Junctures
The Journal for Thematic Dialogue

26: gender

November 2026

https://doi.org/10.34074/junc.26

Published by Otago Polytechnic Press. Otago Polytechnic Ltd is a subsidiary of Te Pūkenga – New Zealand Institute of Skills and Technology.

© 2025 the authors; © illustrations, the artists or other copyright owners.



26: gender

November 2026

Junctures: The Journal for Thematic Dialogue is a multidisciplinary academic journal founded in 2003 as a forum for trans-disciplinary discussion, analysis, and critique. *Junctures* is published by Otago Polytechnic Press. The print edition of this journal is co-published by Otago Polytechnic Press and General Editions.





Junctures encourages discussion across boundaries, whether these are disciplinary, geographic, cultural, social or economic. *Junctures* embraces the long established fields of the humanities, arts, science, law, medicine and philosophy, as well as engaging with the challenges of more recent disciplinary and interdisciplinary fields. Each issue of *Junctures* is organised as a site of encounter around a theme. This allows us to highlight the resonances and disturbances of dialogue. With New Zealand and the Asia-Pacific region as a backdrop, but not its only stage, *Junctures* seeks to address the matters which concern us all as we negotiate the contemporary environment.

Junctures is fully blind peer reviewed and catalogued on the EBSCO Academic Search, Scopus and Thomson Reuters databases: Academic OneFile, Literature Resource Center and Expanded Academic.

ISSN: 1176-5119 (print)

ISSN: 1179-8912 (online)

This issue of *Junctures* is published under the Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derivatives Works 4.0 New Zealand licence (cc-by-nc-nd), unless otherwise indicated.

Copyright in all images remains with the artists, unless otherwise indicated.

Send items for review to:

Junctures Editor: junctures@op.ac.nz

Editor: Edward Hanfling

Editorial Liaison: Pam McKinlay

Design and Typesetting: Joanna Wernham

Printing:, GE/STUDIO

Cover image: Faye Powell-Moore, *Adam*, 2026.
Watercolour on paper mounted on aluminium, 1540cmx2325cm.

EDITOR

Edward Hanfling
Senior Lecturer
Dunedin School of Art
College Te Maru Pūmanawa
Creative Practice & Enterprise
Otago Polytechnic
Dunedin, New Zealand

EDITORIAL BOARD

Professor Susan Ballard, School of English, Film, Theatre, Media and Communication, and Art History, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

Dr Matthew Bannister, Post Graduate Theory Supervisor in the School of Media Arts, Waikato Institute of Technology (WINTEC), Kirikiriroa/Hamilton, New Zealand

Associate Professor Vanessa Byrnes, Head of the School of Creative Industries, Unitec, Auckland, New Zealand

Professor David Hutchinson, Department of Physics, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand

Dr Stephanie Kelly, Director Research and Postgraduate Studies, Te Kura Matatini ki Otago, Otago Polytechnic, Dunedin, New Zealand

Professor Matthew Marshall, Dean of the School of Arts, Sunway University, Malaysia

Dr Cecilia Novero, Former Associate Professor, Languages and Cultures, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand

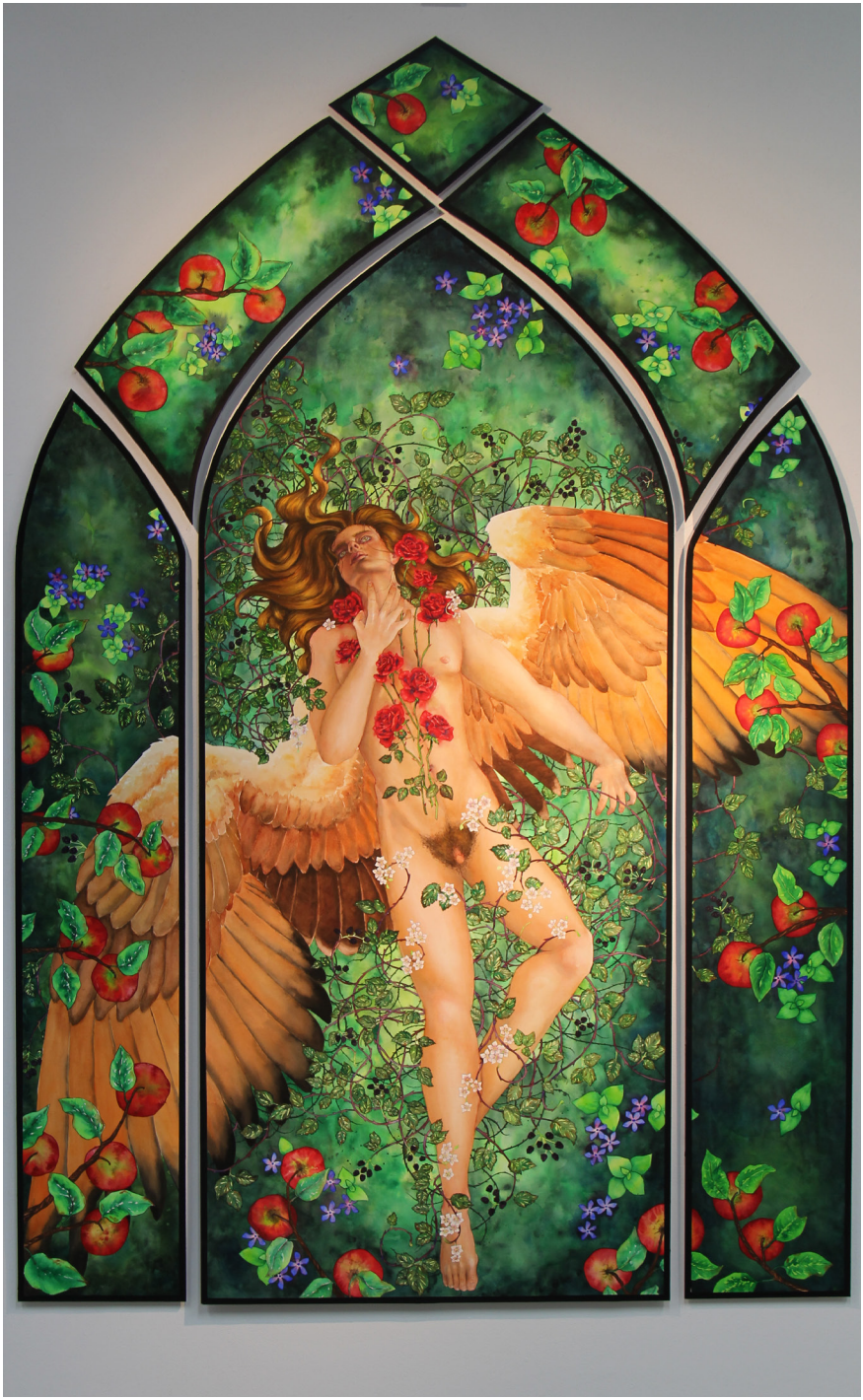
Emeritus Professor Leoni Schmidt, Former Director: Research and Postgraduate Studies, Te Kura Matatini ki Otago, Otago Polytechnic, Dunedin New Zealand

Front Cover image: Faye Powell-Moore, *The Queer, Transgender and the Spiritual*

Faye Powell-Moore creates large scale vibrant watercolour paintings that capture the essence of stained glass in both shape and luminosity, using symbol and narrative to explore The Queer, Transgender and the Spiritual. These works explore opposites and surprising spaces of harmony, pleasure, pain and hope for the future while acknowledging a past that is complex and textured.

These works celebrate the medium of watercolour, exploring the limits of the medium in spaces of play and fine detailed control.

Faye Powell-Moore is an artist living and working in Dunedin, New Zealand. Currently focusing on large scale, figurative water colour works. The themes of their work play with history, time and the metaphysical exploring how to merge these elements with issues around gender identity and symbolic languages, creating work that is both figurative and utilises the expression and fluid glowing nature of watercolour works. Faye has recently completed their Master of Fine Arts degree at the Otago Polytechnic and is currently teaching night classes in watercolour.



Junctures
The Journal for Thematic Dialogue

26: gender
November 2026

Edward Hanfling	Editorial: 'gender'	8
Ahinata Kaitai-Mullane and Maia Berryman-Kamp	Creating Space: Indigenous, Queer, and Gendered Conversations in Creative Practice, Arts-Based, and Mahi Toi Research Methods	14
Daniele Abreu e Lima and Josh Sanoria	Queer Design Research in Architecture: A Cross-Cultural Method from the Philippines to Aotearoa New Zealand	35
Matthew Bannister	*Baby Done* and the 'Misperformance' of New Zealand Gender and Ethnic Paradigms	53
Pratibha Tiwari, Shantanu Ghosh and Garima Dalal	Masculine Crisis and the Quest for the Divine Feminine in *Devdas* and *Dev.D*: A Psychoanalytic Study	65
Niall Campbell	Beautiful Cruelty: Looksmaxing Masculinity as a Response to Neoliberal Capitalism	79
Asmita Kundu	On Wildness and Failure: Reading Jack Halberstam in India	94
Elana Leah Ryklief and Sally-Ann Murray	Storying South African Trans Lives as Activism	113
C Ray Borck	Obligatory Forgetting	130
Peyton Bond	for your life & life-making	147

https://doi.org/10.34074/junc.26008

EDWARD HANFLING

Editorial: 'gender'

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."

Edward Hanfling is Postgraduate Coordinator at the Dunedin School of Art. He writes regularly as a critic for *Art New Zealand*, has published articles in journals such as the *Burlington Magazine*, the *Journal of Australian and New Zealand Art*, the *Journal of Visual Arts Practice* and *Third Text* and books on New Zealand art, including the co-authored *250 Years of New Zealand Painting* (Bateman, 2021). He is editor of *Scope (Art & Design)* and *Junctures: The Journal for Thematic Dialogue*, convenor of the DSA Lunchtime Seminar programme and co-convenor of the Visual Studies Research Network.

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.

https://doi.org/10.34074/junc.26014

AHINATA KAITAI-MULLANE
AND MAIA BERRYMAN-KAMP

CREATING SPACE: INDIGENOUS, QUEER, AND GENDERED CONVERSATIONS IN CREATIVE PRACTICE, ARTS-BASED, AND MAHI TOI RESEARCH METHODS

ABSTRACT

As we seek theory and methods to begin to articulate identities of Indigenous queerness and gender diversity, a space of absence and potential unfolds before us. Indigeneity, queerness and particularly gender diversity are repeatedly positioned at the margins of research. This marginality is multiplied when considered in its intersections. We, as theorists, invert space to re-orient these marginalities at the centre, drawing on a combination of arts-based, mahi toi and creative research practices as a pathway for Indigenous, queer and gender diverse research. The potential embodied in this practice is explored through the metaphor of a waka journey. This begins with the origin point, exploring the literature that informs and shapes our approaches to research methods. We identify the motivations and origins of our PhD theses, the allure of arts-based methodologies in pursuing these projects and mahi toi as the ultimate descriptor of the artistic and creative methods we both are drawn into. Next, we gaze across the moana, which articulates the methodological and theoretical tensions we navigate and that shape our respective research approaches. Gliding through the moana, we navigate research on our waka, which articulates the vessels of our research and reveals our specific methods. We end with our landing point. Engaging the circularity of Indigenous epistemologies, we establish a new origin.[1] This reflects the journeys we undertake as theorists and develops pathways for future voyages. These phases of movement weave our narrative, asserting that creative practice is one avenue through which we can re-orient research to hold Indigenous, queer, trans and gender-diverse stories of identity, being and belonging.

THE FORM OF CONVERSATION

This article unfolds as a relational work as the two of us reflect on the creative mahi toi research methods we utilised in our PhD theses. Ahinata Kaitai-Mullane (she/her) is a queer Kāi Tahu scholar whose thesis was focused on Kāi Tahu wāhine and gender-diverse stories of identity and belonging.[2] Maia Berryman-Kamp (they/she/ia) descends from Te Puku o Te Ika a Māui. Their thesis explored how irahuhua connect to tā moko and kiritoi as markers of culture.[3]

We speak into this paper with two distinct layers of voices; our collective academic voice (e.g. "we explore …") and our individual discussant voices 'in conversation' (e.g. "my rakahau …"). This allows us to develop a coherent story of our journeys through creative practice methods, layered with our individual narratives and reflections. Both layers reflect a first-person voice—individual (I) and collective (we)—that embodies the value that both Queer theory and Indigenous theory place upon the critical orientation of self in research.[4] Use of both 'we' and 'I' is the first action we take as authors to disrupt the marginalisation of Indigi-Queer theory and identity in research. Established in the work of *tebrakunna* country and Emma Lee, "referent points of 'I' and 'you' are powerful tools of Western privilege: the 'you' is a space of Othering and occupying the margins (Said 1978), while to be an 'I' expresses faculty and demands a place for voice."[5] It is in resistance to this Othering that we claim our first-person voices.

Claiming authentic first-person voices is complicated by our tribal mita (dialects). While Maia is from Te Arawa, and therefore standardised forms of te reo Māori generally reflect their mita, Ahinata is Kāi Tahu. Kāi Tahu mita diverges significantly from other te reo Māori mita, including the most commonly cited difference where 'ng' becomes 'k' (e.g. 'wānanga' becomes 'wānaka').[6] Ahinata retains this mita in her individual first-person voice, but we utilise a standardised mita for our collective voice. To support you to navigate through these differing mita, we supply a glossary with both translations and dialectical variations at the end.

Our layered individual and collective voices draw on the stylistic choices Shawn Wilson makes in his 2008 book *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. While he is the sole author, he addresses the reader in three styles: academically; as members of his community through writing to his sons; and in the voices of collaborators, re-positioning these individual 'interviews' in conversation with each other.[7] These threads are visually cued through the style of text. This mirrors the way that we re-construct our research in conversation with one another. We utilise conventions of dialogue—signalled by single spacing, indentation and the attribution of our individual voices, MAIA and AHINATA—to develop reflective understandings of shared connections and differences in the use of arts-based research methods in our PhD rangahau. The convention of conversation, with multiple voices, allows for dynamic, cross-disciplinary and reflective engagement in questions of how creative practice methods emerge as Indigenous and Queer research praxis.

THE ORIGIN POINT

We are supposed to be our own storytellers,
songmakers, earth painters, trauma breakers,
with roots so long and strong they grip
the fingers of Papatūānuku like newborn
baby hands, never letting go.
—Jessica Hinerangi[8]

Research often commences (and rarely continues) in a straightforward manner. As researchers, we begin the process by identifying what we want to research, then exploring what has been done already. Here, we map our engagement with these two processes, engaging the questions and literature that constitute our grounding and therefore our point of origin. Together we find arts-based, and later mahi toi, methods as an origin point to set sail from.

Way back at the beginning, what did you want to research?

AHINATA: My rangahau is Kāi Tahu centred. It looked to build upon Kāi Tahu stories of identity to understand how we, as wāhine and gender diverse Kāi Tahu, learn, care for and grow into our identities. The purpose of this project was threefold: to assert a place within our communities for diverse embodiments of Kāi Tahu identities; to understand the layered factors that shape our understandings of our selves; and to identify enablers and barriers that impact wāhine and gender diverse Kāi Tahu to be ourselves in our diversity. This project, therefore, required a vessel that all Kāi Tahu could hop aboard, express ourselves through and belong in. This search for the tools to build an appropriate waka eventually led me to creative practice.

MAIA: As with a lot of research into belonging and identity, I was drawn into the topic of Māori gender diversity based on personal experience. I've always been fascinated with how the way we look alters how we are treated, and the visual shorthands people use to build identity without speech. Gender, in particular, is something deeply visual, where we can pull together a few visual symbols and craft a man or a woman. The logic of these assemblages always seemed to escape me, as I routinely found myself the exception to the rule of gender. I was too tall and broad to comfortably be seen as a woman, but too soft to be seen as a man. Being mixed race also meant I was routinely faced with opposing notions of gender—the sports shirts and sweatpants that marked me as a tomboy in the Pākehā world were just normal clothing in te ao Māori, while the long hair which was normal in te ao Māori was an unquestionable sign of girlhood in the Pākehā world. I lived in this little liminal zone for as long as I could, darting between genders and between cultures. This was largely inconsequential as a child, but as I grew up, gender started to bear down on me.

In Māori spaces, I started to be asked the question: when 'are you getting your moko kauae?' I always shrugged it off, not knowing what was uncomfortable about it. Then I realised—I had never been asked if I would consider a mataora. They had read me as a woman and assumed I would be marked accordingly. For someone who had escaped gender, all of a sudden it was staring me in the face.

> I started to think about what would happen if I was marked, how a moko kanohi might look for someone who didn't want to be seen as a woman and whether I would feel like a fraud to wear those markings. No one had spoken to gender-diverse Māori about our take on the matter. My thesis therefore explored how irahuhua connect to tā moko and skin marking and what this says about gender and belonging.

The two of us first converged in our interest in doing research with Māori and queer identity at the centre. Ahinata did this through an iwi-specific Kāi Tahu lens focused on wāhine and gender-diverse stories of identity. Maia was more specific in their focus on irahuhua identities, while engaging a larger scope through Māori from diverse hapū and iwi backgrounds. Dual foci of queerness—specifically in relation to gender—and Indigeneity paved our way toward mahi toi methods.

Coming To Creative Practice as Method

Arts-based methods are a relatively self-explanatory concept: research methods based in the production of art. Unlike textual analysis where art is the object of study, arts-based methods are a form of research in which the means of inquiry are also the mode of inquiry, "congruent with a sociomaterial, performative perspective."[9] These methods are often transdisciplinary and appear across virtually every artistic medium.[10] Central to arts-based methods is the shift from passive to active research. The physicality of the work requires sustained presence by the creator; a constant reminder that one is in the act of producing and thus researching.[11] Arts-based methods include situations where "the story behind the production process of the artefact is presented, alongside the artefact (image) itself and the narrative of its interpretation, drawing on the voices of creator, researcher and audience" to create a holistic story of the 'data' gathered.[12] Put simply, arts-based methods embody a way of doing research which is shaped by the practice of art.

Arts-based methods are deeply contextual and tend to meet research participants in a medium that they are either familiar with or wish to explore.[13] This is particularly critical in Queer and gendered research, where disparate communities of Queer people can be connected by a visual and symbolic language such as flags, specific flowers, handkerchiefs and carabiners, fashion or aesthetics.[14] The familiarity of arts-based methods can result in an "extraordinary process of civil, participatory collaboration that joins the researcher with the researched in an ongoing moral dialogue,"[15] enabling connection, agency and transformation.[16]

Arts-based methods produce knowledge and elicit information, but they also assist us to re-examine existing knowledge, offering different perspectives.[17] They open up an "ethic of imagination [which] connects our stories to the present, allowing creative and active engagement in reimagining, reinterpreting, and revitalising our knowledge in our current context."[18] Arts-based methods record what is experienced, offering ways to understand and interpret it through avenues that are often considered fringe or suspect.[19] To re-imagine through art challenges epistemological norms in colonial environments, encouraging new relationships to knowledge outside of written replication. Art invites the manipulation and shaping of our epistemic world physically and theoretically.

So, what led you to creative practice research methods?

AHINATA: Creativity feels sometimes like it's in my blood—in my whakapapa. Creating has always been a part of my life. My hākui is a weaver; she made kete, as well as jewellery from muka and pāua when I was a kid. My auntie was an artist; she painted, and collaged, and made the best birthday cards. I grew up making costumes and putiputi, painting, drawing, sewing and moulding things into being. As a teenager, I found my voice on stage, through theatre, poetry and, later, in my early 20s, through cabaret and drag. Having conversations, and telling stories, throughout my life has always involved doing together and doing creatively.

Jumping forward, I started my first degree doing theatre studies and ended it doing gender studies. At this point, my understanding of theory and methodology drew on post-structuralism and was firmly grounded in Western research practice: thirty-plus participants, interview style inquiries and thematic coding for analysis. It was not until my Master's and an abrupt challenge to my worldview, through the scholarship of Audre Lorde[20]—begging the question: have I been using colonial tools this whole time?—and a sudden immersion in Indigenous research paradigms, through Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Shawn Wilson, Ngahuia Murphy and Michelle Erai's works, that I returned to considering the ways of knowing, doing and being that thrived in my childhood.[21]

MAIA: Almost the opposite to Ahinata, arts have never been a major part of my life. They held fascination, but I never imagined they would be a research method or something that could be more than just a signifier of some deeper truth. I'm largely a words person, the more analytic, strict and calculating the better. I planned that my rangahau would fall in line with this, so I sought out ways to make discursive work resonate with communities. At the beginning of my thesis, I sat in on a two-day seminar led by Caroline Lenette on Participatory Action Research (PAR). In PAR, participants don't just engage with outcomes but with research development as well.[22] I started to think about what an irahuhua research method could look like if it were to be *participatory*, not just 'inclusive.' Of course, the immediate participatory method fitting Māori research is wānanga. Arguably the most common Māori qualitative research method, wānanga allows a more democratic research process as there is "emphasis on the needs, priorities, and knowledge base of the collective which forms a central value of wānanga as a culturally grounded and empowering research methodology."[23] I felt this was a natural end point for me; staying in the realm of the unchanging written word. However, Brad Coombes pushes Māori research to explore "more experimentation with performative and generative approaches to participatory action" rather than staying solely in a space of wānanga.[24] I looked for a way to honour the research focus and the participants, ensuring that those who had historically been excluded from the written record would be able to speak. For gender-diverse Māori who have long been stopped from speaking in Māori spaces, tying in wānanga to other methods can provide multiple pathways to participation. In a study of the art of tā moko and the knowledge it holds, art as a site of knowledge production within the research itself made sense. Creative practice could challenge how we see 'voice' and 'speech' in research and allow those without the confidence to speak to still be seen.

From our divergent starting points and experiences, we both began to understand arts-based research as a possibility for carrying our rangahau and our stories. As we took a good look around and at our origin point, we sought to establish materials that already exist on our shores, and which could be drawn upon to pull our waka into being.

Māori Musings on Art and Research

In all its varied forms—from movements to stories to objects—art lies at the base of many Indigenous societies and is a key tool for exploring how we come to be and live in the world.[25] However, coming up against colonial systems, Indigenous knowledges—particularly those which involve artistic practices—are often marginalised and disrespected.[26] One of the issues with legitimacy is that Indigenous knowledge pools are "diverse and must be learned in the similar diverse and meaningful ways that the people have learned it for it to have continuing vitality and meaning."[27] Creative practice methods expand the confines of research, restore legitimacy to Indigenous epistemic traditions, foster inter-generational relationships, and transmit knowledge into our communities.[28] In artistic practice, we connect across oceans, the embodied practice of art-making is tied fundamentally with knowledge creation and research.

In a Māori environment, art is often translated as 'toi'. Intentionally broad, toi encapsulates all of the elements of art including fine and performance art, visual art, soundscapes, and is both a noun and a verb.[29] Toi is derived from within and outside of word and/or image, where the lines between fine and performance art are blurred. Toi is a way in which the ethereal comes to be known, if only for a moment. Ahinata Kaitai-Mullane crafts a definition where "[m]ahi toi is the process and product of transformation: an idea, a story, a concept is translated through creativity into something that others can experience … made sensorial through doing: through the conduit of takata and our bodies."[30] Toi is not dependent on the end result (often categorised into a specific form such as painting, film, soundscape or fashion item), but on the process of creation. Toi is the art, the knowledge and the production of knowledge all in one, or—as both Jani Wilson and Tangaroa Paora frame it—the link between the physical and conceptual.[31]

Deidre Brown, Ngarino Ellis and Jonathan Mane-Wheoki explain that "'toi' is a word that encompasses both art and knowledge,"[32] while both Kathie Irwin and Aileen Moreton-Robinson indicate that for Indigenous women the lines between arts, healing, knowledge and politics are blurred—if they are present at all.[33] Kahurangi Rora Waititi explicitly recognises that toi refers to "communication platforms our ancestors developed to disseminate knowledge, hold our histories, and to entertain and convey lessons and teachings."[34] The hidden, obscured, fleeting and contextual sit at the core of toi, and taking these practices seriously reveals similarly temporal knowledge. Toi not only provides the material containing knowledge but also provides the tools with which to *do* both the knowing and recording. Arts-based, creative practice methods grounded specifically in mahi toi constitute our shared origin point: creative practice as an invitation to nurture the gathering and production of knowledge.

Tensions In the Ground

While mahi toi methods constitute a natural origin point for the two of us, they are not without tensions. Choosing embodied creative practice to navigate through research

is, as established, deeply Indigenous. It is also rife with resistance from institutions and theorists whose epistemological grounding covets 'rational' and 'measurable' research. Rejection of creative practice methods in Indigenous knowledge production is deeply gendered, as colonisation "prioritised which knowledge was important and they did not consider Māori women's knowledge valid."[35] Ereni Pūtere argues that Te Whare Pora (the traditional institution of weaving) and Te Whare Wānaka/Wānanga (of knowledge deliberation) were equally weighted twins.[36] She notes that while these whare was aligned to the feminine and masculine respectively, neither was entirely restrictive and the totalising associations were introduced with colonisation. Colonial ethnographers recognised Te Whare Wānaka as a 'primitive' yet familiar masculine symposium style of knowledge sharing grounded in debate, and imposed a hierarchy of value, restricting mahi toi to arts, not as a twin in the production of knowledge.[37] In museums and cabinets of curiosity, the metadata of raranga focuses on function, instead of provenance and form, further reducing its place as a holder of knowledge.[38] Mana Wāhine theorists continually challenge this rejection of feminised arts as forms of knowledge production.[39] Raranga, in particular, is deployed as a specifically Māori research method, with practitioners weaving the raranga throughout their *process* of research, instead of limiting it to text to be 'read' or an elicitation method.[40] Mahi toi methods in Indigenous gendered research directly connect to themes of misogyny and patriarchy, the rejection of certain forms of knowledge and labour in favour of others and the impact of colonisation on gender relations and knowledge production. We both were confronted by mechanisms of patriarchal, misogynistic and deeply colonial epistemologies in our exploration of research methods. Our works resist these confines, like the Mana Wāhine and Queer theorists that proceed us.

Another tension that emerges is temporal; between the impetus to fossilise culture and artistic practice in the pre-colonial past and adapt to the realities of the present. Ngahuia Te Awekotuku and colleagues[44] describe a contested process where the bone, stone and wood uhi used to grant tā moko were replaced by metal implements that allowed for swifter work, but at a disconnect from traditional materials.[41] Christine Rogers[45] stitches together her identity, narrative and arts practice through the art of her Ngāi Tahu and Pākehā grandmother Elizabeth Arnett (née Leader), tying Māori imagery down with European technique and materials.[42] Here, she grapples with feeling 'Māori enough' to use 'traditional' art forms, due to her own upbringing within differing worlds. Ellis and Robertson chart the troubled relationship Māori have with photography as a medium, which has been used to exploit but has also produced treasured images and the desire for the camera to be considered part of the Māori artistic family.[43] Many gender-diverse Māori writers deploy photoelicitation, portraiture and collage works to explore being gender-diverse and Māori, connecting the old and new, Māori and non-Māori worlds.[44] Questions of 'authentic practice' abound here, alongside questions of 'authentic knowledge.' Tāwhanga Mary-Legs Nopera argues that the use of contemporary media formats brings toi into the modern world, while simultaneously rejecting modernity's ownership of the image of Indigenous peoples.[45] Arts-based methods in Māori research can allow us to re/claim and re/craft our own artistic legacies, embracing the tools that are part of our presents and futures, if not parts of our pasts. They encourage us to question what is considered traditional, how culture and knowledge develop and how far to go when setting down the lines between Indigenous and colonial.

Through grounding in creative practice and mahi toi, as well as navigation of tensions and challenges to arts as research theory and practice, we both came to carve out distinct old/new ways of integrating creativity, theory, and praxis.

The Moana

> *I am standing before ocean with tūmanako and a dream.*
> —Eartha Davis[46]

As we leave the shores of the known in pursuit of something more, we move into the ocean. In the metaphor underpinning the article, we position knowledge as a vast sea. For Jo Smith, the sea "is an intellectual and imaginary space, inspired by 'the real' and embedded in specific locations, a concept that stresses connectedness across space and time, and a concept that draws one into a relationship with others, without privileging a single view point."[47] When out in the moana, the coastline falls out of view and the mountains vanish into nothingness. The sea merges with the horizon to form an encapsulating sphere above and below the voyager, an ocean which is "uncontainable and pays no respect to territoriality."[48] Our origin point gives us information on what to expect when undertaking research and primes us as much as possible. Once in the field, however, researchers constantly adapt and change, entering into a liminal state.

There are endless research models and methods which already exist, why did, or didn't, you pick these up?

AHINATA: The question of how to *do* the research actually did begin for me with looking at past ways of doing, though extended back beyond what is classified as 'research methods.' I began with an ongoing reflexive question: how would my tīpuna—my ancestors—do this? This is the question that grounded the project and shaped the theory, methodology, methods and practices that brought the project into being. Seeking to *do*, inspired by your tīpuna, is how Kim McBreen defines tikaka.[49] It is this connection—this inspiration—that paved the way toward creative practice as research method, but which also led me away from other theorists' pre-established methods.

Temporal connection to ancestors, and to ancestral knowledge, is a cornerstone of an Indigenous research paradigm. This is reflected not only in theory that is coveted by the academy but also in creative expressions of Indigenous lived realities.[50] Poet Tayi Tibble asserts "my ancestors ride wit me";[51] playwright Cindy Diver draws her ancestor Pātahi into dialogue with a fictional modern day descendant, Elizabeth;[52] artist Xoë Hall brings the atua we descend from crashing into our built urban environments.[53] In the absence of an existing Kāi Tahu, Queer, creative research method, I constructed one in relationship with the knowledge, experiences and stories of my tīpuna. Thus, the question of how to *do* this research was answered by tīpuna—by an Indigenous research paradigm that connects us temporally through action to the creative and embodied practices of tīpuna.

This focus on Kāi Tahu tīpuna knowledge and practices positioned a mōkihi as the ideal vessel to carry to stories of whanauka, both metaphorically and tangibly. Mōkihi are traditional Kāi Tahu vessels that are canoe-like in shape and made most frequently—and effectively—from raupō.[54] The raupō is dried and latched in

bundles to make a very buoyant vessel, which was utilised extensively by Kāi Tahu to both cross and traverse downriver during seasonal food gathering.[55] Mōkihi are practical, easy to make, un-gendered and noa (unrestricted) creations that represent the everyday knowledge of our ancestors. This made them the ideal creative practice for Kāi Tahu research.

MAIA: When coming to terms with the fact that research about art could be done through art, I turned back to my home discipline of Cultural Anthropology. As an Indigenous anthropologist, this was not a fun reflection. Tā moko and other Pasifika tattoo traditions have long been a favourite topic for non-Indigenous anthropologists to ogle at and possess.[56] As Puawai Cairns writes: "much has been made by Pākehā researchers about tā moko as a dying art of a dying race."[57] Certainly, anthropology has a troubling colonial legacy,[58] but there has been movement in the discipline away from exploitative research practices. Part of this has been re-assessing the tools of research. Key here is visual ethnography, a specific style of recording human activity through visual imagery which hones in on an individual's way of moving through the world, challenging who and what is being looked at.[59] It is deeply critical of the ethnographer's controlling lens, and has shifted the aim of ethnography from documenting Other cultures, to telling stories with them.[60] However, the gap between the empowering theory of ethnography and the practice in Indigenous communities is often vast. To use a method so tightly bound to anthropology, a discipline which still holds connotations of extraction, empire and death for Indigenous peoples, felt like repeating the same patterns but with a Māori twist. While promising, the idea of purely visual ethnography was counter to the primary ethics of the research—community voice and development. As such, I knew that I would need to create a method in-between ethnography and art, wānanga and participant observation.

Drawing on the knowledge established in our origin point, we both surveyed the moana with a view to adaptation and the ability to occupy plural and between spaces as central.

Epistemic Liminality

As we situate ourselves as Indigi-Queer researchers engaged in mahi toi, not only do we adapt to the waves breaking on the moana, we also embrace the liminality of our journeys. Liminality has often sat at the heart of work to do with how people move through the world and change their belonging and place in society.[61] The liminal is not a rejection of form and structure; rather, it is a purposeful and temporary abandonment of it. Just as the moana appears to be an empty mass of space which extends on all sides but actually contains millions of interactions and observable points, liminality offers new possibilities for production of knowledge and understanding if one is able to keep one's head and avoid getting swallowed.

Much work has been done to explore how the liminal can be a site of potential instead of rejection in Indigenous works. Gloria Anzaldúa defines liminal spaces as borderlands, spaces of transition and in-betweenness, a metaphorical bridge and resting point.[62] Ross Hemera observes this liminal in-betweenness as a wātea, and concludes it is a challenge that "has been handed down to me from my ancestors: 'this is something for you to use Ross, as an artist, go and use it, do something with it, do something with that

space.'"[63] The prefix wā carries multiple 'in-between' meanings of time, season, space, depth and truth, and the emptiness becomes a potential to follow any one of these meanings. Seuta'afili Patrick Thomsen and Joshua Iosefo-Williams identify that across Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa emerges a similar idea of vā, a "third space of in-between."[64] Garrick Cooper actualises "shifting the geography of reason" and moves knowledge into the epistemic wilderness outside of institutional structures and Eurocentric scaffolds.[65] There is a legacy of liminality as a form of in-between nothingness in Queer feminist theory as well. Susan Stryker in particular has pushed the idea that trans-identity is a sort of "being and becoming that emerges from a nothingness that nevertheless teems with lively potentials."[66] Karen Barad reinforces Stryker through their work in quantum physics, noting that "the quantum vacuum is more like an ongoing questioning of the nature of emptiness than anything like a lack. The ongoing questioning of itself (and itself and it and self) is what generates, or rather is, the structure of nothingness."[67] Here, the nothingness and the process of self-birth within the chaos are key terms when exploring trans identity. For method and research production, exploring the structure, form and quality of nothingness opens up areas of inquiry which had previously been considered empty.

Mahi toi methods are critical when exploring the liminal, the vā, the wātea, the wilderness or the rich potential embodied in nothingness. These sites of careful and purposeful knowledge production and recognition—where the rules and limitations of traditional epistemic practice fall away and new knowledges can come to the fore—are deeply productive if one is able to navigate them. If arts-based methods are just thrown together, however, and "unsuitably trained outsiders" are "allowed too much freedom … we need to take into account the costs in both human-physical and spiritual terms."[68] Throughout our conversation, we emphasise that each of us chose our methods carefully, taking into account the journey we were undertaking, the participants we would bring with us and the purpose of the voyage. Drawing from the grounding of our origin point, it is clear that arts-based methods can be supportive or primary. They can elicit knowledge or create it. We know that the layered realities of being queer, gender diverse and Indigenous culminate in our scholarly positioning in a moana of betweenness: of epistemic wilderness and productive nothingness; at borderlands and in liminality. Navigation of this moana requires a waka, a vessel.

Our Waka

> *My ancestors knew the exact distance between the stars*
> *and still had the desire to risk it all anyway. Voyaging*
> *to the horizon where this world meets the next, feeling*
> *for the boundary, and pushing the sky out even further.*
> —Tayi Tibble[69]

We steer through this epistemic moana on vessels crafted with the materials gifted by the origin point. The connection between the origin point and the waka never fades, as it is the enduring bind of whakapapa and mauri: "[a] waka's mauri is the totality of all the elements, actions, attitudes and processes that go into it, not only when it was built, but every after."[70] Waka have long been markers of Māori epistemic practice and ability, with complex navigational systems charting their ways across the largest body of water on the planet.[71] We begin with a description of the waka we used to journey

through our theses, focusing on the waka in action. This embodies how we come to navigate research and what mahi toi methods we used to chart through the epistemic moana and into the unknown.

Navigating the Moana

How did your mahi toi research methods play out?

AHINATA: So, my methods played out as a wānaka on one of my marae. This spatially and culturally situated us in a Kāi Tahu locality. We gathered as a group of wāhine and gender-diverse Kāi Tahu to collectively create and reflect on our stories of gender, queerness, Kāi Tahu identity and belonging. At the wānaka, creative practice unfolded in two distinct layers: creating individual visual responses to discussion and weaving them all together into a mōkihi. This embodies elements of both creative expression as research methodology and resurgence of Indigenous knowledges and practices.

You may find yourself asking: what do I mean by visual responses? By design, because of the fluidity and flexibility in how this creative practice occurred, it is difficult to articulate. I brought with me dried corn husks as canvases—taking the place of raupō which would usually be the material for making mōkihi,[72] but were seasonally unavailable—and a range of art supplies such as paint, paint pens, markers, chalk and oil pastels. Following whakawhanaukataka, the materials were laid out and I explained that we would use the corn husks to create as we talked. It was made clear that the creations whanauka made with these supplies would be brought together into a singular mōkihi, and that I would not analyse what was created. This affirmed that there was no pressure for these creations to be 'masterpieces' and situated this creative practice as part of the process of discussion, rather than as an object for analysis or extraction. Whanauka worked at different paces and with preference for different mediums and styles, some creating literal depictions reflecting the discussion, some using words, some creating patterns and colours. At the end of this process, whanauka were given the opportunity to go around and talk about what they had depicted and highlight key parts of the discussion that really resonated with them. This process integrated creativity as a foundational element of doing together, rather than as a supplementary addition. It also highlighted the rakatirataka (self-determination) and mana (authority, power, prestige) of whanauka to determine their stories and creations, minimising feelings of shyness and pressure to create in specific ways or for specific audiences.

The next layer of creative practice is the actual construction of a mōkihi. After a break for kai and giving a chance for the artworks to dry, we began to work toward creating a single mōkihi from our collective creative contributions. Mōkihi making thus functioned as a process of data generation and a reciprocal exchange of knowledge. Creating together facilitated conversations, and whanauka left with new knowledge on how to make a mōkihi. This relates to Indigenous knowledge resurgence—which is explored specifically in relation to Kāi Tahu by Kerri Cleaver—and to mahi toi as research practice in the way that Hinekura Smith utilises it.[73] Indigenous resurgence has developed as a significant strand of Indigenous theory,

practice, activism and resistance. Hōkūlani K. Aikau[79] explains that "at the core of Indigenous resurgence is re-establishing and re-enforcing the relationships among people, place, and practices."[74] In the ongoing process of combatting colonialism in our communities, resurgence asks for more than decolonisation—more than the centring of colonialism in our identities and actions. Resurgence asks us to consider, when we peel back the layered colonialism that is suffocating us, what then? Moana Jackson addresses this question with an 'ethic of restoration'; working to restore Māori self-determination and ways of knowing, doing, and being.[75] Gina Starblanket elaborates on the connection between resurgence and restoration: "[It refers] to the course of action geared towards the revitalization of our traditional lifeways … contribut[ing] to the restoration of our ability to practice the relationships with people, places and practices that were disrupted through colonialism."[76] Making mōkihi is a practice that almost reached extinction; was almost lost to our communities, with only one whanaunga carrying that knowledge. In recent years, there has been a concerted effort to revitalise it as a practice, though it remains knowledge not many Kāi Tahu possess.[77] To both teach and learn mōkihi making is to engage collectively in an act of Kāi Tahu resurgence.

In this second layer of the creative practice of the wānaka, the focus of doing was less engaged in creative expression, and more grounded in the resurgence and sharing of tīpuna knowledge. To learn how to make a mōkihi is not expressive of individuality, but rather focuses on bringing together individual visual responses into a collective bound by our ancestral knowledge. Betasamosake Simpson explains that "'Indigenous theory' is lived, not just discussed and actualised in the intellectual realm."[78] Making a mōkihi collectively as a research method answered this challenge, offering whanauka an opportunity to *live* identity at the same time as discussing it; to embody and articulate together.

MAIA: Building on experimentative PAR and a desire for an irahuhua-specific method, I combined wānanga with participant observation, autoethnography and two mahi toi methods. The first was a conventional arts-based method: bodymapping. The second was more distinct and a direct response to the limitations of undertaking research in a tika way: tattooing-as-method. Instead of seeing one method as supplementary to another, they became equally load-bearing strands in which participants could connect to the research when and how they wanted.

At the heart of research to do with gender, and research to do with tā moko, lies the body. It became clear early in the research process that very few people had actually asked Māori how we conceptualise our bodies. Instead, literature assumed that we saw the physical body the same way that other cultures did.[79] Due to the scarcity of work on Māori gender diversity, how irahuhua conceptualised our bodies was even lighter, essentially existing in a handful of theses and tied into broader takatāpui studies, which included cisgender Māori. As such, I knew that I wanted to address the question of the body. Where the body has been a subject of discussion in Māori-led research, it has often been approached through physical art and representative metaphor, as opposed to wānanga and dialogue based on recognition of the immediacy and lived reality of

the body.[80] Arts-based methods to do with the body (and gender specifically) often reference the method of bodymapping. Bodymapping has its roots in research to do with women's reproductive rights and identity across cultures, allowing holistic understandings of the body and the ability to represent more than is visible to the human eye, where women created representations of their bodies through paper and pen.[81] Bodymaps "have the capacity to represent symbolically the ways in which interactions with others and cultural meanings are inscribed and performed through the body."[82]

In the thesis research, the prompt given to generate the bodymaps was simple: 'How do YOU be YOU if you cannot use words?' The bodymaps generated for the thesis ranged in appearance from traditional outlines of the body to three-dimensional paper pou, which represented the carvings in wharenui, and drawings of marae and trees. The bodymaps revealed the complexity of ways in which irahuhua conceptualised their bodies and the way that the visual markers of identity fold into each other. They were catalysts for conversation and connection, and allowed participants to take control of what was being seen and recorded in the research.

For the second mahi toi method, I essentially built something new. The catalyst for using these methods came from a suspicion of the way research had been done so far. As such, I started to look at how research could not only produce benefits but be beneficial in and of itself. How could the process of creating data support participants? Part of the benefit of research comes from knowing the specifics of those being researched with. In the case of irahuhua, most had tattoos, loved to be tattooed and wanted more Māori tattoos. Though I never thought it would get past the ethics committee, I took a shot in the dark: let me pay for participants to be tattooed; let me be tattooed; and then let me put these together to understand how Māori artists build Māori designs for gender-diverse Māori. Incredibly, the ethics committee accepted the method, and I was booking in for two takatāpui artists to tattoo myself and my participants with designs made for us and by us. The data collection at these instances was rich, and participants were given the option for an experience that only the research could facilitate. Some of them have gone on to build up those pieces, either following the specific style or taking them as the starting point of full sleeves. Others built connections through being tattooed together, and the artists were able to communicate with themselves and participants in an environment they controlled. They spoke through their art, and all I had to do was organise the visual into the written.

We ended up defining not only new knowledge, but also new art. From the thesis sprung the term 'kiritoi,' a 'by Māori for Māori' art form grounded in our tikanga, but not as strict as tā moko. I admit that I underestimated how profound this element of the research would be, given that it partly came up as a way to skirt around limiting 'koha' policies that universities require. Māori tattoo, whether that be tā moko or kiritoi, relies on complex information systems based in whakapapa and can be used to signal one's family, status or life story. Markings contain knowledge, bodies are equally loaded as sites of knowledge production and practitioners take on roles varying from healers to epistemic authorities and

spiritual protectors for both the bearer and the art form. Combining both mahi toi methods provided a deeper connection to participants and knowledge than a distanced, 'objective' approach ever could.

The Landing Point

At the start there is nothing but black sand
except it is wider than we can know,
deeper than we can feel.
In fact, we are not yet a we,
but are within it,
the pulse of potential.
—Ruby Solly[83]

Each voyage is circular. Just as Matawhaorua waka was rebuilt into Ngātokimatawhaorua for a new generation to sail along the routes of Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa to Aotearoa, every landing point becomes an origin point. The knowledge we fish from the epistemic moana is woven into the waka that leave on their own journeys. The technical elements, tried and tested out in the moana, are either picked up or discarded for something more effective. Some waka never land, but settle to the floor of the moana and turn into something more—a journey completed, an outcome reached.

To close this journey, and to pave the way for future queer, gender diverse, Māori, and Indigenous scholars, activists, artists and theorists, we leave you with reflections that may become a new beginning:

AHINATA: Time spent with my whanauka at our wānaka filled me with hope, and the strongest sense of belonging. That was the first thing I wanted to make sure my research did: create a space of belonging for Kāi Tahu in our diversity, as queer, gender-diverse, trans, with various experiences and connections; a space to *be* and belong as Kāi Tahu.

MAIA: Despite recognition of toi as knowledge, the use of mahi toi *methods* in Māori research is rare. Many adherents of Kaupapa Māori favour dialogue as the principal form of knowledge creation.[84] Though I still hold a soft spot for wānanga, and the allure of the theoretical pulls me into endless readings about affect theory, mahi toi methods have become one of the foremost methods in my arsenal. Tattooing, a practice often stigmatised and belittled, reduced to stereotypes or psychosocial phenomena, offers real value for future research if we are willing to lean into it and literally put our bodies on the line for our work.

Throughout our theses, we considered the ways that research exists in its own little world. Linda Tuhiwai Smith talks—to paraphrase a little—about the resistance embedded in our communities to researchers sucking us dry of our stories.[85] These stories, then, are frequently reproduced in purposefully exclusive and complex language and hidden behind journals' paywalls. Our works look at the way that we can do research that flows stories back into our communities and in ways that matter to our people, not just as reports or academic articles. This is one of the greatest offerings mahi toi methods gift to researchers; toi whose form holds depth, meaning and theory, by, and for, our people.

Hamley et al. "leave behind a trail for other (LGBTIQ+) Indigenous researchers to map their own creative pathways in research. This speaks to a form of research that transcends the binarism between scholars and communities and instead implicates us within shared research practices of hope and care."[86] From when we began planning this paper, one of the resounding reflections that has stuck is the idea of deepening the paths for future Indigi-Queer researchers, not as an abstract concept but as people we know who are beginning research journeys of their own. We found ourselves in epistemic wilderness—traversing vast oceans—and found pathways and comfort there, but we also have hope that through this work we can construct origin points that prove to be tools for those who follow us.

the stomach gurgles
for some real ass community
a million hers across the age
rip up the boards of this rundown stage
explode out across te moana nui a kiwa
till we right ourselves back to
islander
tangata
atua
—essa may ranapiri[87]

GLOSSARY

Te Reo Māori	Kāi Tahu mita	Translation
Irahuhua		Gender-diverse Māori
Kai		Food/s
Kete		Basket/s
Kiritoi		Skin marking/s
Koha		Gift/reciprocal offering
Māmā	Hākui	Mother/s
Mana		Power/authority/prestige
Mana Wāhine		A theoretical and artistic movement recognising the power and authority of Māori women, challenging cisheteropatriarchy.
Marae		Marae function as our gathering places. A marae is a complex made of a number of aspects, usually a wharenui/meeting house, a wharekai/place for eating, outdoor space, and often other aspects such as an urupā/burial grounds.
Mataora		Masculine face marking
Mauri		Lifeforce
Mita		Dialect
Moana		Ocean/s
	Mōkihi	A Kāi Tahu vessel
Moko kanohi		Face marking/s
Moko kauae		Feminine chin/lip marking/s
Muka		Fibre from inside harakeke/flax plants
Noa		Unrestricted
Pākehā		Non-Māori; usually referring to those of European descent
Pāua		Abalone
Pou		Post/s/pillar/s
Putiputi		Flower/s
Rangahau	Rakahau	Research/pursuit
Raranga	Raraka	Weaving
Raupō		Bulrush
Tā moko		Ancestral skin marking/s
Takatāpui		A broad Queer Māori identity
Te Reo Māori		Māori language
Tika		To be right/correct
Tikanga	Tikaka	Process and procedure that governs the right way of doing things
Toi / Mahi toi		Art/s
Tupuna / Tūpuna	Tipuna / Tīpuna	Ancestor / Ancestors
Wāhine		Women/feminine gendered identity
Waka		Vessel/s
Wānanga	Wānaka	A collective gathering to discuss and/or do together
Whakapapa		Genealogical connections which link us to our ancestors and atua
Whānau		Family; the smallest political and economic unit of Māori society
Whanaunga	Whanauka	Relations

Ahinata Kaitai-Mullane (she/her) is a queer Kāi Tahu, Kāti Māmoe, and Waitaha researcher. Currently completing a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Canterbury focused on Māori political economies, her work is interested in socioeconomic structures and institutions, identity, Indigeneity, queerness, and gender. She is also passionate about alternative ways to connect research and communities including short stories, poetry, and art.

Maia Berryman-Kamp (they/she/ia) descends from Te Puku o te Ika a Māui, through the waka Te Arawa, Mātaatua, and Tainui. Berryman-Kamp's PhD thesis through Victoria University of Wellington focuses on irahuhua (gender-diverse Māori) relationships to tā moko and embodiment politics, and they have published in the fields of Māori gender history and Queer theory. They also research Indigenous women's health responses to HIV and AIDS, LGBTQ+ Māori political landscapes, and Indigi-Queer methodological expansions.

Acknowledgement: Funding: This research was supported by a combination of scholarships awarded by Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington, the Māori Education Trust, Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu, and Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga.

1. Shawn Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Fernwood, 2008).
2. Ahinata Kaitai-Mullane, "Te Heke o Kaiamio: Kāi Tahu Wāhine and Gender Diverse Stories of Navigating Gender, Sexuality, and Identity" (PhD thesis, Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington, 2026).
3. Maia Berryman-Kamp, "Ngā Hiahia Kia Titiro ki te Timata, ā, Ka Kite ai Tātou te Mutunga: Irahuhua Understandings of Gender and Identity Through Tā Moko and Kiritoi," (PhD thesis, Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington, 2026).
4. Esther Newton, *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay: Personal Essays, Public Ideas,* Series Q (Duke University Press, 2000); Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples,* 2nd ed. (Zed Books, 2012); *tebrakunna* country, Emma Lee, and Jennifer Evans, eds., *Indigenous Women's Voices: 20 Years on from Linda Tuhiwai Smith's Decolonizing Methodologies* (Zed Books, 2021).
5. *tebrakunna* country and Emma Lee, "Reclaiming the First Person Voice," in Lee et al., *Indigenous Women's Voices*, 138.
6. Hana M. O'Regan, *Ko Tahu, Ko Au: Kāi Tahu Tribal Identity* (Horomaka, 2001).
7. Wilson, *Research is Ceremony*.
8. Jessica Hinerangi, *Aria*, 1st ed. (Auckland University Press, 2023), 32.
9. Sally Eaves, "From Art for Arts Sake to Art as Means of Knowing: A Rationale for Advancing Arts-Based Methods in Research, Practice and Pedagogy," *Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods* 12, no. 2 (2014): 149.
10. Mia Strand, Yaseen Albany, Mandisa Nonhlanhla Lulama Buthelezi, et al., "Reflecting on Arts-Based Participatory Research: Considerations for More Equitable Transdisciplinary Collaborations," *Ecology and Society* 29, no. 4 (2024): 29-48, doi:10.5751/ES-15563-290429; Joie D. Acosta, Lia Pak, Devin McCarthy, et al., "Stitching the Threads Together: A Cross-Disciplinary Literature Review on Youth Arts Engagement and Well-Being," Rand Research, 2025, accessed 20 October 2026, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA3264-1.html.

