mangartom to them they’re all like: “What, really?” But when we start explaining to them about the continuous presence of the Muslim community from 1917 onwards, to the present day [...]. They can’t believe it at all. (FG2)

Related to Islamophobia, the imaginary of “the Turk” in Slovenia is very strong. The Turks, actually Ottomans at the time, are still imagined as cruel invaders:

This very deeply woven primal fear of the Turk, of the Turkish invasions. Why? Because the entire perception of the Turkish invasions begins and ends with the revised identity of this Turk. And this is a peculiarity in the Slovenian cultural space, which very much reflects all these reactions, contexts, thoughts, in my case [...] that I am an ideal target [of hate speech]. And I think this primal fear is almost impossible to eradicate. [...] Children encounter this [...]. These representations that are served to them during schooling. (FG2)

Historical continuity and fear

The historical imaginary of the Turk reveals also the selectivity and dominance of some imaginaries over others, especially the persistence of historical, colonial-oriental imaginary, since the Turkish imaginary has this: ““Oriental breath” [...] if we place the Turkish attacks in a historical timeline, for example, the Turkish invasions happened 500 years ago. The invasions of some other groups, such as the Italian fascists, the burning of the Slovenian cultural center in Trieste happened less than 100 years ago. And Nazism [...] some 70 years ago” (FG2).

The continuation of colonial imaginaries has consequences also for hate speech:

Sometimes you have the feeling that this is a “neverending story” [...]. It’s just a continuation of this postcolonial and also Orientalist discourse, which is constantly dragging on [...]. But the saddest thing is that [these] kinds of discourses... are a very fertile and good basis for the establishment and development of hate speech. Such a paradigm has been present and woven into the Slovenian primary education system for years. (FG2)

This historical continuity and fear in the imaginary thus functions as to construct a unified historical social community and the constant fear of its extinction at a personal-societal level, as local people reportedly complained to some activists: “We have been here, my family has been here for 500, 600 years. What about us?” (FG4).

One of the main reasons for this type of imaginaries that fuel hate speech is, as expressed by participants in focus groups, fear (FG1, FG2, FG4). People are constantly fed with an imaginary of fear to which they must respond:

[When] hate speech is expressed, which reflects some extreme comments, I always have the feeling that these kinds of people, who belong to a majority culture, a majority population, have some fear in the background that stems from this awareness of a numerically small nation, of some smallness [...]. That this small country, culture, nation, geographical space needs to be protected. I have the feeling that there is always this reason in the background, which then “pushes” all other forms of behaviour, which of course also leads to hate speech. (FG2)

Gendered fear

This fear within the imaginary materializes in practice as discrimination and hate speech. As described previously, the colonial imaginary is based on gendered bodies of the Other, forming the context of hate speech. Hate speech directed against men from marginalized and especially immigrant communities frequently employs a colonial imaginary of hypermasculinity and violence: immigrant men are represented as sexually predatory and a threat to national security. This induces a need to defend the Slovenian nation, women, and children, echoing colonial fears and justifications for control of Other men. Against this backdrop, hate speech is seen as a normal reaction:

The promotion of the Styrian Varda. When these people were asked why they were doing this, they said: “We are walking along this border, we will protect our wives and children from these migrants, so that they will not rape them.” [...] No one talked about the 2800 cases against sexual inviolability in Slovenia, everyone said: “Look at what migrants are like, they will do this to us.” [...] Do crimes by migrants not happen? [...] They do happen, just like by all of us [...]. But this hate speech just further cements it [crimes done by migrants]. (FG2)

Gendered imaginaries through excessive sexualization and objectification affect also women. Albanian, Kosovar, and Roma women are stereotyped as lazy, submissive, and hypersexualized staying at home and living off welfare. As one activist explained: “70% of the participants actually got a job after the project was completed, and our spokesperson [...] put that in the media. But [...] the mantra is that Albanian immigrant women don’t even integrate into society, let alone work. They’re just on social assistance. Well, here we contradict you – 70% of them actually got a job” (FG4).

Ukrainian women reported that they were often approached with sexual offers, since they are perceived as hypersexualized, sexually available objects:

When I graduated from college, some managers suggested that I sleep with them first, and then I’d get a job [...] But I also found out in one of these conversations with [my] manager that many employees of this company thought that I slept my way into this job [...]. There were also incidents like this in my student days, saying, “come on, you’re Ukrainian anyway, sleep with me.” (INT U5)

The sexual imaginary of Ukrainian women is very strong and permeates every aspect of society; even children are not spared: “You know, mom, my classmate said that his mom said you were a whore because we came from Ukraine” (INT U7).

