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Over approximately a year, from when the call for papers went out for this issue of *Junctures* to the writing of its editorial, I read the *Wolves Chronicles* to my eleven/twelve-year-old child. It is a series of twelve children's novels by the British writer Joan Aiken (1924–2004) published over the period 1962 to 2005. The *Chronicles* are, I believe, chronically underappreciated. The best volumes in the series, set in a world that approaches steampunk (though before the term was invented), are equal parts gripping, poignant, fantastical and funny. But what lifts eight of the stories to particular heights is the character of Dido Twite. Dido is first encountered in *Black Hearts in Battersea* (1964), "a shrewish-looking little creature of perhaps eight or nine, with sharp eyes of a pale washed-out blue and no eyebrows or eyelashes to speak of."[1] Over the course of that novel, and those that follow, as Dido is caught up in a procession of adventures (usually involving a nefarious Hanoverian plot to wipe out the sitting British monarch), it is impossible not to feel affection for the mistreated cockney 'brat' who exhibits resourcefulness, self-determination, integrity and wit. Dido is described unequivocally as a girl, but the circumstances in which she finds herself, as well as her own preferences and decisions, lead her to dress and act in ways that are not stereotypically feminine; she is sometimes assumed by other characters to be a boy. Dido's speech is littered with such colourful expressions as "Croopus!" and "all rug and rat's ramble" and "lobbed his groats" (vomited) and "I jist hope we gets to London this side o' Turpentine Sunday." Despite regularly getting "scrobbled" by "havey-cavey coves," she is both spry and tough enough to foil the scoundrels and help her friends attain their rightful place in society, though Dido herself is often left feeling homesick and alone in the world.

The earlier books in the *Chronicles* could be described as ahead of their time, in their representation of gender, or at least in tune with the progressive social movements of the 1960s. Later stories are more overtly feminist in their description of women's collectives and patriarchal and industrial violence. Today, a couple of decades on from the publication of the final book in the series, Aiken's treatment of gender might seem only modestly progressive. The tomboy is, after all, a familiar trope. There are isolated but strong hints, too, that Dido ultimately seeks a heteronormative relationship, first with her shipboard tutor Mr Holystone in *The Stolen Lake* (1981),[2] then with her long-

time friend Simon, whom she nonetheless refuses to marry when it turns out that, despite growing up in a cave with only geese for family, he is in line to be king (Dido's adherence to her own working-class background means that she cannot regard herself as a potential queen).[3] Queer identities and relationships are nowhere to be found in the *Chronicles* (though cross-dressing is a recurring theme). All things considered, Aiken's stories read now as mildly progressive, while also indicative of how far we have come in the intervening years.

But how far *have* we come? In Aotearoa New Zealand, the Legislation (Definitions of Woman and Man) Amendment Bill, introduced by New Zealand First, the ostensibly centrist partner in the current Government coalition, passed its first reading in May 2026 and is currently at the Select Committee stage. The Bill would impose biological definitions of 'woman' and 'man,' and potentially promote discrimination against gender-diverse people. The New Zealand example is just one of numerous cases worldwide of a depressing reversal of many decades-worth of gains towards breaking down the oppressiveness of binary understandings of gender. Over that time, it seemed inevitable, for someone of a leftist bent, that these incremental achievements would always continue to unfold, with even conservative ruling political parties absorbing them, even if belatedly, into the acknowledged 'normal' conditions of society. Now it is evident that this was an illusion. History is not linear. Whatever is gained can be lost. An era of social progress might turn into an era of unthinkable social injustice. And we are unlikely to find ourselves in a queer utopia before Turpentine Sunday.

Australian art writer Amelia Groom has, in a recent essay, pointed to what they call (channelling Lady Gaga) the 'born this way' syndrome of the 2010s as an instance in which even a liberatory expression of trans identities has in fact been based on precisely the biological terms that constrained earlier discussions of gender.[4] One can understand why it has been useful, or necessary, for people who are gay or trans to assert that this is not merely a choice—something that they can take on or throw off according to whim—but a conviction they have had since birth. To assert otherwise might be to invite the possibility that, as conservative and religious groups believe, such people could readily be cured of their 'perversion,' converted 'back' to their 'correct' orientation. If gender is a choice, then people are consumers of gender, susceptible, under media influence, to choosing the 'wrong' one. Groom refers to the contemporary backlash against trans people as a fear of the 'contagion' of gender-affirmative ideology. To deny that gender-nonconformity is contagious sometimes means resorting to something resembling the old-fashioned assertion of an essentialist 'true self.' The 'born this way' narrative can equally be reprised by trans people, not out of choice but because it satisfies the dominant diagnostic discourse built into the process of medical transition. For Groom, rather than prescribing the identity of a given individual, the speculative ideas of Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto"—now more than 40 years old—are a more realistic framework for understanding gender diversity as integral to human experience:

> Ultimately, it shouldn't matter if someone's divergent gender or sexuality is understood as acquired or chosen or nurtured or fluctuating or ancient or new or predestined or in-progress or cosmically imparted or biologically innate or caught through something in the water. The question of why the divergence exists is beside the point; the fact that

it exists should be more than enough reason to insist on the flourishing of trans and queer life.[5]