11. Tracey Bunda, Robyn Heckenberg, Kim Snepvangers, Louise Gwenneth Phillips, Alexandra Lasczik and Alison L Black, "Storymaking Belonging," *Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal* 4, no. 1 (2019): 153–179, https://doi.org/10.18432/ari29429; Christine Rogers, "The Needle as Medium: Using Embroidery to Speak to Ghosts," *Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal* 4, no. 1 (2019): 127–152, https://doi.org/10.18432/ari29407.
12. Eaves, "From Art for Arts Sake," 151.
13. Eaves, "From Art for Arts Sake"; Claire Paterson-Young, Michael Maher, Ecem Karlıdağ-Dennis, Richard Hazenberg and Harla Octarra, "Bridging Generations: Leveraging Arts-Based Methods and Evaluation to Foster Intergenerational Dialogue," *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 21, no. 1 (2026): 106–22, doi:10.1177/15423166251329547; Hinekura Smith, "Whatuora: Theorizing 'New' Indigenous Research Methodology from 'Old' Indigenous Weaving Practice," *Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal* 4, no. 1 (2019): 1–27, https://doi.org/10.18432/ari29393; Sarah Pink, *Doing Visual Ethnography*, 4th ed. (Sage Publications, 2020); Kaitai-Mullane, "Te Heke o Kaiamio."
14. Margot Weiss, "The Epistemology of Ethnography," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 17, no. 4 (2011): 649–64. https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-1302451; Victoria Pitts, *In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Florian Rudolph, Benjamin Wolbergs and Brody Polinksy, eds., *Queer Tattoo* (Verlag Kettler, 2022).
15. Keyan G. Tomaselli, Lauren Dyll and Michael Francis, "'Self' and 'Other': Auto-Reflexive and Indigenous Ethnography," in *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*, ed. Norman Denzin, Yvonna Lincoln and Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Sage, 2008), 20.
16. Eaves, "From Art for Arts Sake"; Strand et al., "Reflecting on Arts-Based Participatory Research"; Ngarino Ellis and Natalie Robertson, "The Iwirākau Project: A Collaborative Waiapu Approach," *History of Photography* 42, no. 3 (2018): 239–48, doi:10.1080/03087298.2018.1537099.
17. Marie Battiste, "Research Ethics for Protecting Indigenous Knowledge and Heritage: Institutional and Researcher Responsibilities," in *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*; Bunda et al., "Storymaking Belonging"; Awhina Tamarapa, "Whatua Mai te Aho: The Role of Museums in the Maintenance of Māori Weaving As a Living Cultural Practice" (PhD thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 2024); Hayley M. Cavino, "Holding Space: Centering Mana Wahine Ethics in Historical Trauma Research" in *HE RAU MURIMURI AROHA: Wāhine Māori Insights into Historical Trauma and Healing,* ed. Cherryl Smith and Rāwiri Tinirau (Te Atawhai o Te Ao: Independent Māori Institute for Environment & Health, 2019).
18. Kaitai-Mullane, "Te Heke o Kaiamio," 116.
19. Pink, *Doing Visual Ethnography*.
20. Audre Lorde. *Sister Outsider* (Penguin Books, 2019).
21. Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*; Wilson, *Research is Ceremony*; Ngahuia Murphy, *Te Awa Atua: Menstruation in the Māori Pre-Colonial World*, 4th ed (He Puna Manawa, 2020); Michelle Erai, *Girl of New Zealand: Colonial Optics in Aotearoa* (University of Arizona Press, 2020).
22. Caroline Lenette, Nelli Stavropoulou, Caitlin Nunn, et al., "Brushed under the Carpet: Examining the Complexities of Participatory Research," *Research for All* 3, no. 2 (2019): 161–179, https://doi.org/10.18546/RFA.03.2.04; Janet A. Parsons and Katherine M. Boydell, "Arts-Based Research and Knowledge Translation: Some Key Concerns for Health-Care Professionals," *Journal of Interprofessional Care* 26, no. 3 (2012): 170–172.
23. Nēpia Mahuika and Rangimārie Mahuika," Wānanga as a Research Methodology," *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 16, no. 4 (2020): 372, https://doi.org/10.1177/1177180120968580.
24. Brad Coombes, "Kaupapa Māori Research as Participatory Enquiry: Where's the Action?" in *Critical Conversations in Kaupapa Māori*, ed. Te Kawehau Hoskins and Alison Jones (Huia, 2017), 29–30.
25. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence* (Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2011); Tangaroa Paora, "Takatāpui—Beyond Marginalisation: Exploring Māori Gender, Identity and Performance" (PhD

thesis, Auckland University of Technology, 2023); Ngahuia Te Awekotuku, Linda Waimarie Nikora, Mohi Robert Rua, Rolinda Karapu and Becky Nunes, *Mau Moko: The World of Māori Tattoo* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2007).

26. Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies;* Denzin, Lincoln and Tuhiwai Smith, *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*.
27. Battiste, in Denzin et al., *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*, 7.
28. Paterson-Young et al., "Bridging Generations"*;* Logan Hamley, Shiloh Groot, Jade Le Grice, et al., "'You're the One That Was on Uncle's Wall': Identity, Whanaungatanga and Connection for Takatāpui (LGBTQ+ Māori)," *Genealogy* 5, no. 2 (2021): 54–75, https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy5020054.
29. Ellis and Robertson, "The Iwirākau Project"; ia Morrison-Young, "Weaving Ourselves Back Together: Te Whare Takatāpui as Rongoā for Takatāpui Wellbeing," *New Zealand Journal of Psychology* 54, no. 3 (2025): 74–89, doi:10.63146/001c.143405.
30. Kaitai-Mullane, "Te Heke o Kaiamio", 51.
31. Jani K. T. Wilson, "Developing Mahi-Toi Theory and Analysis," *MAI Journal* 6, no. 2 (2017): 116–128; Paora, "Takatāpui—Beyond Marginalisation."
32. Deidre Brown, Ngarino Ellis and Jonathan Mane-Wheoki, eds., *Toi Te Mana: An Indigenous History of Māori Art* (Auckland University Press, 2024), 12.
33. Kathie Irwin, Introduction to *Toi Wāhine: The Worlds of Māori Women*, ed. Kathie Irwin and Irihapeti Ramsden (Penguin Books, 1995); Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin' up to the White Woman: Indigenous Women and White Feminism*, 1st ed. (University of Queensland Press, 2000).
34. Kahurangi Rora Waititi, "Toi Tuku Iho: An Exploration of Oranga and Mana Motuhake Through Toi" (PhD thesis, The University of Waikato, 2023), 7.
35. Naomi Simmonds, "Mana Wahine Geographies: Spiritual, Spatial and Embodied Understandings of Papatūānuku" (Master of Social Sciences thesis, University of Waikato, 2009), 74.
36. Ereni Pūtere, "Te Tāhū: The Role of Weaving in Kāi Tahu Memory," *New Zealand Journal of History* 58, no. 1 (2024): 12–26.
37. Pūtere, "Te Tāhū"; Simmonds; "Mana Wahine Geographies"; Leonie Pihama, "Brief of Evidence," Wai 2700, A19, Waitangi Tribunal, 2021; Ani Mikaere, *Colonising Myths: Māori Realities—He Rukuruku Whakaaro* (Huia, 2011); Rosemary Madden, "Dynamic and Different: Mana Wahine" (Master of Arts thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 1997); Wikitoria August, "Māori Women: Bodies, Spaces, Sacredness and Mana," *New Zealand Geographer*, no. 61 (2005): 117–123, doi: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-7939.2005.00025.
38. Kaitai-Mullane, "Te Heke o Kaiamio"; Erai, *Girl of New Zealand*; Bunda et al., "Storymaking Belonging"; Hinekura Smith and Kim Penetito, "Toi Ora, Reo Ora: Arts-Based Pedagogy and Māori Aspirations for Thriving Reo and Tikanga," conference paper presented at International Indigenous Research Conference, Auckland, New Zealand (2024).
39. Irwin in Irwin and Ramsden, *Toi Wāhine*; Pūtere, "Te Tāhū"; Smith, "Whatuora".
40. Smith and Penetito, "Toi Ora, Reo Ora"; Wilson, "Developing Mahi-Toi Theory"; Tamarapa, "Whatua Mai te Aho"; Smith, "Whatuora"; Elizabeth Kerekere, "Part of The Whānau: The Emergence of Takatāpui Identity" (PhD thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 2017).
41. Te Awekotuku et al., *Mau Moko*.
42. Rogers, "The Needle as Medium."
43. Ellis and Robertson, "The Iwirākau Project."
44. Morrison-Young, "Weaving Ourselves Back Together"; Paora, "Takatāpui - Beyond Marginalisation"; Hamley et al., "'You're the One That Was on Uncle's Wall'"; Tāwhanga Mary-Legs Nopera, "Huka can Haka: Taonga Performing Tino Rangatiratanga" (PhD thesis, University of Waikato, 2017).
45. Nopera, "Huka can Haka."
46. Eartha Davis, "To Weave the Spirit, To Weave the Breath: Following the Thread," *Awa Wahine* (June 2026): 38.
47. Jo Smith, "Aotearoa/New Zealand: An Unsettled State in a Sea of Islands," *Settler Colonial Studies* 1, no. 1 (2011): 121, https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473x.2011.10648803.

48. Epeli Hau'ofa, *We Are the Ocean: Selected Works* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 55.
49. Kim McBreen, "He Hōaka: Our Tūpuna Dreamed the Future For All of Us: Rebuilding Healthy Relationships is at the Heart of Decolonisation," He Hōaka, 6 March 2015, http://starspangledrodeo.blogspot.com/2015/03/our-tupuna-dreamed-future-for-all-of-us.html.
50. See Wilson, *Research is Ceremony*; Jo-Ann Archibald Q'um Q'um Xiiem, Jenny Bol, Jason Lee-Morgan and Jason De Santolo, eds., *Decolonising Research: Indigenous Storywork as Methodology* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2022); Chellie Spiller, Hoturoa Barclay-Kerr and John Panoho, *Wayfinding Leadership: Ground-Breaking Wisdom for Developing Leaders* (Huia, 2015).
51. Tayi Tibble, *Rangikura* (Victoria University Press, 2021), 91.
52. Cindy Diver, *Wahine Mātātoa: The (Mostly) True Story of Erihāpeti Pātahi* (Playmarket: 2025).
53. Xoë Hall, *Bloodline* and *Bloodline—The Return*, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 9 April 2022–30 November 2027; *Ka Mua Ka Muri*, mural, Massey University Wellington, 2020.
54. Herries Beattie, "The Mokihi, Moki or Mogi; Maori rafting down the Waitaki," notebook, Hocken Digital Collections, 1935, https://hocken.recollect.co.nz/nodes/view/65867?keywords=mogi&type=all&highlights=WyJtb2dpIl0%3D#idx224783; Paul Madgwick, *Poutini: The Ngaī Tahu History of the West Coast* (Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu and Oratia Books, 2024); Edward Shortland, *The Southern Districts of New Zealand: A Journal, with Passing Notices of the Customs of the Aborigines* (Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1851); Joe Wakefield, Maatakiwi Wakefield and Jodi Cameron, "Kaupapa Raupō," workshop (Whakamoe Tau Wānaka, Twizel, 20 January 2024).
55. Madgwick, *Poutini*; Beattie, "The Mokihi, Moki or Mogi"; Atholl J. Anderson, *The Welcome of Strangers: A History of Southern Māori*, 2nd ed. (Bridget Williams Books, 2025).
56. Te Awekotuku et al., *Mau Moko;* Enid Schildkrout, "Inscribing the Body," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33, no. 1 (2004): 319–44, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.33.070203.143947; Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage,* trans. Monika B. Arnold, Gabrielle L. Caffee and Solon T. Kimball (University of Chicago Press, 2019).
57. Puawai Cairns, "He Taonga te Ta Moko ki Tauranga Moana" in *The Proceedings of the National Māori Graduates of Psychology Symposium 2002: Making a difference*, ed. Linda Waimarie Nikora, Michelle Levy, Bridgette Masters-Awatere, Waikaremoana Waitoki, Ngahuia Te Awekotuku and Richard J.M. Etheredge (University of Waikato, 2003), 134.
58. Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonising Methodologies*; Denzin et al. eds., *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*; Anand Pandian, *A Possible Anthropology: Methods for Uneasy Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).
59. Parsons and Boydell, "Arts-based research and knowledge translation"; Pink, *Doing Visual Ethnography*.
60. Laura Azzarito, *Visual Methods for Social Justice in Education* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023); James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988).
61. Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*; Schildkrout, "Inscribing the Body."
62. Gloria Anzaldúa, Preface to *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa and Ana Louise Keating (Psychology Press, 2002), 1–5; Anzaldúa. *Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mexican Mestiza*, 3rd ed. (Aunt Lute Books, 2007).
63. Ross Hemera, "Ross Hemera—Ngā Ringa Toi o Tahu," Ngai Tahu, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ntu-5AjZ_Dk.
64. Seuta'afili Patrick Thomsen and Joshua Iosefo-Williams, "Disruptions, Decolonial Desire and Diaspora: A Provocation toward a Pacific Queer Worldmaking Scholarly Practice in Aotearoa–New Zealand," *The Journal of New Zealand Studies*, NS33 (2021): 99, https://doi.org/10.26686/jnzs.iNS33.7385.
65. Garrick Cooper, "Kaupapa Māori research: Epistemic wilderness as freedom?" *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies* 47, no. 2 (2012): 66.
66. Susan Stryker, (speaker). "Transgeneration: Or, Becoming-With My Monstrous Kin," University of Cambridge, 1 March 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hZreL7D8gQ8.
67. Karen Barad, "TransMaterialities," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2015): 396, https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2843239.

68. Margaret Mutu, "Barriers to Research: The Constraints of Imposed Framework," *He Pukenga Kōrero* 4, no. 1 (1998): 17.
69. Tayi Tibble, "Wayfinders," Alta Online, 25 September 2023, https://www.altaonline.com/culture/fiction-and-poetry/a44938250/tayi-tibble-wayfinders-poem/.
70. Spiller et al., *Wayfinding Leadership*, 94.
71. Ibid; Witi Ihimaera, *Navigating the Stars: Māori Creation Myths* (Auckland: Vintage, 2020).
72. Beattie, "The Mokihi, Moki or Mogi"; Shortland, *The Southern Districts of New Zealand*; Wakefield et al., "Kaupapa Raupō."
73. Kerri Cleaver, "Wāhine Kāi Tahu Mōrehu: Navigating Kāi Tahu Identity and Belonging, Post Foster System" (PhD thesis, University of Otago, 2025); Smith, "Whatuora."
74. Hōkūlani K. Aikau, "From Malihini to Hoa'āina: Reconnecting People, Places, and Practices" in *The Past Before Us: Mo'okū'auhau as Methodology*, ed. Nalani Wilson-Hokowhitu (University of Hawai'i Press, 2019), 85.
75. Moana Jackson, "Decolonisation and the Stories in the Land," in *Imagining Decolonisation*, ed. Bianca Elkington, Moana Jackson, Rebecca Kiddle, et al. (Bridget Williams Books, 2020).
76. Gina Starblanket, "Resurgence as Relationality," in *Everyday Acts of Resurgence: People, Places, Practices*, ed. Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel (Daykeeper Press, 2018), 29.
77. Wakefield et al., "Kaupapa Raupō."
78. Betasamosake Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back*, 44.
79. Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin' Up to the White Woman*; Simmonds, "Mana Wahine Geographies"; Paora, "Takatāpui—Beyond Marginalisation"; Kerekere, "Part of The Whānau."
80. Diana Kopua, Mark Kopua and Lisa Cherrington, *Mahi a Atua* (Huia Publishing, 2024); Paora, "Takatāpui—Beyond Marginalisation"; Nopera, "Huka can Haka"; Brendan Hokowhitu, "Indigenous Existentialism and the Body," *Cultural Studies Review* 15, no. 2 (2009): 101–18.
81. Adèle de Jager, Anna Tewson, Bryn Ludlow and Katherine Boydell, "Embodied Ways of Storying the Self: A Systematic Review of Body-Mapping," *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 17, no. 2 (2016): 1–31, https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-17.2.2526; Adriana Brodyn, Soo Young Lee, Elizabeth Futrell, et al., "Body Mapping and Story Circles in Sexual Health Research With Youth of Color: Methodological Insights and Study Findings From Adolescent X, an Art-Based Research Project," *Health Promotion Practice* 23, no. 4 (2021): 594–608. doi:10.1177/15248399211039796.
82. De Jager et al, "Embodied Ways of Storying the Self," 17.
83. Ruby Solly, *The Artist* (Te Herenga Waka University Press, 2023), 15.
84. Mahuika and Mahuika, "Wānanga as a Research Methodology"; August, "Māori Women: Bodies, Spaces, Sacredness and Mana"; Ihimaera, *Navigating the Stars*; Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln, Introduction to Denzin et al., *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies.*
85. Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*.
86. Hamley et al., "'You're the One That Was on Uncle's Wall,'" 17.
87. essa may ranapiri (@ired0mi), "LAUNCH POEM FOR A BAD ASS SICKASS SAMAORISH KAITUHI," 7 April 2026, https://www.instagram.com/p/DW0YceEiV84/?img_index=1.

https://doi.org/10.34074/junc.26035

DANIELE ABREU E LIMA AND JOSH SANORIA

QUEER DESIGN RESEARCH IN ARCHITECTURE: A CROSS-CULTURAL METHOD FROM THE PHILIPPINES TO AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

ABSTRACT

This article examines how queer theory can inform architectural design research through Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of the closet. The research investigates how relationships between concealment, visibility, safety, identity and belonging can become architectural questions. A research-through-design process combined theoretical investigation, community interviews and questionnaires, contextual research, and iterative architectural experimentation across Manila, Philippines and Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand. Conceptual models explored the spatial implications of the closet before informing two site-specific proposals. The Manila project investigates adaptive reuse and collective living through different degrees of visibility. The Wellington proposal explores a queer social and cultural venue organised around changing relationships between private experience, social interaction and public participation. Their comparison shows how a shared conceptual framework can generate different architectural responses when developed through situated cultural and community knowledge. We argue that the closet can operate as a productive design framework for investigating relationships between visibility, concealment, safety and self-expression. The research demonstrates how queer theory, community knowledge and design experimentation can generate situated architectural knowledge while remaining responsive to diverse experiences of identity and inhabitation.

INTRODUCTION

Architecture participates in the ways societies organise gender, sexuality, identity and social relationships. Spatial distinctions between public and private, visible and concealed and accessible and restricted can shape how people are recognised, how belonging is negotiated, and how everyday environments are experienced. Architectural scholarship has examined these relationships through feminist, queer and critical approaches, drawing attention to the social and political conditions embedded in the built environment.[1]

This article develops research originally undertaken in Josh Sanoria's Master of Architecture thesis, "Queeriosities of Space," at Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington. We ask how queer theory can inform architectural design through the concept of the closet. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* provides a central theoretical point of departure. Sedgwick's analysis centres on the unstable relationship between knowledge and concealment, disclosure and secrecy and the uneven conditions under which sexual identity becomes known.[2] These relationships are spatially relevant because architecture continually regulates degrees of access, visibility, exposure and retreat.

In "Queeriosities of Space," the closet was developed as a spatial framework for investigating how architecture might accommodate changing relationships between privacy and exposure, protection and visibility and individual and collective life. This interpretation provides a conceptual thread connecting the theoretical research with a series of architectural experiments and, subsequently, two site-specific design proposals.

The inquiry here is situated within the established field of research through design, in which designing, making, testing and reflecting can contribute to the production of architectural knowledge.[3] Christopher Frayling's distinctions between research into, through and for art and design establish a vocabulary for understanding different relationships between research and creative practice. Amongst other architectural practitioners and researchers, Murray Fraser has examined the role of design research within architecture,[4] while Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio have also used design experimentation to investigate social, cultural and theoretical questions.[5] The contribution of this article lies in applying this established research approach to queer theory through the spatial possibilities of the closet.

The design process began with theoretical investigations into sexuality, gender, performativity, visibility and queer space. These ideas were translated into drawings, diagrams, models and speculative architectural propositions, each providing an opportunity to examine their spatial implications. As the research developed, community engagement through interviews and questionnaires in the Philippines and Aotearoa New Zealand introduced situated experiences of privacy, visibility, safety, belonging, care and self-expression.

The research subsequently developed two site-specific design alternatives: an adaptive reuse proposal in Manila and a queer social and cultural venue in Wellington. Both projects emerged from the same conceptual enquiry but responded to different cultural, social and urban conditions. Their comparison provides a means of examining how the closet can generate different architectural questions when situated within different contexts.

This article argues that Sedgwick's concept of the closet can operate as a productive design framework through which relationships between identity and space can be investigated. Its architectural application allows questions of concealment, visibility, safety, belonging and participation to be explored through spatial organisation, thresholds, circulation, programme and occupation. The paper contributes to architectural research by demonstrating how queer theory, situated community knowledge and research through design can be brought together through a common conceptual framework while allowing architectural responses to remain culturally specific.

TRANSLATING QUEER THEORY INTO SPATIAL INQUIRY

The theoretical foundation of this research was developed through an iterative research-through-design process in which theory and design evolved together. From the outset, the literature review was accompanied by a series of visual and spatial investigations that enabled theoretical concepts to be interpreted, synthesised and critically examined through architectural experimentation. Drawings, illustrations, diagrams and physical models therefore operated as analytical tools that made abstract ideas available for spatial investigation.

The research-through-design process followed a recurring sequence (Figure 1). A theoretical concept or question was identified through the literature, interpreted through drawings and diagrams and then developed into a three-dimensional spatial model. Each stage altered the way the initial concept was understood and generated questions for the next investigation. The process therefore moved repeatedly between reading, making and reflection, with design experiments contributing to the development of the theoretical enquiry.

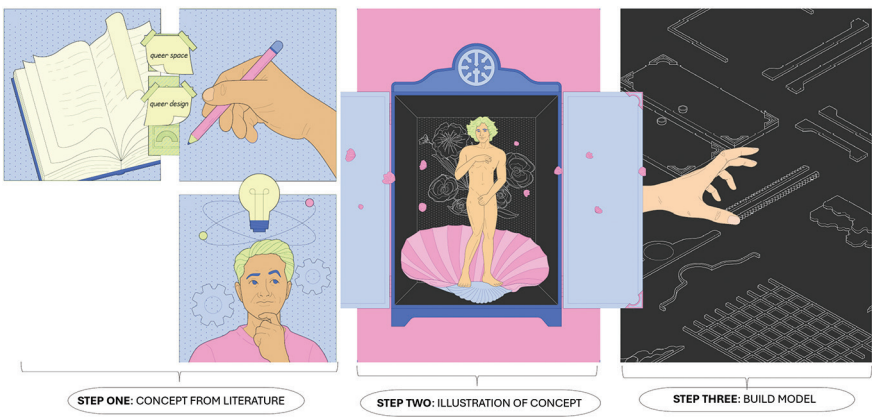


Figure 1. Research-through-design framework illustrating the iterative translation of theoretical concepts into illustrations, conceptual drawings and spatial models.

This approach builds on established research-through-design methodologies described by Frayling and Fraser, in which design activity can contribute to the production of knowledge through cycles of making, reflection and evaluation (Frayling 1993; Fraser 2013).[6] In "Queeriosities of Space," these cycles were used to investigate how queer theory could be given spatial form and tested through architectural propositions. The theoretical literature informed the questions posed through design, while the design experiments provided a means of examining the spatial consequences of those questions.

The initial investigations drew on Michel Foucault, Judith Butler and Sedgwick.[7] Foucault's analysis of sexuality and power, Butler's account of gender performativity and Sedgwick's examination of the closet established related questions concerning identity, disclosure, social recognition and the production of normative categories. These ideas were translated into abstract spatial studies that explored relationships between enclosure and exposure, separation and connection and individual and collective occupation.

Through these investigations, Sedgwick's concept of the closet became the central framework of the research (Figure 2.A). The experiments explored the closet as a condition of changing visibility: a space can conceal, protect, expose, connect or separate, depending on how it is entered, occupied and perceived. This interpretation shifted the closet from an image of a concealed interior towards a spatial relationship between different degrees of visibility and privacy. It also provided a way of connecting the theoretical discussion to architectural elements such as thresholds, enclosure, circulation and access.

The subsequent investigations examined architectural binaries associated with these relationships. Drawing on discussions of urban and architectural spaces and queer identities by Matt Cook and Jennifer V. Evans, Eric O. Clarke, Olivier Vallerand and Shinsuke Eguchi, the research explored distinctions between public and private space, visibility and concealment and normative and alternative forms of occupation.[8] Drawings and models tested how thresholds, circulation, enclosure and spatial ambiguity could alter these relationships (Figure 2.B).

A further body of literature on queer architecture and queer space, including the work of Aaron Betsky, Marko Jobst and Naomi Stead, Katarina Bonnevier, Adam Nathanial Furman and Joshua Mardell, Lucas Belury, Elizabeth Freeman and Vallerand, extended these investigations by considering relationships between bodies, identities, agency and the built environment.[9] The design studies focused on how queer space might be produced through these relationships, exploring how architecture can support multiple ways of inhabiting space through adaptability, negotiation and occupation (Figure 2.C).

The final phase of the literature review introduced a cross-cultural perspective through the work of Rapoport (Rapoport 1982), Kent (Kent, 1993), and Bonenberg (Bonenberg 2016).[10] Their research highlighted the importance of cultural values and social practices in shaping spatial experience, and informed the comparative investigation undertaken in the Philippines and Aotearoa New Zealand. This perspective established the importance of treating experiences of visibility, belonging, safety and identity as culturally situated, while recognising that some concerns may extend across different queer communities (Figure 2.D).

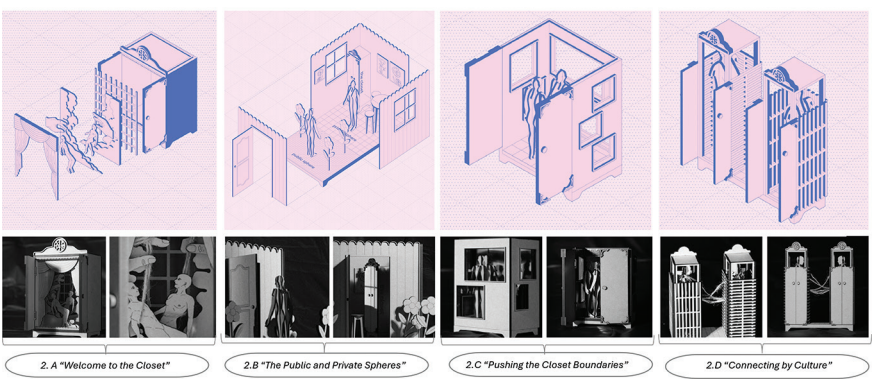


Figure 2. Iterative conceptual investigations translating queer theory into spatial studies of visibility, privacy, thresholds, occupation, agency and cultural difference.

Across these stages, the models functioned as research instruments. They provided opportunities to test spatial relationships, identify tensions within the theoretical concepts and determine which questions warranted further investigation. Four themes became particularly important: the closet as a spatial condition; the relationship between public and private space; changing degrees of visibility and self-expression; and the influence of cultural context on queer spatial experience.

These investigations established the conceptual framework for the next stage of the research. The theoretical and spatial questions developed through the models were subsequently considered alongside community interviews and questionnaires, allowing the research to move from abstract spatial inquiry towards site-specific architectural speculation in Manila and Wellington.

FROM CONCEPTUAL INQUIRY TO ARCHITECTURAL SPECULATION

The conceptual investigations described in the previous section established a series of spatial questions concerning visibility, privacy, enclosure, movement and occupation. The next stage brought these questions into contact with community interviews and questionnaires conducted with queer communities in Aotearoa New Zealand and the Philippines. Across the material collected, participants described experiences involving privacy, visibility, relationships between interior and exterior life, belonging and the need to move between different degrees of exposure. These experiences provided a basis for a speculative architectural investigation before the development of the two site-specific proposals.

The speculative project reinterpreted Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* through the spatial concept of the closet (Figure 3).[11] The familiar domestic house provided a recognisable architectural framework within which the relationships identified through the research could be tested. A transparent acrylic closet was placed at the centre of the composition, making an element associated with concealment visible and inhabitable. The closet became a threshold connecting previously separated domestic spaces and mediating between different degrees of exposure and privacy.

The use of transparency allowed the research to examine what happens when concealment becomes visible. The acrylic enclosure could be seen from surrounding spaces while remaining physically distinct from them. Its position altered the relationships between rooms, circulation and occupation, making visibility a spatial condition that changed according to the position of the occupant and the observer.

The model incorporated layered thresholds, fragmented spatial sequences, colour and varying degrees of enclosure. These elements allowed the design to test how spatial boundaries could become more or less permeable and how movement could alter relationships between interior and exterior, public and private and individual and collective occupation.

Although conceived as a speculative model rather than a full-scale architectural proposal, the project represents an important stage in the research. It brought together the theoretical investigations and community experiences developed in the preceding



Figure 3. Doll's house interpretation of the shared spatial experiences identified across queer communities in Aotearoa New Zealand and the Philippines. Through the closet, the proposal explores immersion, emotion and the negotiation of boundaries between interior and exterior, public and private.

stages and allowed them to be tested through architectural organisation, circulation, thresholds, enclosure and occupation. The experiment also raised a question that became central to the subsequent projects: how might a common conceptual framework produce different architectural responses when developed through different cultural contexts?

The question established the basis for the two site-specific design alternatives developed in Manila and Wellington. Community experiences remained an important reference throughout this stage, while the architectural responses became increasingly shaped by the particular histories, sites and social conditions of each context.

DESIGN ALTERNATIVES AS ARCHITECTURAL RESEARCH

The research subsequently developed two site-specific design alternatives in Manila and Wellington. Building on the conceptual and community-based investigations, each proposal tested how queer experience could be translated into architectural questions within its specific cultural and urban context. The following sections examine the development of the two projects.

Manila: Negotiating Visibility Through Adaptive Reuse

The Manila proposal emerged from engagement with members of the Golden Gays organisation and other queer participants living in Manila. Interviews and questionnaires identified recurring concerns around privacy, collective care, adaptability and visibility. Participants described how the expression of queer identity depended on social context, relationships and circumstance. These experiences raised a spatial question central to the project: how can architecture provide different degrees of exposure and retreat within the same environment?

The experiences of the Golden Gays were particularly influential in developing this question. Their shared residence operates as home, workplace, performance venue and support network. Domestic, cultural and communal activities overlap within limited resources, requiring spaces to accommodate changing patterns of occupation. This condition informed an architectural approach based on flexibility and collective use, with opportunities for retreat, social interaction and public engagement.

The First United Building (FUB), located in Manila's historic Escolta district, was selected as the site for the investigation because of its adaptive reuse and its existing role in artistic and community activities. Although the building was not designed as a queer space, it already accommodates activities associated with Manila's queer community. Its spatial organisation offered an important precedent for the project. Retail spaces open directly towards the surrounding streets, while the main entrance leads towards a more sheltered central area containing queer-related shops and activities. The movement from the street into the building therefore already established a transition between public accessibility and greater interior privacy.

The first site-specific design studies tested how this existing condition could be extended across the FUB and its neighbouring buildings (Figure 4). Successive iterations explored the retention of the historic façade, new connections between the buildings, circulation routes and the distribution of public, communal and residential functions. The studies progressively developed the idea of a layered threshold: the boundary between public and private activity could contain several intermediate conditions instead of functioning as a single dividing line.

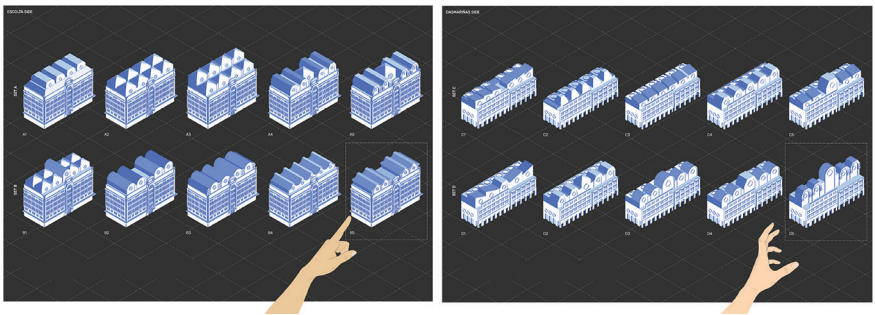


Figure 4. Iterative architectural studies exploring adaptive reuse strategies for the First United Building and adjacent buildings. Successive investigations tested relationships between heritage fabric, public and private space, circulation and collective occupation.

The final proposal transforms the FUB and two adjoining buildings into an interconnected complex supporting collective living, cultural production, performance and community care (Figure 8). The FUB accommodates predominantly social and cultural functions. Retail occupies the ground floor, community art and workshop spaces are located on Level 1, exhibition spaces on Level 2, food and social activities on Level 3 and an auditorium, bar and performance spaces on Level 4. This vertical organisation brings public activity into the lower levels while providing increasingly specialised collective and cultural spaces above.

The two adjoining buildings form a residential and communal structure connected to the FUB by bridges at the upper levels. The connection creates opportunities for interaction between the buildings, while maintaining a distinction between the public activities of the FUB and domestic occupation. Retail occupies the ground floor, with apartments beginning at Level 1.

The residential component introduces three apartment types based on different degrees of visibility and privacy identified through the research (Figure 5). The ‘fully out’ one- and two-bedroom apartments occupy the perimeter of the building and have the greatest exposure to the surrounding environment. The ‘partially out’ one-bedroom apartments face the FUB across the pedestrian connection, allowing visual engagement with the complex while maintaining greater separation from the street. The ‘closed’ studio apartments occupy the centre of the building and receive natural light through skylights, providing a more protected form of occupation.

These categories describe spatial conditions rather than fixed identities. A resident’s relationship to visibility can change according to circumstance, and the apartment types provide different architectural conditions through which that choice can be negotiated. The arrangement therefore connects the conceptual framework of the closet to a concrete architectural organisation: exposure and retreat are qualities of space that can be selected through occupation.

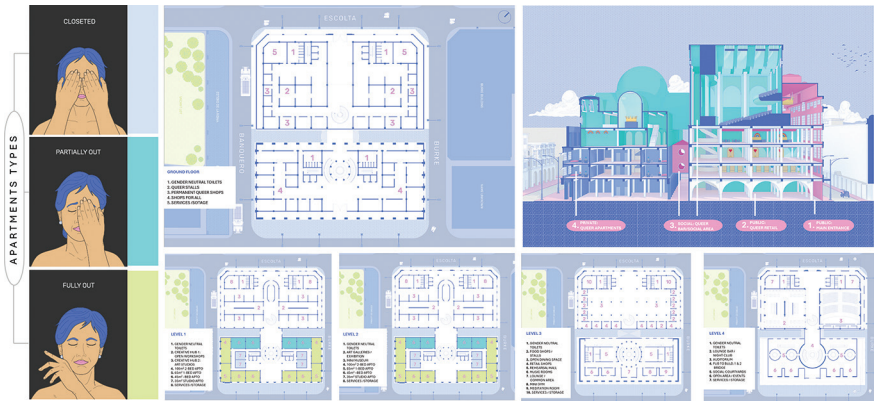


Figure 5. Plans and section of the final proposal illustrating the distribution of public, communal and residential programmes, including three apartment types with varying degrees of privacy and visibility.

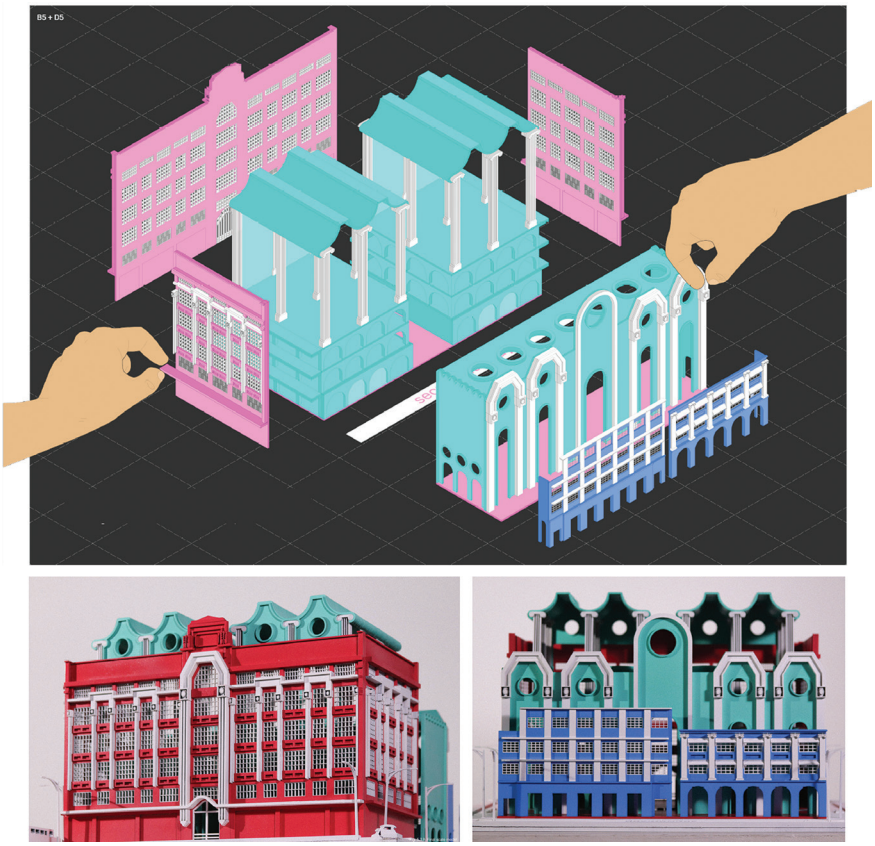


Figure 6. Perspectives and physical models of the final Manila proposal, illustrating the integration of retained historic façades with new architectural interventions.

The architectural treatment of the existing and new buildings reinforces this relationship between continuity and change (Figure 6). The heritage façade of the FUB is retained and combined with the rhythm and proportions of the adjoining buildings, while contemporary interventions introduce a more playful architectural language. Colour, material variation and new insertions contribute a distinct identity to the complex while maintaining a visual relationship with the historic character of Escolta. The retained fabric allows the project to remain connected to the existing urban context, while the new interventions make the community's presence more visible within it.

The public toilet facilities provide a further, more focused application of the project's spatial principles (Figure 7). The proposal organises the facilities according to degrees of privacy and interaction, with individual cubicles positioned alongside communal sinks and grooming areas. Privacy is provided at the level of personal use, while the shared areas support social interaction. The arrangement separates access to privacy from conventional gender divisions and allows occupants to determine their degree of engagement with others.

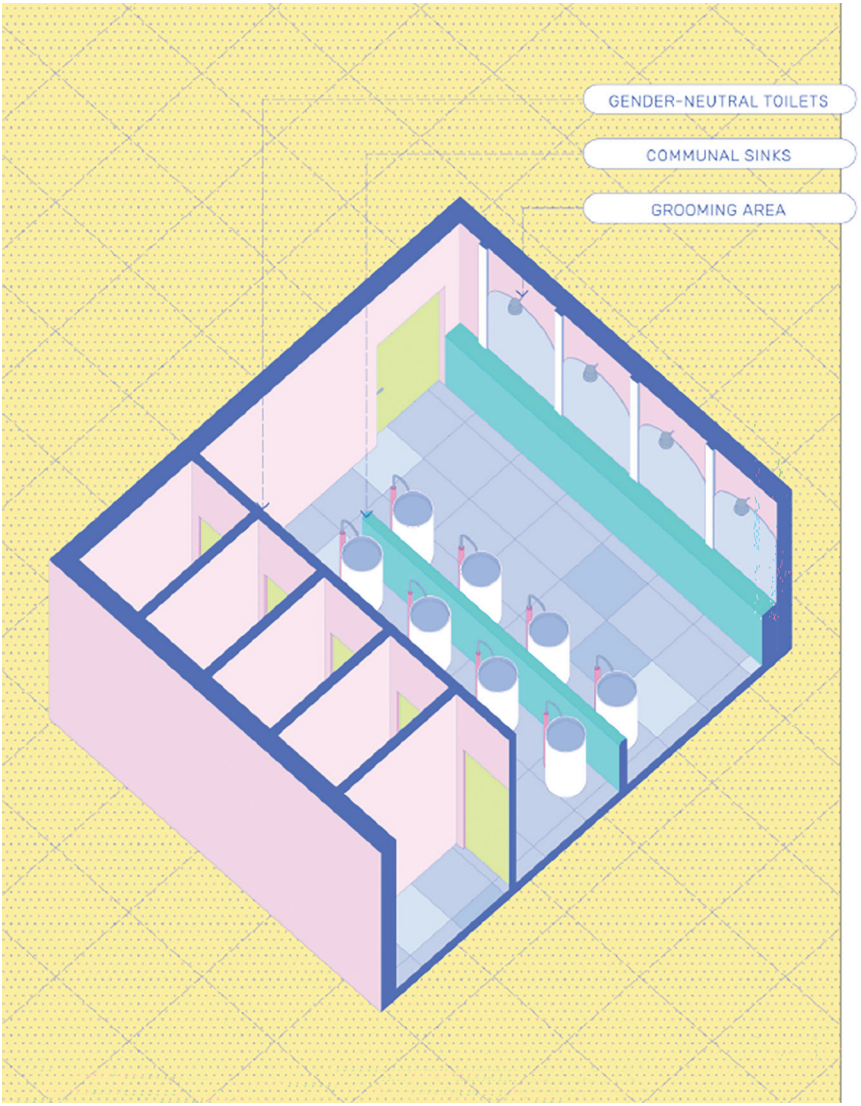


Figure 7. Gender-inclusive public toilets organised around graduated levels of privacy, combining individual cubicles with communal sinks and shared grooming areas.

The Manila proposal therefore demonstrates how the closet can become an architectural question about degrees of visibility and choice. Its application extends from the scale of the apartment to the organisation of the larger complex and to specific interior spaces. Adaptive reuse provides the broader framework through which these relationships are embedded within an existing urban and community context. The project shows how architectural organisation can accommodate different forms of queer inhabitation while retaining connections to the history and social life of the site.



Figure 8. Translation of community oral histories into architectural concepts for the Wellington proposal.

Wellington: Architecture of Transformation and Public Engagement

The Wellington proposal emerged from a context in which queer identities have greater legal recognition and public visibility, while experiences of exclusion, vulnerability and self-discovery remain part of queer life. The project was informed by preliminary interviews and questionnaires with queer communities across Aotearoa New Zealand, followed by more focused conversations with participants in Wellington.

Discussions with L and M were particularly influential in defining the programme and spatial organisation of the proposal. Their reflections highlighted the role that queer social spaces can play in processes of self-recognition and social connection. The experience of coming out emerged as an important theme, particularly in relation to

changing degrees of personal and public visibility. These conversations were considered alongside the history of Wellington's queer social spaces, including bars, clubs and community venues that have provided places for social interaction, performance and self-expression. Together, these sources informed the project's central question: how might architecture support movement between more private experiences of identity and participation in public life (Figure 8)?

The site occupies a prominent corner of Cuba Street and Swan Lane, historically associated with the former White Swan Hotel. Although the original building has been demolished, its presence and symbolic association with the site informed the design investigation. Cuba Street provided an additional cultural context through its history of artistic production, public performance, nightlife and social diversity. The project sought to establish a direct relationship with this public life by opening its programme and circulation towards the street.

The proposal, "The Pink Swan," is conceived as a queer social and cultural venue combining retail, lounge, exhibition and performance spaces. The programme accommodates different forms of occupation throughout the building, from quieter and more private activities to spaces designed for social gathering and public events. This functional organisation provided the architectural framework through which the research could investigate changing degrees of visibility and participation.

The initial design studies explored how the history of the White Swan could be reinterpreted through architectural elements associated with transition and openness. Arches, layered thresholds and interconnected volumes were tested as ways of connecting the building with the street while creating intermediate spaces between interior and exterior (Figure 9). The interviews also indicated a desire for greater visibility and integration with the wider community. In response, the design introduced spatial elements along the edge of the building where people could pause, meet, observe activity or participate, without necessarily entering the main interior spaces.

The design development subsequently shifted from the symbolic interpretation of the White Swan towards the organisation of spatial experience. The relationship between programme, circulation and degrees of enclosure became central to the proposal. Spaces were arranged so that movement through the building could provide different levels of privacy, social interaction and public exposure. The threshold was therefore extended beyond the building entrance and treated as a sequence of spatial conditions.

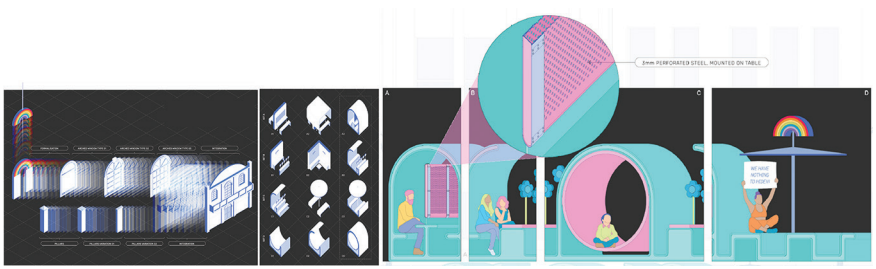


Figure 9. Design explorations for spatial elements that invite public interaction.

This sequence also developed the metaphor of the closet established through the earlier design investigations. In the Wellington project, the closet became the starting point for a movement through different degrees of visibility. The architectural sequence was intended to accommodate moments of retreat and reflection alongside opportunities for encounter and public participation. Movement through these spaces was not conceived as a one-way progression: occupants could move towards greater exposure or return to more private areas according to their circumstances.

The resulting organisation of The Pink Swan establishes a gradual relationship between the rear of the building and Cuba Street (Figure 10). Retail and lounge spaces are located towards the more secluded part of the site, providing quieter environments for individual or small-group occupation. Galleries and exhibition spaces occupy an intermediate position, connecting social and cultural activities. Towards Cuba Street, larger lounges and performance spaces establish the strongest relationship with public life. Changes in scale, height, openness and circulation reinforce these distinctions.

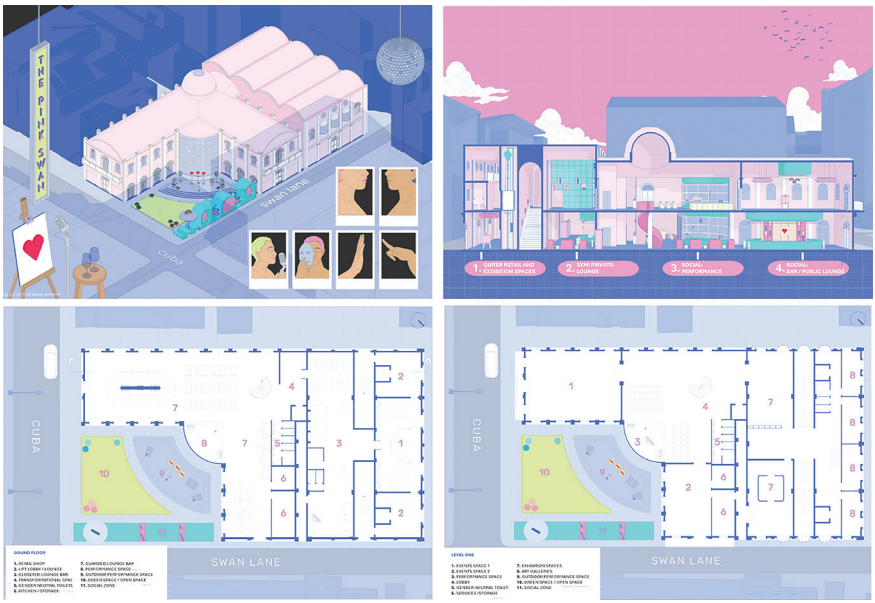


Figure 10. Plans, section and axonometric of The Pink Swan, showing the distribution of retail, lounge, exhibition and performance spaces in relation to Cuba Street, and varying degrees of privacy and openness.

The spatial sequence remains reversible. Occupants can move between more exposed and more private areas without having to follow a prescribed route (Figure 11). This quality is important to the project's interpretation of the closet because visibility is treated as a condition that can be adjusted according to circumstance. The architecture accommodates movement between participation and retreat, allowing individuals to determine their degree of exposure within the building.



Figure 11. The Pink Swan: Internal spaces establishing varying degrees of visibility and social interaction.

The relationship between the building and Cuba Street is therefore central to the proposal. Public space is not simply a destination at the end of the spatial sequence; it forms part of the building's programme and identity. The open lounges, performance areas, exhibition spaces and street-facing thresholds create opportunities for queer cultural activity to become part of everyday urban life.

Through The Pink Swan, the closet operates as a framework for investigating how architecture can organise changing relationships between private experience and public participation. The project translates this enquiry into programme, circulation, thresholds and degrees of enclosure, producing a social and cultural venue in which occupants can choose different forms of engagement. The architectural proposition connects personal processes of self-recognition with opportunities for collective and public expression, while remaining open to different experiences of visibility and participation (Figure 12).

