(Un)Disturbed:
A Journal of Feminist Voices

FEMINIST FUTURITIES: LIVING IN QUEER AND FEMINIST BODIES

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INTRODUCTION

Feminist Futurities in Practice: Mapping Bodies, Spaces, and Possibilities

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In a moment where precarity surrounds us and the chaotic forces of political power go unchecked (and feel never ending) it is important to pause and recognize nothing is inevitable and futures can be imagined into being through intentional and tactical practices, often in community via coalitional solidarities. This is the spirit with which we bring you this special issue of *(Un)Disturbed: A Journal of Feminist Voices*. This second issue of the journal is itself part of a future we have imagined into being where we offer a platform for queer, feminist, anti-racist scholarship, activism, and creative work to be brought together for the purposes of refusing what is and articulating what can be. This includes considering the possibilities of our feminist futures as necessary responses to the history that shapes and sometimes constrains us. Such histories inform the structures we live and move within and map our bodies in particular, often regulatory ways. The current full-scale attempts by conservative lobbyists and lawmakers to limit the rights of women, racialized, migrant, and gender-non-conforming bodies globally makes this all to clear.

We are thus moved in pulling together this issue by Angela Davis's (2016) profound observation that "our histories never unfold in isolation" and that "often we discover that those other stories are actually our own stories" (135). For us this resonates powerfully through the diverse collection of voices assembled in this special issue of *(Un)Disturbed*. As we grapple with the urgent need to imagine and actualize feminist futurities—those speculative frameworks that envision radical, inclusive futures beyond patriarchal and white supremacist structures—these contributions demonstrate that such futures are not abstract utopias but are actively being negotiated, embodied, and lived through our present-day struggles, resistances, and acts of care. And they have always been part of our landscape, and will continue to be, as long as social justice efforts are required.

This special issue emerges at a critical juncture when the entanglements between past, present, and future demand our careful attention. The contributors to this volume illuminate how feminist futurities are not merely aspirational visions but are actively constructed through the intimate work of living in feminist and queer bodies—bodies that refuse containment, that bleed across boundaries, that resist categorization, and that create new possibilities through their very existence. From the academic corridors where Middle Eastern intersectionality is mapped and theorized, to the stages where spoken word poetry transforms public spaces into sites of queer resistance, to the digital installations where trans* 'toxicity' becomes a form of radical critique; these pieces collectively demonstrate that feminist futures are being born in the present moment through acts of embodied resistance, creative expression, and scholarly intervention. If indeed, as Davis asserts "our histories never unfold in isolation," then we invite you as readers to learn through these contributions about perspectives, experiences, and histories that edge up against those that you bring to the conversation. In these interstices between our bodies, worlds, experiences, the hopeful future of mutual care and shared efforts can truly unfold.

Intersectionality and Matrix of Domination

Central to this collection is an understanding that bodies, particularly marginalized bodies, serve as both the sites where oppressive structures are inscribed and the locations from which transformative futures emerge. Farinaz Basmechi's comprehensive meta-analysis and data collection reveals how scholarly attention to women's issues in the Middle East has been shaped by intersecting

systems of patriarchy, religion, and state control. At the same time, Basmechi's work also points toward the necessity of developing more responsive theoretical frameworks that can account for what she calls the "Middle Eastern Matrix of Domination." Similarly, Hannah Maitland's exploration of mother-daughter relationships demonstrates how familial bonds can stretch to contain "differently gendered and familial futurities," particularly as families navigate questions of trans-inclusivity and gender expansiveness. These explorations of embodied experience extend into more experimental territories through the work of artists and poets who use their bodies as both medium and message. Viridian Sylvae's "Pharmakon, my Becoming-Toxic" offers a particularly striking example of how trans* embodiment can be reconceptualized not as pathology but as a form of radical critique—a "poisonous cure" that exposes the toxic foundations of cisgender society. Through projection-mapping installations that refuse to separate the digital from the corporeal, Sylvae demonstrates how new media technologies can serve feminist goals while avoiding the techno-optimism that often characterizes cyborg feminism. The intimate poetry of Jenna Dobbelsteyn traces a different path toward self-acceptance and queer futurity, mapping the journey from isolation and self-denial toward community and belonging. Her "Queer Snapshots" reveal how feminist futures are often accessed through small, daily acts of recognition and acceptance—the choice to love rather than hide, to build relationships that honor rather than diminish queer identity. Meanwhile, Evangeline Holtz-Schramek's "*digital receptacle*" provides a stark counterpoint, documenting the persistent violence of everyday misogyny while questioning where "textual references to feminism have led us."