It is tempting, of course, to claim that in an ideal world those oppressive terms, 'male' and 'female,' would have no use anymore; gender would not matter. That is not quite, though, what Haraway had in mind when she used the term 'post-gender,'[6] nor, I suspect, what Groom is proposing, given that the "flourishing of trans and queer life" can only occur if people are able to express trans-ness and queer-ness, to perform gender-diversity. 'Gender,' therefore, remains a salient term for embracing innumerable perspectives and discussions, provocations and disruptions, networks and becomings … and this issue of *Junctures* (the most substantial that I have had the pleasure of editing) represents the fruitfulness of, and crystallises a moment in, this expansive field of inquiry.

In the first article, by Ahinata Kaitai-Mullane and Maia Berryman-Kamp, gender intersects with Indigeneity and with arts-based research and mahi toi. These fields or methodologies are all, as the authors note, "positioned at the margins of research." Their mutual relationships represent an ontological bringing into being of knowledge and identity—a process of research-creation—that reaches beyond a critique of prevailing Eurocentric and colonialist knowledge systems. This is reflected too in the structure of the article. The authors use both academic and conversational voices to reflect on their respective recently completed PhD theses, treating their own research not just as data for analysis but as 'new knowledge' that resides in the process of creating it. A fascinating moment comes when Berryman-Kamp recounts a decision, made part-way through their project, to have both them and other participants tattooed by takatāpui artists, and their surprise when a research ethics approval for this seemingly risky event was granted. Clearly, the intersection of new forms of research and institutional ethics frameworks have the capacity to reinvent, rather than merely represent, ethical principles.

Daniele Abreu e Lima and Josh Sanoria also report on postgraduate practice-as-research, in this case architectural design. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's 'epistemology of the closet' suggests that queer people can experience alienation, if they keep their identities private, or discrimination or abuse for being open about who they are. Abreu e Lima and Sanoria describe how this critical dilemma can inform designed spaces that facilitate a range of phases and moments of queer visibility. Speculative architectural projects in two different cultural contexts, Aotearoa New Zealand and the Philippines, started with input from queer communities and culminated in reflections on the phenomenological implications of designed spaces that might in turn inform future architectural practice. Those who interact with the spaces are given the agency to determine their own levels of concealment and visibility, not just along a linear path from the closet to being 'out,' but by moving through time and space, performing multiple and contingent inflections of privacy and openness, or shifting 'queeriosities.'

Next come three articles that address masculinities. The first two deal with creative works (film and literature) through interpretation rather than practice, considering the implications of particular gender representations.

Matthew Bannister writes about the 2020 film *Baby Done*, starring Pasifika New Zealand comedian Rose Matafeo and fulfilling some of the conventions of the 'unwanted pregnancy' movie trope. Matafeo's character, Zoe, keeps up, until the very last, an attitude of stubbornly non-maternal and non-feminine behaviour, which Bannister reads as a reflection of the incommensurability of femininity with the distinctively masculinist construction of New Zealand identity, derived from colonial history but repeatedly reaffirmed in contemporary popular media. This picture is complicated, however, by the factor of ethnicity. Bannister brings to bear a range of possible readings, but ultimately hands leaves room for his own reader to consider the extent to which Zoe's Pasifikan 'mimicry' represents a conveniently popular reaffirmation of the masculinist national stereotype, a necessary acquiescence to the impossibility of a woman living up to the expectations of that role or a cleverly orchestrated glitch in the hegemony of the national(list) imaginary.

Pratibha Tiwari, Shantanu Ghosh and Garima Dalal examine masculinity in India, specifically the upper-caste *bhadralok* in the context of British colonial rule in Bengal. Devdas is the eponymous male protagonist of a 1917 novel by Chandra Chattopadhyay and the prototype for Dev in Anurag Kashyap's 2009 film, *Dev.D*. The narrative of novel and film is similar: Devdas/Dev rejects—out of pride, arrogance or suspicion—the love formed, during his rural upbringing, for Parvati/Pavo, then spirals into despair and alcoholism when she in turn rejects him and his capitulation to the temptations of modern, urban life. A telling difference, however, is that Dev's downfall comes from his inability to accept the independence of contemporary women. Tiwari, Ghosh and Dalal argue that Devdas and Dev alike reveal tensions within the construction of masculinity, specifically an attachment to the maternal feminine that manifests as either sexual inhibition (Devdas) or sexual aggression (Dev). This psychoanalytic reading, though attached to fictional characters, reflects the social realities of patriarchy, power and consumption in both colonial India and contemporary global capitalism.