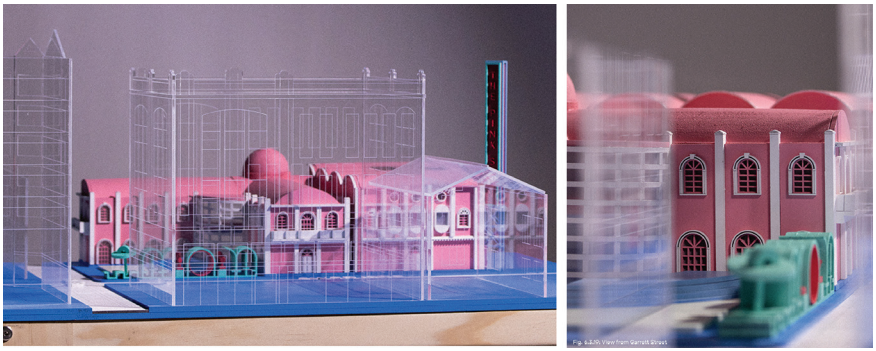


Figure 12. Physical models of The Pink Swan proposal.

Architectural Implications

Read together, the two projects show that queer-informed architectural research is necessarily situated. A shared conceptual framework produced different architectural responses because it was developed through specific cultural, social and urban conditions. The research therefore points to adaptability as an important quality of queer space, allowing relationships between privacy, visibility, encounter and participation to change according to circumstance.

The closet provides the conceptual connection between these investigations. Its interpretation across the two projects demonstrates how a theoretical concept can become a spatial framework without prescribing a fixed architectural form. Through design, relationships between concealment and visibility, retreat and participation, can be examined as conditions of occupation and movement.

The research also demonstrates the value of bringing community knowledge into design enquiry. Interviews and questionnaires informed the questions pursued through architectural experimentation, while drawings and models provided means of testing possible spatial responses. This reciprocal relationship between lived experience, theory and design constitutes an important methodological contribution of "Queeriosities of Space." The research has been presented through an interactive installation at the 2024 New Zealand Institute of Architects (NZIA) Resene Student Design Awards, bringing the two projects together through the shared framework of the closet (Figure 13). The work received the NZIA Student Design Award, providing disciplinary recognition and a public platform for communicating the research.

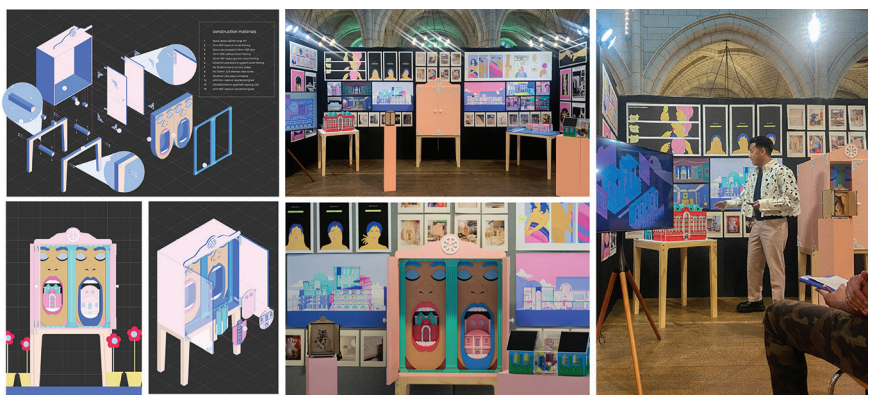


Figure 13. Exhibition installation presenting the research findings through interactive and visual design media at the 2024 NZIA Student Design Awards.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined how queer theory can inform architectural design research through "Queeriosities of Space." The research brought together theoretical enquiry, community engagement, contextual investigation and iterative design to explore how experiences of queer identity can become architectural questions. The process moved between reading, listening, drawing, modelling and architectural speculation, with each stage contributing to the development of the next.

The research identifies Sedgwick's concept of the closet as a productive framework for this process. Its architectural interpretation provided a way to investigate relationships between concealment and visibility, privacy and exposure, safety and participation. The two design proposals demonstrated how these relationships could be interpreted differently when situated within distinct cultural and social contexts. The closet consequently operated as an open conceptual framework whose architectural meaning developed through engagement with specific experiences and places.

The community interviews and questionnaires were important to this process because they introduced situated experiences that shaped the questions pursued through design. These accounts informed the development of architectural strategies without determining a single formal response. Design provided a means of testing how experiences of identity, visibility, belonging and participation might be organised spatially, while the resulting propositions opened further questions for investigation.

The methodological contribution of the research lies in bringing these forms of knowledge into a reciprocal design process. Research through design provides an established basis for generating architectural knowledge through making, testing and reflection. "Queeriosities of Space" extends this approach by placing queer theory and situated community knowledge within the design process and using the closet as a conceptual framework for spatial experimentation.

The research also demonstrates the value of allowing architectural responses to remain culturally situated. The projects did not seek to establish a common formal language for queer space. Their different outcomes emerged from the particular experiences, histories and urban conditions investigated in Manila and Wellington. This provides a basis for architectural research that takes difference seriously and allows context to influence the questions and spatial strategies developed through design.

The implications extend beyond queer architectural research. The approach offers a way for architectural educators and practitioners to engage with communities whose experiences have received limited representation within architectural discourse. Community narratives can introduce questions that are subsequently explored through drawing, modelling and spatial experimentation, creating opportunities for architectural knowledge to develop through engagement with lived experience.

"Queeriosities of Space" therefore contributes a way of working with queer theory through architectural design: listening to situated experiences, identifying spatial questions, testing them through design and reflecting on the knowledge that emerges. The research positions the closet as a particularly productive framework for this process, allowing architecture to investigate changing relationships between identity, visibility, belonging, and inhabitation.

Illustrations: Figures 1-13, Josh Sanoria, "Queeriosities of Space," Master of Architecture (Prof.), Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington, 2025, https://doi.org/10.26686/wgtn.29336090.

Daniele Abreu e Lima is an architect and urban planner whose research and teaching engage modern architecture and dystopian spatial realities as critical lenses on societal issues. A permanent academic at Victoria University of Wellington since 2008, she holds a PhD from the same institution and a Master's degree with Honours from the University of São Paulo.

Josh Sanoria is an architectural graduate whose background in fine arts and graphic design informs a people-centred design approach. His Master of Architecture (Professional) thesis engaged with under-represented communities and inclusive spatial practices. In 2024, his work received the Team Architects Premium Award and the NZIA Student Design Award. He is currently employed at Stapleton Elliott Architects.

1. Marko Jobst and Naomi Stead, eds., *Queering Architecture Methods, Practices, Spaces, Pedagogies* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023).
2. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick,.*Epistemology of the Closet, Updated with a New Preface: Updated with a New Preface* (University of California Press, 1990).
3. Christopher Frayling, "Research in Art and Design," *Royal College of Art Research Papers* 1, no. 1 (London, 1993): 1–5.
4. Murray Fraser, *Design Research in Architecture: An Overview* (Ashgate, 2013).
5. Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio, *Flesh: Architectural Probes* (Princeton Architectural Press, 1994).
6. Frayling, "Research in Art and Design"; Fraser, *Design Research in Architecture*.
7. Michel Foucault (with Colin Gordon), *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (Harvester Press, 1980); Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1 (Vintage, 1990); Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (Routledge, 1993); Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*.
8. Matt Cook and Jennifer V. Evans, *Queer Cities, Queer Cultures: Europe Since 1945* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2014); Eric O. Clarke, *Virtuous Vice: Homoeroticism and the Public Sphere* (Duke University Press, 2000); Olivier Vallerand "Queer Looks on Architecture: From Challenging Identity-Based Approaches to Spatial Thinking," *Archdaily* (18 June 2021), https://www.archdaily.com/963534/queer-looks-on-architecture-from-challenging-identity-based-approaches-to-spatial-thinking; Shinsuke Eguchi, "Negotiating Hegemonic Masculinity: The Rhetorical Strategy of 'Straight-Acting' Among Gay Men," *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research* 38, no. 3: 193–209, https://doi.org/10.1080/17475759.2009.508892.
9. Aaron Betsky, *Queer Space: Architecture and Same-Sex Desire*, 1st ed. (William Morrow and Company, 1997); .Jobst and Stead, *Queering Achitectural Methods*; Katarina Bonnevier, "A Queer Analysis of Eileen Gray's E.1027," in *Negotiating Domesticity: Spatial Productions of Gender in Modern Architecture*, ed. Hilde Heynen and Gülsüm Baydar (Routledge, 2005); Adam Nathanial Furman and Joshua Mardell, eds., *Queer Spaces: An Atlas of LGBTQIA+ Places and Stories* (RIBA Publishing, 2022); Lucas Belury, "Expanding Queer Architectural Theory: Towards a Framework of Decolonial Queer Borderlands Architecture," *Progress in Human Geography* 49, no. 3 (2025): 305–322, https://doi.org/10.1177/03091325251334284; Elizabeth Freeman,

Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories (Duke University Press, 2010); Vallerand, "Home Is the Place We All Share: Building Queer Collective Utopias," *Journal of Architectural Education* 67, no. 1 (1984): 64–75, https://doi.org/10.1080/10464883.2013.767125.

10. Amos Rapoport, *The Meaning of the Built Environment: A Nonverbal Communication Approach* (Sage Publications, 1982); Susan Kent, ed., *Domestic Architecture and the Use of Spaces: An Interdisciplinary Cross-Cultural Study* (Cambridge University Press, 1993); Wojciech Bonenberg, "Cross-Cultural Design and its Application in Architecture," in *Advances in Human Factors and Sustainable Infrastructure*, ed. Jerzy Charytonowicz (Springer, 2016), 105–114, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-41941-1_10.
11. Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll's House* 1st ed. (Methuen Drama, 2020).

https://doi.org/10.34074/junc.26053

MATTHEW BANNISTER

BABY DONE AND THE 'MISPERFORMANCE' OF NEW ZEALAND GENDER AND ETHNIC PARADIGMS

Baby Done (2020) is an Aotearoa New Zealand screen comedy where the laughs derive largely from apparently reversed gender norms: Zoe (Rose Matafeo) is pregnant but has no desire to be a mother, while her partner Tim (Matthew Lewis) assumes a maternal role.[1] Zoe displays stereotypes associated with reluctant parenthood—denial, the desire for independence, the rejection of sentiment regarding children—while Tim is comically anxious and solicitous. In the United States context, gender theorist Pamela Thoma's study of similar, popular millennial 'unwanted pregnancy' films, *Juno, Waitress* and *Knocked Up* (all 2007), suggest that they "celebrate as models young, white, American-born women who demonstrate their privilege as consumers and their modern feminine subjectivity through choosing to reproduce. They carry pregnancies to full term or become mothers despite explicit statements that their pregnancies are unwanted and despite barriers to autonomy and security."[2] These films, Thoma argues, "commercialize motherhood and popular feminist politics, affirm consumer mothers' social belonging or citizenship in a fantasy world that claims it has 'surpassed feminism,' and ultimately displace a broader human rights-based political movement for reproductive justice."[3] In endorsing the allegedly 'natural' role of women as mothers, the films effectively endorse patriarchy.

Baby Done is both like and unlike these films. It is an 'unwanted pregnancy' narrative, broadly comic, both in tone and narrative (a 'chick flick'), and its lead character ultimately has a child, but it is set in Aotearoa New Zealand, with a Pasifikan protagonist who denies her pregnancy, displaying contempt for parenthood in all its social and commercial incarnations. On the other hand, abortion, a possibility in the US films, is not mentioned in *Baby Done*. Is this because abortion is a 'choice,' albeit one superseded by 'consumer choice' in the US films, whereas Zoe's dilemma needs to be understood less as individual choice but symbolically, in relation to cultural background? Thus, the film can be better explained by reference to Aotearoa New Zealand as opposed to US culture, and by comparison with other New Zealand texts (television advertising and Taika Waititi's films, for example, especially given that Waititi produced *Baby Done*). Denial plays a role in all these narratives, but in the New Zealand film it is much more

prolonged. And while the US protagonists all approach the problem as normative women, in the New Zealand film the protagonist behaves like a man.

Ambiguous identity is a recurring theme in the work of *Baby Done*'s writer and director, Sophie Henderson and Curtis Vowell. Their first film, *Fantail* (2013), was about a Pākehā woman who thinks she is Māori. Vowell noted his interest in the theme stemmed from his discovery that he was part Rarotongan, something his parents did not tell him until he was a teenager.[4] This ambiguity is lacking in the US films, whch are about heterosexual, middle-class, white women who despite the 'adversity' of pregnancy make normative choices and end up playing traditional roles. *Baby Done* features a more tortured protagonist who really struggles to accept parenthood (despite there not being any obvious impediments, such as poverty), while also being a comedy in which (as with all the films) pregnancy is played for laughs. If the US films construct US national identity as 'nativist,' white and heteronormative, then *Baby Done* presents a complex protagonist who repeatedly refuses to make the 'right' choices, including about her gender identity—she is not just opposed to motherhood, but identifies as a man (while in a heterosexual relationship and pregnant).

My sense is that, in *Baby Done*, all these identity issues are linked. The blurring of parental and gender roles intersects with ethnicity to produce a complex representation of national identity, fronted by one of New Zealand's biggest international stars. Earlier Matafeo vehicles, such as TV comedy *Funny Girls* (2015–18), featured "a Flight of the Conchords-esque narrative about Matafeo and Laura Daniel's attempts to create a comedy show for women. This begins with Matafeo pitching her idea to a room full of dismissive male suits."[5] The series addressed how women create comedy in a masculine culture by both parodying and emulating it, which is broadly Matafeo's approach in *Baby Done*. Zoe's problems with motherhood relate to a dominant, homosocial culture which devalues femininity and normalises masculinity, although in different ways to other paternalistic cultures (like the US). She apparently identifies with dominant local masculinities (hence her disavowal of femininity), connecting to what Anita Brady terms a transgender aspect to New Zealand cultural representations, where femininity is only representable as masculinity.[6] However, Brady does not consider ethnicity. A potentially transgender reading of Zoe as a manlike woman, or a woman (mis)performing masculinity, is complicated by her Pasifika ethnicity. I have therefore added a reading of her performance as mimicry of the white, male coloniser.[7]

Misperformance primarily refers to comic convention. What is funny in a character relates to their perceived failure to adapt, displaying a kind of social rigidity. Comedy is thus based on social rather than moral conventions.[8] Zoe is comically inflexible in her disavowal, which is tied to her masculine behaviour (or, Zoe's inflexibly masculine behaviour means that she disavows her pregnancy).

BABY DONE NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

The film's opening scenes centre around Zoe and Tim's arboriculture business, Forest Mates (their slogan is "we trim a mean bush"), showing Zoe as a competent, if slightly reckless tree pruner, while partner Tim looks on from below, voicing health and safety concerns. The company name is significant, establishing the centrality of nature,

the outdoors, but also the ambiguity of 'mateship,' suggesting both homosociality and sexual union. The soundtrack, by Pasifika female hip-hop artist Coco Solid, also establishes Zoe's female feistiness, undercut in the following clinic scene when she discovers that she is pregnant. "Tapeworms can give false positives," Zoe tells the nurse, who responds "It's not a tapeworm, it's a baby."

Following scenes initially suggest that both Zoe's and her friends' aversion to parenthood and domesticity is young people's normal, even healthy reaction to social pressure and generational uncertainty. Zoe's friend Molly represents millennial anxiety, grimly intoning that "In Tanzania, one in 20 women die in childbirth," and that having a child "is the worst thing for the planet". Zoe and Tim disrupt a friend's baby shower with irreverent behaviour, simulating sexual intercourse (after the hosts suggest they should have a baby too), sneaking a peek into the gender reveal box and ridiculing convention (drink ice cubes with babies inside). The film title refers ironically to the conventional expectations they are sending up: 'Married, house, baby, done.' Their reactions could also suggest 'heterosexual pessimism,' disillusionment with heteronormativity, although such pessimism has been criticised as quietist.[9] On leaving the party, Zoe announces, "We just lost another two of our friends," continuing the millennial anti-parent theme, although also echoing a traditional, patriarchal narrative: "Wedding bells are breaking up that old gang of mine". Early in the film, then, ambiguity is introduced into the audience's perceptions of Zoe's attitude and motives, just as 'baby done' comes to have a second meaning as Zoe tries to sideline the implications of impending birth.

The audience knows what Tim and Molly do not: Zoe is pregnant. A gulf gradually opens between Zoe, her friends and eventually the audience too, due to her increasingly distracted behaviour and grandiose delusions, including the intention to compete in the world tree climbing championships. At a national tree climbing event, which Zoe wins, Tim discovers a pregnancy test in Zoe's bag. The ensuing stand-off culminates in an abortive (so to speak) joint bungee jump, with Tim announcing, "I thought you wouldn't go through with it. I thought that if I brought you up here, you would tell me what was going on!" The confrontation culminates in Zoe pushing Tim off the platform after the operator refuses to allow her to jump (as she is pregnant). By turning the confrontation into *Jackass*-style slapstick, the film temporarily sidelines the implications of Zoe's stance.

Though Zoe and Tim are apparently a conventional heterosexual couple, the narrative constructs Zoe as masculine and Tim as feminine in behaviour. For example, Tim is emotional and empathetic: "You always cry when I cry," Zoe comments. Zoe is represented as active and competitive: if she is not climbing trees, or winning events, she says, "I feel like I'm not living." Tim's solicitude, such as his wanting to refrain from sex, because "It's like the baby knows," echoes or parodies traditionally feminine concerns. Zoe accuses him of "being obsessed with being a dad," reversing the normative expectation that women are more concerned with parenting, and of "nesting," after he cleans the house.

A feminist reading would not necessarily see any anomaly in partners swapping roles.[10] Gender equality emphasises that roles are not fixed, and in this sense, there is nothing unusual in Zoe's desire to stay at work or in Tim adopting a maternal role. Pregnancy is not natural or inevitable, but social, emotional and physical 'labour' that can be shared. The narrative of the film, however, comically stresses the gap between Zoe and social

expectation: she gets stuck up a tree and pees on her rescuer; gets wedged under a door in a nightclub toilet (a men's toilet, oddly); attempts a threesome with Molly and Tim, despite not having told Molly she is pregnant; skips neonatal classes; and ultimately boards an overseas flight (en route to the world tree climbing championships), going into labour on the cabin floor. Molly comments: "You're a baby having a baby," while Tim, once again assuming the feminine role, says "I know you hate being pregnant and I wish I could do it for you, because you are so fucking bad at it." The comedy consists in Zoe's behavioural rigidity that society censures through laughter.[11] But this rigidity also reflects the society that laughs.

GENDER AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

Zoe's plight can also be interpreted as a symptom of New Zealand culture's continual harping on masculinity as the preferred sign of national identity. Historically, constructions of the nation have emphasised Pākehā masculinity.[12] The 'Kiwi bloke,' a laconic rural type, came to prominence with 1930s cultural nationalist writers, continuing through national sports teams like the All Blacks, popular comedians like John Clarke (Fred Dagg) and a local "cinema of unease,"[13] and ending up in TV advertising, such as the Speight's beer Southern Man campaign. The bloke is identified with rural landscape: South Island hill country (in the Speight's campaign), the outdoors and nature, which continues in '100% Pure New Zealand' branding, representing New Zealand as a mecca for outdoors activities and extreme sports.[14] 'Nature' identifications are also nostalgic, spilling over into colonial ideology—the identification of white masculinity with land (as opposed to tangata whenua), for example, or indeed the term 'Kiwi,' which naturalises settlement and homogenises the New Zealand population. The Speight's campaign can also be read "as an ironic, nostalgic version of an admirable fiction (a belief that 'real men don't exist anymore and I wouldn't measure up if they did … society is changing, things will never be as they were in the past.'"[15] This irony is self-protective in that it allows men to distance themselves from accusations of sexism, but also suggests that on a global stage, the Kiwi bloke is a complicit rather than hegemonic masculinity; his impassivity hides 'unmanly' feelings of inferiority or effeminacy.[16]

Work on New Zealand national identity by US advertising agency FCB noted not only masculine normativity, but, more unusually, the absence of femininity in national iconography:

> When [US researchers] asked … for images that represented New Zealand, women brought pictures of All Blacks, sheep, tractors, the beach—the same as the men. Where were the feminine symbols? The Americans said they had never been to a country where men and women were so morphed … a land where blokes are blokes and even women can be blokes.[17]

Brady extends this argument, analysing the Speight's TV advertising campaign to argue that the adverts' homosociality is so pronounced that female characters are redundant, producing a curious tension.[18] Women are required to confirm the male characters' heterosexuality, but homosociality militates against their presence. The Speight's advert "The Deerstalker's Ball" (1992) illustrates these points, partly as an exception—for most of these adverts do not feature any women.[19] Sharon, a blond, flirtatious barmaid, offers two tickets to the ball to the younger of two 'blokes,' with the clear implication

of a date. But the young man passes the second ticket to his older male mate, who comments, "Good sport, that Sharon." In that appellation, "good sport," Sharon is both acknowledged as a 'bloke' and negated as a woman—misrecognised twice. She is both absent and present, a man and a woman. Brady argues that Sharon incarnates:

> a New Zealandness embodied as female that simultaneously misperforms the imperatives of femininity, and the imperatives of masculinity. The gender binary that functions in the service of national identity is not male/female but masculinity as the gendered and the transgendered body. This 'transgendered Kiwi' is a homosociality recast as the normative binary of masculinity and femininity.[20]

The gist of Brady's argument is that New Zealand culture is so masculinised, it makes sense to be a man, even if you're a woman. Zoe's dilemma can be read as acknowledgment of the impossible situation of women in this national narrative. Accordingly, she states that pregnancy is a threat to her identity: "I can't become one of those pregnant women, Tim. What if I'm not me anymore?" At the same time, she is revolted by women's anatomy: "Do not say vaginal ever again, please, it's gross"; in this, and not wanting to hear the word 'period,' Zoe registers a disgust with abject maternal bodies that is identified with patriarchal masculinity.[21]

If Kiwi men and women want to be best 'mates' (in both senses of the term), women might have to perform masculinity, both for their men, but also as agency in a culture that only recognises masculinity as authentically local. The lesbian Topp Twins (Jools and Lynda Topp) provide an example of women behaving like men, also cross-dressing as 'Kiwi blokes' Ken and Ken, whom they have performed both on stage and in life. Clearly, as lesbians, the Twins enjoy parodying 'bloke' masculinity, but as one review of *Untouchable Girls*, Leanne Pooley's 2009 documentary, points out, although "satire is involved, these incarnations don't so much send up other social groups as inclusively gain trust through infiltrating them."[22] "Untouchable" has the additional connotation of 'stone butch,' or a lesbian presenting as masculine.[23] How do we read such mimicry? Judith Butler suggests that "there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and rearticulated as instruments of cultural hegemony."[24] One example discussed in the documentary concerns a visit to Showgirls, an Auckland strip bar, where Lynda Topp joined the male clientele in ogling the girls. No one seemed to mind that Ken was a lesbian woman in drag, because as Ken and Ken point out in the documentary, "We both go out with women" ("we" could refer to Ken and Ken, Jools and Lynda or men and lesbians). It appears that the Topps are in some ways confirming rather than challenging New Zealand masculinity. "People think Ken and Ken are real," they say; no one had a problem with Lynda acting like one of the boys.

According to Brady, "If women are to be admitted into the homosocial space that is the performance of nationalist mythologies, they can only do so if they fail to fully take up the position of the feminine … Femaleness recognizable as New Zealandness can function only as a misperformed masculinity that underpins, rather than disturbs, masculine homosociality."[25] The Topp Twins example is more ambiguous. In one sense, they enact 'female masculinity,' but in another they are playing along with dominant local gender paradigms, which has surely contributed to their popularity.[26]

GENDER IN *BABY DONE*

The New Zealand identification with men, nature and the outdoors is taken up by Zoe in various ways. As well as her job (tree trimming) and company name (Forest Mates), there is her competing in extreme sport (the national tree climbing championships, set in Rotorua, where Tim and Zoe also "do the luge, the gondola, all the big ones … mud pools, bungee jumping." Rotorua is a centre for the outdoor leisure/adventure sport activities, such as bungee jumping, which comprise an important part of Aotearoa New Zealand's brand identity. Bungee jumping, for example, was developed as a commercial leisure activity by New Zealander A.J. Hackett. In the tree-climbing championship, Zoe beats a field of men, again emphasising her aspiration to compete with 'the boys.' While this is admirable, it also makes Tim's emotional reaction to Zoe's pregnancy (discussed above) more incongruous, being set against a background of sporting victory and 'she'll be right' New Zealand outdoors, phlegmatic masculinity. This incongruity is strengthened by Tim's Englishness. The fact that actor Matthew Lewis played the hapless Neville Longbottom in the Harry Potter franchise makes him appear comically inept in relation to Zoe's intransigence. Tim is like Jock Phillips' "new chum" (1987), the refined English immigrant who cannot adapt to the harshness of colonial life—or in Zoe's words, "a fucking pussy." A Pākehā bloke partner would have upset the symbolic scheme which identifies Zoe as the 'real Kiwi.'

Another aspect of homosociality is banter, a pattern of competitive joking and 'affectionate abuse,' which in homosocial groups can play important roles "affirming the bond of love between men while appearing to deny it."[27] Since 'love' between men cannot be expressed directly, instead it is expressed through abuse, also a form of self-policing by which the group identifies and punishes perceived femininity or 'weakness.' If, as mentioned above, Tim appears feminine in relation to Zoe, this is emphasised by the characteristically combative ways that Zoe interacts with him: "What is the wildest thing you can think of? … I mean, like adventurous, like crazy, like get a tattoo, or stay up for two days straight … or be world champion of competitive tree-climbing." When Tim comes up with plans, Zoe dismisses them: "My God, boring! So boring, Tim! I'm embarrassed for you right now." When Tim goes all out and suggests "a threesome with Molly," Zoe continues emasculating him: "She's not even my hottest friend." In one scene, Zoe surprises Tim watching videos on his computer; we hear women moaning; he is watching childbirth videos. "Why can't you just watch porn like a normal person?" Zoe asks him. "I almost wish you were wanking to this." Normalising porn may be an ironic joke, but it also shows Zoe presenting (again) a masculine perspective as normative. Tim's attempts to plan for their baby are routinely scoffed at by Zoe.

The "radically disrupted" homosocial/homosexual continuum that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick identified in male/male relations is parodied in *Baby Done* as a disruption of heterosexuality.[28] Repeatedly, Zoe and Tim attempt to have sex but never succeed. While on one level this could be a comment on how pregnancy disrupts sex life, on another it could be interpreted as evidence of Zoe's increasing assumption of a masculinity which makes sexual relations with her male partner incongruous, or Tim's assumption of a maternal role which makes him hesitant to have sex at all. Zoe's acceptance of Tim's wish for a threesome (a wish that Tim is reluctant to reveal) could be seen as further evidence of a twisted homosociality in the sense that Zoe is 'offering' Tim Molly's body in lieu of her own, echoing the ritual exchange of women which perpetuates patriarchy.[29]

Brady suggests that New Zealand women are "not quite man enough for a real … man."[30] This puts them in the position of trying to be both feminine and masculine simultaneously. Another way of thinking about this contradiction is that men are never quite masculine enough for Zoe. No one in the film espouses the traditional Kiwi bloke archetype (perhaps because as suggested above, it already seems slightly anachronistic), and she feels obliged to carry that role herself, abseiling out of her bedroom as part of her plan to abscond to Canada for the world tree-climbing championships. Her position is fundamentally ambiguous: is her masculine identification voluntary or involuntary? Does it serve her needs or contradict them? Does it confirm colonising patriarchy or parody it? Is it intentional or unconscious parody?

ETHNICITY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

Thinking Zoe's identity as a Pasifikan woman may address her dilemma by reference to the "multidimensionality of Black women's experience" and the potential double erasure she suffers by being both non-white and a woman.[31] As a Pasifikan woman, she could signify exotic Other, à la Gauguin, but more specifically non-white mother in a "utopian historical romance" producing a new nation, inter-marriage being common in early New Zealand settler narratives.[32] Early in the film is a scene in a greengrocer where a preoccupied Zoe places some fruit against her stomach, as if imagining the foetus. Tim spots this and offers her a pineapple and a coconut, to which Zoe responds, "You're picking very racist fruits, actually." This is the only mention of race in the film, but it speaks to both of the above themes—parenthood, and the implied objectification of Pasifika women.

The main recent change in representation of New Zealanders in local film and TV has been the increasing prominence of non-white, usually Pasifika or Māori characters—typically male, but often in a paternal role and a family context.[33] The Kiwi bloke's homosociality meant that he was rarely represented as a family man. Emphasis on family is common in Pasifikan and Maori culture, but popular culture representations often add a paternalistic and implicitly nationalist inflection. Studies of New Zealand TV advertising suggest that these non-white father figures feature prominently in narratives in which they relate primarily to sons or to white men.[34] The symbolic function of the non-white father is to perpetuate a foundational colonisation myth in which tangata whenua welcome white settlers, thus representing biculturalism normatively. Like Spike Lee's "magical Negro,"[35] these figures selflessly help white men (to dance, in a recent Speight's advert) and reassure colonisers that settlement is legitimate.[36]

In *Baby Done*, Zoe's father Sefa (Fasitua Amosa), an obstetrician, similarly represents a reframing of New Zealand masculinity in ethnic terms. He reassures Tim, after Tim confesses that he has no dad: "Listen Tim, I'm basically your dad. I love you, and there's no need to talk about it." Thus, he fills the role of the loving non-white father, and his parental role extends to his profession—symbolically a 'father of the nation'). This position is more a renegotiation of patriarchy than a critique, but it does represent an alternative to Caucasian blokey impassivity. The paternalist, albeit familial, emphasis continues to exclude women, however, who might also feel, like Zoe, ambivalent about their role in perpetuating family (accordingly, father-daughter relations in the film are quite strained).

Zoe's ethnic and gender identities intersect. Her identification with the coloniser via her assumption of bloke masculinity could be read as Indian postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha's mimicry, a colonial dynamic in which imitation is both colonising ('aping' the coloniser) and anti-colonising (because mimicry can also parody, exposing the artificiality of the coloniser's assumed superiority): "The menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority."[37] Mimicry is both peculiarly relevant (given that New Zealand and India are both former British colonies) and ambivalent, a "blurred copy," like Judith Butler's gender performance: "'imitation' is at the heart of the heterosexual project and its gender binarism … hegemonic heterosexuality is itself a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations."[38] This double-edged colonial/racial situation, which Bhabha identifies with comedy and farce, finds its echo in Zoe's double-edged gender performance.

Throughout the narrative, Zoe becomes increasingly isolated, similar to the 'man alone' tradition of New Zealand literature and film. She even 'goes bush' with a rucksack, although she ends up at her parents'.[39] But she is also an ethnic 'fish out of water,' a Pasifikan in a Pākehā world.[40] Such a view is supported by the film's casting. While Zoe's friends are Pākehā or white, the medical system and maternity care are represented as Māori/Pasifikan—midwives and nurses (played by Kura Forrester, Madeleine Sami and Bree Peters) and her obstetrician father. This puts Zoe apparently in conflict with her ethnicity and with authority, as these institutional characters offer expertise about childbirth, which Zoe rejects. Representations of the ubiquity of Māori and Pasifika teenage pregnancy may also be relevant: Zoe could fear becoming a 'statistic'—a young, non-white mother.[41] Maternity care, already feminised, is also ethnicised against its hegemonic opposite, Pākehā masculinity. This binary is extended through their associations with different spaces—outdoors for blokes, where Zoe feels at home, and internal clinical spaces for maternity care, where she feels threatened and anxious. Ironically, the more solicitous people are towards her, the more alienated Zoe becomes. She only seems comfortable in the traditionally masculine spheres of physical action and aggressive banter. Ultimately, masculinity loses (or authority wins). The baby cannot be wished away, and Zoe finds insight via the Māori/Pasifika caregivers. This suggests that her rejection of femininity is initially linked to a rejection of her ethnic identity, but that in the final scenes there is a rapprochement. Of course, this moment could be normative, as it requires Zoe to embrace the maternal and ethnic stereotypes she has up to this point resisted. On the other hand, obligatory masculinity is another normative stereotype, so perhaps the alternatives cancel each other out.

The intersection of ethnic and gendered identities is also underlined in the one prior occasion when Zoe does accept a maternal role—in relation to her Māori workmate Sonny (Matenga Ashby), whose mother she impersonates in an unlikely attempt to get Sonny's suspension from school overturned. This scene is ironic in many ways: Zoe adopts the role she has rejected in every other context, and she skips antenatal class to do it (underlining her denial). The ruse is rumbled by the Māori/Pasifika school principal (Rachel House). House reprises her role in Taika Waititi's films of a butch woman who dominates and threatens mateship by emulating its more forbidding characteristics of impassivity, laconicism and the veiled threat of violence. She thus represents an example of how women can emulate masculinity without being defined by it. She outstares Zoe, who has to back down and admit that her maternity is a ruse (ironic

given her situation), which underlines how Zoe is unprepared to mother and ironically foreshadows how she will have to accept help from her ethnic peers. One might also suggest that mimicking motherhood symbolically prepares Zoe for the real thing.

Another way of thinking about parenthood in the film is by considering that Zoe is the product of an interracial romance between a Pākehā woman and a Pasifikan (Samoan) man. Interracial romance is one of the archetypal New Zealand narratives. It usually occurs between a Pākehā man and a non-white woman, although since the 1970s the reverse has become the norm, reflecting the influence of (amongst other things) feminism and biculturalism. An example is Waititi's first film, *Eagle vs Shark*, where the woman was played by Loren Horsley, as is Zoe's mother in this film, with the possible connotation that Zoe's parents represent the protagonists of Waititi's film, two decades on. This continuity between filmic worlds suggests an Indigenous, whānau-related perspective, although non-white fatherhood, as we have seen, can also be interpreted normatively.

In the birthing process, Zoe's relationship with the Pasifikan delivering midwife (Sami) becomes important. Sami's character speaks Zoe's masculinised language, which helps Zoe accept her situation. Characteristically (in terms of its local and gendered identifications), this mutual recognition occurs through banter:

> Zoe: Do you think pregnant women become mothers just as soon as they give birth?
>
> Midwife: Um … Yes?
>
> Zoe: What if they become a dick?
>
> Midwife: You're already a dick.

The midwife ironically affirms that Zoe is both a mother and a 'dick,' thus bringing genders together, like other New Zealand unisex vernacular expressions ('you guys' or the ubiquitous and ambiguous 'mate'). Throughout the film, banter has been an important means by which Zoe has negotiated her situation, and here it suggests that she can reconcile the dualities of masculinity and femininity, Pākehā and Māori/Pasifika, singledom and parenthood, public and domestic. On the other hand, the gender reveal at the end of the film ("It's a boy!"), confirms the normativity of masculinity, albeit non-Pākehā (they name him Sonny, after their Māori co-worker). It is an ambiguous resolution—conventional in its endorsement of normative 'motherhood,' but somewhat multicultural in foregrounding non-white identities.

CONCLUSION

When Zoe says, referring to her life before pregnancy, "I really want my old life back," the statement has broader implications about nostalgia for mythical pioneer days and a refusal to accept the face of change, which is brown and babylike. Zoe's story could be a parable about how the Kiwi bloke's reluctance to move on has damaged the national psyche. Brady highlights how this reluctance has produced a paradox in which "the gender binary that functions in the service of national identity is not male/female but masculinity as the gendered, and the transgendered, body",[42] which plays out in texts that highlight local or national identity as masculine and symbolically cancel femininity. However, women can and do assume masculinity in different ways and with

different meanings, both affirming and parodying dominant masculine culture. I see Zoe as a character whose unwanted pregnancy, a standard 'chick flick' narrative, is articulated in culturally specific ways by her adoption of a male persona and denial of her physical state, which can read as a feminist denial of maternal stereotypes but also as identification with hegemonic bloke masculinity.

I have further argued that ethnicity, mostly a subtext in the film (presumably because it complicates the representation of national identity as gendered), allows an alternative reading of Zoe's performance as colonial mimicry, which can be servile or subversive, just as Zoe's gender performance is both affirmation and parody of masculinity. In line with the general 'ethnicisation' of New Zealand popular culture, the narrative embraces the idea of a bi- or multi-cultural family, albeit a paternalistic one, achieved by melding non-white identity with public health, identifying ethnicity with authority. Zoe's labour does seem to bring her more into relation with her ethnic—and, by implication, New Zealand—community, although this family metaphor is normative if it implies that colonisation is an equal relationship. In that light, calling the baby Sonny, after the film's token Māori character, is continuous with bicultural settlement narratives that still foreground masculinity.

The contemporary New Zealand cultural landscape is marked by increasing non-white and non-binary gender presence, but it has continued to emphasise masculinity. Rose Matafeo, who plays Zoe, is, apparently, the perfect riposte to my argument, as she is now an international star. In her comic performances in general, however, she presents a highly ambivalent, tortured persona: "stand-up as a medium for me is 'I hate myself, and I want to tell you about it.'"[43] This sentiment is possibly symptomatic of a broader cultural anxiety about New Zealand identity, which types like the Kiwi bloke mainly served to conceal. If we consider a parallel female celebrity example, New Zealand's former prime minister Jacinda Ardern, what is disturbing is that her overseas eminence is partly driven by her virtual exile from New Zealand due to death threats and online hate, suggesting that New Zealand women still face peculiarly intense discrimination at home, in direct proportion to the scale of their achievements. Mentioning Ardern within the context of her giving birth while serving as prime minister is relevant here, for isn't Zoe, in the film, among other things, also resisting the remorseless surveillance that pregnant women face? In this light, it is not surprising that behaving like a bloke still functions as a defensive mechanism in New Zealand culture, for men and women alike, and that for non-white women, traditionally scapegoats, the attraction of self-denying bluster is powerful. Overall, *Baby Done* suggests the ongoing power of hegemonic masculinity in the local context, even if it is mediated in more ethnically diverse ways. But perhaps Matafeo, like Ardern, envisions a more promising future on the global stage.

Dr. Matthew Bannister is Postgraduate Theory Supervisor in Media Arts at Wintec in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton, Aotearoa/NZ. His recent publications include books on NZ icons Taika Waititi and The Front Lawn. He is currently working on a book on music biopics with UK-based Ewa Mazierska.

1. *Baby Done*, directed by Curtis Vowell, screenplay by Sophie Henderson, produced by Taika Waititi (Madman Entertainment and Piki Films, 2020).
2. Pamela Thoma, "Buying up Baby: Modern Feminine Subjectivity, Assertions of 'Choice,' and the Repudiation of Reproductive Justice in Postfeminist Unwanted Pregnancy Films," *Feminist media studies* 9, no. 4 (2009): 409.
3. Ibid, 410.
4. Rosabel Tan, "The Making of Fantail: Sophie Henderson and Curtis Vowell in Conversation," 25 July 2013, https://pantograph-punch.com/posts/the-making-of-fantail-sophie-henderson-and-curtis-vowell-in-conversation.
5. James Croot, "TV Review: Funny Girls," 23 October 2015, https://www.stuff.co.nz/entertainment/tv-radio/73326107/tv-review-funny-girls.
6. Anita Brady, "The transgendered Kiwi: Homosocial Desire and 'New Zealand identity,'" *Sexualities* 15, no. 3–4 (2012): 355–372. The term 'disavowal' suggests psychoanalytic repression, and this is justified by the way that the plot links to Zoe's identity, which is formed, in Freud's account (used by both Bhabha and Butler), out of identifications and repressions. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 2007).
7. Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October* 28 (Spring 1984): 125–133, https://doi.org/10.2307/778467.
8. Henri Bergson, *Laughter* (Dover, 2005).
9. Asa Seresin, "On Heteropessimism", 9 October 2019, https://thenewinquiry.com/on-heteropessimism/. Matafeo refers to it in her stand-up act: "Me being straight is a symptom of low self-esteem … Being a straight woman is the worst of all." "Rose Matafeo: It's A Tough Year To Be A Straight Woman | CONAN on TBS," 10 May 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7j1WO6BVIdA.
10. Gerlinde Mauerer, "Fatherhood Practices and Shared Parental Leave: Advancing Gender Equity in Parenting," *Social Sciences* 14, no. 5 (2025): 269, https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci14050269.
11. Bergson, *Laughter*.
12. Matthew Bannister, "Kiwi Blokes: Recontextualising White New Zealand Masculinities in a Global Setting," *Genders Online* 42 (2005); Kai Jensen, *Whole Men: The Masculine Tradition in New Zealand Literature* (Auckland University Press, 1996); Jock Phillips, *A Man's Country? The Image of the Pākehā Male—A History* (Penguin, 1987).
13. *Cinema of Unease: A Personal Journey by Sam Neill*, directed by Sam Neill and Judy Rymer (BFI TV, 1995).
14. Jeremy Morrow and Simon Mowatt, "The Implementation of Authentic Sustainable Strategies: I-SITE Middle Managers, Employees and the Delivery of 100% Pure New Zealand," *Business Strategy and the Environment* 24, no. 7 (2015): 656–66. https://doi.org/10.1002/bse.1897.
15. Hugh Campbell, Robin Law and James Honeyfield, "'What it Means to be a Man': Hegemonic Masculinity and the Reinvention of Beer," in *Masculinities in Aotearoa/New Zealand*, edited by Robin Law, Hamish Campbell and John Dolan (Dunmore Press, 1999), 182.
16. R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Amazon, 2020).
17. Chris Barton, "Where Women are Real Men," *NZ Herald*, 5 February 2005: B5.
18. Anita Brady, "The Transgendered Kiwi." Similarly, beer and the pub have been discussed as cornerstones of NZ homosociality. Sarah Gee and Steve J. Jackson, "Leisure Corporations, Beer Brand Culture, and the Crisis of Masculinity: The Speight's 'Southern Man' Advertising Campaign," *Leisure studies* 31, no. 1 (2012): 83–102.

19. "Speights Beer Ad from NZ," (2 August 2007), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1lR1sEn8nMI.
20. Brady, "The Transgendered Kiwi," 358.
21. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (Columbia University Press, 1982).
22. Carmen Gray, "The Topp Twins Untouchable Girls," *Sight & Sound*, March 2012: 77.
23. Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Duke University Press, 1998).
24. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 139.
25. Brady, "The Transgendered Kiwi," 366.
26. Halberstam, *Female Masculinity.*
27. Antony Easthope, *What a Man's Gotta Do*: *The Masculine Myth in Popular Culture* (Routledge, 1990), 88.
28. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (Columbia University Press, 2016), 2.
29. Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, edited by Rayna R. Reiter (Monthly Review Press, 1975), 157–210.
30. Brady, "The Transgendered Kiwi," 364.
31. Kimberle Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," in *Feminism and Politics*, edited by Anne Phillips (Oxford University Press, 1998), 314-343. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198782063.003.0016.
32. Martin Blythe, *Naming the Other: Images of the Maori in Film and TV* (Scarecrow Press, 1994), 9.
33. Matthew Bannister, "Mixed Messages: Māori/Pasifika Masculinities and Aotearoa/New Zealand Identity in Television Advertising, 2000–2019," *Journal of New Zealand Studies* 34 (2022): 49–64.
34. Ibid.
35. Susan Gonzales, "Director Spike Lee Slams 'Same Old' Black Stereotypes in Today's Films," *Yale Bulletin & Calendar* 29, no. 21 (2 March 2001), https://web.archive.org/web/20090121190429/http:/www.yale.edu/opa/arc-ybc/v29.n21/story3.html.
36. "Speight's—The Dance," 30 April 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ss_WKXpJ5l8.
37. Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man," 129.
38. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (Routledge, 2014), 125.
39. Neill and Rymer, *Cinema of Unease*.
40. Christy Ebert Vrtis, "Contemporary Crime-Fighting Dads: Negotiating Masculinity and Fathering in *24* and *Castle*," in *Pops in Pop Culture: Fatherhood, Masculinity, and the New Man*, edited by Elizabeth Podnieks (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 144.
41. Anna Scanlen and Carolyn Hooper, "Teen Parents Evidence Brief," New Zealand Government, Oranga Tamariki—Ministry for Children, 2019, https://orangatamariki.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/About-us/Research/Latest-research/Teen-Parents-Evidence-Brief/Teen-Parents-Evidence-Brief-2019.pdf.
42. Brady, "The Transgendered Kiwi," 355.
43. Nick Dent, "'Baby Done' star Rose Matafeo Talks Potter, Covid Guilt and Taika Waititi," 14 October 2020, https://www.timeout.com/sydney/news/baby-done-star-rose-matafeo-talks-potter-covid-guilt-and-taika-waititi-101420.

https://doi.org/10.34074/junc.26065

PRATIBHA TIWARI, SHANTANU GHOSH
AND GARIMA DALAL

MASCULINE CRISIS AND THE QUEST FOR THE DIVINE FEMININE IN *DEVDAS* AND *DEV.D*: A PSYCHOANALYTIC STUDY

ABSTRACT

This article examines the crisis of masculinity and the quest for the divine feminine in Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's novel *Devdas* (1917) and Anurag Kashyap's film *Dev.D* (2009) through a psychoanalytic and socio-cultural perspective. It explores how the character *Devdas*'s early attachment to his mother and his relationships with Parvati and Chandramukhi shape his masculine identity and create a conflict between sexual desire and the idealisation of the feminine as maternal and sacred. The study then examines how *Dev.D* reworks this conflict in a globalised and consumer-driven India, where Dev responds to changing femininity through sexual assertiveness, aggression and emotional detachment. The paper argues that, despite their contrasting forms of masculinity, both protagonists remain psychologically dependent on the feminine. Their inability to reconcile vulnerability, desire and masculine identity produces a continuing crisis that takes different forms across historical contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's novel *Devdas* (1917) presents the tragedy of a man whose masculine identity is shaped by his attachment to the feminine.[1] Growing up in a wealthy *zamindar* household in colonial Bengal, Devdas develops a deep emotional bond with both his mother and his childhood companion Parvati. Frequently scolded by his father, Devdas seeks comfort in his mother's arms, sometimes in tears, while Parvati also cares for him in a maternal manner, bringing him food when he hides in the garden out of fear of his father. His father's decision to send him to Calcutta for an English education separates him from this familiar world and introduces him to the values of education, status and masculine respectability associated with the Bengali elite. Yet Devdas struggles to fulfil these expectations. Upon returning to home, he is unable to challenge the social conventions that prevent his marriage to Parvati, and he goes back to Calcutta, where regret, emotional dependence and alcohol gradually consume him. His subsequent relationship with the courtesan Chandramukhi further reveals his conflicted attitude towards women: although he seeks emotional refuge

in feminine figures, he finds it difficult to reconcile sexual desire with the idealised image of the woman as mother, caregiver and sacred figure. His crisis can therefore be understood not simply as the result of lost love, but as a conflict between the masculine identity imposed upon him and his deep psychological dependence on the feminine.

This article examines this conflict through a socio-psychoanalytic and comparative reading of Chattopadhyay's *Devdas* and its twenty-first-century film adaptation *Dev.D* (2009) by Anurag Kashyap.[2] The psychoanalytic dimension helps explain Devdas's attachment to the maternal feminine, his separation anxiety, guilt, sexual restraint and tendency to idealise women. The socio-cultural dimension places these psychological conflicts within changing ideas of masculinity in colonial and contemporary India. Drawing on psychoanalytic perspectives on the mother-son relationship and Indian male subjectivity, alongside scholarship on colonial masculinity and the cultural significance of the goddess, the study explores how the feminine functions as both an object of desire and a source of emotional and spiritual belonging. It argues that Devdas's masculine crisis emerges from his inability to reconcile sexual desire with his idealisation of the feminine as maternal, leading him towards restraint, dependence and the elevation of women towards the divine.

The character of Dev in *Dev.D*, on the other hand, situated in a globalised and consumerist India, reverses this pattern. He responds to the cultural stigma of masculine effeminacy through sexual assertiveness, consumption, aggression and emotional detachment. Unlike the earlier Devdas, Dev does not face the same social pressure to give up Paro because of her social status; instead, he struggles with women who are increasingly independent and assertive. His sexual conquest therefore becomes another form of masculine crisis. His attempt to construct masculinity through power and strength leads him to suppress the feminine qualities within himself, reflected in his tendency to demean, belittle and objectify women, yet his masculine identity remains connected to the feminine he tries to reject. This is particularly significant within the Indian goddess tradition, where the feminine is associated not only with maternal compassion and devotion but also with power and strength. Dev therefore cannot completely separate his idea of masculine strength from the powerful feminine image that remains culturally familiar to him. Neither protagonist achieves a balanced integration of masculinity and femininity. The study thus argues that the masculine crisis in these narratives is not simply a conflict between men and women, but a conflict within masculinity itself. Both protagonists struggle to accept qualities associated with the feminine, such as devotion, nurturing, emotional sensitivity and even strength, without experiencing them as a challenge to their masculine identity.

NEGOTIATION WITH WESTERN IDEALS AND SEPARATION FROM THE FEMININE

Growing up in an upper-caste *zamindar* household in colonial Bengal, Devdas can be situated within the social world of the *bhadralok*, the educated and socially respectable Bengali elite whose identity was shaped by refinement, education, social status and claims to cultural and moral authority.[3] As Gautam Ghosh observes in his discussion of the *bhadralok* in Satyajit Ray's 1958 film *Jalsaghar*, this class positioned itself as a custodian of cultural refinement and, by extension, as a bearer of the moral and

cultural values through which the nation could imagine its progress.[4] Thus, *bhadralok* identity involved a tension between the material and cultural demands of colonial modernity and the preservation of an Indigenous moral and spiritual authority. Devdas's masculine formation can be read within this tension. His father, who functions not only as a patriarchal authority within the family but also as an embodiment of the social expectations imposed upon Devdas, attempts to discipline him into an acceptable form of elite masculinity.

This ideal was also shaped by colonial notions that portrayed the Bengali *bhadralok* as effeminate, encouraging men to assert their masculinity in order to gain the validation and approval of the colonial master. Writing about *Devdas*, Rohan Sharma observes that Devdas's father shows concern that his son is being "emasculated" by being surrounded by his mother's affection and attached to his playmate Parvati.[5] This explains why he sends Devdas to Calcutta, where he is expected to acquire the attributes associated with masculine maturity. His movement to Calcutta is therefore more than just a change of place. It also marks his physical and emotional separation from his mother and the familiar world of childhood. It is an attempt to change Devdas from an emotionally attached village boy into a confident man who can meet the expectations of his social class. The transformation is visible in his changed appearance: "The rustic traits in Devdas had vanished completely with his sojourn in Calcutta. Now he sported foreign shoes, bright clothes, a walking stick, gold buttons, a watch."[6] His external transformation reflects his adoption of the cultural signs of colonial modernity and elite masculinity.