Reclaiming the Grotesque and the Toxic

A particularly compelling thread running through this collection concerns the reclamation of what Jacqueline Cardoso and Amaya Kodituwakku, drawing on the work of Bakhtin, analyze as "the grotesque"—those aspects of embodied experience that dominant culture renders abject, dangerous, or polluting. Their dialogic exploration of "Tripartite Nightmares and Feminist Dreams"

demonstrates how feminist reclamation work might involve not just challenging negative representations but actively embracing what has been labeled toxic or monstrous. This work resonates powerfully with Ayra Alex Thomas's analysis of menstrual taboos through Mary Douglas's framework of pollution and purity, where menstrual blood becomes a site for understanding how "dirt" can serve as both a threat to social order and a source of creative possibility. The question of toxicity takes on particular urgency in light of Mackenzie Edwards and Mollie Cronin's examination of fat feminist "anti-resolutions"—the deliberate choice to "stay fat" in the face of cultural imperatives toward bodily optimization. Their analysis of digital fat activism reveals how platforms like Instagram can serve as sites for disrupting "straight time" and its linear narratives of progress, instead embracing what they term "fat temporality" where alternative futurities become possible. This work joins a broader conversation about how bodies that refuse normative expectations can serve as vehicles for imagining different ways of being in the world.

Spaces of Possibility

The contributors to this issue consistently demonstrate that feminist futurities are not simply imagined but are actively practiced in specific spaces and contexts. Jessica Van de Kemp's exploration of spoken word poetry reveals how "liminal spaces"—cafés, bookstores, community centers—can be transformed into stages for queer visibility and resistance, particularly in rural contexts where such visibility carries heightened risks. Her analysis of both live performance and digital platforms like Button Poetry demonstrates how feminist futures are constructed through acts of voice and presence that refuse the privatization of queer experience. This attention to spatial politics extends across several contributions. Maitland's work shows how domestic spaces—specifically the mother-daughter relationship—can become laboratories for testing new forms of gender-expansive kinship. Edwards and Cronin's analysis reveals how social media platforms can be leveraged to create "queer communities" that challenge dominant narratives about bodies and temporality. Even Basmechi's academic analysis points toward the need for theoretical frame

works that can account for the specific spatial and cultural contexts of Middle Eastern feminisms rather than imposing Western models.

Perhaps most significantly, this collection demonstrates the generative potential of methodological experimentation as key spaces of possibility in feminist works. Several contributors employ innovative approaches that blur the boundaries between academic analysis and creative practice, between lived experience and what is counted as scholarly knowledge. Cardoso and Kodituwakku's dialogic structure mirrors the collaborative ethos they advocate, while their accompanying zine demonstrates how academic insights can be translated into accessible, material forms of knowledge sharing. Sylvae's autotheoretical approach combines personal narrative, critical theory, and artistic practice in ways that challenge conventional academic boundaries while maintaining intellectual rigor. The poetry and creative writing included in this issue—from Dobbelsteyn's intimate verse to Holtz-Schramek's experimental prose—serve not merely as illustrations of the theoretical concepts under discussion but as forms of feminist scholarship in their own right. These creative contributions demonstrate how lived experience can generate theoretical insights that more traditional academic approaches might miss, while also modeling forms of knowledge production that are more accessible and emotionally resonant.

Temporal Complexities

A crucial insight emerging from this collection concerns the complex temporalities of feminist futurity. Rather than simple linear progression from oppression to liberation, these contributors reveal how feminist futures are characterized by what we might call "queer temporalities"—non-linear, recursive, and multiply-determined. Maitland's analysis of "cruel optimism" in family relationships shows how the desire for feminist futures can itself become a source of frustration when those futures seem perpetually deferred. Edwards and Cronin's concept of "fat temporality" challenges progress narratives that assume all change must be toward optimization, instead embracing forms of temporal resistance. This temporal complexity is perhaps most poignantly captured in the poetry

and personal narratives included in this issue. Dobbelsteyn's progression from self-denial to self-acceptance is not presented as a simple triumph but as an ongoing negotiation with past pain and future possibility. Van de Kemp's analysis of spoken word performance reveals how individual acts of voice can create moments of collective recognition that temporarily interrupt oppressive temporalities while pointing toward different possibilities.