Imaginary borders

Hate speech comments also express imaginaries that define fixed borders (national, European, bodily) and acceptable lifestyles and all those subjects and groups who do not fit into these lifestyle borders are hate speech targets:

Many comments [...] were such that, “People can come, but they have to accept our way of life”.... I doubt that anyone would be able to define this “our way of life” and show me how a group of Slovenians falls into this way of life of ours, because it focuses on everything that deviates from a certain norm in any way. The norm, however, is whatever is in the head of the person who says it or, more broadly, a group through which a person forms some of their expectations. It could be, for example, a political party or even a religious community. [...] All those who are not Slovenians/Slovenian citizens or are not from the Western world are targeted groups. Here we include all those from the so-called Global South. By religion, e.g., Muslims, Jews. In short, all those who are not, as far as Slovenia is concerned, Catholics. And the Roma community and also women, who are often a targeted group. (FG1)

Bodily and symbolic visibility represents a threat to the dominant imaginary and therefore are grounds for hate speech against visibly different subjects. The colonial fantasy of the veil, particularly the Muslim veil, is probably the strongest imaginary about Muslim women. Here, the intersectionality is strongly expressed, since Muslim women face more hate speech (and discrimination in general) than Muslim men; since these women are also attacked (physically and verbally) by other women. In this imaginary, the veil is perceived as a threat to Western women: the veil corresponds to an imaginary of a submissive, inactive object of secluded (Oriental) woman in the harem. Therefore, she should be “saved” and “emancipated”. These attitudes also reflect the intersectional discrimination that Muslim women face, not only as women but also as members of different ethnic, religious and social communities. Different visibility and

visibility represent a threat to the dominant imaginary, as one Muslim interviewee explained: “I am an ideal subject to whom some kind of hate speech can be directed. [...] Because I very visibly express my affiliation, which is immediately visible as markedly different from a majority pattern in the environment in which I live. [...] That is, some patterns that, I would say, do not fit into my dress code at all, or at least I do not fit into them” (FG2).

However, there is a parallel imaginary of the veil – besides the one unacceptable, i.e., the one pertaining to Islam – and the acceptable one:

Then the scarves. It was so funny [...] The grandmothers all have scarves and walk around. [...] these grandmothers of mine are not from the Balkans. My grandmother Marija was from Bela Krajina and also wore a scarf until her death, just like my grandmother Zagorka. In other words, they both had a scarf. Today, when we walk around the market, we see “indigenous” Slovenian women called “branjevke” [female market vendors], and they all wear a scarf. [...] A great colleague of mine, a journalist, has cancer and lost her hair, and also wears a scarf. [...] That’s why I don’t understand in what context this scarf is wrong now. [...] That is, visually, when one sees a scarf, they immediately categorize it. (FG2)

So, the veil is a floating or empty signifier (cf. Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), each time filled with new meaning – acceptable when worn by local old ladies, Christians, or cancer patients, but absolutely rejected when worn by Muslims.

Performative aspects of hate speech in context

Many interviewees recognized hate speech not only as verbal conduct, but noted how it performs in implicit ways, as nonverbal attitudes accompanying speech (FG1, FG2, FG4, INT L, INT K). Hate speech is one of the many means that perform Othering. One Muslim interviewee expressed that: “I understand hate speech as the first, easiest way someone discriminates against you, how someone, simply put, “puts you in a box,” in the way they see it [...] they Other you [te podružači]. So, I would say, it is easiest to do this with language first, and then with all other means, because speech as such is almost for everyone the first and easiest means how we do this” (FG2).

Hate speech is not only done on a verbal level, but it has influence in terms of power relations, attitudes, or treatment of Others, which all can

express hate. Hate in practice also includes habitual bodily gestures, attitudes, and the gaze (the hateful, dismissive gaze), all nonverbal attitudes that form the context of hate speech. This reveals the importance of the relationship between hate speech and the context in which it happens: hate speech is not strictly verbal but performative,⁶ with physical-bodily effects:

We also talked about the actual effects. That is, not only at the level of these certain statements about this group, but the physical consequences [...] this becoming flesh [...] the saleswomen immediately follow them to see what they are going to steal, they address them with 'you' their whole life, because we [as a society] do not feel respect for the Roma. (FG4)

That's why I say [...] that I'm ideal at first glance. So sometimes, if we define hate speech as something we say that has a discriminatory intent, in my case it's often just the gaze itself. (FG2)

Yes, they may be polite, they may be cultured, but silent ignorance hurts too. It's not necessary – sometimes a look says more than words. [...] No one will say "dirty migrant". But I read what she thinks. And I feel what she feels towards me. [...] This silent institutional hatred is more important. [...] Hate speech exists and there is more this kind of hateful behaviour that is nonverbal. (INT K)

Speech itself is therefore a conduct that "does", that performs the discrimination with material consequences: "Isn't it hate speech that says 'refugee' in big, block letters on a refugee's card, that everyone can see, every security guard, right?" (INT K).

Implicit hate speech is also part of the "benevolent speech", comprising structural hate and discrimination, as one expert and minority participant expressed: "Often, those who make sexist statements are not even aware that they are sexist and even think that they are doing it out of a positive motive, such as complimenting colleagues on how nicely dressed and groomed they are today" (INT J).