Homi K. Bhabha's concept of mimicry, drawing upon Frantz Fanon's earlier discussion of colonial subjectivity, is useful for understanding this transformation.[7] Colonial power often demands that the colonised adopt and internalise the habits and forms of the colonial master. Mimicry is therefore not a straightforward act of obedience; rather, it is a complex form of resistance. Natives can "return the gaze" of the colonial master; therefore, the mimic becomes a "camouflaged" figure, producing a distorted image of the coloniser that subtly undermines colonial authority.[8] In the novel, Devdas's imitation eventually leads him to resistance towards the Western ideals of masculinity, mainly associated with rationality, power, wealth and sexual conquest, which measure a man's worth. His resistance manifests as a critique of the Western education Devdas has been receiving. Education, in this context, is significant because it was central to the self-conception of the *bhadralok*, whose respectability was closely associated with educational and professional achievement.[9] Devdas says, "Chunni, education, learning, knowledge, success, all they achieve is a false feeling of happiness; however you look at it, they are only meant to pander your own happiness."[10] His criticism is notable, because it does not merely reject education; it questions the promise of fulfilment that education, knowledge and social success are supposed to produce. The statement marks a growing dissatisfaction with the model of masculine achievement that Calcutta represents. The problem for Devdas is not simply that he has become "modern," but that the masculine identity he has been taught to perform fails to provide emotional or moral coherence.

The father's authority is crucial here because the social expectations he represents extend beyond the family. Society continues the same control that the father first imposes on Devdas, revealing the patriarchal structure of the society in which individual

choices are shaped by male authority. The same social order that determines his education, marriage and status also separates him from Parvati. When Parvati breaks all society's conventions and, as a woman, proposes marriage to Devdas at midnight, he gets nervous and cannot gather the courage to fight against social marriage conventions and thus rejects Parvati's proposal, only to regret it later. His inability to act at this crucial moment exposes the limits of the masculinity he has acquired. Although he possesses the external markers of status and education, he lacks the courage to challenge the social structure that determines his choices. His subsequent realisation is therefore important. He goes back to Calcutta and observes that "it was wrong to destroy an individual's life in order to preserve a status that was in any case a product of narrow-minded thought."[11] The statement reveals his growing awareness that social status, the very basis of the masculine identity he has been taught to value, has come at the cost of individual emotional fulfilment. His decision to return to the village, along with his admission "I have lost a lot, too much, by coming to Calcutta,"[12] can therefore be seen as an attempt to recover something that he had lost while entering the world of elite modernity.

Partha Chatterjee's distinction between the "inner spiritual" and "external material" domains of nationalist thought also help to understand Devdas's relationship to his home village.[13] Chatterjee argues that the *bhadralok*'s engagement with nationalism involved a claim to protect the inner domain of Indian identity that was associated with family, religion, culture and spirituality, even while they entered the 'external' world of education, work, politics and material progress.[14] From the perspective of gender dynamics, Indian women were often placed at the centre of the inner or spiritual domain and were expected to preserve the family's cultural and moral values. This idea has also appeared repeatedly in Indian literature and cinema, where women are often represented through images of the mother, goddess, wife or moral guardian. Parvati can be read through this tradition of representation. She is not simply the woman Devdas has lost; she is connected to the familiar world of home, family, affection and moral values that he leaves behind when he goes to Calcutta.

Ghosh similarly shows that, for the *bhadralok*, family, religious practice, and moral identity were closely connected. He argues that their nationalist historical consciousness gained its emotional force from a "morally and emotionally loaded understanding" of time connected with family deities.[15] Although Devdas is not directly engaged in nationalist politics, this idea helps us understand his movement between Calcutta and the village. In Calcutta, he tries to build his identity through education, status, wealth and other external signs of masculine success, but these do not give him the emotional or moral fulfilment he expects. His return to Parvati can be understood not simply as a retreat from modernity, but as a search for the emotional, familial and moral belonging that his performed elite masculinity has failed to provide.

Devdas's expectation that Parvati would accept him despite his wrongdoings suggests that he still associates her with the emotional security of his childhood. This is where Sudhir Kakar's interpretation of the *Devdas* archetype as the "*Majnun*-lover" becomes relevant. Kakar sees Devdas's longing and desires as an emotional and psychological experience of childhood, where he wishes to completely merge with the mother. His suffering reflects the infant's cry at the absence of the mother. He seeks to reclaim the

"paradise lost," the time when he was not separated from his mother.[16] Devdas's return to Parvati can therefore be understood as a search for refuge in a familiar emotional and moral space. At the same time, Parvati can be read through the wider cultural representation of the feminine as a figure associated with motherhood, spirituality and the preservation of cultural values. Nandini Gupta, drawing on the idea of 'Mother India,' explains how the figure of the mother came to represent "the essence, the inner side, the spirituality and greatness of Hindu civilization."[17] Within this cultural framework, Parvati's significance extends beyond that of a romantic beloved. She becomes associated with a maternal and spiritual ideal that Devdas believes can offer him moral stability. However, Parvati refuses to accept Devdas and speaks of her pride with authority. She challenges Devdas's virtue by calling him "ruthless, reckless, and unwise."[18] Her decision to separate from him further wounds his masculine ego. In a moment of anger, Devdas strikes Parvati on the forehead with a fishing rod. However, he immediately tries to tend to her wound by tearing a strip from his cotton kurta and using it as a bandage. He says, "This wound will heal soon … I have merely left a mark for you to remember our last meeting."[19] Devdas's anger and violence reveal an old patriarchal tool used against women to hide their own inner weakness. Devdas accepts separation, but it becomes a permanent wound for him, repeating an earlier separation from his mother and intensifying his crisis of masculine identity.

Devdas's urge to be united with the mother figure further leads him to the courtesan Chandramukhi's house. The courtesan culture of colonial Calcutta was closely connected with the lifestyle of the *babu*, whose performance of elite masculinity often included drinking, pleasure-seeking and visiting courtesans.[20] Devdas tries to be a part of the society he belongs to, but at the same time, he remains critical about the people who go to a courtesan's house and of courtesan culture as well. Kakar says that the *Majnun*-lover of Indian cinema often finds space for his rejected desires in *kothas* (traditional brothels), yet his experience of pleasure is filled with guilt and sadness.[21] From an Indian perspective, an ideal love is tied to a maternal image of a woman, where sexual desires feel like shame. The dizziness of alcohol provides Devdas a sense of pleasure in Chandramukhi's presence; however, this pleasure is accompanied by persistent guilt, as the idealised image of the mother gradually begins to fracture. Sexual desires distance him from the sacred image of a compassionate mother, and he consistently resists the prostitute, signifying his sexual restraint toward women. This sexual restraint encourages the male psyche to elevate women to a divine status.

REPRESENTATION OF FEMININE AND QUEST FOR DIVINITY IN FLESH-AND-BLOOD WOMEN

The worship of goddesses has an important place in Bengali religious and cultural traditions, where they are often seen as both nurturing mothers and powerful figures. In this context, the name Devdas, meaning a servant or devotee of the divine, can also be read as a *das* of the *Devi*, suggesting his emotional dependence on an idealised feminine figure. This association of the feminine with the divine is also seen in figures such as Radha, the divine feminine, and Mirabai, the devoted saint of Krishna. The representation of Parvati and Chandramukhi as maternal, devotional, morally elevated or quasi-divine figures, echoing the devotional figures of Radha and Meera, can be understood not simply as an inherent quality of these women, but as a projection of the

male subject's psychological and cultural desire for an idealised feminine. In seeking emotional security, moral guidance and qualities associated with devotion and care, male subjectivities often elevate the women around them beyond their ordinary human identities, a pattern reflected in the representation of Parvati and Chandramukhi across multiple film adaptations of *Devdas*, beginning with P.C. Barua's adaptation in 1936.[22]

Dietmar Rothermund describes the period of the 1930s in India as one marked by political tensions surrounding the Civil Disobedience Movement, the Round Table Conferences and growing Hindu-Muslim conflicts, creating a strong need for nationalist cultural expression.[23] In this context, Barua's *Devdas* preserves an older spiritual ideal centred on devotion and the elevated representation of women, offering a cultural space through which nationalist values could be preserved and expressed. Bimal Roy adapted the novel again in post-independence India in 1955.[24] He continues this cultural association by explicitly connecting Parvati with Radha. For instance, when Devdas is sent to Calcutta at a young age and Parvati remains in the village, she remembers him and becomes emotional. In one scene, she cries while listening to the song *Aan milo Shyam saaware, Braj mein akeli Radha khoi khoi phire* ("Come meet me, dark beloved Shyam; Radha wanders alone and lost in Braj"). Chandramukhi, on the other hand, is represented as a woman who cultivates her life by becoming a devotee like Meerabai. While the women remain connected to Devdas, they are not reduced entirely to his romantic desire.

Sanjay Leela Bhansali's 2002 *Devdas* reworks this relationship within a more transnational and diasporic context.[25] Bhansali reconstructs the pre-independence world with no clear reference, using spectacle and glamour and an auteur sensibility to create an aesthetically nostalgic experience rather than a historically realistic one. Here, Devdas is a London returnee who comes back after ten years, portrayed as the beloved child of the family, except for his father, with whom his relationship remains distant. Bhansali also introduces the character of the grandmother to suggest that Devdas is surrounded by maternal affection and emotional care of not one but two mothers. This emphasis on maternal care is important because Devdas's attachment to Parvati and Chandramukhi is presented not simply as sexual desire but as a search for emotional and spiritual belonging. Thus, in all three adaptations, although in different ways, the female characters acquire a devotional or spiritual significance that is shaped by male subjectivities.

This pattern can be further understood through the cultural significance of the mother in Indian masculinity. Sudhir Kakar and Amrita Narayanan argue that Freud's father-centred model of the Oedipus complex is not fully useful in relation to the Indian cultural imagination, where the mother-son relationship often occupies a much more central position. They describe the mother as a deeply valued figure in Indian cultural narratives and suggest that early maternal attachments can continue to shape emotional life beyond childhood. Kakar's concept of 'maternal enthrallment' refers to a deep psychological attachment to the mother, in which the maternal image remains powerful in the individual's emotional life.[26] Jhuma Basak develops this idea more directly in relation to Indian male subjectivity. She describes the Indian mother-son relationship as a culturally intensified bond in which the mother is associated with care, protection and unconditional giving.[27]

These theories of Indian gender identity help clarify the tension already visible in *Devdas*. Devdas's sexual desire creates guilt because it conflicts with the ideal of the pure and sacred feminine figure; therefore, Parvati and Chandramukhi are elevated to divinity. They do not remain ordinary women for Devdas; they are rather considered the voice of his conscience. They represent a symbolic motherly concern that is deeply admired by men. These women consistently teach Devdas the value of humility and push him to come out of his self-absorption. They motivate and support him to become spiritually uplifted through their own practice of devotion and surrender. They have been portrayed as symbols of wisdom for men amidst the chaos of society. Parvati and Chandramukhi carry qualities associated with the maternal and the divine: care, compassion, emotional strength, guidance and self-sacrifice. Devdas is repeatedly drawn towards these qualities, but he cannot fully unite with them as a sexual partner. His attraction to women therefore remains caught between desire and devotion. The women provide him with the emotional security and moral direction associated with the maternal figure, while his own sexual desire threatens to disturb this idealised image. His inability to reconcile these two forms of attachment, sacred and sexual, produces the central conflict in his masculinity. This conflict also suggests that Devdas does not develop masculinity through sexual conquest or physical domination. Instead, he moves towards a form of masculinity based on restraint, vulnerability and dependence. His attachment to Parvati and Chandramukhi shows that femininity is not simply positioned as the opposite of masculinity. Rather, qualities culturally associated with the feminine become part of his own masculine identity. His emotional dependence on women, his inability to assert himself through physical power and his repeated return to feminine figures for emotional and moral support suggest a masculine self that is incomplete without the feminine.

It is interesting to speculate about how, in the Indian goddess cultures, authoritative female speech has created a space for the emergence of the 'incomplete masculine,' a masculine subject who comes to recognise that he is not "omnipotent" and that he must come out of his narcissistic self-perception.[28] This is particularly significant in the colonial context. Poonam Arora, while discussing the psychological imprint of effeminacy on Devdas, suggests that Devdas remains sexually restrained to prove to the colonial gaze that he possesses the very self-control they claim Indians lack.[29] In this context, Devdas's rejection of conventional masculine behaviour can be read differently. His restraint from sexual relationships does not simply indicate weakness or failure. Instead, it allows him to occupy a different masculine position—one that does not depend upon the domination of women or the display of sexual virility. His relationship with femininity also creates an alternative model of the male self. Rather than eliminating feminine qualities in order to become masculine, Devdas remains attached to qualities such as emotional intelligence, sensitivity, surrender and receptivity. Meraj Ahmed Mubarki suggests that "Devdas's spiritual masculinity, and his rejection of carnal pleasures, serves as a counterpoint to Western notions of masculinity that over-emphasise physical strength, virility and assertiveness."[30] Yet this alternative masculinity remains deeply conflicted. Devdas can recognise and even idealise feminine qualities, but he cannot fully integrate, or rather accept, them into his own lived identity. Instead, he locates these qualities in the women around him, idealising them as embodiments of care, devotion and moral guidance. His 'quest' for the divine feminine thus reflects his own unmet emotional and psychological needs.

EUROCENTRIC MODERNITY, CHANGING FEMININITY, AND THE CRISIS OF MASCULINITY

Dev.D, the 2009 film adaptation, reimagines *Devdas* in a contemporary India shaped by globalisation, consumer culture and changing ideas about gender identity. Unlike the earlier versions, Anurag Kashyap, the director of the film, places Dev in a world where women are no longer confined to the roles of the devoted lover, wife or self-sacrificing woman. Parvati (Paro), Chandramukhi (Chanda), and the introduced character Rasika openly express their desires and make bold choices for themselves. In a changing and globalised world, capitalist aspirations are no longer confined to the territory of men, as women too increasingly pursue money, independence and social power. This changing relation between capitalism and identity can also be seen in Paro and Chanda's characters. Unlike earlier versions of Parvati, who lives like an ascetic after her marriage to a much older man and devotes herself to duty and sacrifice, Paro chooses to marry Bhuvan, an industrialist, partly as a response to Dev's insult. Unlike earlier versions, she does not continue living only in Dev's memory but moves forward and chooses a life of comfort and stability with Bhuvan. Similar to Chandramukhi, whose later values were associated with sacrifice and emotional devotion, Chanda's identity is closely linked to economic survival and self-accomplishment. She works as a prostitute at night and studies in college during the day to gain independence. This change in the position of women also changes the way Dev performs his masculinity. He responds to this new social environment by becoming more aggressive, sexually assertive and emotionally distant. His masculinity is therefore closely connected to his attempt to deal with a changing femininity.

One way of understanding this change is through the colonial history of masculinity in India. Virinder S. Kalra notes that Bengali men were stereotyped as "effeminate," while the Punjabis and Pathans were seen as "real men, strong, brave, loyal, independent and so-called martial race."[31] Kashyap's decision to relocate Devdas from Bengal to Punjab is therefore significant. Dev is no longer the visibly emotional Bengali man who cries over separation and expresses his vulnerability openly. The film rather portrays a strong man who suppresses femininity and expresses emotion through anger, addiction and excess. Significantly, Dev does not cry throughout the film, except at the death of his father. In contrast, Devdas weeps repeatedly over his separation first from his mother and then from Parvati, but not at his father's death. Dev's loss, one might suggest, is tied to power and inheritance rather than emotional dependence. This transformation reflects a wider change in the representation of masculinity in postcolonial India. As R.W. Connell's concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' suggests, masculine identity is often established through strength, authority, independence and control.[32] In the Indian context, the colonial association of the Bengali male with effeminacy created an additional pressure to distance the male self from qualities considered feminine. The emergence of the strong, physically assertive male hero in popular cinema can be understood within this larger cultural shift. In independent India, masculinity became tied to rationality, strength and moral superiority, while effeminacy had "no place in this new rhetoric."[33] In cinema too, the "sensitive lover-boy hero was soon replaced" by hypermasculine stars like Dharmendra, a trend later continued by actors such as Salman Khan and John Abraham.[34]

Kashyap intentionally deviates from the original *Devdas*; he explains, "*Dev.D* takes off from the original narrative to depict a modern age defined by fast cars, fast food, fast cash, and instant gratification."[35] The modernity that Kashyap refers to is mainly associated with a consumerist mindset. Dev is represented as someone who leads a luxurious life and believes in finding happiness in materialism. Like Bhansali's version, Kashyap's Dev is also sent to London at an early age and returns only after reaching adulthood. He has internalised the Western cultural codes, where an ideal masculinity is understood as sexually dominant and emotionally restrained. Ross Poole suggests that Western ideals of masculinity rely on "instrumental rationality," particularly guiding masculine identity toward the pursuit of power and consumption, and generating tension in dealing with emotions in the subject.[36]

The change in character from Devdas to Dev is particularly visible in his relationship with women. The modernity that Dev performs tends to materialise women as objects of consumption and sources of pleasure. Dev's sexual assertion remains consistent throughout the movie. First, he pursues Paro for sex, but when he hears the rumour about her affair, he steps back. He then turns to Rasika, treating her primarily as a sexual object. Rasika eventually recognises this and rejects him. Later, when Paro visits him after her marriage, her behaviour recalls the caring figure of the earlier Parvati. She washes Dev's dirty clothes and cleans his room, showing concern for his condition. Dev, however, again responds by trying to sexualise the relationship. Paro refuses him and tells him that "he is not worth it." Her response is important because she no longer accepts the position of the woman who simply provides emotional or sexual satisfaction to Dev. Paro's response reflects the changing position of women in contemporary India. Runa Chakraborty Paunksnis and Sarunas Paunksnis suggest that the changing notion of femininity in India created the 'new women' who express themselves and satisfy their aspirations as a reflection of the economic liberalisation of the late 1990s.[37] Dev therefore encounters women who cannot be easily placed within the earlier maternal or sacrificial image of femininity. His difficulty in dealing with this change produces a crisis in his own masculine identity. He attempts to regain control through sexual behaviour, aggression, alcohol and emotional withdrawal. This is where *Dev.D* differs most clearly from the earlier *Devdas* narratives. Devdas's relationship with women was shaped by an idealised femininity associated with care, sacrifice and the maternal, leading him to restrain sexual desires and elevate the feminine to a sacred position. Dev, in contrast, tries to separate femininity from this sacred position. He approaches women through the body and through sexual desire. Yet this does not give him the satisfaction he expects.

The film[38] provides a visual representation of this conflict through the setting of Dev's Delhi hotel room where he stays. The background wall of his room is painted with many symbols and colours. For instance, there is an image of a man weightlifting that appears below the word "Muscletones," representing exaggerated male strength. Elsewhere on the wall, the phrase "Girls vs. Boys" presents masculinity and femininity as opposing categories. Dev appears to have accepted precisely this opposition: to become masculine, he must distance himself from the feminine. Interestingly, on the same wall there is also an image of the Hindu goddess Kali, which complicates the association of masculinity with strength. Kali in the visual imagery represents a complication in Dev's attempt. Kali, who represents power within the feminine itself,

suggests that the strength Dev tries to claim as masculine cannot be understood as entirely separate from femininity. Mikel Burley explains that the Hindu Divine Mother, particularly in the form of Kali, brings together qualities that may appear opposite, such as "maternity and truculence" and "beneficence and ferocity."[39] Thus, the feminine in the Hindu imagination is not necessarily gentle or passive; it can also be powerful and fierce. The film image can be read as a reflection of a wider social tension, where women are becoming more independent and assertive; masculine identity may be responding by becoming more aggressive in its attempt to retain authority. Dev's increasing toughness can therefore be understood as a response to a femininity that is no longer passive or easily controlled.

Kakar and Narayanan's discussion of Hindu cultural imagination helps develop this point further. Their reading of Hindu God Shiva as *Ardhanarishvara* challenges the idea that masculine and feminine are separated entities. They point to the image of Shiva as "half man and half woman" and discuss the "lingam" and "yoni" as representations of the unity of male and female creative energies.[40] Their argument suggests that Indian cultural imagination provides a form of masculinity that does not require the complete rejection of the feminine. However, the tension becomes even clearer in Kashyap's description of the deleted scene in which Dev imagines Paro as a goddess: "Dev goes to meet Paro, Dev starts hallucinating that Paro has become a goddess, and the house has become a temple."[41] The description is significant because it shows that the association between Paro and the divine remained part of his conception of Dev's character. But this is not the gentle, nurturing image of divinity associated with the earlier *Devdas*. Instead, it suggests a more powerful and fierce form of the feminine, closer to the image of Kali. Dev's struggle reflects a contemporary masculine crisis in which changing female agency does not necessarily make men more secure.

CONCLUSION

This study suggests that the masculinity represented through *Devdas* is deeply shaped by the presence of the mother as a figure of guidance, protection and emotional security. Devdas's separation from his mother creates a longing that he later transfers onto Parvati and Chandramukhi. However, because these women are idealised through a maternal and sacred image, he struggles to reconcile his emotional attachment with sexual desire. His masculinity therefore remains caught between devotion to the feminine and the social expectation to maintain masculine authority. The colonial social order further limits his ability to accept femininity as part of his own masculine identity. In *Dev.D*, this conflict takes a different form. Dev does not display the emotional vulnerability of the earlier Devdas; instead, he adopts aggression, sexual conquest and emotional restraint to establish himself as masculine. Yet his attempt to separate himself from the feminine does not resolve his crisis. The changing agency of women exposes the insecurity of this masculinity. Thus, the movement from sexual restraint in *Devdas* to sexual excess in *Dev.D* reflects a change in the form of masculine crisis rather than its disappearance. Both Devdas and Dev struggle to relate to the feminine, but in opposite ways: while Devdas seeks emotional refuge in women and resists separation from the feminine by elevating it to the sacred, Dev attempts to distance himself from it by reducing women to the sexual. This study therefore suggests that the idea of the divine feminine does not need to turn flesh-and-blood women into embodiments of divinity or

expect them to carry the qualities that men cannot integrate within themselves. Rather, the divine feminine can be understood as a set of qualities that can also exist within the masculine self: compassion, care, nurturing, emotional sensitivity, protection and the capacity to provide, as well as power and strength expressed through the ancient Indian texts in the form of *Shakti*. A more integrated masculinity would therefore require neither dependence upon nor rejection of femininity, but the recognition and acceptance of these qualities as a legitimate part of the masculine self.

Ms. Pratibha Tiwari is a Ph.D. scholar at the Amity Institute of English Studies and Research (AIESR), Amity University, Noida, India. Her research interests lie at the intersection of adaptation studies and cultural studies, exploring how literary adaptations undergo transformation to represent culture-specific ideas and negotiate the socio-cultural contexts in which they are produced. Besides her research work, she has also served as a Teaching Assistant at Amity University, Noida, where she taught Communication Skills courses to undergraduate and postgraduate students.

Prof. Shantanu Ghosh is the Director of the Amity Institute of English Studies and Research (AIESR), and also the Amity Centre for Cognitive Science (ACCS), at Amity University, Noida, India. He mentors Ph.D. scholars working in diverse areas, including diaspora studies, adaptation studies, cognitive neuroscience, and linguistics. Before joining Amity University, he served as a Research Fellow (Neurology Service) at Harvard Medical School.

Dr. Garima Dalal is an Associate Professor (Linguistics) and Chief Coordinator of the Linguistic Empowerment Cell at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, India. Her research and teaching focus on English for Academic Purposes, English Language Teaching, and Communication Skills in Higher Education. She has collaborated internationally with the University of Maryland, the University of Texas at Dallas, and Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

1. Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, *Devdas*, trans. G. Sreejata ([1917], repr., Penguin Books, 2002).
2. Anurag Kashyap, dir., *Dev.D* (UTV Spotboy and UTV Motion Pictures, 2009).
3. Gautam Ghosh, "God is a Refugee: Nationality, Morality and History in the 1947 Partition of India," *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice* 42, no. 1 (1998): 37–41, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23171742.
4. Gautam Ghosh, "Nobility or Utility? *Zamindars*, Businessmen, and *Bhadralok* as Curators of the Indian Nation in Satyajit Ray's *Jalsaghar (The Music Room)*," *Modern Asian Studies* 52, no. 2 (March 2018): 684.
5. Rohan Sharma, "Gods, Anti-Heroes and Heroes: Exploring Masculinity and the Male Lover through Mythological, Textual and Cinematic Narratives in India," in *Violent and Vulnerable Performances: Challenging the Gender Boundaries of Masculinities and Femininities*, ed. Katalin Kis and Aleah N. Ranjitsingh (Brill, 2019), 50.
6. Chattopadhyay, *Devdas*, 22.
7. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986). Fanon examines how colonial subjects may internalise the cultural values and standards of the coloniser, particularly through the pressure to adopt the coloniser's language, behaviour and social ideals. This internalisation can produce a conflicted sense of identity in which the colonised subject seeks recognition through forms associated with the colonial culture.
8. Pramod K. Nayar, *Literary Theory Today* (Asia Book Club, 2017): 199. Nayar discusses Bhabha's concept of mimicry in the chapter "Postcolonial Studies."
9. Ghosh, "God Is a Refugee," 37.
10. Chattopadhyay, *Devdas*, 43.
11. Ibid,40.
12. Ibid,43.
13. Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton University Press, 1993), 26–27. Chatterjee distinguishes between the "spiritual" or "inner" domain, associated with language, religion and personal and family life, and the "material"

or "outer" domain of law, administration, economy and statecraft. He argues that nationalist thought sought to protect the inner domain as a sphere of cultural difference while engaging with modern institutions in the outer domain.

14. Ghosh, "Nobility or Utility?" 686. Ghosh draws on Partha Chatterjee's understanding of the *bhadralok* as a "nationalist elite" that saw itself as the bearer of India's modernity and progress.
15. Ghosh, "God Is a Refugee," 36–37. Ghosh extends this discussion by showing how family deities and religious practices contributed to a morally and emotionally charged understanding of historical time. The connection between family, religious practice and cultural identity provides a useful context for understanding the representation of Parvati within the Bengali cultural imagination.
16. Sudhir Kakar, "Lovers in the Dark," in *Intimate Relations: Exploring Indian Sexuality* (Penguin Books India, 1989), 36. Kakar interprets the *Devdas* figure as the "Majnun-lover," whose longing is rooted in an early desire for complete union with the mother.
17. Nandini Gupta, "Deconstructing the Hailing of 'Mother India,'" *Journal of International Women's Studies* 22, no. 9 (2021): 132, https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol22/iss9/9.
18. Chattopadhyay, *Devdas*, 47.
19. Ibid, 48.
20. Jyotirmoy Sil, "Intoxications, Baiji Dance, and Babu-Culture of Colonial Calcutta: A Literary Survey," *Assonance: A Journal of Russian & Comparative Literary Studies*, no. 23 (2023): 286.
21. Kakar, "Lovers in the Dark," 37.
22. P.C. Barua, dir., *Devdas* (New Theatres, 1936).
23. Dietmar Rothermund, "The Impact of the Great Depression on India in the 1930s," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 41 (1980): 657.
24. Bimal Roy, dir., *Devdas* (Bimal Roy Productions, 1955).
25. Sanjay Leela Bhansali, dir., *Devdas* (Mega Bollywood and Bhansali Productions, 2002).
26. Kakar and Amrita Narayanan, "The Capacious Freud," in *The Ego and the Id: 100 Years Later*, ed. Fred Busch and Natacha Delgado (Routledge, 2024), 39.
27. Jhuma Basak, "Cultural Invocation of Maternal-Fusion in Males, India and Japan," in *Psychoanalytic Explorations into the Primal Relationship in Japan and India*, ed. Osamu Kitayama and Jhuma Basak (Routledge, 2025), 118–134.
28. Anway Mukhopadhyay, "Modifying Masculinity: Tantric Culture, Female Speech and Reframed Masculinities," in *The Authority of Female Speech in Indian Goddess Traditions* (Springer Nature, 2020), 124.
29. Poonam Arora, "Devdas: Indian Cinema's Emasculated Hero, Sado-Masochism, and Colonialism," *Journal of South Asian Literature* 30, no. 1–2 (1995): 272, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40873587.
30. Meraj Ahmed Mubarki, "Body, Masculinity and the Male Hero in Hindi Cinema," *Social Semiotics* (2018): 8, https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2018.1547497.
31. Virinder S. Kalra, "Between Emasculation and Hypermasculinity: Theorizing British South Asian Masculinities," *South Asian Popular Culture* 7, no. 2 (2009): 121, https://doi.org/10.1080/14746680902920874.
32. R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (University of California Press, 1995).
33. Rohit K. Dasgupta and K. Moti Gokulsing, "Introduction: Perceptions of Masculinity and Challenges to the Indian Male," in *Masculinity and Its Challenges in India: Essays on Changing Perceptions*, ed. Rohit K. Dasgupta and K. Moti Gokulsing (McFarland, 2014), 11–14.
34. Ibid.
35. Eros Now Music, "Anurag Kashyap Speaks About Dev D," YouTube, 2 February 2009, 3:17, https://youtu.be/L5Fch4rLeV8?si=owB7Ppk5iG5t_qWq.
36. Ross Poole, "Modernity, Rationality and Masculine," in *Feminine, Masculine and Representation*, ed. Terry Threadgold and Anne Cranny-Francis (Routledge, 2020), 54.
37. Runa Chakraborty Paunksnis and Sarunas Paunksnis, "Masculine Anxiety and the New Indian Woman in the Films of Anurag Kashyap," *South Asian Popular Culture* 18, no. 2 (2020): 5–6, https://doi.org/10.1080/14746689.2020.1773656.
38. Anurag Kashyap, dir., *Dev.D* (UTV Spotboy and UTV Motion Pictures, 2009).

39. Mikel Burley, "The Nature and Significance of the Hindu Divine Mother in Embodied Thealogical Perspective," *Religious Studies* 58 (2022): 5–6, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412521000263.
40. Kakar and Narayanan, "The Capacious Freud," 38.
41. Cinemaan, "Did You Know Anurag Kashyap Ne…," YouTube Shorts, 25 March 2025, https://www.youtube.com/shorts/kujbJC9xmFw.

https://doi.org/10.34074/junc.26079

NIALL CAMPBELL

BEAUTIFUL CRUELTY: LOOKSMAXING MASCULINITY AS A RESPONSE TO NEOLIBERAL CAPITALISM

ABSTRACT

This article argues that the phenomenon of looksmaxing masculinity is part of a wider neoliberal trend of self-optimisation that is embedded within the marketplace technology of online exchange. Rather than approach this presentation of masculinity from the perspective of an abstract identity, this article unearths the technical milieu that is intrinsically connected to its expression. The looksmaxing phenomenon is approached through the lens of Gilles Deleuze's control society and two of its crises: the danger of becoming stuck within the indefinite flows of data and the danger of ressentiment. This article demonstrates that looksmaxing is a response to the technical conditions of online exchange that function to trap users within unending content consumption that cancels out progress. Looksmaxing provides a pathway towards masculine ideals and bodily augmentation in an effort to restore this lost sense of progress. However, looksmaxing is a poisoned chalice that offers an illusory greener pasture of superiority, but in reality traps users within the sad passions, leaving them feeling inferior, jealous and hostile to one another. The article draws upon research conducted on looksmax.org in 2023 to show that the community is fragmented along the lines of individual projects of self-optimisation, but unified by a ressentiment that causes perpetual conflict between users.

INTRODUCTION

The notion of looksmaxing has been slowly seeping out from various fringe forums for more than a decade and is now circulating widely in the broader online ecosystem. Within the flows of data of online exchange, the language of looksmaxing has quietly dispersed across the social media feeds of many. However, the sudden discovery of looksmaxing by global media has been anything but subtle. Media outlets are quick to capitalise upon the exoticism of a novel masculinity and its worrying representation. One article's title boldly asserts: "Looksmaxing: the new male beauty crisis capturing our kids."[1] These articles are quick to warn parents of the potentially dangerous cosmetic techniques shared among looksmaxing circles.[2] Experts are also chiming in with early judgements. Debra Soh, a sex neuroscientist, argues that we should all be concerned

about Gen Z's alignment with the hypermasculine values of looksmaxing, which, Soh argues, has emerged as young men's reaction to the perceived progressive push to feminise men.[3] Child psychologist Eugene Beresin has published guidelines for parents and caregivers to discuss looksmaxing with their children, and offers advice such as monitoring your child's behaviour and limiting screen time if your child displays too much preoccupation with their image.[4] What these articles demonstrate is that the media panic is in full swing, interpreting looksmaxing within familiar categories of dangerous online misinformation, radicalisation, children's wellbeing and the uncontrollability of social media. Yet, despite preliminary media assertions, looksmaxing is currently an under-researched social phenomenon and the forums that support it are highly fragmented and difficult to parse. Only a small selection of academic articles currently offer a more nuanced analysis of looksmaxing subculture. This article contributes to this growing area of research by offering insight into looksmaxing via a study of online forums, and considering how they can be understood within the broader context of neoliberal capitalism and its connection to the online gender politics of looksmaxing.

This article is primarily informed by my 2024 thesis on incels, which included an empirical analysis of one of the key forums that constitutes the looksmaxing community.[5] The thesis project deployed a rhizo-textual methodology to analyse three important forums that constitute incel communities: incels.is, looksmax.org, and r/incelexit. One hundred and fifty forum posts were collected over the course of three months in 2023. The aim of the project was to challenge the 'echo chamber' theory that is central to much early critical scholarship into online subculture. The concept asserts that the internet medium generates problematic and dangerous effects because it allows for participants to engage in a high level of selection bias towards information, which leads to users surrounding themselves with information that they agree with.[6] Not only is this assumption challenged by empirical evidence,[7] but familiarity with these online spaces reveals that unanimous agreement is scarce. Analysis across the key forums shows that antagonism, not agreement, is the lifeblood of online engagement. Users are constantly exposed to opposing viewpoints and frequently engage by attacking others. In examining forum posts, it was demonstrated that dissent is subject to criteria of acceptability and varying moderation policies that affect the broader constraints of discussion—which can be misunderstood as 'agreement' when looking in from outside. Even within these constraints, users are continually able to challenge one another, express dissatisfaction with the framework itself and sidestep enforcement by going to another space. The project, as reported in a recent book chapter, "Exploring Radical Approaches to Understanding the Internet and Inceldom," rejected the echo chamber characterisation as simply not reflecting what happens in these online spaces and, accordingly, unable to provide a satisfactory explanation of how incel spaces intensify hateful political discourse.[8] Two important theoretical concepts emerged from this research to provide a more flexible understanding of the dynamics of online subculture: Nietzsche's concept of 'ressentiment' and Deleuze's concept of 'societies of control.' This article focuses on one element of the project, the online phenomenon of looksmaxing, and unpacks Nietzsche's and Deleuze's theories to provide insight into the inner workings of an online subculture that is messy and contradictory in nature. The objective is to add nuance to a social theory of looksmaxers, elaborating on the technical procedures of late capitalism that are directly involved in the construction of a problematic masculine subjectivity.

WHAT IS LOOKSMAXING?

The practice of looksmaxing is a form of aesthetic self-improvement that predominantly involves an enhancement of masculine features.[9] Looksmaxing techniques comprise a range of methods for achieving masculine beauty, including exercise, skincare, dieting and cosmetic surgery. What has particularly made looksmaxing notorious is its association with a growing trend of masculine beauty metrics based upon facial symmetry and ratios. However, recent media attention considerably overstates the levels of consensus present within the looksmaxing community. Looksmaxers seldom agree on the methods and aesthetics that are shared within their forum.[5]

Online discourse within the looksmaxing community often revolves around facial features such as the jawline, cheekbones and brow ridge. Looksmaxers also discuss many potential methods for chiselling the face into a more masculine appearance: cosmetic procedures such as bimaxillary osteotomies or dermal filler, or at-home exercises such as jaw pumps, mewing or bonesmashing. These latter two techniques have been the source of much media attention due to their novelty.[2] Mewing is a tongue exercise developed by Dr John Mew, a former orthodontist who lost his license after the General Dental Council found that his practice was pseudoscientific and harmful to the reputation of orthodontics.[10] Looksmaxers have appropriated the tongue exercise, which supposedly helps realign the jaw, for the purpose of trying to achieve a sharper jawline. The act of bonesmashing involves hitting the brow or cheek bones with a hard object such as a fist or hammer, with the intention to cause small fractures in the bone and for the bone to heal thicker and create more protrusion.[11] Like mewing, there is also no scientific basis to this technique. Regardless, these types of techniques relentlessly circulate within online media, tempting the insecure and confusing the out-of-touch.

Initially, the term looksmaxing originated from incel subculture and was one of a range of remedial strategies for dealing with involuntary celibacy, which subsequently became characterised slang terms using the '-maxing' suffix.[12] Some popular strategies are 'escortmaxing,' which involves purchasing sex work, and 'geomaxing,' which entails travelling to the global south to try to date women in precarious circumstances by leveraging higher social standing and income.[5] However, looksmaxing has become a particularly divisive topic among incels, and within the largest incel forum, incels.is, it is currently a banned topic that is only allowed to be discussed in the context of opposition to the idea or within certain threads where some banned topics are allowed.[13] As Björn Pelzer et al.[14] point out, however, the relationship is only rhetorically distanced: the most popular looksmaxing forum, looksmax.org, shares the same owner as incels.is. Therefore, even though they are differentiated topics by forum rule, they remain intertwined. More recently, looksmaxing has become popularised by TikTok, which has dissociated it from its forum-based origins.[15] Incels have noticed this trend and lament that looksmax.org has been 'normified' and overtaken by young people from TikTok.[16] Therefore, mainstream interest in the community is not always welcomed as it poses a risk for the content to drift further from its incel roots.

While there are only a few initial scholarly studies of looksmaxing to draw upon, it is worth exploring the initial emergence of critical theoretical frameworks in the looksmaxing literature. Anda Solea and Lisa Sugiura argue that looksmaxing is a more mainstream form of incel rhetoric that has cloaked itself in a neutral tone to obscure its misogyny and

racism.[17] They state that looksmaxing shares with inceldom a concept called the 'PSL scale,' an acronym that represents three older incel forums: Puahate.com, Sluthate.com, and Lookism.net. This scale purports to measure objective beauty based upon a ranking system of one to ten, but it also generates a racialised and gendered hierarchy that naturalises beauty standards as innate genetic values. Michael Halpin et al. argue that the ranking system fails to deliver on its promise of objective beauty standards, but serves rather as a conduit for competition between looksmaxers.[9] They identify that the dynamics of the PSL scale repeat the tropes of hegemonic masculinity—a concept created by Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell.[18] Connell demonstrated that institutions naturalise a masculine practice that splits individuals into a binary of superior/inferior, resulting in an atmosphere of competition and status-seeking that subordinates the feminine and other non-hegemonic masculinities. Halpin et al. show that users reproduce hegemonic masculinity through the various ways that they dehumanise one another under the guise of objective masculine advice.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity is valuable to this area of scholarship because it reveals that looksmaxing masculinity is not a simple repetition of the long-established feminine beauty culture; it is an emerging project of masculine dominance that has adapted to seek the subordination of others through ideals of beauty. However, the concept of hegemonic masculinity has a tendency to drift towards theorising online subculture as a site of abstract identity, without much consideration for the mechanisms that desires filter through to reach an identity. Connell and Messerschmidt's revision of the concept acknowledges that it has led to rigid typologies of masculinity, and in retrospect much of the research on masculinities that uses the concept reveals a context specificity relating to geographical and cultural formations that mutate over time.[19] It is therefore vital that scholarship on online masculinities does not neglect the online component, but instead offers a robust explanation of the technical milieu that is increasingly mediating social life. The present article provides context to looksmaxing masculinity by connecting it to neoliberal self-optimisation and Deleuze's control society. It is worth mentioning that this article uses ressentiment to explain the problematic nature of looksmaxing masculinity rather than hegemonic masculinity, and this is due to its closer connection to Deleuze's work. In combination, these concepts help explain the technical milieu of neoliberal capitalism that is intrinsically connected to expressions of looksmaxing masculinity.

LOOKSMAXING AND SELF-OPTIMISATION

To understand looksmaxing masculinity, it is important to first situate it within a broader culture of self-optimisation that is prevalent across the online subculture. This is a vital context for untangling the fragmented nature of online exchange that makes researching the looksmaxing community difficult. Every forum post within looksmax.org contains contradictions that thwart attempts to generate cogent analysis. However, self-optimisation offers an avenue of understanding that accounts for such inconsistency, while still remaining coherent by situating looksmaxing within the broader context of neoliberal capitalism. German sociologists Daniel Nehring and Anja Röcke describe self-optimisation as an effect of the recent conditions of neoliberal capitalism.[20] The idea of self-improvement is not new, with examples dating back to the Stoics' understanding of life as a continual training process.[21] The particular idea of self-optimisation presented

by Nehring and Röcke refers to a broader social shift towards decentralisation and the subsequent rise in self-governance through the logics of market economics. According to French theorists Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, the neoliberal project requires the individual to be understood as an entrepreneur, which is a separate category to other subjectivities such as the capitalist, innovator or producer.[22] They argue that the entrepreneur is distinct in that they are not initially situated in a fortunate social position but are guided by an inner savvy that allows them to capitalise upon opportunities that arise. This entrepreneurial subject combines risk and anticipation to engage in an active pursuit of self-formation and maximisation. As a result, Dardot and Laval argue, human activity is reduced to relating to the self and for the self, which renders the social field a solipsistic mutual elaboration of personal plans. Situating looksmaxing within this theoretical interpretation of neoliberalism helps explain the diversity of the group, as they are pursuing personal projects of self-optimisation, but it also shows that they are united by a desire to maximise the self within those projects.

The neoliberal notion of self as entrepreneur also extends to the sphere of sexuality. Sociologists Dana Kaplan and Eva Illouz[23] argue that, within the politics of sexual capital, a new form of neoliberal sexual politics has emerged that connects feelings of sexual competency to a type of self-efficacy that mimics the subjectivity an employer seeks. Scholars have noticed that incel discourse, for example, revolves around understanding dating as a sexual marketplace.[24] Lauren Menzie's analysis of incels finds that the worldview is divided by a vertical hierarchy of who possesses the most erotic capital, which splits men and women into categories of sexual privilege; incels use this concept to place themselves in the underprivileged category.[25] Menzie reveals that incels understand romantic relationships through the lens of gaining an attractive partner to display competency, but also see women as an object that signals wealth and success. Although the communities of inceldom and looksmaxing overlap, what distinguishes them is a matter of where responsibility is placed. Inceldom externalises blame towards women and feminism, whereas looksmaxing embraces self-optimisation.[5] However, both masculinities are entrenched within a broader context of marketplace exchange that is influencing their conceptualisation of sexual politics.

CONTROL SOCIETY AND THE CANCELLATION OF PROGRESS

Deleuze's later work provides not only an excellent theorisation of neoliberal capitalism, but also a warning of crises that emerge under these conditions that are particularly relevant to the study of looksmaxing masculinity.[26] Despite writing prior to the full flourishing of online worlds, Deleuze presciently identified a series of problems within the transition to computing and the expansion of marketplace logics that inevitably results in an intensification of reactionary politics. Deleuze provides a framework for understanding computer networks as enacting a form of permissive control that continually fragments its users while at the same time repeating a consistent method of control through marketplace logics. What he establishes is a clear line of departure from the familiar mode of society that Michel Foucault identified, and an ubiquitous movement towards a new mode that mediates social life through technical machinery to a greater extent. As suggested earlier, it would be a mistake to conflate contemporary looksmaxing masculinity as a simple repetition of past forms, and Deleuze's control society offers a compelling account of a distinct social mode. It is crucial to consider

this social context because it locates a set of crises within neoliberalism that agitate and propel looksmaxing masculinity.

Within his text, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," Deleuze argues that we are departing from what Foucault calls 'disciplinary society' and heading towards 'control society.'[26] Deleuze details the way in which Foucault mapped the modern institution to reveal a repeated pattern of control through interiors: each institution follows a logic of prison-like enclosure that draws boundaries that individuals traverse. One exits one kind of prison, such as a school, to find oneself in another, such as a workplace. Within these prisons, the individual is subject to regulatory powers that channel them into an ideal subjectivity through discipline. However, Deleuze argued that we have been trending away from this style of control since the Second World War and are now heading towards a new method. The older regime's discipline was associated with training and was long-term, infinite and discontinuous. Our current regime of control, on the other hand, is concerned with amassing power within the marketplace, which is short-term, continuous and thus without limit. Deleuze argues that within disciplinary societies, individuals are always starting again as they move between enclosures such as the school, factory, hospital or barracks. In control societies, the journey is never finished in that they are in a perpetual state of being unable to complete training. In both forms of capitalism, completion and progress are illusory, but disciplinary society attempts to provide a vertical hierarchy to sustain progress through graduating steps, whereas control society forgoes this type of progress in favour of the indefinite conditions of marketplace expansion. The enclosures of disciplinary society act as moulds that contain and restrict, but the modulations of control societies act as a mould that transforms continually.

Deleuze states that the sovereign of this control society is the corporation.[26] Capitalism has moved away from production with raw materials, which is more frequently shifted offshore, and is now more intensely invested in buying finished products and assembly as well as higher-order production such as marketing, stocks and services. The older enclosures of disciplinary society, such as the factory, operated with private or state ownership as a convergence point. However, within a control society, the corporation exposes the factory to an indefinite flux of stocks. To further elaborate on control society's distinct nature, Deleuze provides the example of changes in wages. Under previous regimes of discipline, the capitalist would maximise production and minimise the proletariat's wages, potentially causing mass outrage, whereas control society results from the rise in corporate power and its logic of competitive wages. Deleuze notes that the factory has always understood meritocracy and bonuses, but the corporation massively expands this dimension of wages to create perpetual modulation that formalises competition between workers as a healthy expression. Such expansion of competition fragments the workforce and disarms potential mass resistance through the destruction of unions and prioritisation of individual excellence. But this logic is not contained within enclosure, it expands hungrily beyond to be replicated across other areas of society, hijacking desires to replace discipline with control via gaining power within a marketplace.

Elements of Deleuze's theory of control societies align with contemporary research that has identified an increase in corporate self-regulation across society. For example, Kaplan and Illouz's historical account of the intermingling of sexual desirability and

capitalism indicates distinct differences between past and contemporary formations.[23] Within the Victorian era of religious asceticism, bourgeois marriage markets would leverage a young woman's sexual purity as a form of value for the economic exchange of marriage. In light of Deleuze's theory, this could be seen as disciplinary society's discontinuous training of a woman, and movement between enclosures, as a woman is sold from one family to another. Such social transitions would entail a completion and starting again on each side of enclosure boundaries. But within Kaplan and Illouz's analysis of our contemporary period, sex and desirability have become disassociated from religion and thus have become an independent sphere of consumption. Desirability now resides in the qualities of employability, in the form of personal achievement and advantageous skills, thus mimicking the dynamics of a job market. From a control society perspective, this would suggest that a collapse of the boundaries around sex and the insertion of corporate competitive norms into sexual desires has created an indefinite state of being unable to complete training. What this combination of research and theory shows is that sex and desirability are connected to capitalism, and we cannot assume that we are dealing with the same abstract identities across history.

CONTROL SOCIETY'S MACHINERY AND THE INTENSIFICATION OF RESSENTIMENT

Centring Deleuze's control society theory allows us to connect a rise in reactionary politics to the machinery of neoliberal capitalism. Deleuze[26] argues that the particular machinery of control societies is computers, and within these machines are three potential crises: jamming, piracy and virus. The first and third of these are particularly relevant to this article's argument. Deleuze understood machinery throughout history as cumulative in that contemporary machinery builds upon the machinery of previous regimes. While he did not believe that machines are determinative of desires, they still require a certain logic for their use. He foresaw computing as an avenue for control society to enshrine a state of continual modulation. His account of how control society would thrive within computing is remarkably relevant to our current online social order of corporate-owned search engines and algorithms, big data, infinite scrolling and endless AI interventionism. The first crisis of jamming denotes the fact that continual variation of the mould does not create a sense of constant progression; it does the complete opposite in that it creates a sense of immobility and becoming stuck. Within disciplinary society, one experiences progress through 'apparent acquittal,' seemingly deemed not guilty as one moves between various societal prisons and receives recognition for one's effort. Within control society, one is subject to 'limitless postponement,' operating within the conditions of continual variation as moulds are constantly changing to fit the desire. For example, infinite scrolling does not allow one to move on and start again. Rather, it staves off any finality in favour of continual transition and modulation. To scroll is to experience stagnation as the mould for the desire continually morphs into something else to maintain capture over the desire.

Deleuze's third crisis of control society is the introduction of viruses. It is at this point in his theorisation that the door opens for consideration of how control society intensifies and spreads reactionary politics. In Deleuze and Félix Guattari's work, the term 'virus' is used to describe the situated production of fascistic desire, which is heavily influenced by Nietzsche's concept of ressentiment, as well as his theoretical

predecessor, Spinoza, and his theory on morality and the sad passions.[27] For Deleuze, Spinoza identifies a problematic transcendent morality of good and evil that reduces our power for existence, which is found within joy, and traps us within the sad passions.[28] This morality disassociates us from our immediate life and the conditions that create us, as well as the good and bad that is imbedded within that life. Instead, we are invested in a separate abstract theatre of morality that makes us suffer. Nietzsche takes Spinoza's theorisation on abstract morality's capacity to entrench suffering and names the phenomenon 'ressentiment.' Nietzsche uses this concept of ressentiment to criticise a style of thought that he deemed to be life-denying due to its pursuit of perfection, beauty and virtue, rendering the human condition incomplete, broken and in need of redemption.[29] Nietzsche argues that these ideals make us live a suffering life of comparison, inadequacy and jealousy, which lead to hatred, spite and vengeance against those who are determined to cause the suffering. However, Nietzsche believed that ressentiment is an act of self-poisoning that directs us towards scapegoats, but it is the conditions of ressentiment that make one suffer. This style of suffering is particularly relevant to the landscape of online grievance politics, deeply imbedded within a morality that is self-advancing because it is not connected to any immediate harms. Instead, the aggrieved are paranoid over abstract moral harms that continually haunt them, thus trapping them within the sad passions.