Intersectional Futures and Patriarchal Constraints

Throughout this collection, contributors demonstrate their commitment to intersectional analyses that refuse to separate different forms of oppression and resistance. Basmechi's work explicitly calls for theoretical frameworks that can account for the intersection of patriarchy, religion, state violence, and colonial domination in Middle Eastern contexts. Thomas's analysis of menstrual taboos shows how systems of pollution and purity operate across multiple axes of difference, while pointing toward the need for more inclusive understandings of menstruation that don't assume cisgender female embodiment. The attention to intersectionality is particularly evident in the creative contributions. Cardoso and Kodituwakku's exploration of the grotesque explicitly connects questions of beauty standards, disability representation, queer villains, and religious oppression, demonstrating how different forms of marginalization can be understood through shared frameworks while maintaining attention to their specific manifestations. Edwards and Cronin's work on fat activism shows how size-based oppression intersects with other forms of marginalization while also revealing how digital platforms can be used to build coalitions across difference.

This collection also honestly confronts the limitations and challenges facing feminist futurity projects. Several contributors note how their own positionalities—often white, educated, relatively privileged—shape their access to platforms and audiences. Edwards and Cronin explicitly acknowledge how digital fat activism has been dominated by white voices despite the foundational work of fat Black women and women of colour.

Van de Kemp recognizes how her own experiences performing in rural spaces are shaped by her relative privilege and safety. These acknowledgments point toward larger questions about who gets to imagine feminist futures and whose voices are centered in these imaginative projects. The collection demonstrates both the generative potential of feminist futurity thinking and the ongoing need for more inclusive approaches that center the voices and experiences of those most marginalized by current systems.

Looking Forward

As we look toward the future directions suggested by this issue, several key themes emerge. First, there is a clear need for methodological experimentation that bridges academic analysis and creative practice, individual experience and collective struggle, local knowledge and global solidarity. The innovative approaches demonstrated here—from dialogic academic writing to autotheoretical analysis to creative-critical hybrid texts—suggest rich possibilities for feminist scholarship that can speak across different audiences and contexts. Second, this collection points toward the importance of spatial and temporal analyses that can account for the complex ways that feminist futures are both imagined and practiced. Whether through digital platforms, live performance spaces, family relationships, or academic institutions, feminist futures are not abstract concepts but are actively constructed through specific practices in particular contexts. These contributions demonstrate the ongoing relevance of embodied experience as both a site of oppression and a source of resistance. From the mother-daughter relationships negotiating trans-inclusive futures to the fat bodies rejecting optimization imperatives to the bleeding bodies that refuse gendered categorization, this collection shows how feminist futures are being lived through and with bodies that insist on their own complexity and resistance to containment.

The voices assembled in this special issue of (Un)Disturbed ultimately demonstrate that feminist futurities are not distant utopias but are actively being constructed through the daily work of living in feminist and queer bodies. Their stories—individual and collective, academic and creative, hopeful and frustrated—remind us that the futures we seek are not separate from the presents we inhabit but are emerging through our current struggles, resistances, and acts of imagination. As we continue to learn from each other through our shared feminist stories, we discover not only that our stories are interconnected but that through their telling and retelling, we are actively creating the feminist futures we seek to inhabit.

MIDDLE EASTERN INTERSECTIONALITY:

A Meta-Analysis on Scholarly Work about Women's Issues in the Middle East

By   Farinaz Basmechi

During the past few decades, many scholars in the social sciences, the humanities, and more specifically in women's and gender studies have studied women and gender-related issues in the Middle East using different theoretical and methodological perspectives. Some of those approaches include analyzing the issues of women within a patriarchal context (Joseph 1996; Kandiyoti 1988; Moghadam 2019), addressing women and gender issues focusing on the role of religion, specifically Islam (Ahmed 1982; Al-Rasheed 2013; Joseph 1991; Okkenhaug and Flaskerud 2005), and focusing on the influence of the state and law on women's lives in their society (Charrad 2011; Dwyer 1990; Maddy-Weitzman 2005; Maktabi 2010). Despite the numerous papers written about women and gender in the Middle East, Hasso (2005) argues that this field of study is limited since the standpoint that could address various systems of oppression imposed on women is from the research. Many scholars only try to study one or a few of the issues related to women and gender in the Middle East. In addition, they usually focus on these issues in one or a few social and political contexts in the Middle East. This paper argues that the challenges faced by women in the Middle East, which negatively impact their lives, result from their location at the intersection of multiple systems of oppression—including religion, patriarchy, domestic authoritarian governance, and the international neocolonial politics of the 'West' in the region.