In the neoliberal economy, entrepreneurship extends to individuals' attempts to improve, or optimise, their own bodies. Niall Campbell's research focuses on the weird world of looksmaxing, an offshoot of the incel (involuntary celibate) subculture characterised by delusions of masculine superiority and embittered misogyny. Looksmaxers resort to extreme techniques of bodily enhancement—'mewing' and 'bonesmashing'—and congregate online to show off the outcomes. Conventional wisdom suggests that they are united in their pursuit of masculine beauty and contempt for lesser mortals. Campbell argues, on the contrary, that they perpetuate and intensify the malignancy of their views through ongoing conflict and Nietzschean 'ressentiment,' continually turning on their own kind. Looksmaxers are locked into competition with each other, such that one person's claim to masculine beauty must be knocked down by others to sustain the community's pursuit of perfection. Gilles Deleuze's 'control society' captures, for Campbell, the looksmaxers' delusions of progress through competition, but the scope of Deleuze's concept is such as to suggest that the rest of us are depressingly akin to looksmaxers ourselves.

The next three articles consider trans identities in terms of resistance, affirmation and critique.

Asmita Kundu picks up Campbell's discussion of 'success' from a different angle: the celebration of queer success stories in popular culture. She studies South Asian films in which queer characters attain visibility and acceptance, but do so through conforming to heteronormative expectations, appearances and accomplishments, reaffirming the capitalist meritocracy. Kundu, like other contributors to this issue, considers the intersection of gender and cultural identity, in this case against the backdrop of India's Transgender Amendment Act (2026), which seeks to put gender-diverse people at the mercy of medical diagnoses and categorisations. Kundu's article, however, is not only "On Wildness and Failure," but is itself a little 'wild' and embraces 'failure,' according to Jack Halberstam's theorisation of these terms. It is, in Kundu's own elaboration of another Halberstam concept, a 'dis-ordering.' One sign of this is the unexpected irruption of autoethnography—moments of gritty lived experience that counteract the slick fictions of the selected films.

From South Asia to South Africa, where, according to Elana Leah Ryklief and Sally-Ann Murray, trans life writing is an emerging field, still little studied. Again, the approach to gender is intersectional in that it deals with the specific cultural conditions that shape trans lives. The examples of life writing here span print and online media, written and verbal accounts, and range from well-established forms of memoir to experimental modes of storying. The content of these texts also varies in the extent to which it is channelled into conventional linear constructions of trans-ness and trans experience, such as the before and after of gender-affirming surgery. Ryklief and Murray emphasise, however, that all the case studies represent "politically charged and moving life stories that have the potential to provoke change." They argue for trans writing as activism, not only recording alienation and discrimination, but experiences of resilience and joy that are often, in fact, enhanced by the act of life writing itself. What I find striking about the article is that its meticulous scholarship works in tandem with, or in the service of, the telling of otherwise overlooked and ordinary stories—"small examples" of trans people "intentionally wording their actions."

C Ray Borck's article resides partly in the realm of trans life writing—an autoethnographic and at times provocative narrative. It also, however, makes an incisive critique of a widespread blindness to what happens when someone, like Borck himself, transitioning from female to male. The article refers to the 'born this way' trope, interrogated by Groom, as a construction that operates effectively in the medical context. Borck does not deny that for some people the trope fits their experience, but he suggests that there are other, less widely aired or formalised, motivations for transitioning. For Borck, the appeal for hormones and surgery was not a response to having always believed he was a man, but, on the contrary, because he did not feel like a man and wanted to do so. As a result, however, he finds that he has joined forces with masculine privilege and no longer experiences—almost fails to see—the vulnerability to violence that women do. Borck calls this 'obligatory forgetting.' Men, of course, can be feminists. But all the while that he strives to articulate his feminist argument, Borck feels acutely a loss of "the availability of feminist conviction—the felt sense that the analysis is urgent rather than abstract."

This *Junctures* 'gender' issue concludes on a relatively hopeful, or at least aspirational, feminist note: "To attempt to disentangle love and labour from the confines and

constraints of gender under capitalism is to enter a knotty dialogue that spans our histories, presents and future-possibilities." In another autoethnographic text, Peyton Bond reflects on her relationship with her grandmother, who seems to have been the very model of the apple-pie American housewife. Bond describes her grandmother not only competently carrying out domestic labour—the cooking, the child and grandchild rearing—but doing so with an alacrity and pleasure cherished in the memories of everyone around her. How do we read this? Certainly, one might lament the oppressive and unpaid responsibilities that constructed gender roles place upon women. If, however, such life-giving and life-making labour is in fact life-affirming—both essential and satisfying—then, Bond speculates, it might be possible to value it and to envision a world in which duties of care are not allocated along capitalist and gender-based lines. It seems fitting to conclude with an article that has its roots in feminism and aspires to "gender liberation."

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1. Joan Aiken, *Black Hearts in Battersea* (Jonathan Cape, 1963), 13.
2. Aiken, *The Stolen Lake* (Jonathan Cape, 1981).
3. Aiken, *Midwinter Nightgale* (Jonathan Cape, 2004) and *The Witch of Clatteringshaws* (Jonathan Cape, 2005).
4. Amelia Groom, "Precedents and Contagions: Oceanic Genders Against Personhood," Contemporary Art Stavanger, 24 September 2026, https://contemporaryartstavanger.no/archive/precedents-and-contagions-oceanic-genders-against-personhood.
5. Ibid.
6. Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (Routledge, 1991), 150.