However, ressentiment is an ancient problem, so a question returns regarding how ressentiment is revitalised by computer networking in our contemporary time. German philosopher Joseph Vogl argues that corporate expansion into online data markets significantly increases the potential surpluses of ressentiment by creating commercialised opinion markets.[30] Therefore, capitalism's mutation through computing has enabled market forces to capitalise upon a sector of abstract morality to a much more intense degree. Contemporary thinkers often understand the problematic nature of online discourse through a lens of 'misinformation.'[31] When working with a subject area such as masculinity, however, this is not a particularly helpful framing, as it requires a tracing back to fact when masculinity is an abstract system of representation. Instead, by using Deleuze's critique of representation, we can locate a risk of ressentiment with an economy of representation that would be considerably expanded by market forces within control society.[32]

Within *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze outlines the way in which signs risk producing ressentiment when they become detached from the movements that cause the sign to emerge in the first place.[32] For Deleuze, signs are deceptive, but necessary for communicating and learning. Within life, we are constantly experiencing shifts and movements in the world around us that cause sensory emissions. Signs are the human response to these shifts, but they function to obscure the movements that initially caused the sensory emission. For example, the sun rising is witnessed as a flash of light, producing the notion of the sun as an abstract sign. But that sign possesses none of the initial flash that produces the sign in the first place. Deleuze argues that this process of cancellation poses a risk of blinding, in that the abstract sign can become detached from its movements and create a disconnected image. Deleuze states that the image becomes blinding when it appears from either too close or too far away. The sign from too close blinds because it is visceral and invokes strong affects such as fear or anger that are short-sighted. The sign from too far away is vague and confusing, unable to be connected to anything or anywhere specific. In the context of computer networks and

their economies of representation, we are constantly blinded by signs that appear from up close and too far away as online exchange has conjured away the movements that produce signs. As we browse the online medium, we are struck by affect inducing signs and signs which offer no immediate connection to offline movements. The technology of online communication may not always produce ressentiment, but it ensures that the economy of signs is always at risk of leading to ressentiment as it has mechanised the blinding conditions that lead to it, and it will inevitably capitalise upon the ressentiment once it is expressed.

Deleuze's dangers of jamming and virus within control society set up an important context for the analysis of looksmaxing masculinity. Jamming helps us understand that marketplace expansion has created a unique form of stagnation—one that operates through indefinite conditions to trap desires within constantly shifting platforms, cancelling out any progress in favour of marketplace expansion without limit. Virus also shows us that the economies of representation within online networks are a fertile ground for ressentiment as they obscure the movements that produce signs, leaving us blinded by signs that appear from up close and far away—and they capitalise upon this blindness. As the next section will show, looksmaxing masculinity is both stuck within the indefinite postponements of online media and also embraces a ressentiment of a superior masculinity to attempt to reinstate progress. However, the pursuit of ressentiment as a form of redemption only leads to suffering, jealousy and hatred, which ultimately proliferates dynamics of cruelty and mutual hostility throughout the looksmaxing community.

ANALYSIS OF THE LOOKSMAXING COMMUNITY

The looksmax.org community provides an excellent example of a ressentiment that thrives within the conditions of Deleuze's control society. Looksmaxing masculinity embodies a ressentiment of self-optimisation that pursues a potential self that is more beautiful, and it promises that this version of the body will alleviate insecurity and suffering. In terms of Kaplan and Illouz's theory of sexual capital, looksmaxers replicate a notion of employability and personal excellence within how they understand their desirability, and they compete with others akin to how one might compete within a job market. The abstract morality of looksmaxing promises redemption if users exercise restraint and discipline through dieting and frequenting the gym, but also by way of intelligence, critical thought and self-efficacy while navigating the market of various cosmetic techniques. A large part of the emphasis upon intelligence is derived from the acknowledged risks of looksmaxing, which aligns with Dardot and Laval's description of the inherently savvy entrepreneur who assesses risks and notices opportunities to capitalise upon.[22] But the looksmaxing ressentiment is not purely a case of economic calculation as it is still embedded within a hope of salvation. Some of the language looksmaxers use takes on heavenly qualities; they describe the looksmaxing process as 'ascension' towards a better self. In combination, the ideas of looksmaxing masculinity intertwine the mechanisms of a marketplace with a grandiose moral notion of redemption found within beauty.

Looksmaxer masculinity exemplifies the tendency of Nietzsche's ressentiment to become vengeful against a perceived immorality that contradicts their principles. Looksmaxing's embrace of self-optimisation generates a desire for revenge against

a bad type of person that is ugly, stupid and unproductive. But this bad person is not necessarily just an exterior group, it is also a dynamic that strongly shapes actions inside looksmaxing subculture as well. At any moment, a slip-up can cause any member to fall into this derisory category. The 'immorality' of ugliness and stupidity also creates harsh self-reflection, and consequently the looksmaxer cannot escape the sad passions and remains stuck within the habits of self-loathing. This dynamic manifests within the written evisceration of other users; looksmaxers revel in the opportunity to cut one another down and dish out criticism as a form of justice against those who do not fulfil elite self-optimisation. Looksmaxers will often post pictures of post-op cosmetic surgeries of people who they believe have 'botched' their looks. The receptions range from cruel laughter and insults about lack of intellect to pity. This type of communally determined failure is sobering for some looksmaxers, who reflect upon the unintelligence of those undertaking the surgery. But for others, there is a perverse enjoyment in witnessing the downfall of the inadequate.

The unification of looksmaxers under an entrepreneurial rationale does not lead to a unity of perspectives between users. The marketplace structure of the forum fragments the userbase in a way that causes the looksmaxing community to continually aggravate and attack itself. Dardot and Laval's notion of the social field of self-interested entrepreneurs reveals a subtle market logic that generates competition between users. This logic undermines any shared vision of a looksmaxing aesthetic, and instead users are interlocked within a continual state of conflict regarding aesthetic superiority. Halpin et al. also notice looksmaxers' propensity for competition within their application of hegemonic masculinity, where they find that the objective beauty standards of the PSL scale cannot deliver on its promise of a shared metric, but instead act as a conduit for competition.[9] Within looksmax.org, the impasse of the marketplace in delivering a shared system of standards does not liberate the space, but only emboldens the masculinity that operates with entrepreneurial rationale to attack and punish what it deems inferior. The lifeblood of looksmax.org is not a harmonious vision of aesthetic perfection; it is a continually renewed state of antagonism as users inflict suffering via derision and denigration. In the research findings informing this argument, users shared their own desired horizons: Richard Ramirez's cheekbones; Emma Stone's sanpaku eyes; a 'slutty' feminine waist. But these personal projects for looksmaxing were continually attacked and indignantly defended: the user wanting Stone's eyes was mocked by other users who believed they were ugly; the user wanting a feminine waist was met with homophobic slurs. What these examples show is that the forum's marketplace structure maintains a field of personal projects, which renders the overall community aesthetically incompatible. The dynamics of posting, however, still follow a distinct pattern of ressentiment, and conflict between users is due to sad passions that are generated by striving for superiority under the ideals of beauty.

The division of looksmaxers as competitors is reinforced further by hostilities that constantly undermine the potential for collaboration between users. Whenever users post that they have made a personal breakthrough, commenters are quick to demand evidence via before and after photographs. Looksmaxers leap at the opportunity to scrutinise and criticise, leading to off-topic commentary on bodies and their inadequacy. At times the criticism is welcomed, as users want to know the truth of where they stand. But the enthusiasm that users express in attacking one another

also creates reluctance in sharing. In one instance where a user provided pictures, he received racist insults, was described as bloated and told he had asymmetrical lips, while one user said that his eye width was so ugly it was 'brutal.' However, this undermining of collaboration due to a preference for criticism extends to posts that are considered truthful. In cases where forum posters provided information that was widely accepted as truthful, they were met with criticism for stating information that was so obvious that it was insulting. These types of posts are referred to as 'water posts,' an abbreviation of the saying 'water is wet.' Posts that are considered 'water' reinforce a notion of masculine superiority in that they are technically considered truthful, but do not display looksmaxing excellence. Furthermore, on occasions where users express joy from their breakthroughs, few within the comment sections are happy to see them succeed. The revenge of Nietzsche's ressentiment resurfaces again as disgruntled commenters' hostility is motivated by jealousy and loathing. Upset by the success of other looksmaxers, these commenters leverage criticism as a form of 'justice.' They call into question legitimacy and try to poke holes in the logic of the poster's practice.

Deleuze's concept of continual modulation is present within the mechanical function of the forum. The forum is not an infinite scroll per se; it is a more rudimentary format that allows one to indefinitely browse older posts, but it mainly circulates new posts that are made each day. This flow of online content still functions through limitless deferral in that the horizon has no point of completion, and it also embodies the shifting mould of control society insofar as it is flexible and allows multiple forms of content to enter into the forum from other online spaces. The structural features of limitless deferral and shifting moulds create a constant churn within the space; the forum is constantly being connected to other areas of the internet to help achieve indefinite conditions. This structure gives rise to clashes as knowledge enters from the science of cosmetic surgery, the world of YouTube content creators and personal theories. The byproduct of this ephemeral nature of continual modulation is that the authority of the forum is continually undermined. The dynamics of the forum instead rely upon ressentiment to police boundaries and maintain consistency over the shifting sands of online content. Users swarm to attack content on the forum that they feel does not meet their own personal standards. Moderation is the only formal role that can have any definitive authority over what can and cannot be said, but looksmax.org's moderators are somewhat relaxed about their own rules. Although the forum rules specifically forbid Queer content, users who describe themselves as femboys and non-binary do occasionally make their way into the forum to discuss their own techniques of bodily augmentation. These users are subject to Queerphobia, which strangely does not stand out in terms of its brutality as the intensity of this style of reaction is a normative standard between looksmaxers across a wide range of disgusts and hatreds.

Hostility between looksmaxers is not only promoted by the conditions of masculine competition and the moving ground of continual modulation; it is also exacerbated by the blinding signs that looksmaxers consume as online content. Deleuze's critique of representation, for its risks of becoming detached and thus producing ressentiment, plays out in the forum within its economy of representation. Users are blinded by their ideal looksmaxing goals—signs that appear from too far away and detached from the body. The ideal notions of beauty render the current body inadequate, while the belief that the body can fulfil the ideal leads the looksmaxer down a pathway of sad passions;

they feel inferior and fail in the impossible venture of achieving ideal beauty. But looksmaxing discussion also blinds because it is vague, and users are trapped grasping at descriptions of off-screen activity. Users frequently demand evidence, but the vague nature of the forum's distant signs and their detachment from the movements that produce them ensure that such conditions are a non-starter. However, the looksmaxer's difficulty in searching for the movements that produce signs is not simply a case of misinformation. Authority, for the looksmaxer, is not about scientific rigour, but about whether the proposed techniques advance the looksmaxer's personal plan, which has already been structured by an ideal. Looksmaxing concepts such as mewing and bonesmashing are contentious, and while dispute occurs across perceived lines of objectivity, users are actually evaluating the methods' effectiveness in the venture of achieving ideal masculine beauty. This style of conflict combines both a blindness from afar, in terms of the ideal but also the obfuscation inherent to online exchange.

Interestingly, a great deal of engagement in the looksmaxing forum is derived from the blindness that signs from far away can produce. The forum capitalises on obfuscation rather than on precision. For the mechanisms of the forum, it is not important if the user achieves their looksmaxing objectives, so long as their ressentiment animates the forum with activity, which vague signs effectively promote. But it is not just the signs from far away; the signs from up close also goad people into contributing. Those who comment are typically not drawn in because they witness an exemplary post on effective looksmaxing practice, but provoked through a viscerally close sign that they simply cannot look past. In one case, a poster reported that he was in the early stages of liver failure due to the combination of hormones that he was experimenting with. Users are drawn in by the strong affects such a post creates, and they flood the comments with insults directed at the poster for his lack of intelligence in taking a nonsensical combination of hormones. In another case, a user lamented that his use of jawline sharpening gum had left him with an abnormally square face. Commenters both piled in to mock him, attacking him for falling for an 'obvious scam,' while some users criticised others for not understanding that it takes time and rest for the muscles to settle into a more normal shape. What these posts demonstrate is that the discussion is frequently reacting from signs up close that draw users in to participate. Whether signs induces disgust, anger or laughter, they contribute to the overall activity of the forum and generate engagement.

Deleuze's warning that control society will create a problem of becoming stuck and spread ressentiment is particularly compelling in the context of the looksmaxing forum. The forum is a quagmire that cancels out progress with its continual modulation and limitless deferral. But content within the forum is still engrossing to many for its signs and ressentiment that pertain to masculine ideals and entrepreneurial rationale. There is always something more to react to, something to pull one in to comment—a pointless capitalisation on ressentiment that has no off-ramp. While it would be foolish to presume that no one leaves the community, there is certainly no common theme of people reporting that their looksmaxing has been sufficiently achieved and they are now no longer in need of it. The only case in this research referencing an exit was a user asking to be banned because he was so addicted to looksmaxing content that he felt that he needed to be cut off by a moderator. When users recounted looksmaxing successes, it generated more looksmaxing investment as users became excited

about how much they could push looksmaxing further. While users undergo bodily changes and see this as transformational and celebrate their acquisition of status, there is nothing enduring about this newly gained confidence. Once the feelings of joy dissipate, the ressentiment returns to focus on inadequacy. Users remain trapped within the limitless deferral of online content consumption, and within this continual modulation, looksmaxing exposes the desires for bodily augmentation to these same indefinite conditions.

CONCLUSION

The study of looksmaxing is in its infancy, but this article as sought to offer insight into the broader contexts of self-optimisation, marketplace logic and employability that underpin looksmaxing masculinity. Deleuze's control society thesis and two of its crises clarify how marketplace logic is creating both stagnation, through continual modulation within computer networks, and conditions that are fertile for the spread of ressentiment. The intention behind this theoretical perspective is to help explain why computer networking has revitalised and popularised the pursuit of masculine ideals in a way that is undoubtedly shaped by the emergent conditions of neoliberal capitalism. This article's analysis shows that looksmaxing is deeply embedded within a neoliberal culture of self-optimisation that divides up social practice into a mutual state of elaborating personal plans. Such fragmentation generates fierce competition and hostility between users. Continual modulation within the mechanisms of the forum removes any possibility of completion. It also introduces a flexibility that allows outside content to penetrate the forum, placing the userbase in the position of needing to police the boundaries of looksmaxing content. These forms of hostility are exacerbated by the blinding abstract signs that they are constantly exposed to within the medium of online exchange. Signs presented to looksmaxers appear either too far away—vague and detached from the movements that create them—or they appear from too close and provoke passionate reactions. In response to these conditions of stagnation, looksmaxing masculinity reinstates direction through ressentiment and ideal masculine beauty, but in actuality traps users within the sad passions and suspends them within the indefinite content cycle of control society.

Niall Campbell is a PhD student in Gender Studies from the University of Otago. His research interests include the online worlds of incels and looksmaxxing, with a specific focus on the role of the internet within the subcultures.

1. Amanda Gillies, "Looksmaxxing: The New Male Beauty Crisis Capturing Our Kids," RNZ (Wellington) 13 June 2026, https://www.rnz.co.nz/life/wellbeing/looksmaxxing-the-new-male-beauty-crisis-capturing-our-kids.
2. Alana Wise, "Taking a Look at Looksmaxxing—and What Parents Should Know," NPR (Washington, D.C.), 1 May 2026, https://www.npr.org/2026/05/01/nx-s1-5795549/looksmaxxing-teen-boys-clavicular.
3. Debra Soh, "Looksmaxxing: A Gen Z Boy's Reply to Anti-Male Bias: We Should All Be Concerned by the Hyper-Masculinity Content Some Young Boys Are Aligning Themselves with, Both Online and in Real Life," *The Globe and Mail*, 10 January 2026, https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-looksmaxxing-gen-z-boys-hyper-masculinity/.
4. Eugene Beresin, "The Perils of Looksmaxxing for Young Men," *Psychology Today*, 1 May 2026, https://www.psychologytoday.com/nz/blog/inside-out-outside-in/202605/the-perils-of-looksmaxxing-for-young-men.
5. Niall Campbell, "Jaw is Law: A Rhizo-Textual Analysis of Incel Forums as a Site of Alternative Research" (Master of Arts thesis, University of Otago, 2025).
6. Andrei Boutyline and Robb Willer, "The Social Structure of Political Echo Chambers: Variation in Ideological Homophily in Online Networks," *Political Psychology* 38, no. 3 (2017): 551–69, https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12337; Matteo Cinelli, Gianmarco De Francisci Morales, Alessandro Galeazzi, Walter Quattrociocchi and Michele Starnini, "The Echo Chamber Effect on Social Media," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118, no. 9 (2021): e2023301118, https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2023301118; Guo, Lei, Jacob A. Rohde, Denis H. Wu, "Who Is Responsible for Twitter's Echo Chamber Problem? Evidence from 2016 U.S. Election Networks," *Information, Communication & Society* 23, no. 2 (2020): 234–51, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2018.1499793.
7. Elizabeth Dubois and Grant Blank, "The Echo Chamber is Overstated: The Moderating Effect of Political Interest and Diverse Media," *Information, Communication & Society* 21, no. 5 (2018): 729–45, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2018.1428656; Gregory Eady, Jonathan Nagler, Andy Guess, Jan Zilinsky and Joshua A. Tucker, "How Many People Live in Political Bubbles on Social Media? Evidence From Linked Survey and Twitter Data," *Sage Open* 9, no. 1 (2019), https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244019832705; Brendan Nyhan et al., "Like-Minded Sources on Facebook Are Prevalent but Not Polarizing," *Nature* 620 (2023): 137–44, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-023-06297-w.
8. Niall Campbell, Neil Vallelly and Lesley Proctor, "Exploring Radical Approaches to Understanding the Internet and Inceldom," in *A Multi-Disciplinary Approach to Studying Involuntary Celibacy: Understanding Incels*, ed. Christian A.I. Schlaerth, Aaron M. Puhrmann and Laura L. Finley (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2026), 159–82.
9. Michael Halpin et al., "When Help is Harm: Health, Lookism and Self-Improvement in the Manosphere," *Sociology of Health & Illness* 47, no. 3 (2025), https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.70015.
10. Ted Hennessey, "'Mewing' TikTok Dentist Advised Young Children Harmful Treatment, Tribunal Told," *The Standard*, 15 November 2022, https://www.standard.co.uk/news/crime/tiktok-london-youtube-b1039805.html.
11. Stephanie Landers and Bridget Parsh, "Risks of 'Bone Smashing' Trend on Social Media," *Nursing* 54, no. 6 (2024).
12. "-Maxxing," Incels Wiki, accessed 24 February 2024, https://incels.wiki/w/-maxxing.
13. "Rules and FAQ," 2026, Incels.Is.

14. Björn Pelzer et al., “Toxic Language in Online Incel Communities,” *SN Social Sciences* 1, no. 8 (2021): 213, https://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-021-00220-8.
15. Aina Muntaner Vives, Marianna Ostrerova and Nitzan Kenig, “Looksmaxxing: An Emerging Facial Aesthetic Culture,” *Indian Journal of Otolaryngology and Head & Neck Surgery* 78, no. 4 (2026): 2594–99, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12070-026-06507-7.
16. “Looksmax.org is a Fucking Joke,” Incel.ls, 2026.
17. Anda Iulia Solea and Lisa Sugiura, “Digital Subcultural Diffusion Theory: Rebranding the Incel Ideology through Looksmaxxing, Sub5s and the PSL Scale,” *Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal* (16 November 2025), https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/17416590251387245.
18. Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd ed. (University of California Press 2005).
19. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” *Gender & Society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 829–59, https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639.
20. Daniel Nehring and Anja Röcke, “Self-Optimisation: Conceptual, Discursive and Historical Perspectives,” *Current Sociology* 72, no. 6 (2024): 1069–87, https://doi.org/10.1177/00113921221146575.
21. Scott Rubarth, “Competing Constructions of Masculinity in Ancient Greece,” *Athens Journal of Humanities & Arts* 1, no. 1 (2013): 21–32, https://doi.org/10.30958/ajha.1-1-2.
22. Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neo-Liberal Society*, translated by Gregory Elliott (Verso, 2017).
23. Dana Kaplan and Eva Illouz, *What Is Sexual Capital?* (Polity Press, 2022).
24. Roberta Liggett O’Malley, Karen Holt and Thomas J. Holt, “An Exploration of the Involuntary Celibate (Incel) Subculture Online,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 37, no. 7–8 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260520959625; Kayla Preston, Michael Halpin and Finlay Maguire, “The Black Pill: New Technology and the Male Supremacy of Involuntarily Celibate Men,” *Men and Masculinities* 24, no. 5 (2021): 823–41, https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X211017954; Henry Price, “Anti-Feminism as Anti-Establishment and Emancipatory: The Gendered Metapolitics of Incel,” *Feminist Media Studies* 24, no. 5 (2024): 1042–58, https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2023.2291314.
25. Lauren Menzie, “Stacys, Beckys, and Chads: The Construction of Femininity and Hegemonic Masculinity Within Incel Rhetoric,” *Psychology and Sexuality* 13, no. 1 (2022): 1, https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2020.1806915.
26. Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* 59 (Winter 1992): 3–7.
27. Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Brian Massumi (Bloomsbury, 2013).
28. Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* (Presses Universitaires de France, 1970; repr., City Lights, 1988).
29. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One* (Penguin, 1961).
30. Joseph Vogl, *Capital and Ressentiment: A Brief Theory of the Present*, translated by Neil Solomon (Polity Press, 2022)
31. Hunt Allcott, Matthew Gentzkow and Chuan Yu, “Trends in the Diffusion of Misinformation on Social Media,” *Research and Politics* 6, no. 2 (April-June 2019): 1–8, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2053168019848554.
32. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (Bloomsbury, 2014).

https://doi.org/10.34074/junc.26094

ASMITA KUNDU

ON WILDNESS AND FAILURE: READING JACK HALBERSTAM IN INDIA

ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to think through certain crises in gender and sexuality with the philosophical ideas of 'wildness' and 'failure,' as articulated in Jack Halberstam's *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (2020) and *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011). The essay analyses how preoccupations with meritocracy, capitalism, legibility and success shape our understanding of gender binarism, heterosexism and other normative modes of being. In India especially, the aftermath of the Transgender Amendment Act (2026), which seeks to delegitimise the question of self-determination of gender to establish trans-ness and gender as categories to be verified by screening committees and medical boards, has opened up crucial junctures to think through anxieties about gender and sexuality in popular and political discourses. These anxieties often result in attitudes reflected in visual media whenever it seeks to represent the queer subject. Moreover, since India still operates as a caste-hierarchical society, questions about intersectionality also feature in the politics and aesthetics of representation, and, inadvertently, many stories about queer lives mirror queer concerns about success and failure. Halberstam's ideas offer possibilities to think beyond 'orderliness' and taxonomic obsessions and re-imagine failure as resistance. This paper refers to four South Asian films, Karan Kandhari's *Sister Midnight* (2024), Abhishek Kapoor's *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui* (2021), Neeraj Ghaywan's *Geeli Pucchi* (2021) and Saim Sadiq's *Joyland* (2020) to understand the radical possibilities wildness and failure can offer for queer subjectivities in India.

INTRODUCTION

In India, one of the ways concerns pertaining to trans and queer rights, and how we think of gender and identity at large, has manifested recently is in the passing of the Transgender Amendment Act, 2026. Despite considerable public outrage, mobilisations and protests, the act was officially passed by the Indian Parliament on 25 March 2026, jeopardising the right to self-determination of one's gender.[1] Previously, because of a 2018 judgement, Indian citizens had the right to officially name their gender (as it appeared in official government mandated documents) and subsequently access

gender affirmative health care.[2] The present act mandates that applicants must go through a process of medical certification by a Chief Medical Board where they will be screened to determine if their claims to acquire a 'new' identity are indeed valid.

Additionally, the Act seems to prioritise only certain identities (like individuals with intersex variations), leaves a whole range of gender non-conforming and trans people out of the provisions and dictates that any gender-affirming surgeries be directly reported to the District Magistrate. Aside from equating gender with essentialised and biological realities (that can be 'verified' and 'screened'), the act can be read as an example of the persistent bureaucratic need to make something *legible* and *provable* to deem it worthy of credibility. This article argues that such needs are inextricably linked with institutional preoccupations with orderliness and merit that manifest in social, political and cultural attitudes towards gender and sexuality, and occasionally in stances of resistance that aim to challenge oppressions that result from it. In other words, attitudes and ideations that come into play in determining meritocracy as an adequate means to ensure equality in a deeply hierarchical system, that progression must be linear and measurable for everyone or that human worth is tied to productivity, are in many ways similar to thought processes that fixate on codifying expressions of gender and sexuality as naturalised realities through state-sanctioned or capitalist norms. For example, the Transgender Amendment Act puts the onus on the individual to possess traits and capabilities that are both legible and sufficient enough to be deemed worthy of board-certified recognition. They need to *pass* the screening to gain visibility and supposed legal protection. This carries the assumption that certain identities, and by extension certain individuals, are more deserving than others to *merit* official recognition.

The article argues that narratives of gender inclusion which centre ideals of success, assimilation or legibility can inadvertently alienate many queer subjectivities that cannot be contained within such discourses. It uses Jack Halberstam's theorisations on failure and wildness, as they appear in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) and *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (2020), to understand and analyse how contemporary queer discourse in India is both associated with and challenges notions of orderliness, meritocracy, and legibility.[3]

Halberstam's works deal with two related ways of thinking against structures that render certain lives more intelligible than others. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam reclaims failure both from its status of being a deficiency and from its optimistic repute as a learning opportunity and a step towards success. He argues that failure can interrupt the progressional logics of capitalism, heteronormativity and meritocracy. It is a political formulation to critique our attachments towards expectations of success and a productive future. Moreover, it is a medium through which we can understand what defines success in the first place. *Wild Thing*s extends this line of critique to challenge the epistemological foundations of order itself. For Halberstam, wildness or the wild represents a mode of knowing that unsettles classification, naturalised binaries and the desire to place subjects within stable categories. Ultimately, both failure and wildness are ways of understanding queerness.

Halberstam theorises that the queer subject is always already incorporated in the logic of having failed—in relation to capitalism as well as to patriarchy. His formulation of wildness is an act of epistemological dis-ordering that looks at ways through which a

queer subject is rendered either natural or unnatural. Here, wildness challenges ways of living, interacting and being in the world as a human, which include and exclude certain modes of being queer.

The present article uses Halberstam's ideas to analyse select South Asian films with respect to ongoing discourses from politics and popular culture in India, to examine how failure and dis-order can produce alternative ways of knowing, relating and inhabiting the world. It specifically focuses on the Indian context where caste, gender, sexuality, merit and institutional belonging are deeply entangled. Broadly, it asks whether becoming visible, successful, legible and 'in place' within existing social and institutional structures is necessary for imagining a queer reclamation.

The inspiration for this essay emanates from my personal entanglement with wildness and failure. Growing up queer in India, when I began to realise the contours and repercussions of my identity, I (not unlike many Indian children/students) reassured myself many times that eventual success (either financial or academic) would solve everything. However, I was at best an average student and was sub-par in matters of calculation, memorising, quick-thinking and so on. I could fare better in literary studies, but eventually when I was faced with the reality of standardised testing, even in humanities subjects, where MCQ questions determine whether someone will be suitable as a teacher, I had to make peace with a delay in success in that domain as well. For all intents and purposes, my life does not resemble any conventional aspirational narrative because I cannot be settled within a heteronormative family, and I cannot compensate by possessing a lucrative job. Additionally, either due to neurodivergence or my general disposition, I struggle with tasks that involve aesthetics and execution: keeping a clean house, organising, not losing valuables and so on, which sometimes spill over into how others perceive me—as a thoroughly dis-organised woman.

Conventionally speaking, I may not qualify by many standards of 'success,' which then implies a certain affinity with failure; and the fact that I cannot present myself as a methodical and organised human being highlights my proximity to wildness. These judgements are exacerbated by the fact that queerness in itself is a failure to uphold certain notions of normativity and lies outside of how things are organised—hence, wild. Therefore, stories that showcase how a queer person or a woman girl-bossed their way into becoming a high court judge, or how they have impeccable fashion sense, do little for me. While there are enough scholarly, literary and artistic works that critique such phenomena as pink-capitalism or problematise how often queerness gets co-opted by heteronormativity, the most succinct expressions of these anxieties are best expanded upon via Halberstam's work. It is worthwhile to note that this essay does not take an auto-ethnographical approach as a core methodology; however, I briefly cite my personal experiences here as lived realities that serve as possible examples. Methodologically, the essay combines theoretical analysis, close reading, film analysis and political critique of popular culture and media. It reads Halberstam alongside scholarship on caste, meritocracy, memory, affect and reproductive futurity, and attends closely to specific cinematic scenes and narrative resolutions. The autobiographical passages offer a limited reflexive and situated analysis, in which using personal experience is used to exemplify rather than generalise the operations of normative aspiration and failure.

The first section of the article is about reclaiming the act of forgetting as a political and survival tool. With reference to Halberstam's ideas, it discusses the peculiar

position memory and forgetting hold for any kind of marginality, especially queerness. It refers to Karan Kandhari's film *Sister Midnight* (2024) to reflect on how performances of normative gender rely heavily on memory and often resemble practices such as rote-learning.[4] The following section explains the connection that meritocracy might have with cis-hetero normativity and caste hierarchy, and the problems of queer aspirational stories that get represented in South Asian movies such as Abhishek Kapoor's *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui* (2021).[5] It contrasts this with representations in short films like Neeraj Ghaywan's *Geeli Pucchi* (2021).[6] The following section refers to Saim Sadiq's *Joyland* (2020)[7] and deals with understanding failure as a political category. Finally, I expand upon the liberatory potential of Halberstam's ideas of wildness and their connections with queerness. This is substantiated with references to all four movies discussed, to look at how different representations of queer reclamation arise from their relationship with normativity and orderliness. Ultimately, the article explores how queerness connects with sociocultural ideas of order and merit. It looks at Halberstam's ideas of failure, forgetting and wildness as critical practices through which the normative conditions of recognition themselves can be questioned.

FORGETTING AS RESISTANCE

One of the common ways forgetting is invoked as a blessing (mostly in psychological studies or therapeutic discourses) is in the idea of 'moving on.' Numerous examples of self-help literature, like "Let Go and Move On: 15 Tips to Forget the Past," by Elizabeth Perry, posit that when something tragic or traumatic happens, one's ability to forget becomes the ultimate act of refusal.[8] Such formulations participate in a broader therapeutic discourse in which the past is understood as something that must eventually be released in order for the subject to become productive, resilient and future-oriented. In a slightly different context, the aspirational logic of 'moving on' often gets incorporated in the ways queer lives are narrated retrospectively. A 2017 Better India article titled "8 Inspiring Indian LGBTQ Individuals Who Raged Fearless Wars & Emerged Victorious!" cites the case of Laxmi Narayan Tripathi (a well-known transgender activist and socialite in India) as one of the "successful queer stories."[9] The article recounts her experiences of being bullied and abused, before moving on to her educational achievements, activism, international representation and the establishment of the Indian Super Queen pageant. The piece organises queer experience through a grammar of adversity followed by triumph, or by citing cases where the adversities were required to be forgotten in order to 'move on.' Laxmi's history becomes legible primarily because the obstacles have been successfully overcome. Conversely, forgetting, at least how it manifests in academia among other domains, is considered a mark of failure, while having a good memory and being able to retain information is considered meritorious. The privileging of memory is evident in examination practices where students are required to negotiate between memorising and understanding in order to demonstrate the acquisition of knowledge. British education researchers Noel and Dorothy Entwistle have examined how memorisation remains integral to students' preparation for examinations, even as it exists in tension with deeper forms of understanding.[10] Within such a framework, forgetting can operate as an inability to adequately acquire or reproduce academic knowledge.

In India, despite several measures to instil methods of teaching that prioritise

conceptual familiarity, rote-learning persists as a pervasive method. Hindu religious institutions have historically centred rote-learning in the transmission of knowledge, and it bears association with the Brahmanical practice of teaching Vedas.[11] Similar practices were codified with education and examination standards instituted during British colonial rule in India.[12] One of the tendencies reflected in rote learning practices is the mechanical replication of knowledge as is (like a doctrine or law). Similarly, it lowers the possibility of a subjective relationship with knowledge. In such a case, knowledge ensures its unaltered longevity in the confidence of its reproduction. Thus, knowledge is synonymous with memory. Since knowledge is a crucial tool that organises structures and ideologies, hetero-patriarchy and cis-normativity too must rely on memory and replication to ensure that they continue to be performed and passed on:

> Women are most often the repositories for generational logics of being and becoming, and then become the transmitters of that logic to the next generation…forgetfulness becomes a rupture with the eternally self- generating present, a break with a self-authorizing past, and an opportunity for a non- hetero- reproductive future.[13]

Women, Halberstam theorises, are instrumental in passing on the 'generational logic' of family and being in the world.

Nitya Rao's study of rural North India describes the household as a site of "gendered co-performance," in which men and women collectively reproduce the roles of male provider and female housewife.[14] Furthermore, Parvati Raghuram demonstrates how domestic labour itself is organised through intersecting caste and gender hierarchies and spatial divisions.[15] The context of India—where rote-learning is embedded strongly in the cultural fold as a means to replicate subjectivities through transmission of education,[16] and the domestic space is shaped with gendered performance—is especially conducive to studying how gender relations within a domestic set-up can often rely on the capacities of women to (rote) learn. Women are expected to fashion their being in a specific manner according to the logic of the family, by picking up the rules at their face value and constantly *remembering* to execute them. The film *Sister Midnight* captures the absurdity that unfolds when a woman refuses to memorise the rules of domesticity and, indeed, how to be a woman.

Sister Midnight is a critically-acclaimed dark punk comedy film about the strange occurrences that surround a woman after she gets trapped in an unhappy marriage in Mumbai. It follows Uma, who is frustrated and persistently irritated after she gets married. What appears at first to be her unease with expectations of domesticity later reveals itself as a kind of vampirism that brings her closer to wildness. While a later section of this article will discuss Uma's proximity to the wild, here what stands out is her total rejection of normalcy through her indifference towards the gendered expectations of a married woman. For example, in a scene that shows the night of her wedding, Uma hastily takes off her saree and jewellery, slips into her nightie and dozes off. The absurdity of the scenario is presented with the implication that the audience (especially South Asian, in this case) would expect certain stock behaviour from the bride and groom either through scenes of consummation or coquettish, awkward behaviour. Uma either disregards the passed-down knowledge of how to be a bride/wife or has simply *forgotten* the rules. In a later scene, she stares blankly at some vegetables, flour and other cooking ingredients, utterly confused about what to make of them. Her attempts to utilise her commonsense to prepare a meal fails catastrophically since she lacks the

slightest muscle memory of handling the ingredients. Uma befriends her neighbour Sheetal, who tries to teach her some of the things she has to 'learn' as a married woman, including cooking. Uma selectively follows some of Sheetal's lessons but with the same befuddlement with which she had stared at the vegetables.

Uma's reluctant acceptance of domestic gender norms resembles the mechanical and detached nature of rote-learning that prioritises unquestioned internalisation. Throughout the course of the film, Uma keeps on forgetting what she has learned and keeps on distancing herself from the idea of being a woman, to the extent that it becomes evident nthat she is no woman at all. The revelation of her identity as a vampire supersedes the presumption of her identity as a woman. In this tacit erasure, gender is revealed as a set of repetitive acts: how to fold clothes 'properly,' how to serve food in a particular order, how to clean, host guests, speak softly, anticipate the needs of others or regulate one's own body within the domestic space.

How can we perceive this act of forgetting as queer? Halberstam suggests that the forgetting of hetero-patriarchal logic can be a rupture in the sense of futurity that tradition takes for granted. Eve Sedgwick, similarly, argued that queerness helps break the presumed teleology of family that is operative in heteronormativity.[17] Heteronormativity justifies itself through the "paranoia of the inevitable," claiming that because something has continued to happen in the past, it should be repeated in the future. Queerness dismantles this idea of temporality and refuses to treat the heteropatriarchal family as inevitable. Uma, by repeatedly forgetting and failing in becoming a woman, ruptures the logic of temporality. Her existence outside of any cis-hetero logic of how a woman should be queers cis-hetero-normativity by simply forgetting it.

The peculiar politics of memory and forgetting extend beyond the domestic sphere. History has systemically deployed tactics of erasure and selective amnesia to suppress narratives that do not serve the powerful. States, religious institutions, educational systems and patriarchal social structures strategically preserve memories that legitimise their authority while simultaneously erasing histories of dissent, marginality and resistance. Similarly, official archives or school curricula often represent a selective remembrance, pushing the experiences of women, queer communities, lower castes, racialised populations and other marginalised groups to the periphery. As a result, many de-colonising projects justifiably create archives or other modes of preserving memories that have been hitherto erased. Yet, that does not exhaust the possibility of looking at forgetting as a radical act of reclamation. A form of forgetting can be imagined that disregards any authoritative logic and refuses repetition of inherited norms, identities and affective attachments. Forgetting, in these terms, constitutes an active practice of disidentification, creating new subjectivities that are no longer governed by the demands of inherited memory.

American historian Norman Klein, in *The History of Forgetting*, rejects the empiricist project of simply recovering and preserving the past, instead proposing 'selective forgetting' as a way of understanding how societies construct their realities. Drawing on Borges, he describes selective forgetting as a literary tool through which "fictions are turned into facts, while in turn erasing facts into fictions," emphasising that forgetting is an active process in the production of social imaginaries rather than merely the loss of information.[18] Forgetting, or rather active forgetting, is then a rejection of all the memories that were supposed to be (rote) learnt and replicated to keep normativity in place.

MERIT AND (CIS-HETERO) NORMATIVITY

Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui (2021) is a Bollywood romantic comedy-drama that gained some popularity by challenging traditional genre expectations, notably with the inclusion of themes of trans acceptance. At the end of the movie, Manu, the male romantic lead, is finally able to win a fitness competition called G.O.A.T when he gets inspired by looking at his lover, Maanvi. As Manu is declared the champion and the lovers run towards each other, Manu tells Maanvi, "You are the real G.O.A.T!" The resolution of the film is that Manu has not only emerged victorious in this competition but is now a better person since he is no longer transphobic towards his girlfriend, who is a transwoman. The revelation of Maanvi's trans-ness, along with Manu's and others' reactions to this, form the central conflict. Evidently, when Manu overcomes his transphobia, the conflict is resolved. However, the other not-so-subtle implication in this whole narrative is that Maanvi *deserves* and *merits* Manu's love and his family's acceptance. Her credentials are expressed in various ways, ranging from being an extremely attractive cis-passing woman (the character was played by a cis-woman) to being a great dancer and a hard-working Zumba instructor. When Manu calls Maanvi "the real G.O.A.T," he is complementing all her credentials, to which he was hitherto oblivious.

Maanvi's credentials also include coming from a similar family background as Manu in terms of class, caste and region. The film places Maanvi in contrast with another trans-femme character, Roopa, who is substantially less privileged than Maanvi and, most importantly, not cis-passing. Roopa's place in the narrative is to prove that Manu adores and is altruistic towards her (signalling Manu's kind disposition, which makes his eventual transphobia a rectifiable character flaw). The latent implication is, however, that Roopa is only worthy of receiving altruistic and sisterly affection, and will never be the object of romantic and sexual desire. We are led to understand that Maanvi, in contrast, comes from a "respectable family" and is conventionally attractive *because* of her proximity to cis-gender standards of beauty. Her resilience is conveyed through metaphors of athletic prowess, which allows her to be Manu's equal. In some senses, this film is an important example of Hindi commercial cinema because it depicts a trans character as a desirable romantic lead. Noted film critic Shoma Chatterji called it a "well-structured love story between two social and clinical unequals using some melodrama to arrive at a happy closure acceptable to all."[19] However, the film highlights our fascination with merit, credentialism and legibility. Maanvi is legible and acceptable as a transwoman because her transness is otherwise illegible—hidden, decorated, assimilated. Queerness, in this case, is shrouded by merit to make it palatable.

Liberal democracies have tended to favour meritocracy as a necessary step towards ensuring an egalitarian society, where an individual's talents, efforts and skills are to be rewarded, rather than their social class. Yet, as American political philosopher Michael Sandel points out in his 2021 book *The Tyranny of Merit*, meritocracy may be neither neutral nor emancipatory.[20] Other than obscuring the host of effects that systemic privileges and luck play in deeply unequal societies, meritocracy instils the notion that success is entirely deserved and anyone left out of success must be at fault. In the Indian context, merit is often cited as the reason to discredit affirmative action for lower caste individuals—so much so that contemporary invocations of the influential anti-caste thinker B.R. Ambedkar in debates about 'merit' often obscure the structural critique at the heart of his work, claiming that he "advocated for a social system in which a man's

rank is determined by his merit and achievements" favouring instead his arguments for institutional measures designed to counter inherited social disadvantage.[21] On the other hand, several anti-caste scholars have vehemently disagreed with such discourses, pointing out that merit functions as a means through which upper-caste privilege masquerades as objective excellence. Rather than measuring ability, merit often records accumulated historical advantage: "In India, meritocracy is a cruel, a cynical illusion, a carefully engineered facade that maintains and perpetuates the caste-based stratification under the guise of fairness and equality."[22]

Many contemporary queer aspirational narratives celebrate the accomplished and exceptional queer individual who secures recognition through productivity and professional achievement. In such cases, queerness becomes understandable as long as the queer subject proves their merit according to the metrics of capitalism and the modern state, which they might anyway be forever left out of. Similarly, the celebration of conditional visibility fails to separate queerness from other systemic prejudices and will invariably side with them. For example, in May 2015, mother of prominent queer activist in India, Harish Iyer,[23]made headlines by publishing a matrimonial ad that read: "25-40, well placed, animal-loving vegetarian groom for her son … caste no bar but Iyer [Tamil Brahmin caste] preferred."[24] This ad was heavily criticised as it pointed out the many ways queer success-narratives have sidelined questions of caste prejudice. A 2015 Al Jazeera report noted that preferences for higher-caste communities such as Iyers are commonly specified in Indian matrimonial advertisements, and the phrase "Iyer preferred" reproduces caste-based exclusion within an otherwise progressive gesture.[25] This is especially noteworthy because marriage in India remains largely endogamous, and as Ambedkar's groundbreaking work has described, endogamy is the fundamental creator of caste.[26]

A study by anthropologist Akhil Kang shows the barriers to inter-caste queer love and argues for the need to "recentre desire and intimacy into caste to imagine queer (im) possibilities of dalit love."[27] Kang suggests that queer desire, intimacy and aspiration cannot be abstracted from the material and historical relations of caste in which they occur. Similarly, when queer success stories are ensconced in the language of merit, they can obscure the caste-based distribution of the very resources that make such achievements possible. As a result, queer politics organised around merit risks reproducing the caste-neutral fiction of merit itself, unless it asks whose histories, resources and social privileges are being converted into 'achievement.' Given that, in India, merit is tied to the polemics of caste hierarchy, narratives of queer success that bank on merit inevitably remain in a problematic association with caste supremacy.[28]

In embracing failure as a "queer art," Halberstam suggests that things that are conventionally antagonistic to merit, such as failure, forgetting, unknowing or refusal, can be valuable because they disclose the limits of all kinds of organising principles that seek to measure human worth with accomplishment.[29] As a result, any act of queer celebration can reclaim these de-merits for their radical potential to splinter the biases of prevailing social systems. An example of such radicality unfolds in the narrative of the short film *Geeli Pucchi* (2021). As a standalone short within the Netflix anthology film *Ajeeb Daastaans*, it is a Hindi socio-political drama that engages in intersectional exploration of caste privilege, patriarchy and same-sex desire. The film follows Bharti Mondal, a lesbian and Dalit factory worker who is repeatedly denied promotions at work

despite her competence and technical expertise. In one scene, one of her colleagues makes it clear that she should accept the consequences of being a 'Mondal' (a last name common among Dalit communities). Her plans for a possible promotion are further curtailed when Priya Sharma gets the job. Priya's lack of technical knowledge is overshadowed by her upper-caste social capital. She is also well-liked by her colleagues because of the arbitrary value attached to her palm-reading abilities. Regardless, Priya and Bharti eventually develop feelings for each other. They share some tender moments, and Priya confesses that she feels immense shame towards her identity, especially since she is married. Bharti consoles her and tells her that there is nothing wrong with accepting who she is. However, Bharti is repeatedly treated as disposable when she meets Priya's family. She soon finds out that Priya has hidden Bharti's lower caste identity from her family members and seems to be at home in her marriage, as she is complicit in planning a child with her husband. Rendered invisible by her workplace as well as by Priya's actions, Bharti grows bitter and dejected. Bharti is framed in this scenario as a subject for whom any language of merit, either professional or romantic, is simply inaccessible. She becomes the ultimate queer and Dalit subject of failure.

Bharti's apparent failure accentuates everyday caste and heteropatriarchal hierarchies. When she visits Priya after the birth of her child, Priya's mother-in-law, who objects to the idea of Priya returning to work post her maternity leave, turns to Bharti for her opinion, since "she comes from a family of midwives,"—yet another allusion to her caste identity. She is then served tea in a separately marked vessel. This makes the hierarchy even more explicit, recalling the everyday practices of segregation historically associated with untouchability. Bharti, however, does not display shame or discomfort. She picks up the cup with an air of confidence, transforming the object of caste-based exclusion into a moment of self-assertion. She recommends that Priya indeed remain at home and not return to work. She returns to the factory to discover that Priya has resigned and that she can finally assume the position permanently. Bharti, therefore, does not secure the promotion through merit, and she does not find her desires reciprocated by Priya. Moreover, she is never included within the symbolic spaces of institutional belonging (at a birthday celebration at her office she is made to serve cake to her superiors). Bharti's 'success' in ultimately obtaining the data operator position is therefore ironic: she inherits a position through luck that turns caste-based and gendered labour divisions in her favour. Halberstam's theory of failure may be used to cast the film's resolution as a *refusal* of success, rather than a deferred success story. Bharti's merit is essentially irrelevant to institutional recognition.

Priya's marriage, on the other hand, offers neither fulfilment nor freedom, and queer intimacy cannot flourish within the intersecting violences of caste and heteropatriarchy. Bharti neither overcomes the system nor becomes its exemplary subject. She exposes the phantasma of liberation achieved through institutional recognition. The film projects a narrative of radical affirmation precisely because it refuses to equate dignity with success. Bharti does not prove that she merits inclusion. She is contained in her personhood and never doubts her capacities either as a lover or as an employee. She endures and adapts in a system of values that will always fail her. This resolution mirrors Halberstam's insistence that the critical force of queerness does not actualise by assimilating and internalising the normative but by exposing the myths such norms are built upon.

As mentioned in the introduction, my own engagement with failure comes from my personal recognition of its transformative possibilities. Throughout my adolescence, I experienced my body as constantly failing in many ways, mostly because I could never perform or present myself as the ideal and aesthetic feminine subject. My relationship with my body was shaped by the repeated attempts to discipline myself into becoming a 'woman' worthy of recognition within heteronormativity. Even, feminist discourses of empowerment that celebrated confidence, independence or self-love were incapable of changing how I looked at my body. It was the realisation of my queerness that disrupted these systems of aspiration in a way that conventional feminist affirmation could not. Once I recognised that my affective life was completely indifferent to cisgender men, the very standards against which I had measured my failures ceased to exist. One can say that queerness relieved me of the burden of performing an identity whose rewards were never promised to me in the first place. This reflects Halberstam's argument that lesbianism frequently operates as an anti-aesthetic within capitalist visual culture. The failure of the lesbian, especially the masc or non-feminine lesbian, operates as an anti-aesthetic because the masculine gaze remains one of the principal mechanisms through which femininity is commodified. Halberstam refers to Guy Hocquenghem's idea that "Capitalism turns its homosexuals into failed normal people, just as it turns its working class into an imitation of the middle class."[30] More importantly, Halberstam remarks that capitalism marks homosexuality as a form of failure because it does not conform to the expected connections between productive labour, heterosexual reproduction, family and consumption. The homosexual subject is consequently represented as socially and relationally "incomplete" because their desires do not fit capitalism's normative model of how sex, love, family, production and consumption should be connected.[31]

A similar narrative of failure shaped my educational trajectory. In school, I repeatedly failed to master subjects like mathematics and the applied sciences, disciplines that occupy a lucrative and default space within the Indian meritocratic imagination. My inability to succeed within these fields was initially experienced as personal deficiency, precisely because we dwell in a social environment that equates scientific achievement with intelligence. Yet this succession of failures eventually compelled me to think of something that meritocratic culture rarely allows: What forms of knowledge genuinely sustained my curiosity and political commitments? When I chose to pursue humanities, I certainly did not discover a space free from institutional hierarchies or neoliberal pressures. However, it at least presented a possibility to frame questions of history, language, power, memory, caste, gender and sexuality as objects of inquiry. The humanities offered, however imperfectly, the potential to articulate subjectivity as a mode of political practice.

According to Halberstam, failure acquires political significance precisely because it interrupts the progressional logic of capitalism, heteronormativity and meritocracy. Halberstam does not valorise failure as suffering or as learning opportunities that might bring us closer to success. Failure opens up alternative ways of knowing and living that transgress normative value systems. My failures did not so much reveal hidden talents waiting to be rewarded by another institution. They weakened my attachment to the institutions in the first place. In both instances, failure functioned as an epistemological break and symbolised a kind of refusal, however unintentional, to keep letting myself chase futures imagined by others.