In this paper, I am conducting a meta-analysis to provide a wider picture of the scholarly works written about gender and women's issues in the seventeen countries located in the Middle East to examine which systems of domination are receiving more scholarly attention in the analysis of women's problem in the different countries located in the Middle East. This type of larger analysis is necessary because women and gender-related issues in the Middle East, like everywhere else in the world, cannot be explained by focusing on just one single factor. Cultural, political, economic, and social dynamics of power comprise interwoven dominant systems that are determined by a number of intersecting identity categories such as gender, sexuality, race, class, disability. Therefore it is necessary to examine how all of these elements are working together (Gouws 2017).

It may seem that making such a comparative meta-analysis would be challenging due to the diverse population that is being analyzed in papers related to different countries in the region. While I acknowledge the diversity of the population in different social contexts like class and ethnicity, there are some common unifying experiences that can connect a wealthy Jewish woman in Tel Aviv with a poor Muslim woman in Yemen such as degrading women because of patriarchal systems in societies. I am aiming to see how matrices of domination are being addressed in papers of social scientists and gender scholars in the Middle East. My main research questions are: Is there any common pattern or element in the papers/books that address women's issues in the Middle East? If so, how do they differ? As Mohanty (2013)mentioned there is a need "for theory to address fundamental questions of systematic power and inequities and to develop feminist, antiracist analysis of neoliberalism, militarism, and heterosexism as nation-state building project" (968). Conducting an analysis about the ways different systems of domination are being addressed in scholarly papers provides a future steps toward answering the broader question on theorizing women's problems in the region. Realizing a working feminist theory that is applicable across the Middle East will provide future research with a tool for further investigation or allow for possible action-based solutions to the problems women in the Middle East face.

Intersectionality and Matrix of Domination

Intersectionality plays an important role in feminist studies as a responsive paradigm aimed at understanding the complexity of compounding oppressions and inequalities via an integrated approach toward the formation of a standpoint which articulates production and reproduction of social inequalities by taking various axes of social differentiation into account (Bilge 2010; Brah and Phoenix 2004; Collins 2002; Crenshaw 1989). The term intersectionality was introduced by Kimberly Crenshaw (1989) once she aimed to discuss the problems of black women's legal rights related to employment in the US. She introduces this term to be used toward recognition of the importance of studying the intersection of multiple forms of discrimination (Yuval-Davis 2006). Patricia Hill Collins (1998) was one of the first theorists who picked up the term when she was writing about family and state. Both Crenshaw and Collins used intersectionality as a framework to describe different sections of power structures interacting (Carbin and Edenheim 2013).

While intersectionality works as a functional concept or even as a buzzword (Davis 2008) which connects postmodern theories with contemporary politics, it seems necessary to see if this concept has been used as a theoretical tool to explain the globalized context. The process of theorizing gender hegemonized by the global north made the rich archive of gender analysis from the global south unacknowledged (Banerjee and Connell 2018). Much of the research on intersectionality focuses on African-American women and other women of color (Alexander-Floyd 2012; Banerjee and Connell 2018; Bhabha et al. 1992; Crenshaw 1991; Davis 1981; Ferber 1998; Harris 1990; Collins and Bilge 2016; Wacquant 1997; Williams 1991) and it seems that the research on intersectionality has not addressed the lives of Middle Eastern women enough yet. Therefore, it is necessary to give voice to the global south to show the importance of postcolonial[1] thinking about gender theory, interrogate the ways that western feminism fails to understand and meet the

Patricia Hill Collins referred to the "matrix of domination" to address the overall organization of power within any society. She employed intersectionality to signal the specific form taken by the complex of interconnected oppressions in the experiences of individuals throughout their lives. She employs the term matrix of domination to appoint the societal organizations (Bilge 2010). This concept has two main features, the first of which is related to the fact that any matrix has a particular arrangement of intersecting systems of oppression and the ways that these systems socially and historically intersect with each other is unique. The other feature is "intersecting systems of oppression" (Collins 2002). She specifically talks about the four interconnected domains of power. Structural domain of power includes social structures like laws and polity, disciplinary domains of power that manage oppression. Hegemonic domain of power legitimates oppression and interpersonal domains of oppression that influence the everyday lives of people. Studying the matrix of domination in social science research that addresses the overall organization of power in society is not a new venture. However, the state of knowledge about matrix of domination in broader social context remains relatively disregarded because Collins did not discuss the structure of domination in transnational spaces (Purkayastha 2012). In particular, large-scale analyses in the social sciences have often overlooked intersecting systems of oppression. Postcolonial feminists have long criticized the absence of a comprehensive understanding of women's experiences in the Global South within feminist scholarship from the Global North (Al-wazedi 2020; Hamid 2006; Parshar 2017). They argue that such analyses frequently reduce women in the Global South to passive victims of either patriarchy or religion, failing to account for the complexities of their intersectional positions. While postcolonial feminist narratives on women in the Middle East have called for the use of intersectional frameworks in analyzing gender-related issues in the Global South, it remains essential to situate these analyses within the specific context of the Middle Eastern matrix of domination as a unique configuration of power that shapes the lived experiences of women in

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[1] Postcolonialism is a critical theory analysis of the culture, literature, history, and discourse as a reaction to European imperial power.

the region. This framework helps us to explain how various social divisions' positions women differently considering matrices of domination in their social world.