Structural hate is present also in the scientific/academic milieu, expressing epistemological power – the tacit presence of hate and discrimination is

manifested in scientific bias: indeed, the dominant imaginary of a researcher is that of a European/Slovenian, white, straight, and male; inclusive practices are dismissed as something limited to the private sphere:

Often in the field of science, resistance to some inclusive practices is wrapped in the argument of meritocracy – "Why should we support women in science now, it is enough to make fair criteria, it is an open competition." And now we all know that in essence it is neither an open competition nor are the criteria objective but are male-centric, they come from a certain culture [...] While it is clear that open hostility is not allowed, the fact that they happen to be mostly white men, who are ethnic Slovenians, are "straight" and have families is irrelevant because it is their "private matter". [...] And this is now the problem, because hatred or non-acceptance is packaged in the fact that this is something private, something that is outside the field of science. (INT J)

This statement clearly demonstrates how the problem of hate and hate speech dominates at a systemic level, including politics, culture, society, history, and knowledge production/science. The imaginary is in all pores of society; to reveal it and cope with it, we have to address its manifestations on a larger structural-systemic, i.e., imaginary level, including the societal-personal axis of the imaginary.

CONCLUSION

Postcolonial and critical race theory, feminist poststructuralism, gender theory and psychoanalysis all offer valuable insights into the enduring impacts of hegemonic imaginaries of colonialism and the ways in which racism, sexism, and expressions of hate function as a tool of social and political domination. We must acknowledge that science, epistemology, belief systems, and sociopolitical structures reproduce Othering on a systemic level. Jacques-Alain Miller's interpretation provides a comprehensive socio-psychoanalytic perspective on these phenomena elucidating the deep psychological and social mechanisms of hate speech. It shows the interplay between individual identity and the external (social) structures underpinning racism, sexism, and hate, thus offering critical insights into the

⁶ Slovenian law and judicial practice also stress the importance of the context in which hate speech occurs (Criminal Code, 2012, Art. 297).

persistent issues of racism and xenophobia in contemporary society. His exploration of *extimité* underscores the importance of understanding the external roots of intimate, everyday experiences, but also how projecting hate onto Others (hate speech) serves to manage intimate fears and anxieties (individual emotions) and to discipline society. It reveals how hate speech is connected with deeper racist, nationalistic, xenophobic, and gendered constructions. These constructions

are an integral part of the lived experiences of people who do not fit the dominant Slovenian imaginary: many aspects make them the Other, different from what is usually accepted as the norm (skin and appearance, clothing, lifestyle, as well as family, sex/gender, and ethnic relations). Without addressing these larger systems of oppression of the Other and the imaginaries that sustain it, hate speech cannot be properly challenged.

KULTURNI RASIZEM, USPOLJENO DRUGAČENJE IN SOVRAŽNI GOVOR: DISKURZI, IMAGINARIJI IN VSAKDANJE MEJE V SLOVENIJI

Ana FRANK

Mirovni inštitut, Metelkova ul. 6, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenija
e-mail: ana.frank@mirovni-institut.si

POVZETEK

Članek raziskuje, kako kulturni rasizem in zgodovinsko zakoreninjeni imaginariji strukturirajo sovražni govor v Sloveniji. Z uporabo analitičnih pristopov postkolonialne teorije, psihoanalize ter kritičnih študij rase in spola prispevek trdi, da sovražni govor ni zgolj verbalno dejanje, temveč globoko institucionalizirana družbena praksa, ki reproducira in utrjuje sistemske neenakosti. Koncepti drugačenja, imaginarnega in »extimacy« so osrednjega pomena in se nanašajo na simbolne in afektivne okvire, skozi katere družbe konstruirajo identitete, opredeljujejo meje pripadnosti, ter določajo proti komu se usmerjajo izključujoče in sovražne prakse. Imaginarne predstave o Drugem so zgodovinsko sedimentirane, prepletene s kolonialnimi in orientalističnimi diskurzi, ter se nenehno obnavljajo skozi medijske reprezentacije, politične diskurze in vsakdanje interakcije. Ti imaginariji normalizirajo diskriminacijo in projicirajo družbene tesnobe na marginalizirane skupine. Empirična analiza se osredotoča na slovenski kontekst z uporabo metode narativnih intervjujev in fokusnih skupin z migranti in različnimi etničnimi, verskimi in spolnimi manjšinami ter z aktivisti in strokovnjaki. Ugotovitve kažejo, da v vsakdanjih interakcijah sovražni govor pogosto nastane, ko so dominantni imaginariji izzvani in izpodbijani, in deluje kot disciplinski mehanizem za ohranjanje družbenih norm in meja med družbenimi skupinami. Sovražni govor je pogosto tudi implicitnega značaja, umeščen v neverbalne prakse ter normaliziran, saj deluje skozi institucionalne procese in strukture, telesne prakse in ponotranjene navade, ki povezujejo socialno in psihološko dimenzijo delovanja človeka. Prispevek dodatno razkriva povezavo med sovražnim govorom in družbeno proizvedenim strahom, ponotranjenim skozi dominantne imaginarije. Članek sklene, da je za učinkovito preprečevanje sovražnega govora nujno nasloviti širše imaginarne predstave in razmerja moči v družbi, ter uveljaviti sistemske in vključujoče pristope k družbeni pravičnosti.

Ključne besede: sovražni govor, drugačenje, rasizem, imaginarij, spol, marginalizirane skupine

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