The Pakistani film *Joyland* (2022) explores trans desire in the midst of patriarchy, unravelling the fiction of success encoded within cis-het familial obsession with what Lee Edelman calls 'reproductive futurism.'[32] The film received an overwhelmingly positive reception in India and earned widespread critical acclaim from Indian audiences and reviewers for its shared South Asian themes.[33] *Joyland* is set in contemporary Lahore and follows Haider Rana, an unemployed man living in a conservative household rife with patriarchal expectations of masculinity, marriage and reproduction. Haider is often taunted by his family members for not living up to the ideals of masculinity and for being a constant failure. Parts of the film's beginning highlight Haider's inability to get a job and have a son as a matter of familial and social shame. Finally, Haider gets a job as a back-up dancer in an erotic theatre. Here, he meets Biba, a hijra performer, with whom he falls in love.[34] It is Haider's encounter and eventual romance with Biba that gradually interrupts the structure of normative success. He is initially ashamed of his job at the erotic theatre and yet it becomes the first space he starts to experience the joys of desire and vulnerability. His success, both in terms of the relationship and the job, can only take shape in the socially-rejected, queer world of erotic theatre. His success, not unlike Bharti's, is both ironical, since it can only take place in the margins, and radical, puncturing the inherently restrictive logic of social success. His initial failings at masculinity lead him to experience the world in new ways. Halberstam argues that failure can create forms of knowledge that may be unavailable to successful subjects because failure takes away the compulsion to be complicit.[35] Haider's incompetence halts the logic of hetero-masculinity.

Meanwhile, Biba is perhaps a more radical subject of failure. As a transwoman in Pakistan, she exists outside of the state's notions of respectability and legibility, and has very few avenues of success accessible to her. However, she does not romanticise this marginality. She craves visibility, financial independence, artistic recognition and the bodily affirmation of her gender. She even refuses to be an object through whom Haider experiments with his sexuality. In one scene, where Haider and Biba try to be physically intimate, she gets extremely upset that Haider wants to be the receptive sexual partner. Her anger results from disgust she feels at Haider's inability to perceive her subjectivity and his placing of her according to transphobic standards. Despite this, their relationship signals towards a space untainted by obsessions with marriage, reproduction, domestic stability or social recognition. In an evocative conversation about wanting to visit the ocean, both Haider and Biba visualise the ocean as a space that lies outside of Lahore's social order. Unlike the architecture of the home, the ocean becomes a symbol for free abandon and treasured uncertainty. At the end of the film, it makes sense that Haider chooses to move towards the ocean instead of going back to suffocating domesticity. Biba and Haider's decision to abandon familial and professionally secure lives in Lahore for an uncertain future near the ocean imply that they have permanently failed to belong within structures of legibility. However, the hypothetical success of continuing to locate themselves within normativity would have been catastrophic for their affective beings. It is failure that eventually liberates them.

Joyland critiques success by becoming a tragedy of success. While queer and trans deaths are often framed as tragedies of failing to attain normative happiness, here tragedy befalls the supposedly 'successful' family. Most of the other characters are depicted as being trapped and suffocated by normativity. Haider's family achieves

everything society demands, yet they experience alienation, resentment, despair and violence. The tragedy is that of a socially sanctioned success. This is in keeping with what Lauren Berlant calls 'cruel optimism'—an attachment to fantasies of the good life that turn adjustment to suffering into an apparent accomplishment.[36] Biba and Haider, on the other hand, as failed subjects, remain outside this promise of normative success. Failure is a crucial narrative tool that frames them as radical queer subjects, and offers them the path towards liberation.

POSSIBILITIES OF WILDNESS

Halberstam's argument in *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* is that we need to re-conceptualise wildness as an epistemological condition that unsettles the very frameworks through which knowledge is organised. Halberstam asks if wildness can be reclaimed as a site from which all civilisational logic, whether of queerness or the gender binary, can be interrogated. He thinks of the wild "as an epistemology, a terrain of affirmative formulations that resist the orderly impulses of modernity and as a merging of anticolonial, anticapitalist, and radical queer interests."[37] Wildness, in these terms, is a critique of the orderliness of all classificatory knowledge systems, especially gender and sexuality, that segregate and assign subjectivities and ways of being. Just as failure and forgetting interrupt the presumed linearity of time and narratives that are burdened by them, Halberstam describes 'bewilderment' as an aesthetic and epistemological practice that achieves a necessary dis-orientation. Wildness urges us to suspend our desire for certainty. This section of the present article reads selected films through this discourse of wildness, to understand what alternate forms of being can emerge when queerness is celebrated as a state of wildness. That state is not wild because it is against or within nature, but because it creates a juncture to critique all that is accepted and rejected through presumptions of naturality and order.

In a conversation with Rizvana Bradley, Halberstam says, with regard to the gendered factors that dictate human relationships with the wild, that masculinity is presented as a 'natural' mode of inhabiting the world with a rather toxic relationship with its environment.[38] It is the masculinist imagination of autonomy and mastery that sustains the extractive logic of colonialism and capitalism. On the other hand, womanhood is positioned to be almost synonymous with nature as a resource that needs to be managed and extracted.

Uma, in *Sister Midnight,* upends this strange human and animal/nature dialectic by simultaneously being 'closer to nature' while, through her unabashed display of vampirism defying all rules of naturalness and order. In other words, when we see Uma leaving the confines of her household at night to hunt for animals and drink their blood, or stuff bird corpses in the drawer, she is more at home with nature, because the stifling domestic world stands in sharp contrast to the wild world of vampirism. On the other hand, she is repeatedly criticised as being weird and "not a woman at all," because she defies all naturalised logic of what it is to be a woman. Uma also develops unexplained emotional bonds with certain animals; the animals are happy that she feeds them the bodies of people she has killed and, in some magic realist instances, the birds she had trapped as prey get reborn as fantastical beings. Gendered perceptions created in *opposition to* the wild are thus reshaped *in the* wild. Uma's

relationship with the animals, as both their ruthless hunter and the one that makes their magical rebirth possible, also unsettles her relationship to the wild and moves beyond all binary gendered imaginations of the wild (men as the extractor and women as the proximal). Uma's relationship with nature is symbolic of her relationship with gender—it is absurd. However, her absurdity, which becomes the sole reason for her happiness but also the reason for heteropatriarchal ridicule, represents a critique of the disciplined performance of gender that is expected from women.

Halberstam and Bradley suggest that wildness does not necessarily promise liberation or emancipation, but foregrounds the possibilities of dissolving the binary separating human and nature. In dissolving that binary, all other binaries that shape and categorise human life are dissolved too. For example, as Uma embarks on her journey to negotiate and finally escape domesticity, the only friends she makes along the way are another quirky and disenchanted housewife, a hyper-optimistic transwoman and a withdrawn lift-man, whose beings are considered *against* nature: the oddball, the queer, the rebel. These 'unnatural' and 'wild' friendships are what Halberstam, alluding to Stockton's work on the queer child,[39] describes as "'sideways' relations, relations that grow along parallel lines rather than upward and onward," as substitutes for heteronormative social structures.[40] Uma's bonds with other species—such as a flock of goats who become enamoured with her—also appear 'sideways' because they defy all logic of transactional relationships. In many cases, as the lines between Uma's womanhood and vampirism dissolve, the boundaries that separate her from these other species or her friends also seem to blur in what Stacy Alaimo calls 'trans-corporeal' relationships, where "the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world."[41] In *Sister Midnight*, domestic relationships are exposed as vapid and conditional, whereas the substitutive ones seem to open a terrain of solidarity.

Halberstam conceptualises wildness as more like 'un-place'; it is not a geographical location that can be discovered, named and classified, but a practice of defying the strongly held logic of the spatial, epistemological and the normative social. In *Joyland*, two locations emerge as important examples of this un-place. There is the eponymous amusement park, where the characters, including Haider and Biba, experience temporary moments of joy and abandon. This gaudy venue is a place of refuge and, at the same time, a metaphor for the impossibility of joy within the realms of domesticity and heteropatriarchy. The second location is the ocean—an unfathomable expanse of possibilities that Haider and Biba dream about. Neither place functions as a stable destination. They are horizons of possibility to imagine space and by extension, existences that are not tamed or controlled by the architectures of family, gender or reproductive obligations. The ocean appears as an incomplete imaginative elsewhere. At the end of the film, Haider's sea is like an un-place that exists outside the coordinates of success, kinship and social recognition. Here, living otherwise is at least possible, even if it is never fully resolved. Halberstam declares that "It is this notion of existing without explanation, without a niche, outside of an orderly and inevitable scheme of life … that captures what I am calling wildness."[42]

These un-places serve as formulations of wildness that establish "vocabulary, narratives, and figurations for the inevitable *disorder* of things, the ways of being that resist expert knowledge, that fail to resolve into identity forms, and that find expression in the practices of…eccentrics and recluses."[43] In a slightly different manner, in *Geeli*

Puchhi, un-place features in Bharti's relationship to both the factory and Priya's home. Neither space allows her unconditional belonging. The factory renders her labour visible but weaponises her caste to make her professionally subordinate. In Priya's home, her caste dictates the everyday practice of offering her a separate cup. It is precisely this cup that becomes a beckoning for un-place. When Bharti picks it up, drinks from it with confidence and delivers the ultimate act of revenge (that is, advising that Priya should not come back to work), she refuses the meaning assigned to both the object and her own position within the space. Her reclamation does not involve finding a new place of belonging but brings attention to the classificatory logic through which existing spaces determine who belongs where, rendering them meaningless.

Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui offers almost the inverse of the un-place that *Geeli Pucchi* imagines. Maanvi's transness is reconcilable by becoming completely in-place. She is made to legibly belong in Chandigarh, in Manu's family, in the gym and within the heterosexual romance that structures the film. Her acceptance depends on her usefulness. She is a successful Zumba instructor whose classes revive the gym. When she is forced to leave her job because she is outed as a transwoman, the film highlights that the gym has made a mistake because no other instructor can fill the classes as well as she did. Finally, she inspires Manu to win the bodybuilding competition. Maanvi is someone whose value is demonstrated by how successfully she inhabits the places offered to her. Her transness is one aspect of an otherwise highly normative and socially legible subject. This distinguishes her from Bharti or Uma. Where Bharti reclaims by disrupting the meanings assigned to a space, Maanvi's narrative culminates in demonstrating that she can occupy the existing space without fundamentally unsettling its logic.

Halberstam's conception of wildness helps us think of queerness and, by extension, fighting for queerness as a practice of unsettling the spaces, classifications and norms that make identities legible in the first place. India's Transgender Persons Amendment Act makes legal recognition dependent upon definitional and medical forms of legibility. Such conditions of recognition can inspire reclamations that prioritise legibility with queer-aspirational narratives, as modelled by Maanvi in *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui*, where being in-place is an imperative for human rights. This essay does not question the necessity of legal belonging but asks what forms of reclamation can take place within and beyond our proximity to ideas of legibility, credential and order. Halberstam's 'wildness' and 'failure' are epistemological categories that invite caution towards aspirational narratives that equate emancipation with being 'in place,' socially useful or meritorious. They offer ways to investigate the presumptions that surround systems of gender exclusion.

CONCLUSION: POTENTIALS OF DIS-ORDERING

During nationwide protests that followed India's Citizenship Amendment Act (2019), one of the most powerful slogans was *Hum kagaaz nahi dikhayenge* (We will not show the papers).[44] This was not simply a refusal to comply with bureaucratic procedures but a complete refusal to prove legitimacy and legibility through documents, disavowing classificatory logic itself. Similarly, when protests erupted against the Bill, many voiced opposition against the logic of medical scrutiny to ascertain gender identity.

These cannot be reduced to fights over rights of inclusion; they demonstrate a struggle against the authoritative impulse to classify, verify and *order* lives to create a hierarchy of credentials and worthiness. Halberstam's ideas of wildness and failure propel us beyond the taxonomic logic of civilisation and ask us to embrace a necessary act of dis-ordering.

I use 'dis-ordering' as an extension of Halberstam's vocabulary; Halberstam's phrase, 'disorder of desire,' may be loosely defined as a way of living, feeling and loving that refuses to follow neat categories and demands for socially acceptable behaviour. Dis-ordering, here, refers to the active interruption of the classificatory systems through which bodies, identities, spaces and forms of life are organised into binaries of natural/unnatural, successful/failed and belonging/exclusion. A politics of dis-ordering, therefore, rejects all rationales of legibility that emerge from state, market or family. Historically, queer lives have adopted many methods of dis-ordering, such as creating families and caregiving communities that exceed the demand for biological kinship, or through communities organised through solidarity rather than lineage or prestige. Similarly, cultural productions of queerness are frequently inventive, creating new aesthetic forms and affective utterings that seek to challenge commercialised and tokenistic languages of 'diversity' or 'inclusion.' These practices are important in an age of pink capitalism where some iconographies of queerness are co-opted within the market logics of production.[45] The latter, like aspirational narratives, may provide temporary and conditional visibility, but they narrow the queer political imagination by equating liberation with marriage, consumption, property owning or even citizenship. This essay has explored forgetting, failure and wildness as possibilities for a radical dis-ordering, considering, specifically, what they mean with respect to queer reclamation in India.

To "read Halberstam in India" is to examine how his concepts of wildness and failure acquire different meanings in relation to how identity, merit, belonging and social legitimacy are organised in India. Caste, gendered labour, heteropatriarchal family structures, educational meritocracy and the demand for social respectability shape queer existence in ways that cannot be treated as incidental cultural variations. The Indian context, represented here through queer representation in cinematic narratives, is a site where Halberstam's arguments take on culturally-specific implications.

The first section of the essay looked at how forgetting can become an act of resistance and how memory can have contradictory political functions. The revolutionary potential of forgetting is represented in the character of Uma from *Sister Midnight*. Uma's failures to remember and perform the rituals of domestic femininity constitute a refusal to embody the gendered knowledge through which womanhood is produced. Forgetting is a tool to deny the inheritance and retention of gender norms. The following section discusses how merit, in India, is often organised through cis-hetero normativity as well as caste. In *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui,* we saw that trans recognition was deemed acceptable, subject to respectability and legibility. The film was analysed in relation to discourses of meritocracy and how it manifests in India. Conversely, in the film *Geeli Puchhi*, Bharti's caste and sexuality place her outside of conceivable promises of professional and romantic merit. Her eventual procuring of Priya's position is a cruel irony that exposes the instability of structures that recognise success. These examples show that reading Halberstam in India is a recognition that failure at normative

successes can sometimes be a refusal of the exclusions that normative meritocracy can take for granted. The section on radical subjects of failure extended this argument through personal reflection as well as a discussion of the film *Joyland.* It discussed how failure to inhabit and be included within structures of marginalisation can lead to finding alternative modes of being that resist the very assimilatory impulses that make marginalisation possible in the first place.

Finally, Halberstam's ideas on wildness were discussed with respect to all four films to understand how orderliness is imposed through institutional, spatial and epistemological order. In *Sister Midnight*, Uma's equations with animals, magical beings and other socially marginalised individuals unsettle distinctions between human and animal, natural and unnatural, normative and aberrant. In *Joyland*, the amusement park and the ocean operate as un-places or spaces outside of social order that open possibilities beyond the demands of family, reproduction and recognition. Bharti in *Geeli Puchhi* picks up the cup of tea (the cup marked separate due to casteist practices) with aplomb and self-assurance to deliver her ultimate statement of revenge. In doing so, she disrupts the meaning that hierarchy assigns to the spaces she occupies. *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui* offers an inverse possibility. Maanvi is made to be in-place within Chandigarh, the gym, Manu's family and, most importantly, heterosexual romance. Her acceptance in these places is made possible by her network of inherited privileges, including social capital, cis-normative beauty and athletic abilities. Maanvi's presence within these systems does little to disrupt the classificatory logic of social structures and merely indicates the conditional ways she can be included within them. These films, therefore, showcase different ways in which orderliness can be either challenged or compromised.

Ultimately, reading Halberstam in India involve going beyond concerns of recognition and identity. Such a reading reveals how queerness and gender resonate with the troublesome nature of meritocracy, success, memory, knowledge and even the category of the human itself. It creates the imperative, amidst queer enquiries and scholarship, to ask: how are marginalised subjects incorporated within prevailing social structures? More importantly, how do we imagine life-forms when such structures no longer form the horizons of our political desire? Failure, forgetting and wildness are methodological provocations to embrace disorder and imagine life beyond classification.

Asmita Kundu is an Academic Fellow at Balvant Parekh Center for General Semantics and Other Human Sciences, Baroda. She has completed her PhD from the Center for English Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India. Her research interests include Queer Studies, Crime Narrative, Crime Fiction, Literary History and Cultural Studies.

1. See "India's Govt Wants to Turn Trans Rights Law into Trans Persecution Law; Queer Groups Prepare to Fight Back," *Queerbeat*, 16 March 2026, https://www.queerbeat.org/stories/indias-govt-wants-to-turn-trans-rights-law-into-trans-persecution-law-queer-groups-prepare-to-fight-back/.
2. See "2018: Section 377 Struck Down," *Frontline*, 15 August 2022, https://frontline.thehindu.com/the-nation/india-at-75-epochal-moments-2018-rainbow-victory-section-377-struck-down/article65730933.ece.
3. Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failur*e (Duke University Press, 2011); Halberstam, *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (Duke University Press, 2020).
4. Karan Kandhari, dir., *Sister Midnight*, 107 min (Wellington Films and Griffin Pictures, 2024).
5. Abhishek Kapoor, dir., *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui*, 117 min (T-Series and Guy in the Sky Pictures, 2021).
6. Neeraj Ghaywan, dir., *Geeli Pucchi*, 38 min., in *Ajeeb Daastaan*s (Netflix, 2021).
7. Saim Sadiq, dir., *Joyland*, 126 min (Khoosat Films, 2022).
8. Elizabeth Perry, "Let Go and Move On: 15 Tips to Forget the Past," *BetterUp*, 21 February 2023, https://www.betterup.com/blog/how-to-forget-the-past.
9. Lekshmi Priya S., "8 Inspiring Indian LGBTQ Individuals Who Raged Fearless Wars & Emerged Victorious!" *The Better India*, 23 June 2017, https://thebetterindia.com/106115/list-lqbtq-famous-personalities-pride-month/.
10. Noel Entwistle and Dorothy Entwistle, "Preparing for Examinations: The Interplay of Memorising and Understanding, and the Development of Knowledge Objects," *Higher Education Research & Development* 22, no. 1 (2003): 19–41, https://doi.org/10.1080/0729436032000056562.
11. Brahmins rank highest in the caste hierarchy of India and are usually associated with learning and education. The word 'Brahmanical' can either indicate practices pertaining to religious scriptures or Vedas or, in a broader sense, imply the caste-hegemonic sociocultural structures that continue to exert influence in the Indian subcontinent.
12. Ushree Bhattacharya 2022, "'I Am a Parrot': Literacy Ideologies and Rote Learning," *Journal of Literacy Research* 54, no. 2 (2022): 114.
13. Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 70.
14. Nitya Rao, "Male 'Providers' and Female 'Housewives': A Gendered Co-performance in Rural North India," *Development and Change* 43, no. 5 (2012).
15. Parvati Raghuram, "Caste and Gender in the Organisation of Paid Domestic Work in India," *Work, Employment & Society* 15, no. 3 (2001): 607–617.
16. See Raghuram, "Caste and Gender in the Organisation of Paid Domestic Work in India," and Bhattacharya, "'I Am a Parrot.'"
17. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Duke University Press, 2003).
18. Halberstam, Queer Art of Failure, 83.
19. Shoma A. Chatterji, "Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui Breaks a Glass Ceiling," *The Citizen*, 15 December 2021, https://www.thecitizen.in/index.php/en/newsdetail/index/7/21226/chandigarh-kare-aashiqui-breaks-a-glass-ceiling.
20. Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

21. Drishti Ias, "Celebrating Dr. B.R Ambedkar: Architect of Social Justice," 15 April 2024, https://www.drishtiias.com/blog/celebrating-dr-br-ambedkar-architect-of-social-justice. B.R. Ambedkar (1891–1956) played a central role in drafting the Constitution of independent India. There, he incorporated provisions for affirmative action, including education, public employment and political representation for historically disadvantaged communities. His critique of caste is developed in such works as *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), *Who Were the Shudras?* (1946) and *The Untouchables* (1948). His advocacy of political representation and affirmative measures should be understood within a broader project of achieving substantive equality.
22. Vaibhav Kharat, "Merit: A Savarna Tool to Reinforce Caste Hegemony," *Round Table India*, 21 September 2024, https://www.roundtableindia.co.in/merit-a-savarna-tool-to-reinforce-caste-hegemony/i.
23. The surname, Iyer, refers to a Tamil Brahmin caste community; caste identities such as Iyer have historically been significant in matrimonial practices in India, where advertisements frequently specify preferred caste or community backgrounds. Such practices refer to caste-based endogamy to maintain caste purity and pride.
24. Nandini Kumar, "Harish Iyer Finds a Suitable Boy, And It All Just Adds Up," *Mumbai Mirror*, 16 June 2015, https://mumbaimirror.indiatimes.com/mumbai/other/harish-iyer-finds-a-suitable-boy-and-it-all-just-ads-up/articleshow/47682094.html.
25. Al Jazeera. "Indian Mother Places Matrimonial Ad for Gay Son." 20 May 2015, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/5/20/indian-mother-places-matrimonial-ad-for-gay-son?utm_source=chatgpt.com.
26. B.R. Ambedkar, *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development* (Columbia University, 1916).
27. Akhil Kang, "Savarna Citations of Desire: Queer Impossibilities of Inter-Caste Love," *Feminist Review* 133, no. 1 (2023): 88–104.
28. In India, debates about 'merit' are closely tied to caste hierarchy because caste has historically structured access to education, occupations, social status and material resources. See Ambedkar, Annihilation of Caste (B.R. Ambedkar, 1936). Ambedkar conceptualised caste as a system of "graded inequality," in which social and occupational positions were inherited rather than determined by individual ability or achievement. Following the constitutional inclusion of affirmative-action measures, commonly referred to as "reservations," for historically disadvantaged communities in education, public employment and political representation, there have been sustained debates over the relationship between merit and social justice, with critics frequently presenting reservations as departures from meritocratic selection. Scholars such as Ashwini Deshpande show that this opposition can obscure the unequal social conditions through which educational and professional achievement is produced and recognised, and highlight caste disparities in access to education and employment. Treating merit as an entirely individual and caste-neutral attribute risks making the accumulated advantages associated with social privilege appear as the outcome of individual ability. See Ashwini Deshpande, "Merit, Mobility and Modernism: Caste Discrimination in Contemporary Indian Labour Markets," *Indian Journal of Labour Economics* 53, no. 3 (2010): 433–455.
29. Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 50.
30. Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*, trans. Daniella Dangoor (Duke University Press, 1993), 94.
31. Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 95.
32. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Duke University Press, 2004).
33. See Chintan Girish Modi, "'Joyland' crosses the barbed wire between India and Pakistan," *Himal Southasian*, 14 July 2023, https://www.himalmag.com/joyland-queer-film-pakistan-saim-sadiq/.
34. In India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, a *hijra* refers to (usually trans-femme) individuals who are transgender, intersex or gender non-conforming, and who usually live together as groups within a traditional unit.
35. Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 25.
36. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011), 3.
37. Halberstam, *Wild Things*, x.

38. Harvard Book Store, "Jack Halberstam Presents 'Wild Things' with Rizvana Bradley," YouTube, 29 October 2020, https://youtu.be/cuKZ4PkBeng?si=sJ26tD8Smip-lwCy.
39. Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Duke University Press, 2009).
40. Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, 73.
41. Stacy Alaimo, "Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature," in *Material Feminisms*, ed. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (Indiana University Press, 2008), 238.
42. Halberstam, *Wild Things*, 22.
43. Ibid, 15.
44. See Kenny Bhatia, "'Hum Kaagaz Nahi Dikhayenge' ('We Won't Show Our Papers'): The Narratives of Bodies and Belongings at the Anti-CAA Shaheen Bagh Protests 2019-20," *Samyukta: A Journal of Gender and Culture*, n.d. doi:10.53007/SJGC.2023.V8.I2.203.
45. See Eric Smialek and Kiersten Beszterda van Vliet, "Rainbow Capitalism," in *The Sage Encyclopedia of LGBTQ+ STUDIES*, 2nd edition (Sage Publications, 2024), 1062–1065, https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071891414.n371.

https://doi.org/10.34074/junc.26113

ELANA LEAH RYKLIEF AND SALLY-ANN MURRAY

STORYING SOUTH AFRICAN TRANS LIVES AS ACTIVISM

ABSTRACT

Trans life writing in South Africa remains scarce, underexplored and under-researched. Yet scholarly engagement with this nascent modality has the potential not only to contribute to thinking around auto/biographical narration, but to change the lives of transgender people by improving society's understanding of trans lived experience. This article argues for a range of even more othered, more precarious South African trans narratives to be included within the emergent body of trans life accounts, where conventionally published, full-length memoirs by writers such as Anastacia Thompson and Landa Mabenge are given visibility and could perhaps be seen to emphasise more normative elements of transitioning. This study advocates for informal, unpublished, ongoing, processual forms of life narration, such as conversational encounter and anecdote, which often foreground ideas of trans representation and transitioning as ongoing trans-ing,[1] rather than popularly dominant, medicalised narratives of before-and-after surgery, pre-op and post-transition. The use of a fragmented, pluri-textual approach to the subject matter and episodic recounting of trans lives disrupts transnormative narratives and their conceptual linearity; arguing for forms of trans life narration that connect 'the self' to a community that is variously evidenced *and* constantly in process, present and yet constantly under threat of erasure. This is "an interpretive strategy allowing for reading lives preserved only fragmentarily, in ephemeral form."[2] This strategy surfaces alternative trans life narration, potentially as a form of activism that transgresses dominant discourses on transitioning by attending to the everyday actions of trans people. Drawing on Paul B. Preciado's activist trans life writing, we reposition ordinary trans South Africans as agents of change, who "burrow in and virally disrupt the smoothness and closure on which" dominant trans discourses of becoming depend.[3] The tumultuous political history of South Africa positions trans narratives as catalysts for change, with the transformative power to challenge institutional practices that oppress marginalised identities based on gender and sexual orientation. Trans people deliberately write themselves into the country's history and political legacy. This strategy aims to work towards greater inclusivity for trans people when seeking to add/redress the wrongs committed against the community.

INTRODUCING TRANS LIFE (WRITING) AND ACTIVISM

Trans lives in South Africa take on deeply personal and political qualities that enable trans people to act and be repositioned as knowledge producers, change makers and educational facilitators. Unsurprisingly, then, trans "[a]ctivism manifests in different shapes and forms."[4] Despite still being one of the most unequal countries in the world, post-apartheid South Africa owes its democratic and constitutional advancements to the written and physical works of activists and South African trans activism, situated within a long history of activism, has manifested itself in sites such as non-governmental organisations,[5] education,[6] artistic performances,[7] policy,[8] political movements[9] and literature.[10] The present article addresses trans life narration as a form of activism that involves working with and across multiple, intersecting and diverse literary and socio-political spheres. These agentive practices enable trans people to work with both the negative and positive aspects of trans becoming and trans representation to effect change in their day-to-day lives. South African trans activism is rooted in the stories trans people tell, attesting to the confluence of life narration, transness and activism to be found in accounts of trans people overcoming political exclusion and injustice and working to secure the validity of transness as a mode of being. Trans life narration as activist agency goes beyond obvious issues of visibility and access, delving deeper into the very question of transness as socio-political existence while recognising the many ways in which trans persons' human rights, as well as their personal responsibilities, to themselves and others like them, shape their realities.

Even before we address literary manifestations of trans activism, we emphasise that South African trans activism can be viewed as an interactive and collaborative response to the dominant restrictions of cis-heteronormativity in society and politics.[11] To respond to the damaging, restrictive practices of entrenched norms and stigma, trans people have to be deliberately disruptive to cause change. This can be effected across both small and more dramatic fronts. For example, as Ryan Thorseon describes, by focusing on the "micropolitics of everyday life," trans people develop quotidian tactics that "invoke the Constitution" to creatively and proactively respond to the aggression of cisnormative institutional and legislative practices.[12]

Thoreson notes that "since the end of apartheid, at least some trans … mobilising has taken place," especially in NGOs, to advance the rights and protections of trans people in South Africa, and this mobilisation has been institutionalised in the expressly political work done by trans activists.[13] Gender Dynamix, a trans-led organisation in Cape Town, has championed the rights of trans people, advocating for and providing psychological, medical and social support for the most marginalised in the trans community. Yet, as B Camminga observes, such organisations, which "work endlessly under less than perfect conditions, financial and otherwise," are still under-recognised, despite the spaces they provide being fundamental to how many trans people "survive and thrive" within the country.[14] South African scholars have also notably conceptualised trans activism and illustrated how trans people engage with the country's institutions, its social architecture and political makeup. Dennis Francis, in *Queer Activism in South African Education* (2023),[15] attempts to map out the many ways trans and gender diverse scholars are resisting and countering the normalisation of cisheteronormative "education practices, discourses and structures" in South African schools.

Such trans-activist attempts are important to our own wish to position trans life narration as entailing activism. Accordingly, our choice of materials for discussion is premised on the transformative potential of including othered, underrepresented and alternative forms of trans life storying alongside more familiar individual memoirs, so as to cover a wider range of content and insight into how trans people narrate their lives. Here, we suggest that this storying is a narrative analogue which extends and deepens the activism of existing scholarship on trans lives in education contexts. For example, Camminga, in *Transgender Refugees and The Imagined South Africa: Bodies Over Borders and Borders Over Bodies* (2019), has revealed the experiences and challenges of trans refugees and asylum seekers who come to South Africa. Crucial to Camminga's method is sharing stories of "resilience, struggle and survival," since such stories become part of the "travels and tales of trans identity and existence around the globe" that seek to change both people's opinions of and policies on trans issues.[16] Jean Prinsloo's conspicuously early (2011) study on how trans youth negotiate their identities online found that the internet has the potential to foster a sense of community and enable trans people not only to enact their identities, but to share experiences, disclose emotions and go beyond simply "identifying an issue or stating the commencement of a stage of transitioning."[17] In online contexts, individual personae share personal topics that are uncommon in the transnormative discourse that characterises typical social 'understandings' of transness, yet which are significant to the processing of trans people's experiences and their ongoing trans becoming. This is supported by Camminga and Zethu Matebeni, who, in examining the links between "activism, activist writing and queer scholarship in the [South] African context," focus on experiences "that go beyond" traditionally researched concepts and phenomena associated with trans lives, such as medically transitioning and accessing hormones, the ways transness has been pathologised and familiar leitmotifs of coming out and familial rejection.[18] Notably, Camminga and Matebeni also emphasise the need for "new perspectives and new scholarship by working with young scholars and with those not yet fully established in the field."[19] Such initiatives serve to, in the words of Katrina M. Powell, "highlight the ways writers write out of turn and dismantle the power structures that serve to reify dominant narratives" of the trans self, trans-ing and trans life narration.[20]

Positioning trans life narration within South Africa's history of activism enables us to reframe and examine the ordinary, practical ways in which trans life engages with both the literary and socio-political structures that inhibit alternative forms of transness. In this article, we argue that we can situate elements of South African trans life writing as activism, offering new, critical perspectives on how trans people author accounts of their lives. We provide insight into both the experiential and expressive mechanisms of activist trans life writing, suggesting that such life storying has the power to validate trans lives, transform cis people's understanding of transness and influence policies on transgender justice. Part of our focus falls on the well-established life writing genre (and mode) of memoir, albeit that this familiar form and method is used to shape the comparatively unfamiliar terrain, in cishet society, of trans experience. Here, our texts are *Becoming Him: A Trans Memoir of Triumph* (2018) by Landa Mabenge and *Always Anastacia: A Transgender Life in South Africa* (2016) by Anastacia Tomson.[21] However, a further part of our focus extends to a range of othered, more precarious trans life narratives, beyond those brought to public attention via conventional print publishing.

This wider ambit enables us to broaden the present narrowness (and indeed scarcity) that characterises the still emergent genre of South African trans life writing. Through examining conventionally-published life stories as well as conversations had with ordinary trans people, we explore how trans people seek to story themselves both in response to *and* generatively beyond the narrows of existing transnormative discourse, a tactic which enables them to do a form of literary activism, "burrow[ing] in and virally disrupt[ing] the smoothness and closure on which" hegemonic discourse depends.[22]

In this study we explore a range of forms of life 'storying.' First, we explore how conventionally published forms of trans life writing in South Africa break and disrupt normative expectations. Second, we move on to consider forms of spoken narration and magazine features that contribute to this emerging body of disruptive and ontological literature.

EXPLORING FRAGMENTS OF TRANS LIFE WRITING/NARRATION *AS* ACTIVISM

Life writing draws on the lived experiences of people, and how their lives, or parts of them, are composed.[23] The study of how lives are written has been re-conceptualised to reflect the varied and multifaceted work done within the field. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have worked to define different kinds of life writing as writing that is self-referential—that narrates "the story of one's life written by" themselves.[24] While there are many modes of writing about the self, life writing presents authors with possibilities to experiment with the subject matter, form, structure and style of their life narratives, enabling them to create experientially innovative and rich stories that reflect on how their lives are lived and how they make sense of their identity and world. Hélène Cixous has theorised life writing as a process that "circulates, caresses and paints all the phenomena before they are precipitated, assembled and crystallised in a word," a process that happens before a life is transcribed and narrated to others.[25] These theorisations inform our analysis of how trans lives are variously and disruptively written and narrated in South African forms of unconventional literature.

Trans life writing is still a nascent genre in South Africa, with few formally-published examples of trans memoir or auto/biography. An example of conventional transnormative life writing is the 2022 memoir of Elise Bishop, *Twee Lewens* (Two Lives), which traces her journey to becoming a woman during apartheid, conforming to socio-cultural constructions of gender and obtaining gender reassignment surgery.[26] The most prominent examples, however, are the aforementioned memoirs of trans authors Mabenge and Tomson, which document their lives and transitioning trajectories. Mabenge comes from Umtata, a profoundly traditional town in the Eastern Cape, and his brutally honest account of his upbringing as a black trans man illustrates the realities of what it means to grow up being gender diverse in an ideologically conservative community shaped by strict, binary definitions of man and woman. In contrast, Tomson's upbringing as a white Jewish trans woman from Pretoria (although also harrowing), demonstrates that, despite her privileged position, she faced multiple obstacles throughout her medical, social and legal transition. A further recent example of South African trans life writing is Tshiamo Modisane's *I am Tshiamo: My transition to Self-acceptance and Womanhood* (2025).[27] Modisane, a black trans woman from a

township in Johannesburg, always knew that she was a girl, despite being expected to conform to her culture's expectations and assumptions of what it means to be black and male. Modisane's memoir illustrates how, very early in her life, she sought to live in keeping with her felt gender expression. Each of these contemporary texts could be considered a conventional form of transnormative life writing, but they also, in their own way, disrupt normative assumptions about trans life by locating their stories and differing trans trajectories within the (South) African context.

Beyond individually-authored trans memoirs, a distinctive local example of trans life writing is *Trans: Transgender Life Stories from South Africa* (2009),[28] edited by Ruth Morgan, Charl Marais and Joy Rosemary Wellbeloved, a collection of trans life stories from all walks of South African life, both pre- and post-democracy. The range of experiences and contexts gives transness in South Africa both a deep and varied lived timeline. This volume features 30 original voices which collectively serve to re-collate individual narration as a collective voicing of a trans community, and all contributors were involved in the writing, editing and shaping of the book. The editors note that the "book is long overdue," as it fills a gap in South African trans literature that emergent and isolated trans people can benefit from, seeing their lives represented and affirmed.[29] The diverse trans life stories bring readers into the varied worlds of trans people, asserting that "there is no right or wrong way of being trans" and illustrating something of the "choices [that] are available," along with the personal and systemic constraints that influence how transness is able to materialise in South Africa.[30] Here, too, we acknowledge MambaOnline, a news organisation that curated a series of articles written by trans people in a 2025 digital collection, 'Project Transcend,' documenting their lives and experiences.[31] This collection addresses topics such as spirituality, addiction, economic exclusion and mental health, spotlighting the "challenges, experiences and achievements" of the trans community, with the aim of advancing "dignity, quality and human rights for all gender diverse individuals."[32] Clearly, while not life writing *per se*, Project Transcend unapologetically attempts to fill the life storying gap identified by Camminga and Matebeni, working digitally to take up space in conventionally normative contexts that habitually erase trans people. Further, in addressing subjects such as trans spirituality and issues of home, belonging and dignity, the online archive is producing and archiving a form of trans activist literature as life resource; it goes beyond familiar topics on trans life such as gender transition, aiming to overcome normative notions of transness and address what is missing within the trans autobiographical genre.

Purposefully positioning trans life narration as a form of activism enables us to highlight the transformative power of trans lives to inspire socio-political change by illustrating the specific challenges the group faces when going against and transgressing cisheteronormative power structures. By looking both at examples of published memoir *and* at briefer, more fragmented accounts of and angles on trans experiences, we show how trans lives serve as activism.[33] Trans lives can teach, intervene and make known the continuing work done by trans people to improve their lives and remedy the injustices done by society against the community.[34] Through positioning trans life writing as activism, we can show how essential the personal narratives of trans people are for inspiring or provoking change in transphobic society. Such claims have precedent. For instance, Duygu Erbil et al. note that the Spanish writer Paul B. Preciado

wanted to connect the everyday actions of trans people and his own personal stories to a socio-political reality that was not "dependent on the logic of sexual difference" but actively claimed space for gender divergence.[35] Preciado's vision aimed to locate trans lives beyond the technology of the psycho-medical, pharmacological architecture that tends to define trans identity in normative cishet society, and he wanted to provide the trans community with new ways of linking their experiences and narratives, outside of the transnormative requirements and expectations that are superimposed onto trans people. Through this logic, trans life accounts, reframed as activism, can enable us to view the embodied texts produced by trans people as productive forms of disruption that recognise their creative possibilities in giving a testament of trans lives where formal, published life writing formats are incompatible with the political purpose.[36]

LANDA MABENGE AND ANASTACIA TOMSON

Despite trans life writing still being a nascent genre of auto/biography, several habitual life writing characteristics seem quickly to have set some rather simplistic narrative norms for what could be termed transnormative life writing. Key tropes include: before/after; linear life storying; first being gay/straight, then trans; and having gender-affirming surgery, and only then being 'fully' or 'properly' trans. Observing Mabenge's account of his experiences in his memoir, we can see that his trans narrative and trans trajectory tend to follow a familiar chronology. He begins the account by focusing on his youth; moves on to tracing his trans origins into adulthood, where he first identified as gay and eventually concludes with how he medically transitioned and became straight.[37] Despite transness being a non-normative category of experience, Mabenge's narrative follows relatively conventional life writing parameters that have filtered into trans life storying: he recounts before and after transition, and how he *establishes* his transness only when his body medically aligns with his identity. This adherence to cisnormative expectations of before/after is what some trans authors consider the best way to legitimise and make legible their trans identity to dominant society. Mabenge's narrative patterning in his memoir corroborates the belief that medically transitioning secures and affirms one's trans identity, noting that once his surgeries are done, he can "begin to obsess about the direction" his life will take.[38] However, even though Mabenge, as writer, elects to present his trans-ing self trans-normatively, in terms of narrative arrangement, he is also gradually revealing to readers his felt sense of his authentic trans self, and this is never forfeited for easy audience acceptance. He does not placate or appease or concede. Instead, the storying illustrates that, as time went by, he felt inspired and safe enough to reveal himself not only to his birth persona but to his family and, in his memoir, to the world—an enfolded process of becoming in which he was enabled, partly through writing, to emerge as himself.

In comparison, Tomson's narrative begins in adulthood, but still follows a familiar trans life storying pattern: Tomson demonstrates that she redefined her sexuality from being a heterosexual man who dated a woman to a "demisexual and lesbian" trans woman after she transitioned.[39] Tomson's exploration of her trans identity, directly influencing her sexual orientation, asserts that trans sexuality can assume different forms. This allows her memoir to take on a particular position that counters the assumption that someone's gender identity determines their sexual orientation and who they are attracted to. Such tropes of trans becoming derive from transnormative

narratives of transitioning, which favour successful 'complete' medical transitions that are deemed respectable, legible and medically valid; these are familiar trajectories of trans becoming.[40] Through repetition, the experiential patterns around transness become normalised in society and represent trans people through a psycho-medical lens, featuring shared and familiar language that reproduces and reifies misleading tropes and misunderstandings of trans life. This reproducibility can result in increased visibility for some trans people who pass as cisgender (or are cis-assumed), but can invisibilise those who do not meet this standard. It is important to understand that such norms tend to be those of cishet society, which (whether consciously or unwittingly) subscribes to a popular, mass-mediated imaginary that expects trans people to fulfil familiar criteria so as to be legible as trans. Understood through this optic, we suggest that both Mabenge and Tomson do not merely adopt the norms, but also subtly adapt them—a form of trans authorial advocacy that enables them to unsettle the received social and discursive structures that seek to narrativise their identities via persistent ideas of normativity.

In considering trans life writing as a form of activism in the work of Mabenge and Tomson, we notice sections of their memoirs where the writers expressly disrupt expectations, even tentatively. Mabenge's emphasis on his self-reflexivity as a young child, for example, implies that trans youth can be acutely aware of their environments and, by extension, their own identity. This calls into question the accuracy of the notion that trans people are confused or mistaken about their gender identity and who they are. Mabenge, in living with his abusive mother, "knew instinctively" that he could not live freely as a trans person, and that "any defiance"—whether it be regarding their rules or deviating from gender norms—would "yield outcomes detrimental" to him.[41] In other words, while the narrative structure of Mabenge's memoir makes concessions that conform to transnormative conventions of linearity and transness as entailing a clear before/and after, the storying also suggests that a trans person may be self-aware of the dangers of entering environments largely populated by those who are unfamiliar with (or actively phobic about) trans identities and trans issues. As Mabenge's life storying indicates, such self insight enabled him to deploy mechanisms to enable forms of self-preservation. That he can write into being his trans self via both familiar and disruptive narrative patterns, positioning 'himself' through a range of victimised and agentive selves, attests to the potential of trans life storying to challenge simplistic ideas about The Self as always needing to be envisaged as a coherently integrated entity.

Tomson's memoir provides trans youth with excellent examples of how to navigate the tumultuous terrain of transgender definitions, gender dysphoria and body dysmorphia. At the same time, through narrating and reflecting on her experiences, she also gives cis readers a guide on how to respond to trans people and what truisms or denigrating platitudes to avoid. When narrating how she came out to her brother, Tomson acknowledges that "there is no rulebook for handling a loved one's coming out to you as transgender. But if there was, Leo would have broken every rule in it."[42] Leo, in his confusion, asked a multitude of questions, needing clarification on what it meant to be trans and also aiming to ascertain whether Tomson was certain of her decision to transition. Tomson recounts that she was cautious and thoughtful in response, taking the time to answer her brother's questions and to educate him. Her frank recounting of

how she needed to be aware of her own actions in relation to her brother's struggle with her coming out is both empowering and informative. While it does feature a familiar trans trope—coming out—the complexity of the narrated situation gives the lie to facile ideas of announcing one's transness once and for all, and then being done and ready to move on. The difficult reciprocity of the life storying handled by Tomson illustrates the need to allow a mutual learning from the interaction, for both trans and cis people.

Mabenge's and Tomson's memoirs embody, in the words of Douglas A, Vakoch and Sabine Sharp, "social functions of legibility and empowerment" and subtly enable the expansion of the shapes and forms that trans life narratives can take, beyond the enactment of transnormative tropes.[43] This too, we argue, constitutes a form of activist agency in contexts where transness is ostracised and the validity of trans life is habitually discounted and even erased. Mabenge's and Tomson's memoirs bring aspects of trans life storying empathetically into public discourse, highlighting both imaginative and material demands. For people who are transitioning in a society still unreflexively structured through entrenched gender binaries (Male or Female), such experiential, lived accounts can offer much-needed, validating self-representations of trans becoming, affirming transness as a legitimate way of being in the world: you have a right to exist, a right to healthcare and happiness, a right to a future.

By extension, Mabenge's and Tomson's memoirs can also be considered contemporary examples of trans literature that provide trans South Africans with a guide on how to navigate the country's bureaucratic systems, such as accessing hormone replacement therapy (HRT) to successfully self-actualise. Mabenge's first step was the self-acceptance of his trans identity, drawing from his year of experience with gender incongruity. Later, Mabenge was encouraged to "go online and read" up about his incongruence, and he discovered "a wealth of information in the form of literature and online academic journals."[44] As the memoir illustrates, this information became the launchpad for his medical transition, beginning in 2009. Mabenge recounts how he underwent several "assessments to meet the diagnostic requirements set out" to determine his transness, comprising a first meeting with a "panel of clinicians, including a psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker, endocrinologist, plastic surgeon and sexologist."[45] (The list is a telling signal of the power of medical disciplines in 'determining' valid trans lives, and of life storying.) He tells of subsequent meetings that explained how hormone replacement therapy would affect his life and what his options were regarding gender-reassignment surgery.[46] This lived account of the bureaucratic systems and practices enables other trans people who read his memoir to map out the process of accessing HRT and be better prepared for the administrative and institutional challenges. Here, too, such narrative attention given to the administrative systems that variously impede and enable transness is innovative. Our reading suggests that many trans memoirs incline to focus on the gradual unfurling of the writer's very personal experience of trans issues, rather than directly addressing systemic parameters that might assist trans people in their navigation of the world and its systems, foregoing the inclusion of strategies that could help others overcome potential hurdles. Mabenge, instead, details his appointments at the Groote Schuur Transgender Clinic, and his eventual success in being the first transman to oblige a medical aid to pay for his surgeries. This is a form of activism, which Mabenge subsequently expands into discourse in the memoir, where he narrates how he motivated and advocated for his gender affirming surgery to be paid by

his medical insurance, in the process changing the way insurers define and categorise trans healthcare.[47] Mabenge's achievement—understood in an imbricated sense as his win over medical aid, his undergoing gender-affirming surgeries and his writing and publishing of the associated memoir—is active, activist evidence of the emotional and physical efforts needed to redress the "multiple forces behind the dehumanisation" and exclusion of trans people in policy and institutions.[48] Through Mabenge's memoir, South African trans people have been provided with a guide on how to mediate the intersecting intricacies of the public health system and medical aid bureaucracy.

Tomson's memoir shares how she navigated the private South African health system in order to medically transition. In her consultations with private healthcare professionals, she notes that several doctors had their own, trans-averse beliefs, and that many "lacked empathy and understanding."[49] Yet, Tomson persisted, despite the pushback she received from her psychologist and endocrinologist. Bear in mind that Tomson is herself a medical professional, versed in the discourses and practices. Despite this knowledge repertoire, her memoir charts the challenges and frustrations and gaslighting she experienced, with her transness being discounted. The memoir also moves beyond her own experience of eventual successful transition, reaching towards a future in which Tomson wants to open a practice for trans people run by a qualified trans doctor. This practice would establish a "place where patients could receive holistic healthcare, where they'd be treated like human beings instead of lab results or clinical diagnosis" and without the fear of prejudice, discrimination and judgment; actively seeking to change the medical landscape through her actions.[50]

TRANS LIFE WRITING AS ACTIVISM

We can now begin to think through the potential for the strategies employed by Mabenge and Tomson as valuable and innovative means that unsettle and broaden the narrow codes of narration associated with transnormative life writing. In terms of our argument, this disruption can be thought of as activism in the service of trans lives, which demonstrates how trans people can reclaim their power and overcome the challenges they face. Importantly, the entrenched narrative tropes of trans becoming, as American speculative fiction writer Keffy Kehrly describes, "affect the ways others see" trans people, but they also influence how trans people "see themselves"; this can obscure and obfuscate their developing personal narratives along the ongoing route of transition, until they are able to break free from them.[51] Further, the established generalisations about what a trans life looks like and how it 'should' 'finally' emerge often bear minimal resemblance to the realities of most trans people and function to delimit, minimise and erase the intersectional challenges faced and decisions taken during the processual, often conflictual realities of trans becoming.[52]

Vakoch and Sharp observe several forms that enable trans life writers to resist harmful tropes—such as wrong body or dressing up as a woman—that have emerged from traditional and historical trans autobiography.[53] Examples include Munroe Bergdorf's *Transitional: In One Way or Another We All Transition* (2023)[54] and Raquel Willis' *The Risk it Takes to Bloom: On Life and Liberation* (2023).[55] While these are not South African examples, they do illustrate how trans activists have resisted and subverted tropes about trans people. This is a salient reminder that life writing can be envisaged

as inclusive and flexible, as both a genre and literary practice, allowing life writers to blur boundaries and transgress conventions, rather than simply reinforce expectations.[56]

Borrowing from this expansive conception of life writing, trans life writing, further extended to forms of lived account, storying and spoken narration more broadly, can enable trans authors to counter transnormative assumptions and conventionalised auto/biographical patterning and voicing. In relating aspects of their lived experience, trans people can adapt and expand the familiar scope of a life story's subject matter, but also the very conventions of what it means to narrate what is understood as a single coherent self in a life—since trans experience needs to make room for especially complex modes of selving, differing trans experiences and representational possibilities. Vakoch and Sharp observe that "by reclaiming" power, trans life writers and activists can offer a "critique of the narrow and oppressive" institutional practices that are derived from the gender binary, cisheteronormative ideologies and institutional practices and imposed onto trans people.[57] Through the nuanced re-storying of narratives of trans becoming, trans(itioning) trajectories and trans terminologies, trans people can create dialogic sites where they can reassess their connections and experiences to entrenched ideas about transness, regaining power over themselves, their identities and the patterns through which their lived experiences are brought into narrative.