It should be mentioned that there is much written about the Middle East but most of the research tries to address one or a few issues related to women and gender in the Middle East. Although the work that has been done by scholars in the Middle East has made a difference in the broader study of women and gender (Moghadam 2008), there are few resources that have studied intersectionality and various systems of oppression of women within the Middle East context (Al-Rebholz 2013; Ozkaleli 2015; Patil 2013; Salih, Welchman, and Zambelli 2016). Since intersectionality and the matrix of domination have become central concepts in feminist scholarship in the new millennium (Bilge 2010), with their significance elevated through contributions to feminist theory (McCall 2005), I seek to examine how scholars have addressed various systems of domination in their work on women and gender across Middle Eastern countries. To this end, I propose the 'Middle Eastern Matrix of Domination' as a framework for recognizing the interplay of neocolonial practices by the Global North, patriarchal norms, state regulations and repressive policies, and extremist religious orders in marginalizing and oppressing at least half of the population in the Middle East. The main questions that I want to address in this paper are: What are the main themes found through analysis? How could they be interpreted through the proposed Middle Eastern matrix of domination? This analysis will us help have a better understanding of women's common problems in the Middle East toward conducting a comprehensive research on intersectionality within a Middle Eastern context. Also, it enables us to find out the problems that attract the most attention and the ones that are not being addressed properly, in order to propose more responsive studies about women's and gender related issues in future.

Meta–Content–Analysis of Scholarly Work on Women and Gender in the Middle East

The stated questions above are examined with the assistance of a simplified meta-analysis of 170 articles published between about women and gender in the Middle East. The data set of the articles was created through the process of searching one general electronic- internet source for scholarly articles (https://scholar.google.com) using the following terms: gender, women, feminism, and name of each country in the Middle East. The search was restricted to the articles which were focusing on women and gender issues in each country through the lens of social sciences, psychology, gender studies, management, and business. Since I wanted to get a random sample of the available articles, I did not set a priority to get the more recent articles about women and gender in the Middle East[2]. The major limitation of this search was the bias toward the publications in English and the exclusion of articles focusing on women and gender in the Middle Eastern countries published in other languages. In addition, it is important to recognize that global academic publishing, particularly within English-dominated spaces, shapes which topics and types of research gain visibility, often leading to biases in the body of published work.

The Middle East includes seventeen countries (World Population Review, 2019) and the following table is the main demographic characteristics of each of them:

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[2] Theoretically, it might be a problem since it is the West writing about the East through a western lens. My study might be skewed toward patriarchy because western scholars look negatively upon Islamic patriarchies.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Middle East Countries

	Population	Major Language	Major Religion
Bahrain	1.4 million	Arabic	Islam
Cyprus	1.17 million	Greek, Turkish	Christian, Islam
Egypt	83.9 million	Arabic	Islam, Christianity
Iran	80 million	Persian	Islam
Iraq	37 million	Arabic, Kurdish	Islam
Israel	9,097 million	Hebrew	Jewish
Jordan	6.5 million	Arabic	Islam
Kuwait	4 million	Arabic	Islam
Lebanon	6 million	Arabic	Islam, Christianity
Oman	2.9 million	Arabic	Islam
Palestine	4.5 million	Arabic	Islam
Qatar	2.639 million	Arabic	Islam
Saudi Arabia	32 million	Arabic	Islam
Syria	21.1 million	Arabic	Islam, Christianity
Turkey	80.81 million	Turkish	Islam
United Arab Emirates	8.1 million	Arabic	Islam
Yemen	27.5 million	Arabic	Islam

Table 2: The Main Themes of Articles' Percentage[3]

	Race/Tribe	Class	Patriarchy	Religion	Economy	Laws	War	Government
Bahrain	10	-	60	50	20	30	-	30
Cyprus	-	-	70	10	-	-	20	60
Egypt	-	10	30	60	10	40	10	70
Iran	-	-	-	90	10	50	-	100
Iraq	-	-	30	30	10	40	60	60
Israel	30	30	50	30	10	10	30	30
Jordan	-	-	40	60	-	40	10	70
Kuwait	20	10	70	90	20	40	-	60
Lebanon	40	-	40	70	-	70	20	70
Oman	10	30	100	40	30	60	-	30
Palestine	20	-	40	50	-	30	60	70
Qatar	10	-	90	60	20	40	-	50
Saudi Arabia	-	-	80	70	10	50	-	60
Syria	10	-	50	80	10	30	40	50
Turkey	10	-	80	80	-	30	-	40
UAE	-	-	50	70	30	10	-	50
Yemen	20	-	60	70	10	60	-	30
Mean of Themes	10.6	4.7	55.3	59.4	11.2	37	14.7	54.7

Through an initial process of inductive coding, all 170 articles and books were carefully read and coded based on the key characteristics identified by the authors and the ways in which they addressed women's issues in the region. This process led to the identification of the most prevalent themes: race, class, religion, patriarchy, war, laws, government, and politics. Building on these themes and the Middle Eastern Matrix of Domination framework, a subsequent round of deductive coding was conducted to situate these themes within their specific geopolitical contexts, examining all the influential factors shaping women's social and private lives as discussed in the texts. Table 2 presents the results of this analysis of the 170 articles and books.

Results: An Overview

Patriarchy, government, and religion emerge as dominant themes in the analysis of gender-related scholarship across the Middle East. In Bahrain, patriarchy (60%) is rooted in tribal traditions and economic limitations, while laws and government (30%) influence women's status, and religion (50%) reinforces societal restrictions (Ebrahim 2016; Seikaly 1994; Al-Musawi 2016). Similarly, patriarchy (70%) is a critical theme in Cyprus, where women's organizations often operate within male-dominated political structures, limiting their capacity to challenge systemic gendr discrimination (Hadjipavlou & Mertan 2010). Government (60%) also plays a crucial role in reinforcing patriarchal portrayals of women in media (Aliefendioglu & Arslan 2011).

In Egypt, government (70%) and religion (60%) shape gender roles, with state policies historically affecting women's rights (Al-Ali 2002). While feminists critique religious restrictions on gender equality (Younis 2006), some Islamist feminists advocate for women's rights within an Islamic framework (Cole 1981). Iran's scholarship overwhelmingly emphasizes government (100%) and religion (90%) as interconnected forces shaping women's roles post-1979 revolution (Barlow & Akbarzadeh 2008). Feminists face state repression but utilize digital activism to resist gendered oppression (Tahmasebi-Birgani 2017), while Islamic feminists propose faith-based gender reforms (Ahmadi 2006).

War and government (60%) dominate Iraqi

scholarship, reflecting how political upheavals have impacted women's rights. While regime changes promised reform, they often worsened gender inequalities (Sjoberg 2008). In Israel, patriarchy (50%) is the most discussed theme, with race, class, and war (30%) also shaping gender discourse. Militarization and occupation reinforce gender hierarchies (Dahan-Kalev 2001; Sharoni 1992), and women's peace movements must navigate intersections of ethnicity, class, and gender (Shadmi 2000).

Across the Gulf, patriarchy, religion, and government shape women's lives. In Saudi Arabia, patriarchy (80%), religion (70%), and government (60%) reinforce male dominance despite historical women's movements advocating for education and rights (Al-Rasheed 2013; Al Alhareth, Al Dighrir 2015). Similarly, in Kuwait, religious and patriarchal structures hinder women's rights despite democratization efforts (Al Mughni 1993; Rizzo et al. 2002). In Yemen, religious patriarchy sustains discriminatory laws, including child marriage, though activists push for legal reform (Voinarevich 2015).

The Main Themes

A meta-analysis of the sample of published papers about issues related to gender and women studied in social sciences and humanities revealed the main themes of intersecting systems of oppression in the Middle Eastern countries. Those themes are racism, classism, patriarchy, religion, economy, laws, war, and polity/government. Finding all of the most repeated themes is crucial since common themes brought up in the papers/books can show the pattern of women's issues in the Middles East that could lead scholars toward conceptualizing and forming a responsive theory about women's issues in the region.

In the analysis of 170 articles, religion is the most important theme with the mean close to 60%. All of the counties in the Middle East have at least one article pointing out the influences of religion on women in their social lives. Iran and Kuwait have the highest focus on religion in articles (90%) which means almost all of the papers mentioned the role of religion on women's life. Kuwait's society has been experiencing an Islamic revival since 1993 (Al Mughni 1993). This could explain high level of focus on

religion's role in women's life. Iran also has a long history of religious movements, the most extreme form of which led to the Islamic Revolution in 1979. So, in the case of focusing on different ways of addressing women and gender in such an Islamic country, it is crucial to address Islam as an important influential factor (Razavi 2006).