Conventionally published South African trans life writing, scarce as it is, seems to favour a focus on the positively transformational power of trans existence and the triumphant, enduring self-determination required to overcome systemic barriers to access and personal circumstance. We suggest, however, that attention to a variety of less visible, more diverse and non-traditional trans experiences and subject matters is needed. Through such inclusion, a nascent field of South African trans life narration can create possibilities for recognising the complexity of trans identity that go beyond prescriptive definitions of trans/gender.[58] Camminga notes that incorporating "a multiplicity of experiences of gender," yielding stories that diverge from transnormativity and demonstrating "varying levels of scope for agency," enables trans people to tell their stories in expansive ways that can better capture their experience.[59] Alternative, non-traditional trans life stories can be political, but this is not a requirement. Positioning trans life narration as a form of activism enables us to complicate the preference for a narrowly political understanding of transness, instead including more subtle, ordinary life experiences. Our expansive approach unsettles an emphasis in which the urgent desire to counter trans invisibility and erasure unfortunately privileges a select few trans narratives that uphold prescriptive cis/gender norms and expectations of transness, while excluding trans narratives that transgress, deviate and do not conform.[60]

Trans life narration broadly understood as activism transforms the personal experiences of trans people into politically charged and moving life stories that have the potential to provoke change. By sharing their experiences, good and bad, of trauma and triumph, trans people recounting their life stories work in relation to rigid institutional systems and literary conventions, producing "hopeful narratives of enacting political agency" that contest stereotypes, discrimination, social marginalisation, institutional oppression and a lack of access.[61] Apart from recognising the potential to change subject, and subject matter, in telling their stories, trans people can potentially also change trans life writing itself, by highlighting in their narration different modes of (re)presenting their trans experiences. Vakoch and Sharp note that by looking at alternative modes of

"literary self-construction," we can locate trans life narratives within a broader history of activism within the country's transition from apartheid to a democracy.[62] Exploring trans life writing as activism enables us to "pursue a richer understanding of the diverse techniques of trans self-representation and theories of gendered selfhood alternative to mainstream narratives of trans identity."[63]

TRANS LIFE STORYING

In seeking other nodes of lived account beyond conventional memoir as activist trans disruption, we also turn to anecdotal stories and spoken accounts. These are not conventional life writing, per se. But such life storying, ephemerally encountered and shared in happenstance situations, if given the attention of public record, has the power to foster a powerful trans imaginary beyond society's more abstracted and disembodied misunderstandings of 'transness.' Our example, here, is the life story of Maria, who, having moved to Cape Town from a small town on the West Coast, recounted, to the first author of the present paper, her experiences of accessing hormones at Groote Schuur Hospital's (GSH) Transgender Clinic.

Maria, sharing her story conversationally, demonstrates her resilience as a trans person, determined to expose the challenges she faced, the prejudices present at satellite clinics and how she overcame them.[64] These clinics can themselves be seen as a form of activism, since, as part of public health outreach provision they are intended to bridge the health service gaps that persist in South Africa. However, Maria told of how she faced long waiting times, limited engagement with healthcare professionals, high fees and the social prejudice of being excluded from more privileged, regular trans groups by clinic sisters. Seeking alternative means to self-actualise and continue her medical transition, at the time of the conversation Maria was now a patient at Groote Schuur Hospital (GSH), sharing her story as a means to make known the systemic imbalances and power struggles that characterise even spaces specifically designed to cater for trans people. Maria's lived account suggests that, despite only sharing elements of life experiences through spoken account, rather than formally-published life writing, a trans person can engage in life storying, creating a personally memorable account of lived situations, challenges encountered and relations as characterised with other social protagonists and antagonists. The storying can reveal how the individual resists systemic stresses and demonstrates personal resilience, which can be demanded even within their own community and spaces created for them. By demanding and asserting her right to access treatment at GSH as a trans woman, after having come via the social and economic inequalities of the marginalised satellite clinic, both Maria's actions *and* her telling of aspects of her life story comprise personal modes of trans "expression, visibility and experimentation" within the limits of the system; they represent "agentic and enabling forms of activism" that could also empower other trans people to challenge and overcome adverse circumstances.[65] Maria's small story is an example of how a trans woman's recounting of her experience contests easy claims about socially-enabling gestures (such as the satellite clinic) that are supposed to be examples of activist outreach. In doing so, she revealed the varying textures, realities and developments of being trans in socially and politically challenging environments, and (with her permission) her experiences have gone on to be recorded in a PhD and in academic scholarship.

Another example of trans life narration that disrupts normative discourse and straddles traditional political activism and trans life narration is the work done by the trans community-building organisation, Sistaazhood, which advocates for the rights of "the most systematically erased and vulnerable transgender people"—those who are homeless and trans and sex workers in Cape Town.[66] Like the satellite clinic that Maria attended, this organisation was established to proactively respond to the "rigid legal frameworks" and transphobic attitudes that marginalise and render trans people invisible in society.[67] Important to our argument about life narration is that their work has been documented by theorists, scholars and journalists, and featured in local conferences held by NGOs such as Gender Dynamix. In other words, the work of an expressly political activist organisation is also imbricated in a range of efforts around storying trans lives as worthy of justice. Camminga and Matebeni, for example, in their scholarship, share the experiences of some of the trans refugee sex workers who are part of the Sistaazhood community.[68] As with Maria, informal conversation occurs, less as a fieldwork method than as human reciprocity, a hospitable, life-affirming space intended to counter more typically hostile responses to refugees, sex workers and trans people. In conversation with the authors Evelyn, an East African trans woman, recounts that the only way she could survive the difficult and expensive life in Cape Town was by becoming a sex worker and by sticking with Flavie, the other trans refugee in the group. Evelyn notes that "Flavie is a very close friend" and that "she has been there by [her] side through the difficulties of being a refugee, a transgender woman, and also selling sex."[69] Even here, the friendship and shared life knowledge exchanged between Flavie and Evelyn is a small form of lived activism that fosters trans solidarity, an "engagement that becomes even more urgent, during heightened" debilitating circumstances.[70] Further expanding the life narration element of Sistaazhood is a magazine special issue, specially designed for the organisation, titled "Sistaaz of the Castle," a documentary-type publication in which members of Sistaazhood voice their stories, aiming to bring awareness to their struggles as homeless sex workers in Cape Town. There exists both a print version of the magazine, and a digital version, which gives physical embodiment to the convention of quoted 'voice' in journalistic features. In the digital magazine, people can listen to the trans women describe their lives in their own words and voices; hearing about their dreams for the future, how they overcame personal challenges and started transitioning. The magazine profile of the group of transwomen affiliated to Sistaazhood illustrates how their everyday actions have influenced the course of their lived narratives, and evidences how the women have sought to recharacterise trans life and life narration by shifting public perception away from often negative reviews of transness. The women's openhearted intimate comments show alternative, unexpected outcomes for trans life, even punctuated by brief, ephemeral moments of creativity, innovation and joy.

In the Sistaazhood magazine, in a conversation with Mariam Bouteba, Netta Marcus explains that she founded the organisation by looking for other trans women like her and deciding one night to "invite the girls" to her place, where they "had a party" and shared stories, bonding to create a community that would enable them to face the issues of "stigma, alienation and the loss of family."[71] The Sistaazhood account is an example of how, against transphobic attitudes and policies as well as stigmatised social storying, trans people create affirming, dialogic spaces in which their lives can find valid expression through conversation, group solidarity and trans-relevant content.

By creating these spaces, they enable one another to speak about, actively engage with and inform themselves on trans issues that are otherwise negatively characterised.[72] Through community, the group creates opportunities for members to "generously share resources, advice and support, spanning the intersections of HIV, homelessness and the criminalisation of sex work."[73] Such conversations are significant modes of trans life narration because they enable them to intimately *trans* or move across the difficulties that shape their lives while prioritising trans self-understandings.[74] Such communal life storying spaces and conversations enable trans people to, as Jamaican feminist literary theorist Betty Wilson puts it, "lay critical groundwork for imagining alternative realities and worlds" that are not plagued by narratives of suffering, trauma, sexual violence and injustice.[75] Reiss and Sogunro note that an emphasis on "resilience and community building alongside critical analysis of violence, exclusion and marginalisation reflects a mature movement capable of holding complexity without sacrificing either intellectual honesty or political commitment," allowing the marginal, brief and complex life narratives of pilloried trans people to be voiced and visible.[76] These small examples demonstrate that trans people have, through intentionally wording their actions, aimed to bring awareness to the issues of a community that has repeatedly been sidelined and forgotten. In response to such erasure of their lived stories, trans people found alternative narrative modes, disrupting normative spaces through celebrating self-in-community and depending on one another.

Why is this acknowledgement of unusual, marginal forms of life narration important? Because depictions and interpretations of trans lives still tend not to find recognition in formal, conventional publishing. In other words, even the apparently minor recounting of trans life stories, such as the brief examples discussed in this paper that emerge enfolded in discursive sites such as scholarly articles, book chapters and research studies, comprises a fragile, innovatively unconventional archiving of trans lives that exist on the margins of society and are habitually overlooked and left unrecorded. Scholars' inquiries into trans lives (such as ours) work with trans people to present new insights on how activism comes into being, in the service of lives otherwise undone.

Beyond traditional publishing, there are also blogs[77] and unscripted and unedited YouTube videos[78] on trans lives in Cape Town that disseminate unfiltered stories about trans lives, offering Vakoch and Sharp's "fresh perspective on transness that disrupts the usual frameworks for understanding, debating and navigating transness in today's society."[79] Through these mediated sites, trans people are creatively able to 'author' and indeed find authorisation for their lives, reaching wider audiences and creating better conditions for trans lives and life stories to be seen and understood. Crucially, ignoring such informal trans life narrations would be to erase a variety of telling perspectives and beliefs, as well as emergent practices of trans life and modes of narration that might not previously have been addressed in the literatures of trans life and established autobiography. This is important, since examples such as social media posts which map individual transition journeys comprise life narration approaches that willingly engage with, and even document, the more difficult questions and material challenges of being trans, serving to remind us that, in the storying of transness, there is not a neat or comprehensive way to story the complex lived realities of being trans. These less formal accounts resist trans erasure by insisting on assertions of bodily visibility and change, as well as rationales for beliefs and the visibilising of difficulties and joy, illustrating the possible breadth of creating and narrating a life for trans others.

CONCLUSION

Trans life narration is a form of activism that works to change how trans people and trans issues are understood and engaged with in society. Present in different shapes and forms, in more traditional and less conventional publishing fora, trans life storying is particularly important because it (re)presents trans people with opportunities to imagine their lives anew, via both collective and individual approaches of living and narrating, to find solutions to the systemic and institutional challenges they face. This may seem old news in a country like South Africa which has a history of activism that includes the fight for equal rights and access, and protections for trans people, with NGOs taking centre stage in this liberation struggle. However, when we begin to see the connections between traditional activist agency, trans life writing and trans life narration understood more broadly, the potential to create a powerfully intersectional bloc of thought and action is strengthened, in the service of still marginalised trans lives. The trans memoirs of Mabenge and Tomson demonstrate that trans authors can both conform to reproducible narrative patterns that render them familiar to dominant understandings of transness, but at the same time deviate from these, actively disrupting the expectations, assumptions and established patterns preferred by traditional trans auto/biography. Additionally, turning to anecdotal, less conventional, informal forms of trans life storying and narrating enables us to initiate a scholarly approach that actively seeks new ways of affirming knowledge of transness and trans lives.

Elana Leah Ryklief has a PhD in English Studies from Stellenbosch University. Her work centres on trans life writing, trans (re)presentation and trans theory in the South African context. Her co-authored article "Transgender Narratives and Online Dating: Reframing Trans-Cis Relations (in Cape Town)" is published in a special issue of the *Journal of International Multidisciplinary Studies*. She is the recipient of a Consolidoc postdoctoral fellowship for 2026 from Stellenbosch University, and she is working on a chapter for the Bloomsbury volume *Lives Remembered: Trans Narratives of Memory* and an article, "Trans Women's Incarceration—Life Writing and (Her)Stories of Transitioning in South African Prisons," for the *International Journal of Transgender Health*.

Sally Ann Murray is a Professor in the English Department at Stellenbosch University. Her recent research publications address queer studies, life writing, scholarship as critical-creative practice and autoethnography.

1. Hil Malatino, "Future Fatigue: Trans Intimacies and Trans Presents (or How to Survive the Interregnum)," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (November 2019): 635–658.
2. Eva Karpinski and Ricia Chansky, "Finding Fragments: The Intersections of Gender and Genre in Life Narratives," in *Life Writing Outside the Lines* (Routledge, 2020), 507.
3. Anna Poletti, "Can the Monster Speak? Ventriloquism and Voice in Trans Activist Life Writing," in *Remembering Contentious Lives*, ed. Duygu Erbil, Ann Rigney and Clara Vlessing (Palgrave Macmillan, 2025), 62.
4. Mariel Reiss and Ayodele Sogunro, eds., *Joy, Reflections, Resistance—LGBTQ+ Lived Realities in Africa*, *Scholarly and Activist Perspectives* (Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2026).
5. Gender Dynamix, https://www.genderdynamix.org.za/.
6. Dennis A. Francis, "Queer and Trans Activism in South African Schools: Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) Disrupting LGBT+ Inequalities," *Teaching and Teacher Education* (October 2024): 1–9, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0742051X24002373?via%3Dihub.
7. Tamara Shefer, "Activist Performance and Performative Activism Towards Intersectional Gender and Sexual Justice in Contemporary South Africa," *International Sociology* (2019): 418–434, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0268580919851430.
8. Thamar Klein, "Intersex and transgender activism in South Africa," *Liminalis* 3 (2009): 15–41, https://www.academia.edu/download/50310636/Intersex_and_Transgender_Activism_in_Sou20161114-8312-r3g09.pdf.
9. Ryan Thoreson, "Beyond Equality: The Post-Apartheid Counternarrative of Trans and Intersex Movements in South Africa," *African Affairs* 112, no. 449 (October 2013): 646-665, https://academic.oup.com/afraf/article-pdf/112/449/646/233158/adt043.pdf.
10. 1Wesley Macheso, "Activism and Agency: Reflections on Emergent Queer Life Writing from Sub-Saharan Africa," *Imbizo* 13, no. 2 (2022): 1–16, https://unisapressjournals.co.za/index.php/Imbizo/article/view/11768.
11. Francis, "Queer and Trans Activism in South African Schools," 1.
12. Thoreson, "Beyond Equality," 658–659.
13. Ibid, 650.
14. B Camminga, *Transgender Refugees and the Imagined South Africa: Bodies over Borders and Borders over Bodies* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).
15. Francis, *Queer Activism in South African Education: Disrupting Cis(hetero)normativity in Schools* (Routledge, 2023).
16. Camminga, *Transgender Refugees*, xi.

17. Jeanne Prinsloo, "Negotiating Transgender Identities on the Internet—A South African Study1," *Agenda* 25, no. 4 (2011): 30-41, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10130950.2011.630527.
18. B Camminga and Zethu Matebeni, eds. *Beyond the Mountain: Queer Life in "Africa's Gay Capital"* (Routledge/UNISA Press Series, 2023), viii.
19. Ibid.
20. Katrina M. Powell. *Performing Autobiography, Narrating A Life as Activism* (Palgrave Macmillan 2021).
21. Landa Mabenge, *Becoming Him: A Trans Memoir of Triumph* (MFBooks Joburg, 2018); Anastacia Tomson, *Always Anastacia: A Transgender Life in South Africa* (Jonathan Ball, 2016).
22. Duygu Erbil, Ann Rigney and Clara Vlessing, eds., *Remembering Contentious Lives* (Palgrave Macmillan 2025).
23. Julia Novak, "Experiments in Life-Writing: Introduction," in *Experiments in Life-Writing: Palgrave Studies in Life Writing*, ed. Lucia Boldrini and Julia Novak (Palgrave Macmillan 2017): 1–36.
24. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (University of Minnesota Press, 2001).
25. Hélène Cixous and Mireille Calle-Gruber, *Hélène Cixous, Rootprints: Memory and Life Writing* (Routledge, 1997).
26. Elise Bishop. *Twee Lewens* (Hemel & See Boeke, 2022).
27. Tshiamo Modisane, *I am Tshiamo: My Transition to Self-Acceptance and Womanhood* (Penguin, 2025).
28. Ruth Morgan, Charl Marais and Joy Rosemary Wellbeloved, eds., *Trans: Transgender Life Stories from South Africa* (Jacana Media, 2009).
29. Ibid, 3.
30. Ibid, 9.
31. "Project Transcend," MambaOnline.com, 2025, https://www.mambaonline.com/project-transcend/.
32. Ibid.
33. Elana Leah Ryklief, "Trans-ing: A Transwoman's Story Beyond Transnormative Life Writing" (PhD diss., University of Stellenbosch, 2026), https://scholar.sun.ac.za/items/4513d14f-a0b7-407e-9da8-70c90917e9c1.
34. Ryklief, "Trans-ing", 149.
35. Erbil, et al., *Remembering Contentious Lives*.
36. Ryklief, "Trans-ing," 149.
37. Mabenge, *Becoming Him*, 46, 150–60.
38. Ibid, 173.
39. Tomson, *Always Anastacia*, 15, 169.
40. Nova J. Bradford and Moin Syed, "Transnormativity and Transgender Identity Development: A Master Narrative Approach," *Sex Roles* 18 (2019): 306–325, https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11199-018-0992-7.
41. Mabenge, *Becoming Him*, 19.
42. Tomson, *Always Anastacia*, 103.
43. Douglas A. Vakoch and Sabine Sharp, *The Routledge Handbook of Trans Literature* (Routledge 2025).
44. Mabenge, *Becoming Him*, 143.
45. Ibid, 143.
46. Ibid, 144.
47. Ibid, 173–74.
48. Macheso, "Activism and Agency," 3.
49. Tomson, *Always Anastacia*, 56.
50. Ibid, 109.
51. Keffy Kehrli. "Tropes as Erasers: A Transgender Perspective," Apex Book Company, 13 December 2016, https://www.apexbookcompany.com/a/blog/apex-magazine/post/tropes-as-erasers-a-transgender-perspective.

52. Ryklief, "Trans-ing," 50.
53. Vakoch and Sharp, *Routledge Handbook*, 158.
54. Munroe Bergdorf, *Transitional: In One Way or Another We all Transition*, (Bloomsburg Tonic, 2023).
55. Raquel Willis, *The Risk it Takes to Bloom: On Life and Liberation*, (St. Martin Press, 2023).
56. Mukul Chaturvedi, "Telling Lives, Signifying Selves: Life Writing, Representation and Identity." *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics,* (2021): 1-8. https://jcla.in/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/JCLA-44.4_Mukul-Chaturvedi-Intro.pdf
57. Vakoch and Sharp, *Routledge Handbook*, 100.
58. Ryklief, "Trans-ing," 141.
59. Camminga, *Transgender Refugees*, vii.
60. Vakoch and Sharp, *Routledge Handbook*, 122.
61. Erbil, et al., *Remembering Contentious Lives*, 111.
62. Vakoch and Sharp, *Routledge Handbook*, 270.
63. Ibid.
64. Ryklief, "Trans-ing."
65. Macheso, "Activism and Agency," 9.
66. Leigh Davids, "Violent Exclusion: Address Given at the Gender DynamiX and Iranti-org Trans Health, Advocacy and Research Conference," *Agenda* 31, no. 3–4 (2017): 31–34.
67. Thoreson, "Beyond Equality," 648
68. Camminga and Matebeni, *Beyond the Mountain*.
69. Ibid, 24.
70. Reiss and Sogunro, *Joy, Reflections, Resistance*, 8.
71. Mariam Bouteba, "Sistaaz of the Castle: A Project by Sistaazhood, Jan Hoek and Duran Lantink," 21 September 2019, https://nataal.com/sistaaz-of-the-castle.
72. Macheso, "Activism and Agency," 10.
73. Davids, "Violent Exclusion," 31.
74. Vakoch and Sharp, *Routledge Handbook*, 275.
75. Betty Wilson, "Literature and Activism, Literature as Activism: Case Studies from Caribbean Women's Writing in French: Marie Chauvet, Edwidge Danticat, Yanick Lahens, Gisle Pineau," *Caribbean Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (September 2020): 405–44, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/48592010.pdf?refreqid=fastly-default%3A2d2c857a6cede3397cfada30de959f89&ab_segments=&initiator=&acceptTC=1.
76. Reiss and Sogunro, *Joy, Reflections, Resistance*, 20.
77. Zoey Black, "Queer Renaissance and Culture Architect," https://www.zoeyblack.com/.
78. Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT), https://www.youtube.com/@sexworkerseducationandadvo4844.
79. Vakoch and Sharp, *Routledge Handbook*, 304.

https://doi.org/10.34074/junc.26130

C RAY BORCK

OBLIGATORY FORGETTING

I. THE CORNER GUY AND I

It is late on an ordinary weeknight in our Crown Heights neighbourhood in Brooklyn, New York. A warm evening, I'm walking Ziggy, nothing too heavy on my mind. A woman coming the other way crosses the street ahead of time. Further down, another woman passes with her bag gripped tight, keys laced between her fingers, movements brisk and deliberate, not afraid exactly, but unavailable. Another has the same air, earbuds in, eyes alert. I watch her cut around a man standing on the corner, a route decided in advance, walking fast with her eyes nowhere and everywhere. I am almost back home when I register the system here, a posture, a way of holding the self. The corner guy and I are the only ones out here loose in the breeze, hands empty, gaits astray, heading wherever we want. I used to move in that economy of vigilance too. I'm not sure when all that information left my body. How'd I get this free?

II. AUTOETHNOGRAPHY: STANDPOINT AND METHOD

My first instinct when information leaves my body is to ask how it got out and where it went. I am also the only available instrument for the measurement I want to take. What I know about becoming a man I know because I became one, not the natural way, but across a medical and social transition that began more than a decade ago, documented all along in personal writing, field notes and the kind of obsessive private reflection that is either a research method or a symptom, depending on who is asking. This essay draws on that archive. It is autoethnography, evidence of exactly one case, offered not because the case is representative but because it is unusually positioned: I have lived on both sides of a line most people only ever stand on one side of, and I can still, for now, remember the crossing.

I want to be precise about which line I mean, because I have crossed some and not others. I have lived as a woman and I live as a man; I have been read as queer and I am now most often read as straight; and I can compare these positions from the inside because I have occupied both. I have not crossed the line of race. I am white, and I have only ever been white, so when I describe the privileges that arrived with my manhood, I am describing the privileges of a white man, which are not the privileges of every man. The strength of autoethnography requires an honest assessment of its limitations and their nature. I can write only what I have been in a position to know. My whiteness is a

fixed limitation. I like to believe I have a critical race gaze, but it's always a white gaze. The embodied perspectives of people of colour do not live anywhere in me.

The standpoint I am reporting from is also generational. I transitioned more than a decade ago, in my early thirties, and I am writing this in my mid-forties. The social, medical, and legal terrain of transgender has shifted significantly in that decade—the political conditions are louder, the available vocabularies have multiplied. Whose trans experience am I describing, then? A particular one: a white, middle-class, United States-based trans man who transitioned at 33 and is writing this at 44, after a decade of being read without difficulty as a man.

A word about scope. The opening scene turns on a gender binary, and so does most of what follows. The binary is in the world I am describing, not in my account of what gender can be. What I am describing on that sidewalk is not what anyone *is* at the level of personal identity. It is how strangers are read at a distance, at night, by a perceptual system that sorts everyone into two categories and assigns risk accordingly. That system does not consult anyone's identity before it sorts them, and its crudeness is the thing under examination. My argument has a narrower requirement. It depends on a before and an after—a subject who was consistently read as a woman and is now consistently read as a man, and who can therefore compare the two positions from inside and measure what has gone missing between them. People whose legibility does not resolve that way, including non-binary and gender-nonconforming people and trans people who are read inconsistently or not at all, occupy positions this comparison cannot reach. To the system I am describing they are largely illegible, and that illegibility is part of how the system works—but it is not what this essay takes up. What obligatory forgetting looks like from there is a real question and not one this method can answer. I do not think the binary I am working with is the truth about gender. I think it is the operative fiction of the system that distributes safety, and I have been on both of its sides.

What I have been in a position to know is less common than what most people get to know, and that uncommonness is the occasion for this essay—though not, I want to be careful to say, its authority. The bodily memory of having lived on both sides of the gender binary is rarer than a life lived on one side. But the memory does not produce the analysis. Plenty of people carry this same double knowledge and make nothing of it, or make of it the opposite of what I am making here—a proof of innocence, a credential, a reason they of all people could not be implicated in male power. The access is one thing; what one does with it is another. In this essay I am trying to hold both positions close enough together to feel the difference between them—the hypervigilance I carried as a woman and the ease with which I move as a man. That difference is fading, and the fading is my subject. I call it 'obligatory forgetting.'

Because the argument accretes rather than unfolds, let me say in advance what is being built. The base claim is the one just named: the sight I had as a woman is eroding, and the erosion is structural rather than personal. Three claims accrete on it. First, the medical apparatus that produced my generation of trans subjects through a script of lifelong certainty now produces the next generation through a script of imminent death, and the victim-subject this script requires makes it nearly unsayable that some of us gain power through transition (Sections V and VI). Second, transition can be motivated in part by flight from the punishments of femininity toward the safety that attaches

to men—a claim I share with trans-exclusionary feminism and arrive at by a different route (Section VIII). Third, the questions these two claims raise have become difficult to ask on the left, which cedes them to the right (Section VIII). These are consequences, not foundations—what makes the questions hard to ask is the same forgetting that makes them hard to see. What the forgetting protects is the last argument, the one the opening scene was already making without saying so—that gender power operates at scale against women (Sections IX and X). The mechanism is not particular to trans men. Obligatory forgetting is how masculine privilege protects itself in every man who occupies the position. Transition only makes it visible, because only someone who crossed can report from both sides. What follows moves out from that crossing and returns to it.

III. DEFINING WHITE MALE PRIVILEGE

By 'white male privilege' I mean a position within a structure of racialised gender domination—not an inventory of advantages held by individual white men, but a location within a system that produces and distributes power between and across genders and races. I follow Kimberlé Crenshaw in treating these privileges as co-constituted rather than additive: white male privilege is not white privilege plus male privilege but a specific position irreducible to its components.[1] I follow Marilyn Frye and R.W. Connell in treating this position as fundamentally *relational* and *structural*: the advantages that accrue to white men who are read as white men are not free-standing goods but the counterpart of disadvantages imposed on others, most directly on women and most acutely on women of colour.[2] A white man's assumed competence is the inverse of others' assumed incompetence. A white man's bodily autonomy in public space is the counterpart of others' vulnerability in that same space. A white man's access to credibility, authority and ease is paid for in another's loss of those things. Peggy McIntosh's well-known knapsack metaphor treats privilege as a portable inventory of advantages — useful pedagogically, but it lets the privileged subject imagine "unpacking" the knapsack as an act of will.[3] The structural framing makes clear that privilege cannot be renounced through individual disavowal. One does not stop receiving credibility by feeling guilty about receiving it. One does not stop being the person women cross the street to avoid just because one used to be the woman crossing the street. The position continues to distribute its resources regardless of the recipient's politics. Distribution is also context-dependent: the credibility extended to a white man in a workplace may not be the credibility extended in a domestic argument, for example. This dynamism is part of why white men can sincerely deny that privilege exists; in any given moment, the advantage may be subtle or absent, even as the structural distribution remains intact. What can change is how the recipient understands and inhabits the position, though this should not be overstated—many privileges simply arrive, regardless of whether one knows what to do with them. If privilege could be renounced through awareness, obligatory forgetting would be unnecessary—one would simply stay aware. The forgetting is necessary precisely because the structure remains in place. The privileges arrive whether they are noticed or not, claimed or not, wanted or not. What the forgetting does is render the structure itself invisible to the one benefiting from it—and that invisibility is the privilege's most efficient operation.

I must operationalise feminism in the context of this essay. Feminism, here, is the

analysis and contestation of gendered power. This analysis operates at multiple scales at once. It takes seriously the structural conditions women live inside—the violence directed at them, the devaluation of their labour, the unequal distribution of political voice and economic resources, the constraints on bodily autonomy. It also takes seriously the daily micro-interactional and embodied texture through which those structural conditions are produced, reproduced and naturalised—the small adjustments, the deferrals, the management of male proximity, the running commentary, the labour of being read. The micro level is not preliminary to the structural; it is one of the forms the structure takes. Both registers matter politically, ethically and morally. Nothing in this definition restricts feminist analysis to women. Men can do it too, and have. But the availability of feminist conviction—the felt sense that the analysis is urgent rather than abstract—is unevenly distributed by position. One of the things this essay is about is what happens to that availability when a position changes.

IV. TWO REGISTERS OF OBLIGATORY FORGETTING

The forgetting works in at least two registers. It is worth separating them conceptually, even though they are always lived in a mobius simultaneity. The first is *epistemological*. There is a tradition in feminist thought—standpoint epistemology, developed by Nancy Hartsock, Sandra Harding and Patricia Hill Collins—where your standpoint, where you're coming from, determines what you can know.[4] The people at the bottom of a hierarchy can see its workings in a way the people on top cannot. Subordination is an education. You learn the shape of power by being on the receiving end of it. The second register is *affective*. Iris Marion Young and Sara Ahmed, among others, have described how gender is not only a set of ideas but a way the body encounters space—braced or loose, scanning or unbothered, claiming the sidewalk or yielding it.[5] What I lost in transition was knowledge in both senses: a way of knowing from inside the experience and a state my body once lived in.

What are the respective weights and rates of thinking and feeling in a changing human body? The feeling went first. I stopped scanning before the explanation (and rage) for why women scan lost its urgency, and the urgency only began to fade once the scanning had been gone a while, the way a language you no longer speak recedes into a mere haunting. I want to be exact about the mechanism: the forgetting is not training and it is not a decision. Cis men are trained, in boyhood, not to see—they are socialised into the not-seeing so early that there was never a before. I missed that training entirely. I arrived in manhood without the orientation lessons. I pass as someone with a compulsory education I never got. But being a man is not the same thing as stopping being a woman. Forgetting is erosion—the slow result of time spent no longer being treated the way we treat women. The sight I had was maintained by an ongoing condition, the daily fact of feminisation, and when that condition stopped, the sight began to starve. Nobody took it from me. It's dying of disuse, a bit like my uterus.

I want to resist the story my culture tells about all this, the one where transition is both authorship and authority—the self-made man, gender as a thing you design and build to spec, and in a stunning reversal, a special group whose stance on gender can never be questioned. Transition is less like authorship than like being set down in an unfamiliar country with a map you drew from somewhere else, trying to navigate terrain that keeps rearranging itself under your feet. The territory imposes on two levels at once. Socially:

I had imagined I would keep something androgynous, some nail polish, some refusal. Then I learned, through other people's faces and other people's slurs, that the refusal cost more than I wanted to pay, and the costs schooled me toward a plainer masculinity I had not exactly chosen. Materially: testosterone does what testosterone does. Sex hormones move the body through largely binary ranges; the in-between, whatever one wants from it, is physiologically hard to hold for long. I am describing how thoroughly transition transforms. Anti-trans writers invoke 'biology' to argue the opposite—that transition is impossible or fake. I am arguing that it is profound: the body commits. It reorganises along lines I did not author and cannot fully steer. I did not build this face. Testosterone surfaced it—my father's eyebrows, unmistakable—a male template I had been carrying all along, dormant genetic markers given an occasion, by injection.

And here is why it is *obligatory*. The forgetting is not painless, and it is not pure loss either. The relief is what carries the forgetting along—it is genuinely easier to stop seeing, lighter. It's privilege and, worryingly, it's pleasurable. What's grievable is not my lost womanhood, it's my lost feminism—the tangible urgency of that kind of embodied rage, the inability to look away from gender inequality that was sustained by being on its receiving end. Well, good for me. The cost is not just mine. My feminism is receding—losing its edge, its intelligence, its depth of experience—and that is consequential for my wife, my daughter, my students, my scholarship evidently, and for every relation I move through as a political and ethical subject. Grief, however political, cannot rebuild the conditions that produced the sight. This is the trap. I didn't forget because I'm weak or complicit. I forgot because remembering has become unpaid labour with no external occasion, and the not-remembering feels like rest. Fear with no predator, dead on arrival.

V. HISTORICISING THE TRANSNORMATIVE SCRIPT

In the global north, the modern shape of gender transition is rooted in the emergence of medical sex change in the mid-twentieth century. The story enters public imagination in 1952, when the *New York Daily News* runs a front-page report on Christine Jorgensen under the headline "EX-GI BECOMES BLONDE BEAUTY: OPERATIONS TRANSFORM BRONX YOUTH." Photographs juxtapose before-and-after. In both, Jorgensen looks remarkably ordinary, and it is her ordinariness that sells the story: a person crossed from one sex to the other and emerged not as a curiosity but as a recognisable woman. Within weeks the doctors who treated her are receiving hundreds of letters, telephone calls and visits from people asking how to acquire a sex change of their own.

The technology was experimental. The science of sex hormones was new, surgical sex modification was improvisational and the medical field was in heated disagreement about whether such interventions were ethical at all. But once the demand existed, it created its own conditions: doctors who would treat became gatekeepers, and people seeking treatment had to produce a narrative that would persuade these gatekeepers to work on their bodies. The historical record shows that two narrative strategies emerged and proved effective.

The first was *duration*. Patients reported they had wanted to live as the other gender since childhood—the desire was lifelong, deep-seated, pre-social, intractable. The longer the duration, the more it could be presented as a fact of the patient's nature rather than a choice the patient was making, and the easier it was for doctors to treat

the intervention as medically necessary rather than electively cosmetic. *I have always felt this way* did the work of establishing that the patient was not asking the doctor to do something *to* them but to confirm something they already *were*. The second was *safety*. In a socio-legal context that criminalised gender nonconformity and licensed both private and public violence against it, patients argued that medical transition would let them live without being arrested, beaten, fired or institutionalised. If a doctor could help a patient pass convincingly as the 'other' sex, the patient would no longer be vulnerable in the same way. This narrative reframed transition as harm reduction—not the granting of a wish but the relief of a danger.[6]

Both narratives worked because they made the doctor's role tolerable. *Duration* made the doctor a witness to nature rather than an author of transformation. *Safety* made the doctor a humanitarian rather than an enabler of deviance. But the narratives did more than reassure the individual clinician. They fortified the *institution*. Duration in particular underwrote the irreversibility of the treatments, foreclosed the worry that a future version of the patient might want something different and rendered the procedures legible as medical care rather than aesthetic intervention—which is to say, billable, insurable, defensible in court. The script protected the apparatus as much as it protected the patient. Patients learned what to say; doctors learned to be persuaded; insurers and hospitals learned how to underwrite the work; and the experimental practice consolidated into systematic protocols, eventually becoming the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) Standards of Care that govern medical transition today. What began as improvised testimony to negotiate access calcified, over half a century, into the institutional ground on which trans medicine stands.

I want to name something the historical summary risks obscuring. The medicalisation didn't only produce a *narrative* requirement. It produced a *type of subject*. The trans person legible to medicine—the one who has always felt this way, who is in danger without intervention, who is asking to be made whole rather than made different—is a kind of person the apparatus brought into being and made recognisable to itself and to the public. Once that subject type existed, it began to shape who could show up at the clinic and be helped, who could recognise themselves as trans in the first place and what kind of story a person had to be able to tell about their own life in order to count. This is what Michel Foucault and Ian Hacking have, in different idioms, called *making up people*: the apparatus does not simply find the subject it treats; it produces the subject it can treat, and then the subject finds itself produced.[7] By the time I arrived at a clinician's office to ask for hormones, the subject I needed to be in order to be helped had been waiting for me, fully formed, for 50 years.

The strategic narrative had become the hegemonic available narrative. It was no longer one way of accounting for the desire to transition; it was the only way intelligible to the institutions that controlled access. Passed from generation to generation, it became the script that gender-nonconforming people learn to deploy—sometimes consciously, more often not—in order to secure medical treatment, legal recognition, family understanding and political legibility. It is, to be clear, not a false script. Many people genuinely experience their gender in the terms it offers. But it is also not the only true script, and its hegemony has costs, including the foreclosure of other ways of narrating what brings a person to transition.

VI. THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF GRIEVANCE

There was a time when trans politics had a different posture. Sandy Stone's "The Empire Strikes Back," written in 1987 in answer to Janice Raymond's charge that transsexual women were agents of patriarchy, did not petition for inclusion in the category of women. Stone refused the terms on which trans women had been made legible at all—the medical demand for a seamless, unremarkable femininity and the feminist demand for a legitimating origin story. The proposal was that trans people stop passing as either, and speak from the position the apparatus had tried to render unspeakable. Sylvia Rivera, who founded STAR with Marsha P. Johnson to house homeless queens, was likewise not asking the gay movement to admit her. She was naming what its respectability politics had already traded away, most publicly when she was booed off the stage at the 1973 Christopher Street Liberation Day rally for saying so. What I mean by refusal is this: declining the terms of recognition rather than petitioning for recognition within them.[8] Something has changed, though I want to be careful about how I name it. I do not think refusal has disappeared. I think the institutional architecture that now produces trans visibility—the clinics, the advocacy organisations, the legal infrastructure, the social media platforms that flatten political speech into recognisable affect—selects for grievance over refusal because grievance is what these institutions can metabolise. Refusal produces nothing institutionally extractable. Grievance produces funding streams, legal standing, professional roles, narrative legibility. There is a political economy here, and it is worth saying so plainly.

I know this because I lived inside the earlier version of it. To social workers, doctors, therapists and psychiatrists I repeated, over and over again, "I have always felt like a man." I said it because I knew it was the effective thing to say. The medical apparatus that gatekept my access to hormones and surgery required a particular narrative—a lifelong, intractable, pre-social gender—and I produced that narrative because producing it was the price of admission. I did not feel like a man. I had never been one. That is why I was there. I was looking to become one.

The script has been updated. The current version is suffering-coded in a sharper register: I will die if I do not transition. Trans kids will die without gender-affirming care. Affirmation is suicide prevention. I am not contesting that trans people experience real distress or that gender-affirming care saves lives. I am noticing that the structural function of this script is what one says to unlock the resource. The medical pipeline that taught my generation to narrate ourselves through always-having-been, now teaches the next generation to narrate itself through imminent death. Same apparatus. Updated affect.

This matters for the argument I am making because the suffering-coded script produces a trans subject who is paradigmatically victimised—by laws, by violence, by erasure—in a way that makes it difficult to say what is also true: that some trans people, including me, have gained substantial power through transition, and that power includes the power to stop noticing what we once could not stop noticing. The victim framework forecloses this admission. It also forecloses, more consequentially, any honest accounting of gender inequality between women and men, because if all trans people are victims of gender oppression, then the basic question of which gender is structurally subordinated gets cancelled before it can even be asked.

VII — COUNTERSUBJECTIVE CONFESSIONS

I am sitting at the end of the long bar at Nostrand Pub with a book. (Martini, gin, perfect with olive *and* twist.) No one tries to talk to me. No one has asked what brings me to the neighbourhood, whether I'm waiting for someone. The man two stools down is also alone and we are extending each other the courtesy of mutual non-acknowledgment. I have been here for an hour and a half. I'm 40 pages into a novel I bought earlier today after browsing at McNally Jackson, where I also moved among others unbothered.

This is one of the great pleasures of my life now. Not the bar, not the martini. It is the absence of every form of attention I used to attract simply by being a woman alone in a bar, anywhere. The pleasure is *negative*: the pleasure of nothing happening, of nobody requiring anything of me, of being permitted, by virtue of my body and my face and the satchel of social associations attached to both, to occupy a public space without having to manage it. I enjoy being a man in part because I do not have to be a woman anymore.

The narrative I'm culturally encouraged to tell here is one where I always knew I was a man and this pleasure is not privilege, but a reflection of my human right, finally realised, to have my outsides match my insides. Gender is social; there is no pre-social place inside a person where a gender can have always been waiting. The 'always was' narrative is also part of how the current discourse produces the trans subject—as a person whose authenticity is secured by lifelong suffering and whose legitimacy depends on victimisation.

It is important to be precise about what the relief is and is not. The relief is not about anything *inherent* in male bodies or male spaces. My flat chest does not feel good because of anything inherent in flat chests as such. What feels good is the absence of breasts, and more precisely, the absence of the way breasts are received in this culture: as always-already sexualised, subject to running commentary by strangers, assumed to be on offer or in need of management. I like having a male chest because of the social meaning that male chests are accorded (very little social meaning, my own personal business). Becoming a man, you could say, was the stunt I pulled to get treated the way I deserve to be treated—and wanting to become a man could only have been a desire that surfaced in the context of living in a global patriarchal order that structures every single microinteraction we have. The same is true of almost every pleasure I have named: the privilege of solitude in a bar; of walking somewhere without being addressed; of not having my face commented on. None of these are pleasures *in* manhood as such. They are pleasures of *not having to be a woman*—which is to say, the underside of the same gender order whose top side I now occupy.

Noah Zazanis put a version of this question in print in "On Hating Men and Becoming One Anyway," extending Andrea Long Chu's "On Liking Women" (2018)—which had named the desire to become a woman as inseparable from the patriarchal conditions that produce womanhood—to the transmasculine side: "If turning your back on manhood is an ultimately feminist act, what are we to make of the decision to become a man?" I am writing one answer to Zazanis's question from inside the crossing he was naming.[9]

Sometimes I imagine trying to explain all of this to Cathy, the name my parents gave me, the person I used to be.

Me: It is so much easier being a man.

Cathy: How do you feel about that? Is ease what you're after in the project of assembling your gender? Being a woman is a political opportunity and ethical responsibility.

Me: Sure. But should I have to engage in the project of being a woman just because I was born a girl?

Cathy: Yes. I think feminism obligates it. Don't you feel like you gave up on the project of womanhood? Sisterhood? Don't you feel you've betrayed women and are now in a complicit celebration of masculinity itself?

Me: My politics haven't changed. I'm still a feminist.

Cathy: Are you sure? You've completely lost your edge. It's like you don't really care. You've lost touch with what it's like to be a woman day in and day out. You're so satisfied. You're so fucking happy.

She is not wrong about the edge. I have lost it. The version of feminism that came from being on the receiving end of feminisation is a version I no longer have full access to, and what I have in its place—analysis, memory, conviction—is colder and at greater remove. I can still think a thought about gender inequality, but honestly it doesn't bother me much, not for real. She is not entirely wrong about the betrayal either. I did leave. I had reasons that felt urgent and that I still believe were sufficient, but reasons are not the same as an absence of cost, and the cost was paid in part by the women I was no longer standing alongside.

The smaller reliefs accumulate. I can stop at a gas station in the middle of nowhere at one in the morning and pump gas with my eyes closed if I want. I can ride the train at any hour. I can go to a wedding without being asked when I am having children. I can host nothing. I can soothe no one. I can decline to be reassuring, to be cheerful, to be available, to be patient with a stranger's emotional weather. I can take up the space I take up and no one comes to collect rent on it. Each of these is unremarkable on its own. Together, they constitute the daily texture of a life I had not realised was possible because I had never lived inside it. Now that I'm here, I will say, I'm a bit scandalised.

What I want to be exact about is that these reliefs are not gifts and they certainly weren't owed me. They are *transfers*. The space I have been freed to occupy in a public bar is space that women in the same bar are still being asked to manage. The interruption I do not experience is being directed somewhere else. The credibility I am extended is credibility being withheld from someone. The structure of male privilege is that of a redistribution, and I am on the receiving end of it. The pleasure is real. The transfer is also real. I do not know how to stop being its beneficiary without ceasing to be the person I have become, and I do not want to cease being the person I have become. That is the part the available scripts do not have room for.

I used to be the meanest dyke I knew. Now she's gone and I've never felt better. I won't answer to my deadname but I can comprehend the loss of her. And isn't it perhaps a problem that we're now in a gender order where I don't want to admit that because then they might take my testosterone away, outlaw the M on my passport? This is, in part, an attempt to rescue a certain type of feminist discourse that seems to have disappeared,

where the personal is political, and politics requires ongoing reflexive engagement with the material conditions within which I come to know the world. Nothing I have experienced in my life has changed the shape of reality quite like changing my gender.

VIII. "SOUNDS LIKE SOMETHING A TERF WOULD SAY"

The claims I have been making in this essay resemble claims associated with trans-exclusionary 'radical' feminism.[10] Trans men gain male privilege when they are read as men. Gender-based violence overwhelmingly affects women regardless of trans status. Trans misogyny is misogyny, which is to say it is the misogyny of a culture that has hated and disciplined women for as long as the category has existed and that does not stop doing so when some of the people it directs that hatred toward are trans. The 'always was' narrative is a strategic discourse, not an ontological fact. Hormones operate in roughly binary ranges. These sentences do sound like the sentences trans-exclusionary feminists write.

There is a substantive observation I share with trans-exclusionary feminism. They argue that trans men are women fleeing the punishments of femininity into the apparent safety of masculinity.[11] I reject the first part of that—trans men are not women—but the second part is something I have been arguing throughout this essay. Transition can be partly motivated by the desire to escape the punishments directed at women (I am hard pressed to imagine how it could be otherwise). When we are drawn towards masculinity we are being drawn away from femininity. Hey, I don't make up the rules. Real patriarchal manhood; it's compulsory.

The questions trans-exclusionary feminism raises and the answers it offers are two different things. TERFs offer that trans women are not women; trans men are confused women; trans existence is a mistake society made and should unmake; trans existence is a wrong turn in feminist history to be corrected by reasserting biological sex as ground truth. These are bad answers. Trans women are women. Trans men are men. But also, who cares? We are all casualties of ideology. That does not make us less real or less deserving of the lives we are building. What I am worried about is when individual ego-protection—the urge to defend our gender categories against scrutiny—forecloses the questions worth asking. This essay is not about individual gender presentation, it's about the analytic spaces available to feminism.

But the questions themselves: *What happens to feminist analysis of male supremacy when some women become men?* That is an interesting question, not inherently transphobic. *Does the political category of 'woman' survive being defined entirely by gender identity rather than by structural subordination?* Also a real question, extremely important. *What happens to the inability to look away from gender inequality—what Section IV called obligatory forgetting—when a cohort of feminist thinkers crosses the gender line? And what happens when, having crossed the line, they seem unable to look back in any meaningful way—when 'looking back' is replaced by the work of asserting our own genders, our own legibility, our own legitimacy?* Pressing questions, and interesting, certainly worth feminism's time. None of these questions has a trans-exclusionary answer baked into it. Each is a question feminism would benefit from sitting with seriously, without rushing to defence or dismissal. Maybe, when trans men and trans people are asked, *how has your gender transition affected your gender politics?*, instead of getting

offended, we could sit with the question. (Julia Serano describes her own transition as having sharpened rather than dulled her feminism, and she is not alone in that.)[12] And what is the alternative? That our genders do not affect our gender politics? I do not buy it, and at the level of my own experience, I cannot even comprehend it.

What has happened instead, in much of left and trans-political response to the trans-exclusionary resurgence, is reaction. The questions get treated as inseparable from the bad answers, the bad answers get treated as the only thing motivating the questions and the questions themselves go unanswered—not because they cannot be answered but because asking them out loud might get you cancelled. Luckily, I have tenure. This silencing is the political-economy dynamic Section VI described, operating now at the level of theory: the discursive economy of trans politics under current conditions selects for defence over inquiry, because inquiry is punished. But critical discourse was never meant for comfort. When inquiry on the left is foreclosed, the right becomes the dominant political force engaging the questions I have just named at the level of mass politics.[13] Republicans, evangelical fundamentalists, trans-exclusionary activists working through legislatures—these are the people asking, in their various distorted forms, what happens to gender politics when our genders change. The left's answer has largely been to refuse the question. The cost of refusing is that we cede the question to people whose answers are reactionary, and we end up arguing against their answers from a position that cannot ask the underlying question at all. This is a catastrophe for feminist theory and it is happening in real time.

Paisley Currah has made a version of this diagnosis in his recent *Yale Review* essay on Judith Butler's *Who's Afraid of Gender?* and Jules Gill-Peterson's *A Short History of Trans Misogyny*, arguing that the structural-materialist analysis Gill-Peterson offers is what the left needs in order to meet the anti-trans backlash analytically and politically.[14]

There is a contradiction in these questions being asked by me. I am a beneficiary of the apparatus I am critiquing. I have male privilege. I am protected from the worst of what trans-exclusionary politics directs at trans people, especially at trans women. The position from which I can ask these questions most clearly is the same position the questions are about. The essay does not resolve this. It is, in part, what the essay is about, why it can surface through me at all.

IX. WHAT FORGETTING PROTECTS

If obligatory forgetting is the structural condition I described in Section IV—and it is—then it is worth asking what, exactly, the forgetting protects. Obligatory forgetting is one of the ways the apparatus that produces trans men sustains the structures of male power those men come to inhabit. It does this not by adding to patriarchy's coercive force—patriarchy does not need our help—but by subtracting from the resistance to it and by making the seeing itself socially costly to articulate. I want to name three of these arrangements and what, together, they are in service of.

The first is the felt sense of gendered authenticity—the experience of one's gender as natural, given, not subject to question. The self-made man's authority—trans or cis—depends on this feeling: the conviction that the gender they inhabit is *theirs*, properly and self-evidently, rather than a position they have been distributed into by an apparatus that needed them to occupy it.

Obligatory forgetting protects this conviction by removing access to the conditions that would expose it. As long as I cannot remember the vigilance I once carried, my present ease can feel like *my* ease, native to me, an expression of who I am. As soon as the memory returns—usually briefly, usually by accident—the ease starts to look more like a distribution than a property, and the man starts to look more like a position than a person. The forgetting closes these openings before they widen. It is the blind spot we inherit from our new location.

The second is the political alliance under the transgender umbrella. The real, totally undisputed victims of gender power are women, trans or otherwise. The umbrella's strength as a coalition depends on this fact being slightly obscured—not denied, but flattened, treated as one truth among others rather than the primary truth feminism organises around. To say 'trans people are persecuted' is intelligible. To say 'trans people are persecuted but some of us also benefit from male privilege at the direct expense of women, including some trans women, and this complicates the coalition' is intelligible too, but it is harder to organise around. The umbrella requires a certain flattening. Obligatory forgetting helps maintain that flattening for trans men specifically: I forget the position I am no longer in, which lets me speak of 'trans people' as if the category of trans were doing the actual political work, when in fact the categories doing that work, for someone like me, are 'white' and 'man.' This is also where the question of *cis* gets tangled. The term emerged from trans discourse to name the unmarked gender position; it was an analytical achievement. But over time it has hardened into a category that flattens difference among non-trans people as much as the umbrella flattens difference among trans people. In its looser uses—and I mean the vernacular register of the term, not the scholarship that introduced it—it comes to name a class of people who are the source of gender harm rather than a position within a gender system. I think that usage is a fiction, and a costly one. Gender harm is organised where men benefit and women lose, and the trans/cis binary, by suggesting otherwise, makes that organisation harder to see. The forgetting helps maintain it.