Patriarchy is the second most important theme in the analysis appearing in 55.3% of articles. Almost all of the countries' papers about women and gender have focused on patriarchy showing the variation between 30% (Egypt and Iraq) to 100% (Oman). However, Iran's articles about women and gender do not show any focus on patriarchy. This leads us to the third important theme which is government/polity. The average percentage of government/polity in the articles is 54.7% but Iran shows the highest focus on the role of this theme and all of the papers related to Iran have the government/polity theme. This can be explained by the fact that after the Islamic revolution in 1979, an Islamic government has ruled Iran and many backward policies related to women have been established and affected women's situation in the country (Razavi 2006; Sanasarian 1982; Sedghi 2007). The cause of this increase in focus on the government theme also potentially explains the lack of importance of patriarchy in analysis about women in Iran. It seems that there is a relationship between the level of attention to patriarchy and government in the papers/books[4]. It seems that scholars put more emphasis on the role of government on women's lives when there is a powerful controller government is in ruling the country. On the other hand, the role and importance of patriarchal system in the women's lives degraded or decreased since patriarchal government try to impose patriarchal rules on women's lives.

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[4] I run a Pearson Correlation between patriarchy and government/polity using SPSS to see if there is any meaningful relationship between the importance of patriarchy and government in papers. The result shows a moderate negative linear relationship (r= -.671) between patriarchy and government in the analysis of main themes of the articles related to gender and women in the Middle East.

The fourth theme I found in the articles is laws, which was featured in 37% of papers. Almost all the countries' articles have at least one paper that talks about the importance and influence of laws on women in the Middle Eastern countries. The only country that has not shown laws as the main theme in Cyprus. The absence of this theme from the sample of papers related to Cyprus seems to be related to the importance of male dominancy and patriarchy as the main themes in analysis on women and gender in the Cypriot social context. War is the fifth important theme that is focused on in 14.7% of articles. High percentages of this theme in articles related to Palestine (60%), Iraq (60%), and Syria (40%), and Israel (30%) are likely due to the fact that these countries have experienced conflict and unrest for many years that influenced women's lives adversely and signal the importance of the relationship between gender and transnationalism in the context of war and peace building in the Middle East (Al-Ali and Pratt 2009).

Economy (11.2%), Race/Tribe (10.6%), and Class (4.7) are the least most repeated themes in the analysis of main themes about women and gender in the Middle Eastern countries. Although finding these themes in the sample of articles does show the importance of political economy's interconnection with class, gender, and race/tribe within gendered contexts (Anthias 2014), ultimately these themes were addressed in small numbers of papers since the structural systems of dominations were the most important theoretical tools used by scholars to address women's and gender issues in the region.

Which Domains of Power Are Getting More Attention?

The current meta-analysis on women and gender related issues featured in papers/books about the Middle East helps me to find out which domains of power get more attention, and which domains of power need to be addressed more in future research. As shown in table ², religion, government/polity, patriarchy, law, war, and economy are the important themes in the analyzed articles related to the Middle Eastern countries. All of the mentioned themes can be categorized in the structural domain of power that includes social systems that organize power relations (Collins 2005). Having a long history of patriarchy within religious contexts, ruling by male-dominated government that articulate laws to rule societies lead most of the scholars to focus on the structural domains of power, once they want to study women and gender issues in the Middle Eastern countries.

The analysis of 170 papers published on the topic of women and gender in the Middle East reveals several key insights. First, it highlights how patriarchal culture and rules shape women's lives and deaths, with evidence on honor killings, family and domestic violence, body ownership, control over outfits, and guardianship through the lens of heteropatriarchy (Arvin et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1991). In addition, it shows the centrality and importance of religion in shaping women's experiences, examining how Islamic laws, based on various interpretations, leave women vulnerable to intimate and state violence. Additionally, the conflict between Zionism and Islam is introduced as a significant point worth further exploration, considering its profound impact on the region's socio-political dynamics. Third, this analysis highlights the importance of politics on the living situation of women in the region. Considering the state polices in the region, the adverse life situation of women has been even more exacerbated by national political systems establish laws to control women (Crenshaw, 1991). In addition, the neocolonial actions of the "west" in the name of the war on terror in the Middle East negatively affects women's lives (Erevelles, 2011; Puar, 2017; Russo, 2019).