The third is the white trans man's investment in his own innocence—what I think of as the inoculation function. The inoculation is against being seen, by self or others, as implicated in male power. If you can't see your own weapon, you don't know how to use it. To hold onto women's history as protection against accruing male supremacy is to use that history as a credential, which is exactly the kind of thing forgetting can afford. *I cannot be implicated in male power because I used to be on its receiving end.* The forgetting makes the inoculation feel earned, liberatory even. That feeling is what the forgetting protects, and at whose expense? The inoculation feels earned, in part, because the becoming is something I am actively doing.

The credential takes more sophisticated forms too. I could claim, instead of innocence, superior analytical access; I can describe male power better than most men because I am newly inside it. That version of the credential is more flattering and probably more defensible. It is still a credential. The forgetting protects this version too, by letting me keep believing the analytical access is current even as the position that grounded it recedes. And the credential does work beyond either innocence or insight. It also licenses the continued claim to feminism—the right to call myself a feminist now, to be read as one, to participate in feminist discourse with the implicit authority of having been on the receiving end of feminisation. The credential protects not only my self-

image but my political legibility. By the time the credential no longer matches the position—by the time you are unmistakably a man receiving male privileges every day—the forgetting has progressed far enough that the mismatch does not register from inside. The trans man arrives at full implication in male power exactly as he loses the access that would let him see it.

These three protections—felt authenticity, the flattened umbrella, the credential of innocence—are not really three separate things. They are three ways of saying that gender power gets to stay intact, and that the people best positioned to notice would have to feel something they no longer feel in order to notice it. The big stake of obligatory forgetting is not personal. It is that violence and oppression against women is currently operating at scale, normalised through everyday micro-level male supremacy, legitimated through the millions of tiny interactions we are all trained to reproduce. We do not live in an equal society. It is only in the context of widespread violence against women, structural devaluation of women's labour and the daily diminishment of women in public and private life—because there is no outside of it—that some women decide to become men. The point is not to condemn the deciders. I am, after all, one of them. And to be fair, trans defensiveness has reasons. The Trump administration and the conservative legislatures advancing trans-restrictive law across the United States are coming for our hormones, our documents, our healthcare, our recognition. The threat is not hypothetical. The defensiveness is not paranoia; it is rational response to actual political conditions. But the conditions do not exempt the larger questions from being asked. Threats from the right cannot be permitted to dictate inquiry on the left. We have enough time in our day to worry about our access to T and to worry about the real social conditions of women. The point is that we would be lying if we did not admit that some of this operates, structurally, to reassert patriarchy—not because patriarchy is doing it from the outside, but because there is no outside, and the apparatus that produces trans subjects is the same apparatus that produces, sustains and re-naturalises male power. Gill-Peterson's recent *A Short History of Trans Misogyny* (2024) makes a parallel argument: the devaluation of femininity and the veneration of masculinity are mutually structuring conditions of modern gender, sustained across centuries of colonial and medical apparatus.[15] I am working in the same materialist register from a trans male standpoint. The forgetting is one of the mechanisms by which the apparatus keeps doing both jobs at once—producing trans subjects who become men and sustaining the male power those men come to inhabit.

It is striking how much of gender on the left is now theorised, taught and legislated about through the trans subject. I am not claiming that trans people are deferred to as experts, or that no one is writing about gender inequality between women and men. I am claiming something narrower and, I think, more consequential. The analytic work of the past decade has gone into destabilising gender—showing it to be assigned rather than given, contestable, individually authorable—and that work has been necessary and largely correct. But feminism's oldest claim requires gender to hold still long enough to be a structure: that women, as a class, are subordinated to men, as a class. These two moves are in tension. The first dissolves the category the second needs.[16] I do not think anyone intended this trade, and I do not think it is a reason to stop making the first move. I think it is a cost that has gone unaccounted, and that the accounting is overdue. What has become hard to say on the left is not that trans people are oppressed. It is that women are.

There is a second mismatch underneath the first, and it is a matter of scale. If we step back to remember how minuscule the relative numbers of trans people are to women, the strangeness of the arrangement comes into view. A small cultural minority has become the reference point for a system of power that primarily targets women. Trans women are in both groups, which complicates the categorical neatness but does not undo the scale mismatch—the minority increasingly does not share, or shares only partially, the conditions of the group whose gender politics it has come to organise. Something has gone badly wrong with how the left has organised its gender politics. The people most directly subjected to gender power should not be the people whose analysis of it is most easily dismissed as suspect or out of fashion.

I cannot end this section without saying what is true. The forgetting I have just described is operating in the writing of this paragraph. I cannot fully see what I am no longer in the position to feel. The essay is partial because I am partial. That is not a confession of failure. It is what the analysis amounts to from where I am standing now.

X. CLOSING

It was an ordinary day. I came down the stairs into the subway station and saw my sixteen-year-old stepdaughter on the platform below. I called out her name. She couldn't hear me—train noise, tourist voices. I kept approaching her and she was like a slippery fish. Something in her body registered me as coming toward her, recognised me as male, perhaps imploring, but not her stepfather. She kept rolling away from me, feigning reasons to look and walk in the other direction as I followed her, calling out to her. At first, I was amused that she didn't recognise me. I was smiling at what felt, momentarily, like happenstance, then I saw what was happening, her protective agency emerging as something disguised as happenstance. Then a pang of grief. This is what I am to women now: always first and foremost a possible threat. No one rolled away from me when I was a woman.

The moment with my stepdaughter is not particularly remarkable. It is what women do, all the time, with men they do not know. The reason they do it is that they cannot tell which men are dangerous, so they manage all of us the same way. What is structurally produced by patriarchy is not only the threat; it is the impossibility of communicating across the gap the threat creates. Women cannot afford to read each man individually. Men cannot fully access what it is like to be on the receiving end of that calculus. The gap is not a misunderstanding that can be cleared up. It is the working condition of the system.

I have argued in this essay that obligatory forgetting is the structural condition of becoming a white man inside a structure of male privilege. I want to be clear about the larger claim that has been gathering underneath. Obligatory forgetting is not unique to trans men. It is the epistemological machinery of masculine privilege itself, operating on every man who occupies the position. Transition only made it visible—only let one person stand on both sides of the threshold and report on the crossing. The cis men around me are inside the same forgetting. They cannot see it because they have nothing to remember.

There is a version of what I have written here that does the exact work obligatory forgetting is supposed to do. The trans man who has seen through obligatory forgetting

performs his seeing in an essay, and the seeing becomes the new credential. The essay describes the trap and then closes by demonstrating the writer's mastery of it. The forgetting continues, undisturbed, having now been performed and processed and aestheticised into theory. This essay's existence is one of the things its analysis would have to suspect. There may be a better-edited version that reads like the silence that a fugitive leaves behind.

Being trans does not in itself change how gender inequality structurally operates. The population on whom gender power most acutely operates—women (trans or cis, doesn't matter)—is the population whose analysis should be structuring feminist politics.

The most urgent feminist concern in this moment is the global oppression of women. The trans-centred gender politics of the past decade has flattened this fact—has made the political category of trans, rather than the structural category of woman, the organising site of feminist energy. Trans-centred gender politics is not feminism. It can be made consistent with feminism, but it has often been made instead the substitute for it, and the substitution has been costly. Some of this essay's argument is that the costliness is structurally produced by the apparatus that produces trans subjects who become men. Some of it is more straightforward: a small population, increasingly distinct in its material conditions from the larger population that gender power targets, has become the organising site for that larger population's politics. The corrective is not to expel trans voices from feminist discourse. The corrective is to stop centring them and to listen, instead, to the women whose analysis of gender inequality is grounded in the conditions that gender inequality actually produces—including trans women, women of colour, poor women, immigrant women, mothers, domestic workers, sex workers, girlfriends and wives, daughters, sisters, nieces, the secretary, the nanny and definitely the grandmother.

C Ray Borck is an Associate Professor of Sociology and Gender & Women's Studies at Borough of Manhattan Community College, City University of New York. He lives in Brooklyn and Hyde Park with his family and looks forward to the next feminist revolution.

1. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989): 139–67; and "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99.
2. Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Crossing Press, 1983); R.W. Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics* (Stanford University Press, 1987), and *Masculinities*, 2nd ed. (University of California Press, 2005).
3. Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," *Peace and Freedom Magazine* (July/August 1989): 10–12.
4. Nancy Hartsock, "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism," in *Discovering Reality*, ed. Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (Reidel, 1983), 283–310; Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives* (Cornell University Press, 1991); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Unwin Hyman, 1990).
5. Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays* (Oxford University Press, 2005); Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Duke University Press, 2006).
6. It is worth noting that the framing under which medical transition became *the* solution was historically contingent rather than necessary. Violence against gender-nonconforming people could have been understood as a public-health problem (the violence itself as the pathology), as a spiritual matter calling for recognition rather than correction or—in some pre-colonial and non-Western traditions, as anthropologists have documented—as an occasion for distinct social roles outside the binary altogether. Under each of these framings, the surgical and pharmaceutical solution does not arise, because the *problem* it answers does not exist in the same form. What consolidated was one possibility among others, given political and institutional staying power by the particular framing the mid-twentieth-century Western medical establishment was equipped to recognise. On the Jorgensen coverage and the correspondence it generated, see Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Harvard University Press, 2002).
7. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (Pantheon, 1978); Ian Hacking, "Making Up People," in *Reconstructing Individualism*, ed. Thomas C. Heller et al. (Stanford University Press, 1986), 222–36.
8. Sandy Stone, "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," *Camera Obscura* 10, no. 2 (1992): 150–76 (originally circulated 1987); Stone was responding to Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire* (see note 11). On Rivera, STAR, and the 1973 Christopher Street Liberation Day rally, see Susan Stryker, *Transgender History*, 2nd ed. (Seal Press, 2017).
9. Andrea Long Chu, "On Liking Women," *n+1* 30 (Winter 2018); Noah Zazanis, "On Hating Men and Becoming One Anyway: Transmasculinity, Feminism, and the Politics of Online," *The New Inquiry*, 24 December 2019, https://thenewinquiry.com/on-hating-men-and-becoming-one-anyway/.
10. Writers in this tradition mostly reject the acronym 'TERF' as a slur and prefer the self-description 'gender-critical feminist.' The position is associated with figures including Kathleen Stock and Helen Joyce, and organisations such as Woman's Place UK, and has been more dominant in the United Kingdom and Australian feminist discourse than in the United States. I retain 'trans-exclusionary feminism' here as the more analytically precise term and the one used in academic literature.

11. Sheila Jeffreys, *Gender Hurts: A Feminist Analysis of the Politics of Transgenderism* (Routledge, 2014), esp. chapters 4–5; Janice Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (Beacon, 1979), provides the foundational text for this tradition.
12. Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*, 2nd ed. (Seal Press, 2016).
13. Important work engaging these questions from the left is being done by feminist and trans-of-colour thinkers Amia Srinivasan, Andrea Long Chu, C. Riley Snorton, Marquis Bey and others, but in less visible registers than the mass-political mobilisations currently shaping legislation and public discourse.
14. Paisley Currah, "Gender Wars: Two Scholars Excavate the Origins of Today's Trans Backlash," *The Yale Review* 112, no. 1 (Spring 2024): 126–40.
15. Jules Gill-Peterson, *A Short History of Trans Misogyny* (Verso, 2024). See also her earlier *Histories of the Transgender Child* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018).
16. Paisley Currah frames a version of this tension in his reading of Butler and Gill-Peterson, arguing that the left needs a structural-materialist account of gender to meet the anti-trans backlash on analytic rather than purely defensive ground. See Currah, "Gender Wars." See also Gill-Peterson, *A Short History of Trans Misogyny*.

https://doi.org/10.34074/junc.26147

PEYTON BOND

FOR YOUR LIFE & LIFE-MAKING

ABSTRACT

This essay draws together the work of anti-capitalist feminist theorists, from Silvia Federici and Shulamith Firestone to Emma Heaney and M.E. O'Brien, with archives and memories of my late grandmother's life. The entanglements of capitalism, gender, labour and love provoke a critical dialectic, centred on the contradictions of life-making under capitalism. Historically contingent, muddled and ripe with tensions, this meditation on gender converges around the question of: when is it love? 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. This essay is dedicated to the complexities and provocations of life-making labour, particularly as it pertains to relationality, love and gender itself.

INTRODUCTION

Five years ago, when I first read Silvia Federici's 1975 "Wages Against Housework," something about gender and capitalism finally made sense to me: "They say it is love. We say it is unwaged work."[1] The seeping of these gendered relations into all facets of what we call *life* had seemed scattered, fragmented, before reading the militant words of an anti-capitalist feminist movement that happened several decades before I was born. The part that still felt hard, that still could not totally click into full being, was the question: but when is it still love? Feminist theorising of social reproduction and liberation began to untangle this central inquiry. Madeline Lane-McKinley, author of *Solidarity with Children,* similarly writes about not being able to "unhear" Federici's bold feminist assertion. She began, like me, to think of it more in questions than as statement, questions "about what can be discerned of love—romantic, maternal, and otherwise—if it cannot be untethered from unwaged work."[2] I began to assemble an archive: communisation of care, social reproduction, feminism against cisness, anti-carceral feminisms, emotional labour and reproduction, friendship as uncommodified relationalities ...[3] My tangential archive coalesced around feminist speculations: what if these most crucial caring labours were freed from patriarchal capitalism, freed from their assignations to the feminine, and were instead distributed among us all? What could care become, what could *gender* become, if life-making labours belonged to all of us?

"All over the world," Emma Heaney writes of the 1970s feminist struggles, "women were observing that womanhood itself is the social expression of reproductive labour."[4] Heaney's articulation of a materialist feminist dialectic—premised on a 1970 dialogue between "two best friends" Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera—captures critical insight into gender, capitalism and feminism. The conversation is as follows:

> Johnson: I could always talk like a woman. I could always act like a woman. I could always do things that women would do because I was raised by my mother. Like, I could wash … iron … cook … sew …
>
> Rivera: [cutting in] That's very oppressive toward women.
>
> Johnson: Well, that's what they're good for doing. …
>
> Rivera: [cutting in] Ewwww, stop!
>
> Johnson: That's what they always do. That's what my mother did. Well, some women don't do that, but my mother was poor; she had to do it all herself.
>
> Rivera: I, as a person, don't believe that a transvestite or a woman should do all the washing, do all the cooking, and do everything that's forced on by the bourgeois society and the establishment that women have to do this. I don't believe in that; that's all a lot of baloney. If you have a lover, or you have a friend that you really care for, you split everything down fifty-fifty. If you don't feel like doing it, you just don't do it. Let him do it because this is what we're all trying to get across. Men are oppressive. They just oppress you in all different ways.[5]

Even though these positions are opposed to each other (women *are* their domestic labour, and domestic labour *oppresses* women), they also provide pertinent analysis in their contradictions. The affinity, as Heaney describes it, that Marsha P. Johnson has with the life-giving labours of her mother speaks to gender-making as (in part) an intergenerational lineage: gender is socially (re)produced, and social reproductive activities not only reproduce "labour powers and our society more generally, but gender distinctions appropriate to 'women' themselves."[6] In thinking through social reproduction, in thinking through how we make lives, we can also consider that we "are the makers of gender … these activities can be nothing other than realisations of our powers … we have the powers to make and continuously remake gender."[7] Heaney argues that the 1970 dialogue reveals an "analytic truth":

> … to destroy patriarchy would be to free these, the only necessary labours, from their gendered and racialised character, to communise them, to free the world's efforts from the production of surplus value and bourgeois identities and refocus these efforts on the tasks that sustain and reproduce life.[8]

That is, life-giving and life-making work is that most necessary labour, yet its assignation to the feminine (re)produces stratifications and oppressions. Heaney's understanding of gender is premised, first, on the contradictions of social reproduction under capitalism.[9] Social reproduction—an abode "even more hidden" than Marx's hidden abode—describes "forms of provisioning, caregiving and interaction that produce and maintain social bonds."[10] In other words, social reproduction is what makes and sustains us. The material feminist dialectic Heaney offers, which foregrounds a refocusing of our collective efforts towards social reproductive activities, is the orientation of this writing and of my feminism more broadly.

Some things about social reproduction, those activities which make and sustain life, only became clear to me after the death of my grandmother, nicknamed 'Tinkie' in her youth. She had been unwell for over a decade, dementia slowly drawing her mind away from us. I had left Virginia for the Southern Hemisphere on my grandmother's birthday, 10 August, almost a decade before her death. I had known, in my body if not the front of my mind, the ineffable impacts of my grandmother's love and care in shaping my life. I had not thought of it as gender-making, or life-making, or even (to be perfectly honest) as labour. It was only when she was gone, and I pored through the archives of our life, that I began to finally understand the provocation at the centre of my grief. Lane-McKinley captures this provocation, asking "what does it mean to care for others when that care is coerced? *and what does it mean to receive such care?* [emphasis my own]"[11] It is the latter question that I turn to for this essay, that guides the feminist method of thinking through and "scaling up" the experiences of the everyday and ordinary.[12] What my grandmother did in her life, the reverberations of which still move through my own and many others' lives, that 'women's work,' that diffuse and relational care labour, was (re)productive of gender, yes—mine, others and her own. But it was also a glimpse into something more. I had learned, through living, through reading, through teaching, "how we are limited and constrained" by the dynamic social relations of social reproduction and capitalism.[13] Through my grandmother, though, her labours and love and labours of love, I could at last envision—and seek to embody and struggle towards—"other, better, freer possibilities" for the organisation of care and of gender itself.[14]

The entry into this particular meditation on gender is thus the disruptive power of life-making itself, grounded in stories that ask: what if we freed the gendered care and labour of our mothers, grandmothers and sisters, and instead moved towards a world where this care no longer had gendered boundaries, where an affinity with care was not precluded by gender? We could understand the caring we see now as

> … labouring that, if only in brief glimpses, and however indirectly, gets at the possibilities of what could be otherwise. And we know this thing—and we know that we know it—but without being able to name it … Perhaps the naming of it is beside the point.[15]

To explore the potentialities of our present with hope towards our futures, I lay out the life-making labours of my grandmother, read through different pieces of our lives together. I draw these labours into conversation with feminist thinkers whose understandings of mothering, capacious possibilities of care and patriarchal capitalism push towards gender liberation.

MOTHERING

My little sister, somewhere between a baby and a toddler, sits on my grandmother's lap in the digitised home video from 2002. My grandmother has a bottle in one hand, feeding my sister, and the other hand holding the gift we—a gaggle of cousins—had presented to her on her seventieth birthday. The gift was a decorated container, within which lived many bits of small paper, each scribbled with memories of our grandmother that we held most dear. She read the memories out loud on-screen as I watched, over two decades later, with tears sometimes blurring my vision. I was seven years old in this video and, like many of the cousins running around, was wearing a swimsuit as

I leaned on her soft shoulder, silently reading the words on the bits of paper as she read them aloud. I often became excited when a memory was read that my mom or dad (her son) had written, whispering "my dad!" into her ear when I recognised the story. She would sometimes pause to tell the full story of the memory to her children, her husband's children, their wives and husbands and kids. I had forgotten how funny she was, her timing and subtle looks. She laughed generously, often, an open-mouthed laugh that always shook her shoulders. There were so many people around—so many adults—but she kept making time for me, my comments, my questions, as the other cousins scattered. I had written in a memory for her: "I like playing games with you because you always laugh when someone else wins." She read it aloud and turned to me, knowing it was my memory, and whispered: "not everyone has nice children to play with, you know that?"

As the video progressed, my seven-year-old self leaned more and more into her body. I felt envy of this 2002-self; I knew that in that moment I would have felt the softness of her blue T-shirt, her specific smell of flour and Dove soap, would have felt listened to even among the chaos of families colliding. At one stage, she turned to me again: "These are treasures, Peyton." As she read out more and more of these one- or two-line memories, the shape of her impact on our making clarified and reverberated. She made Tollhouse chocolate chip cookies, biscuits with thick slabs of butter, South Carolina chewies and these brownies that were in a league of their own. We ate lunch at her house every day of the summers when school was out. She made a Sunday dinner each week for her whole extended family and anyone they wanted to bring along—fried chicken and buttered rolls and macaroni and cheese and some green designs my palate had less interest in. My mom, her daughter-in-law, has always said she must have had fairies helping her. How else could one woman feed and love so many people? I watched my younger self absorbing, not yet with the language I have now, the criss-crossing infrastructure of her care.

Each of the memories I watched my grandmother read aloud, as seven-year-old me nestled into her shoulder, always watching and always listening, was an expression of profound gratitude for her extensive labours. More particularly, for her extensive work of social reproduction. She "always had time to read to the children," she remembered each year the birthday of her daughter-in-law's grandmother, she sent us all letters and care packages wherever we were. Each week, my grandmother volunteered in the nursery at church, holding the babies that were sometimes her grandchildren and often not. When the babies were us, my mother was especially glad; as one of the memories my mother wrote down recounts, she couldn't have kept us on breastmilk without my grandmother there to manage the refrigeration, the heating-up. I had written in that "cooking is fun because grandma lets us eat the leftover dough, just a tiny bit cause it always has an egg in it," and that, even though my cousin was tidy when we all cooked together, I wasn't. All my grandmother asked, I wrote down so long ago, was that I wash my hands and try not to lick my fingers so much. I struggle to define my relationship with my grandmother. She never seemed like an authority figure, and as far as I can tell she didn't want to be. She asked us what we needed and really listened to our answers. She loved big hugs and reading us books and *being* with us, and we loved being with her. When I first read *Solidarity with Children,* I was struck over and over by the presence of my grandmother in the pages. She did have solidarity with us. I had tried to capture this

unnameable relationality when I wrote the words for her service, falling to friendship when other words failed me:

> … it took me getting a lot older to realise that she was a lot more than 'just' my grandmother: she was one of my very first friends, someone who embodied the importance of fierce advocacy for not only those we love, but for those we do not yet know, those we have not yet met, those who will also need our time, our respect, our love, and our care. (2025, *To Ba-ma*)

I have thought quite a lot about friendship. Friends have been monumental in my own life; I have conceptualised them elsewhere as having resistive dynamics,[16] and I return often to Alva Gotby's work on the politics of friendship.[17] Lane-McKinley turns to Gotby, too, writing that,

> … whether as distant memories or in experiences that feel incredibly present, and even reactivated by the relationships we sustain, we can take from these moments [of friendship] the raw materials of a better collective life. With our friends, briefly yet beautifully, we remake the world.[18]

When she died, the funeral home posted an obituary on Facebook. I read through the comments hungrily. Her students from decades before had commented on their love for her, for my grandmother when she cared for them, for when she was Mrs. Avery the schoolteacher. She was, almost exclusively, the only babysitter I ever had. She picked us up for school when my mom went back to work, or just because it was Wednesday and that was the day she brought us cinnamon rolls from the bakery or took us to Dairy Queen for Blizzards. She hosted the 'Tuesday School' church childcare annual picnic each year in her backyard, cartons of Minute Maid Lemonade stocked in the fridge, kids crawling and running across the green grass, riding tricycles like my dad had on that same driveway so many years before. My grandmother was the hardest working person I know, and I never even knew her when she was engaged in paid work. As far as I can tell, *all* of her labours were regenerative, were reproductive, both inside and outside of her own household.[19]

I can't reasonably believe such labour (such love?) was easy for her, unless she really did have those fairies as my mother suspected. My dad had written in a memory for her 70th birthday that he remembered comforting her in her "laundry room retreat, when raising four children became overwhelming." I had wondered, but barely been able to picture, if she had ever felt the need to hide away, take a break from the laundry-list of life-making we all remembered together on her seventieth birthday. She read with us, pushed us on swings, played board games and card games, taught us piano, sang us to sleep, rocked us to sleep, fed us endlessly, listened to us talk on and on. She ordered me clothes out of a catalogue, sent them back or hemmed them if I didn't like the way they felt on my body. She handed me a different catalogue for books. I circled each one I wanted to read in pencil and they arrived days later, a stack as high as the ones we would check out from our local library together.

My parents weren't sure, at first, what would be on those home videos. The tapes had been in our basement for decades, our VCR player long retired. To have in my hands thirteen minutes of my grandmother reading out small pockets of stories we had written to her, each hinging on the very labour that I've spent years reading about, felt like something long and whisperingly elusive had finally become tangible. Emma Heaney,

theorising from and with gestation, notes in her introduction that her "book is about something very ordinary."[20] I suppose that is what became tangible: in the ordinary, here she was, here we were. I've come to think that what my grandmother did so well, even when it was surely difficult, was *mothering* itself. Mothering, in Madeline Lane-McKinley's words, "is a gerund, both a noun and a verb—or … a verb breaking out of a noun." That is, the particularities of the social reproductive labour of my grand*mother* is embedded in the noun but does not find its limits there. She was not, after all, *my* mother; I have a mother, a mother who mothers me and who was also mothered by my grandmother, probably as soon as she started dating my dad at age nineteen. Rather, my grandmother was an expert practitioner in the mothering labour that so many around her needed. She met our vast needs, she anticipated them.

Alexis Pauline Gumbs understands 'mother' "more as a possible action, a technology of transformation that those people who do the most mothering labour are teaching us right now."[21] I thought often, as I was writing and thinking, of the mahi of my friend Arianna Nisa-Waller, mostly taught to me in kōrero together as she finished her thesis, in voice memos to each other or over coffees. Arianna writes of te pīkau, drawing pīkau past the physical act of carrying—"the carrying of pēpi by our tūpuna"—and draws out a "wider system of caregiving grounded in whakapapa relationships, collective responsibility, and the close physical and emotional connection between pēpi and their whānau."[22] Her writing, thinking and friendship provokes "… a philosophy of connection, protection and belonging that situates tamariki within a wider network of relationships to people, place and memory … [which] challenges Western assumptions that mothering is the sole domain of mothers and instead highlights the relational breadth of whānau."[23]

I do not mean here to defang or deradicalise Gumbs' writing on revolutionary Black mothering or displace Arianna's acute focus on te ao Māori and whānau through exploring the mothering labour of my (white, American) grandmother. Rather, I am trying here to position moments of mothering labour against that which is assumed known, against that which has oppressed and constrained these very perspectives I draw on now. [24] I seek to orient from the everyday the love and relationalities that, to me, are unable to settle within the language of oppression and constraint alone. Approaching 'mother' as 'to mother' alters the terrain of the atomised, nuclear family and disintegrates its gendered constraints. Lane-McKinley hopes that—believes that—"we can all be mothers."[25] She wonders if the experience of caring—even for just one night—for an infant could "bring us closer to fathoming how to care for each other collectively, in concrete terms, not just abstractions."[26] Such care, she writes, would not only be extraordinarily helpful to parents, but it could teach us what it means to care for each other. I am interested in these concrete terms, in the knowledge of how many hours upon hours my grandmother held newborns—her own children, her grandchildren, and strangers alike. I think of how my dad shared a story about riding his tricycle down to their neighbour's house, a large parcel of chewing tobacco in tow to deliver to him from my grandmother. Aaron Jaffe, writing on social reproduction, notes that Marx himself considered tobacco as a plausible necessity for maintenance of labour power. I suppose I could understand this memory as yet more of my grandmother's reproductive labour, of the making and re-making of workers themselves for capitalism, for the man down the street with no wife to fetch his tobacco. Yet I return once more to the dialectic; she cared for him, as she taught my father to care for others, too. When is it love?

MEMORY

I had thought, in the years since my grandmother moved out of the white house on Peaks Street that I still dream of each week from my bed oceans away, that maybe the dementia would make the losing of my grandmother easier. Maybe I was losing her at a pace that my body could hold. It didn't feel like that when I got the call to say that she was gone, though. I lost it. My partner drove home when I called him and found me still gasping for breath and sobbing. Two days before she died, I had messaged my partner that I wished I could talk to her properly again, that I could use her advice, her particular kind of love. It was late winter in Ōtepoti and daffodils had just come up through the frost in our backyard when she died. Early spring at my grandmother's was marked by hours of daffodil-picking, and I cried again when they bloomed near what would have been her birthday.

I had thought of her often when reading feminist theory over the years, wishing I could ask her about her life-before-me that, in the gentle narcissism of childhood, I had thought of relatively little. She lost her husband in an accident in 1970 when her youngest child, my father, was five years old. She raised four children after this loss. She went back to teaching alongside mothering. She didn't remarry until 1987, when each of her children had left the house, in a marriage that was ostensibly set up by my grandfather's late wife, who knew my grandmother would take care of him. (She was right. My grandmother had lunch on the table for my grandfather, her second husband, promptly at noon each day, and dinner at six.) By the time I came along, though, this was all background noise: she was, to me, fully and wholly *my grandmother*. The questions only came later, when it felt too late: What was it like, raising four children on your own in the 1960s, 70s, 80s? What did you think of feminism? Did you ever read feminist pamphlets like the one I've found in archives? What advice did you give your friends? What advice did they give you? What did you think about your second marriage, being a wife again? What do you think about men? What do you think of what I write, what I teach?

I still have these questions and have searched for small fractal answers in the hours of home video footage that my mother pulled from the basement, digitised, and then sent through a few months after my grandmother's death. It was only in writing for her memorial service, though, that I realised that she had already given me answers to the questions I hadn't thought to ask. Her life had fundamentally *made* mine. My politics, my friendships, the time spent with my friends' children, the food I make, the hobbies I nurture, the books I read and read—all are mediated through the constellation of her seemingly endless care, her endless labours. New questions: When was it love for you? When was it labour? When was it both?

> She made it all ours, she held it for all of us. I can't imagine the labour of this making. When I think 'labours of love,' I think of my grandmother … Was everyone not taught what a sweet pea looked like by Grandma responding, when I asked what the pretty pink flower was called, that it had the same name as her name for me? (2025, *To Ba-Ma*)

I read these words aloud at 3 a.m. Aotearoa-time, over a WhatsApp audio call set to speaker, turned up loud. We had tried to connect FaceTime to a Bluetooth speaker, but it didn't work. My partner and I propped his phone up, muted and on FaceTime with my mother, so that I could see a small rectangle of green grass, blue sky, grey gravestones and parts of my extended family's faces lit by the Virginia morning sun.

> I won't give a lecture now, though I know if Grandma were still here she would listen for as long as I was wanting or needing to talk. What I want to say about this focus of mine is that to study social reproduction is to study life-making, is to study the care that we give to each other, to study how we make the very people that make up all of our lives … My grandmother Tinkie was the ultimate life-maker: she fed us, held us, and made us into exactly who we are. (2025, *To Ba-ma*)

A few weeks after my grandmother's memorial service, I FaceTimed my mother to find her at a family gathering (much rarer in my grandmother's absence), a birthday party for my cousin's toddler. My three cousins and I diverge greatly in our politics, particularly illuminated in the lead up to the 2016 United States presidential election. I haven't spoken to my eldest cousin since a particularly fraught Facebook comment he left on a post I made in 2016. The exact text of the comment has been lost to time(lines), but the central message was an acute displeasure that I had 'left my conservative roots' and had no understanding of the 'real world.' I think I laughed it off at the time (he had always aimed for me when we played dodgeball at our grandmother's, we had never been close) and didn't respond. I did respond, once, to his younger sister's post that prayed to God to bless President Trump. We *had* been close; as the youngest in her family, she was the closest to my age and my very best friend all through our childhood. We had 'girls' night' sleepovers together at our grandmother's house, dealt Uno every day at lunch with our uncle, played piano together, and sat at our very own table during Sunday dinners. It was 2020 and I didn't know—still don't, really—how to understand how the fragments of our lives had collided and scattered in such disparate ways.

My mom handed the phone to my middle cousin. We hadn't spoken in years. Uncharacteristically sincere, he told me he was glad he got the opportunity to talk to me face to face—he wanted to tell me that he really appreciated what I read at our grandmother's service. I had gotten it all right, gotten *her* all right. His sister came on to say the same, had read her own piece aloud at the service where she traced some of those very same memories, pulled on those lingering threads of our lives once together. I thought after, somewhat ruefully, that the Marxist-feminist origins of the social reproduction that shaped the narrative of my memories would have been cause for a great rift in my family should it have been more explicit. 'Marxist' is not an unburdened term in America. Yet, here we were, in brief political harmony over the caring labour—extended to kin and stranger in need alike—of Grandma Tinkie. Judith Butler writes that

> many people think that grief is privatising, that it returns us to a solitary situation and is, in that sense, depoliticising. But I think it furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order … by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorising fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility.[27]

In remembering my grandmother, in remembering her mothering, I felt perhaps a spark of Butler's "complex order." This is not to say that my MAGA cousins will soon become card-carrying communists—far from it. In my more cynical moments, I see only the rigid acceptance of atomised families: *my* family must be safe, and *their* family is their own concern; *my* kid is safe, *your* kid is your own problem. But for even just a little while, I felt like that fundamental dependency on mothering was understood by us all. My aunt, my grandmother's first child and only daughter, texted me in the days after the memorial service: she had gotten a written copy of what I had read aloud and read it to herself.

I had talked about a song my grandmother had sang to me. I couldn't remember all of the words, nor the name of the song—the memory more felt than meticulously recorded. My grandmother, my aunt's mother, had sang her the same one, she wrote to me, and it was called "You're Just in Love" by Irving Berlin. She loved it, too. My dad's cousin, my grandmother's nephew, who grew up a gay kid in 1960s Bedford County, wrote to me that the "tribute … brought back lots of memories because our generation also experienced the same loving and generous woman who knew how to make a kid feel seen and understood." What could these tangles of love and labour look like if we could only

> … resist resolving the shocking vulnerability of the neonate into a story about our capacity to ensure the safety of *our* children. Care for the most fragile form of life can be a skill that scales up and generalises to a personal ethos and a collective social principle. Reverence for singularity is simply distinct from the valorisation of the individual. To spend days that heap into years devoted to the children you care for is not at odds with your care for all children.[28]

There are contradictions here that need not be "at odds." Some part of what I learned from my grandmother is that, though the capacity may wane, love doesn't run out. Years into dementia, often unspeaking, my grandmother still tried to push over her food to me, somehow asking me "are you hungry" like she had for my whole life. My grandfather once complained that she rarely spoke when he visited her in the dementia ward. But when the grandchildren visited, when the children visited, she struggled against her mind and body to engage, in rare words and expressions reminding us who we—she, and us—were. "Well, that's just wonderful," she told me from that hospital-style bed, when I grasped her hand and told her that without the books she gave me growing up I could have never finished a PhD. She never failed to show us that we mattered, that the people we meet matter, that *together* matters. I hope she knew what she was to us, what she continues to be to us. That 2002 video made me think that she did know, decades before she herself needed an altogether different-and-the-same care in the dementia ward: my mother putting fresh daffodils beside her bed even on the days her eyes barely opened, holding her hand and singing her favourite hymns. After she had finished reading the memories we gave her for her birthday, she looked right into the camera, looking into my eyes across the bounds of time and death and life and variant technologies, and sent comfort into my bones that she *did* know: "Well, I feel like Julie Andrews in the *Sound of Music*. Somewhere along the way, I guess I did something right."

WHEN IS IT LOVE?

The situation of women, Shulamith Firestone writes in *The Dialectic of Sex* in 1970 (the same year that my grandmother lost her husband and Marsha P. Johnson and Silvia Rivera had their conversation), has not changed significantly from what it ever was.[29] Some would argue that even then the argument was untrue or hyperbolic; more still may argue that women have witnessed many gains and wins in the 50-plus years since Firestone penned her work at the age of 25. Rights have been won, after all. The right to vote, to 'equal' work, to choose or deny pregnancy, have all been ostensibly written into (and then so easily out of) the law. We sometimes hear quiet promises of diminishing sexual harassment and violence, though I note the language of 'protecting women and girls' has been more recently used to distribute both transphobia and carcerality.[30]

Each right is couched, nestled in under-funded legislations, a reform or amendment to the 'mistakes' of a bigoted past, assumed long-gone. Each right, hard-won, is proffered as offering, an appeasement to the tantrums thought unnecessary and over-emotional, to be bestowed and maintained only if those in power agree that it is still necessary or deserved or righteous. The enclosures of gendered labour, in this age, are made to feel of our own design. We have babies, or we do not. We get a job, or we do not. The choices are our own, after all, and our own responsibility.[31] It is our fault if we feel exploited, if we cannot quite put words to why Silvia Federici's 1970s writing feels right out of a voice memo sent by a friend only yesterday. There are many reasons why the enclosures and borders of our gendered lives feel more coercive, more covert, than those we read about in the narrative jungle of history. We can trace the neoliberal policies, demise of the welfare state, backlash to feminist and anti-racist organising, late-stage capitalism and settler-colonial regimes, the COVID-19 pandemic and its laying-bare the 'crisis of care,' the emerging—emerged!—fascism. These are material events, marked by extreme inequity, exploitation and violence, grounded in long and brutal histories. "Perhaps," Heaney writes, after outlining these same (and other) dire conditions, "searching for gender freedom beyond the individual may feel too risky."[32] Yet these conditions also call—demand, even—the 'beyond.'

Nancy Fraser names our capitalist society as not experiencing a crisis of care, nor a care crisis. Instead, our crisis is more profound. We are experiencing—have been experiencing—a crisis of our system's ability to reproduce *itself*. As capitalism needs social reproduction, so too does its "unlimited accumulation … destabilise the very processes of social reproduction on which it relies."[33] This fundamental contradiction forms, for Fraser, an "indispensable" background condition of the capitalist economy, which "free-rides" on social reproductive activities.[34] In turn, these contradictions are managed through historically contingent, yet always gendered, distinctions between bodies. This systems critique shows the deep roots of capitalism in our very social order, indicating something rotten that constrains our collective capacities. To end capitalism therefore *must* mean "reimagining the gender order," [35] must mean telling stories that ask questions that are generative, speculative, transformative.

How could I explain the labour that my grandmother did in the vocabulary of oppression or exploitation alone? I felt aggrieved when I saw in a photo that her gravestone said only "loving wife" under her name. She loved more capaciously than 'wife' can possibly hold. She was an avid correspondent, a voracious reader and a lover of babies. She dug worms up for fishing with my little brother and always turned the lamp on for me as I read in my favourite chair at her house. She once let a garbage truck driver absolutely have it for driving too fast down the driveway where her grandchildren played. She didn't suffer fools, but she would still take care of them. Her mothering, her continuous caring labour for as long as her body and mind would allow her, meant something impossibly more. It meant that "we are not alone" and it taught me, too, that "what we feel for our children can amplify, diffuse and saturate. The feeling doesn't need to stay at home. The *us* that is reproduced when we care for a child can multiply until it's simply the sole stuff of our collective lives."[36]

She *was* a 'loving' wife, though, a wife twice over. Before marrying her second husband, Frank, (and the only grandfather I have ever known), my mom figured out there was "something going on" when she overheard my grandmother telling Frank that he might

as well tell her now how he liked his eggs cooked—she would be needing to know. She seemed to approach such courtship, such wife-relationality, with one part duty and two parts eye-roll. I remember her putting my grandfather's lunch on the table in front of him promptly at noon, making a face at me to bring me into a joke whose punchline lives somewhere in a feminist pamphlet. A nurse who had cared for her in the dementia ward commented on her Facebook obituary, writing of her love for my grandmother and then, in tongue-in-cheek text, that she was "feisty, too." I liked that. She was.

POTENTIALITIES, OR, COME ON IN

What is this potentiality that I witnessed, that we witnessed in the life my grandmother led? I know that we can love strangers because, as Heaney writes, each neonate is a stranger at first encounter.[37] I also know that we can love strangers because my grandmother showed me how to love. My grandmother was, whether she would have put it in such words or not, "committed to … the achievement of mothering,"[38] to that crucial verb-form of *mother*. The provision and reception of such care, of such mothering, should not be—or more importantly, *does not have to be*—foreclosed by gender as it is shaped by capitalism.

I do not trace in this writing an 'insurgent' social reproduction, like those in the barracks of protest M.E. O'Brien describes—that social reproductive labour which happens in solidarities outside of more immediate biogenetic ties.[39] When I think of insurgent social reproduction I think to the people of Minnesota, organising diaper deliveries to immigrant families as they sheltered in their homes as ICE invaded their hometown, of Palestinians making lives even as bombs fall. I think of all the small and large ways people insist on life even as it is under attack. My grandmother's mothering labour, at least in relation to me, does not on paper trouble the usual boundaries of the family, nor of gender itself. Her life's work *was* fundamentally the labour of that fiction of 'woman'; it concealed the "reality 'women.'"[40] Yet there is something unnameable in the kinships she reproduced, something that means that if we start from this mothering labour, these labours of love, from what we have now, we can see more clearly that "kinship is always made, not given."[41]

We can understand care and kinship and gender as always-made and thus endless in its possibilities. I turn often to the speculative fiction *Everything for Everyone,* written in exquisite form by O'Brien and Eman Abdelhadi.[42] The project imagines a future that I could suddenly taste—the children in their speculative future-world do not understand the boundaries and cruelties of the past that govern so many lives in our present. It is not naïve to think that this world is possible, not when you know other people can taste it, too. [43] The ways that I have made sense of this desire, these tastes, can only come from those feminist arguments that write towards gender liberation, those feminisms that prioritise life-making labour and seek to communise care, rather than constrain its boundaries and assign its work to certain bodies.

Over the time that I wrote this piece, I often listened to the radio on low in the background. One evening I was curious to hear, in that muted background noise, the words "macaroni and cheese." I paused and tuned in. Karima Moyer-Nocchi, the author of *The Epic History of Macaroni and Cheese,* was being interviewed about her research on RNZ.[44] I listened as she traced macaroni and cheese from Ancient Rome

to its modern iterations in the United States. My grandmother's macaroni and cheese was my favourite in the world, which meant it appeared often on the counter, that soft yellow colour beckoning from between the cranberry casserole and steamed broccoli. I have a photo of the recipe card, in my mother's handwriting, that I no longer need to refer to. I make it often: when my friend's mother passed away; when my friend had a baby; when I feel melancholy or in need of comfort. I have sent that photographed recipe on to friends who need to feed large groups of kids. My grandmother's macaroni and cheese, making the rounds of the South Island of Aotearoa, another migration to add to the ones Moyer-Nocchi described to me through the radio waves. Heaney writes, in prose that soothes and stirs my grief, that

> … the fact is that we are not forever. Our bodies, the infrastructures of our sensoria, have emerged in history and will exit history. But our participation in the real movement of history is a kind of forever. We came from something or rather into something that was already happening. We participated and flavoured the terms of what will come after. We change and precipitate change in others. History at every level is in process, is gestational.[45]

The questions that I grapple with here are not questions that I seek to settle in an essay alone, nor could I settle them alone at all. Rather, I explore these questions in a method that unfurled after my grandmother died and I spent time with archives of our life. From these archives, I trace a feminism that neither subscribes nor clings to the essentialism of gender as it centres life-making, drawing on the "anti-essentialism that has too often been misconstrued as essentialism."[46] This is the feminism that I turn to, that keeps speaking to me from pages and from memories, that continues to demand a future where such care is not privatised, where the provision and reception of care is not bound to the labour of a certain gendered body. Kathi Weeks, writing towards feminist futures, notes that such work requires the long-game, and that, though we may be "among the agents that help to bring that different future into being," we may not ever be the "subjects fully desirous of that world."[47] She writes elsewhere of a "being of becoming," of active (feminist) subjects that contest even as they constrain, that seek to desire otherwise even as their lives (and imaginations) may be grounded in the now.[48] I hope we can desire towards "that" world, that world that *could* end capitalism and stretch for the possibilities of care stripped of its gendered confines, that understands that "we are of and for each other,"[49] that "we are undone by each other,"[50] that we make each other *and* can welcome and transform this making, even long after we are gone from this place. I hope we seek to live and embody this in our being and our becoming. I think more people are desirous of this world than they know or admit, even if only in dreams and in moments. Maybe we feel at risk of naivete. Maybe a utopian vision strapped to a scaled-up critique starting from relational lives asks for 'too much.' We can struggle in the long project of transforming our world, our very relationalities and gender itself, by perhaps just being even a little bit like my Grandmother Tinkie, standing in the doorway, arms wide open, saying "well, come on in!"

Dr Peyton Bond teaches across gender studies and criminology at Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka/the University of Otago. Her work is grounded in social reproduction and abolition feminism and considers friendship, labour, carcerality, and gender.

1. Silvia Federici, "Wages against Housework," in *Feminist Studies* (Routledge, 2025), 74.
2. Madeline Lane-McKinley, *Solidarity with Children: An Essay against Adult Supremacy* (Haymarket Books, 2025), 65.
3. Sophie Lewis, *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation* (Verso Books, 2022); Angela Y. Davis et al., *Abolition. Feminism. Now.* (Penguin UK, 2022); Emma Heaney, *Feminism against Cisness*, (Duke University Press, 2024); Kim TallBear et al., "Making Love and Relations Beyond Settler Sex and Family," *Queerly Canadian: An Introductory Reader in Sexuality Studies*, ed. Scott Rayer and Laine Halpern Zisman (Women's Press, Canadian Scholars, 2022), 18–28; Tithi Bhattacharya, *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* (Pluto books, 2017); Alva Gotby, *They Call It Love: The Politics of Emotional Life* (Verso Books, 2023); Emma Heaney, *This Watery Place: Four Essays on Gestation*, 1st ed. (Pluto Press, 2025), JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.33676960; Alva Gotby, "Friends against Capitalism: Family Abolition as a Politics of Friendship," *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning*, no. 1 (2022): 112–16.
4. Heaney, *Feminism against Cisness*, 4.
5. Ibid.
6. Aaron Jaffe, *Social Reproduction Theory and the Socialist Horizon: Work, Power and Political Strategy* (Pluto Books, 2020), 122.
7. Ibid, 124.
8. Heaney, *Feminism against Cisness*, 5–6.
9. Heaney further elaborates the construction of gender and sex around hierarchal understandings of penetration and feminising bodies, though I focus here on the social reproductive labour.
10. Nancy Fraser, "Behind Marx's Hidden Abode: For an Expanded Conception of Capitalism," in *Critical Theory in Critical Times: Transforming the Global Political and Economic Order*, ed. Penelope Deutscher and Cristina Lafont (Columbia University Press, 2017), 61.
11. Lane-McKinley, *Solidarity with Children*, 65.
12. Kathi Weeks, *Constituting Feminist Subjects* (Cornell University Press, 1998).
13. Jaffe, *Social Reproduction Theory*, 3.
14. Ibid, 3.
15. Lane-McKinley, *Solidarity with Children*, 70.
16. Peyton Bond, "'We Have Each Other's Backs': Friendship as Resistance in Feminized Labor," *Feminist Studies* 50, no. 3 (2025): 406–32.
17. Gotby, "Friends against Capitalism: Family Abolition as a Politics of Friendship."
18. Lane-McKinley, *Solidarity with Children*, 145.
19. Bhattacharya, *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, 1–2.
20. Heaney, *This Watery Place*, xii.
21. Alexis Pauline Gumbs and Mai'a Williams, *Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Front Lines* (Pm Press, 2016), 23. See Bhattacharya, T. & Ferguson, S. (2025) Making Death and Life in Palestine: Social Reproduction in Settler Colonialism. 1st ed. London, Pluto Press.
22. Arianna Nisa-Waller, "Pīkau Ki Tua: Honouring Indigenous Parenting and Whānau Wellbeing Journeys in Aoteaora" (PhD thesis, Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington, 2026), 5.
23. Nisa-Waller, "Pīkau Ki Tua, 6.
24. Lola Olufemi, *Feminism, Interrupted: Disrupting Power* (Pluto Books, 2020).
25. Lane-McKinley, *Solidarity with Children*.

26. Ibid, 80–81.
27. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (Verso, 2004), 12. See also Vallelly, N. (2019). The relationality of disappearance. *Angelaki*, 24(3), 38-52.
28. Heaney, *This Watery Place*, 117–18.
29. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (Bantam Books, 1970).
30. Peyton Bond, "Not Our Sister: Kristi Noem as an Enemy Feminist?" in *Blind Field: A Journal of Cultural Inquiry* (4 June 2025), https://blindfieldjournal.com/2025/06/04/not-our-sister-kristi-noem-as-an-enemy-feminist/.
31. See Charlotte Kells Robertson, "'At some point, I have to be okay': Shattering the Mask of Motherhood: First Time Mothers' Constructed, Structural, and Embodied Experiences of Becoming a Mother and Navigating the Institution of Motherhood" (PhD thesis, University of Otago, 2026).
32. Heaney, *This Watery Place*, 35.
33. Nancy Fraser and Lise Vogel, "Crisis of Care? On the Social-Reproductive Contradictions of Contemporary Capitalism," in *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, 1st ed., ed. Tithi Bhattacharya (Pluto Press, 2017), 22, JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1vz494j.6.
34. Ibid, 23.
35. Ibid, 36.
36. Heaney, *This Watery Place*, xxiv.
37. Ibid, 116.
38. Andrea O'Reilly, *Mother Outlaws: Theories and Practices of Empowered Mothering* (Canadian Scholars' Press, 2004), 71.
39. M.E. O'Brien, *Family Abolition* (Pluto Press, 2023).
40. Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind* (na, 1980), 16; Heaney and JSTOR (Organization), *Feminism against Cisness*, 2.
41. Sophie A. Lewis, "Mothering against Motherhood: Doula Work, Xenohospitality and the Idea of the Momrade," *Feminist Theory* 24, no. 1 (2023): 81.
42. M.E. O'Brien and Eman Abdelhadi, *Everything for Everyone: An Oral History of the New York Commune, 2052–2072* (Common Notions, 2022).
43. Lane-McKinley, *Solidarity with Children*.
44. Karima Moyer-Nocchi, *The Epic History of Macaroni and Cheese: From Ancient Rome to Modern America* (Columbia University Press, 2026).
45. Heaney, *This Watery Place,* 117.
46. Heaney, *Feminism against Cisness*.
47. Kathi Weeks, "Abolition of the Family: The Most Infamous Feminist Proposal," *Feminist Theory* 24, no. 3 (2023): 449.
48. Weeks, *Constituting Feminist Subjects*, 133.
49. Heaney, *This Watery Place*, 117.
50. Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2004), 24, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203499627.