The findings highlight how patriarchy, government policies, and religious ideologies collectively shape women's experiences across the Middle East region. While feminist movements persist in challenging systemic gender discrimination, entrenched political and religious structures continue to pose significant barriers to gender equality (Jamal 2001; Golkowska 2014; Al-Rasheed 2013).

As shown in the analysis, themes such as sexuality, migration, disability, and interpersonal power dynamics and gender-based violence are notably missing from much of the literature. For future studies, since women status is

is influenced greatly by various factors like class, tribal groups' values, cultural values, familial forms and values, sexual orientation, domestic violence, and so on, interviewing a representative sample of women and sexual minorities in each of the Middle Eastern countries will enable researchers to find the similarities and differences in women's lived experiences to form and analyze the interpersonal domain of power influencing on women's lives in the Middle East. In addition, analyzing laws related to women and sexual minorities in each of the countries will help to find out the ways that gendered oppression is being legitimized in similar or variant ways in Middle East. It is necessary to see all four domains of power as interconnected systems. Such analysis will help us to create a dynamic system that understands the contradictions of oppressions toward formation comprehensive standpoint theory about Middle Eastern feminist thoughts dealing with complexities of matrices of domination in the region.

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TRIPARTITE NIGHTMARES AND FEMINIST DREAMS:

Glorifying the Grotesque

By **Jacqueline Cardoso & Amaya Kodituwakku**

Bakhtin and Belief: An Introduction to the Grotesque

In the same way blood runs within our veins, shame and terror over what it means to be human courses through us at the behest of white supremacist, capitalist, ableist patriarchy. By disenfranchising us from our understandings of ourselves and others, systems of oppression work to subordinate individuals, capitalizing on insecurities. The concept of the *grotesque* reared its head during the French Enlightenment, attempting to shock and caricaturize the vulgar to socially codify norms of morality and decency. Come the twentieth century, the grotesque was popularized by Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* (1965), in which he argued that negative phenomenon should not be satirized to reject it, but rather to reclaim its power, and maybe with it, turn the social tides of purity culture (Sara Cohen Shabat 2013). Previous understandings of the grotesque tend to stay within the realm of the physical body, as seen through Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and Nikolai Gogol's "The Nose". We follow Bakhtin's line of thought in which we argue that privileging only the body as a site of the grotesque is antithetical to our comprehension of feminism. Countering academia's urge to follow Descartes' notions of the mind/body split, the feminist reclamation of the grotesque must incorporate a crip feminist understanding of the bodymind: the body cannot be separated from the mind which cannot be separated from the soul which cannot be separated from the world. Constantly in flux, growing, changing, the grotesque is "impossible to represent… with a binary system or any logic of the same" (Cohen Shabat 2013, 65). If our norms of the acceptable are constructions

We have chosen to structure our paper in the form of conversation in order to underscore one of adrienne maree brown's Principles of Emergent Strategy: "There is a conversation in the room that only these people at this moment can have. Find it" (adrienne maree brown 2017, 41). The dialogic nature of this paper mirrors the collaborative and intersectional approaches to feminist reclamation. When engaged in active communication, our smaller individual responses work to create larger moments of collective understanding, mirroring the logics of feminist fractals (brown 2017). The second part of this project then moves into the realm of knowledge mobilization, taking our written conversation and transforming it into a material zine. Zines have a rich history as alternative, counter-cultural, and independent forms of knowledge sharing. Rising in popularity with the creation of 1970s punk fanzines and 1990s feminist and queer zines (Melanie Ramdarshan Bold 2017), they are designed to be passed on from one reader to another. These material artifacts are mediums of hope, as they "offer a model for how individuals might form relationships" and find community within its pages (Alison Piepmeier 2008, 235). Feminist scholars have long advocated for the necessity of zines as a field of study within academic spaces; the mobility and materiality of zines rightfully challenge traditional learning structures, expanding the process of research-creation. The relationship between our paper and our zine reinforces this process by redefining what is considered valuable study under the realm of academia. Throughout this project, we focus on topics such as menstruation, sexuality, beauty standards, drag, butch-femme dynamics, the queer and disabled villain, stand-up comedy, physical and digital protest, and organized religion. Our mission is to explore what facets of identity and community have been *grotesque-ified* and whether reclamation of the grotesque is even possible. What have feminists done to reclaim the grotesque and what needs to continue being done?

Amaya: Blood for the Taking and Transforming

If patriarchy had its way, those of marginalized genders would be fragmented from their bodily processes. In particular, menstruation is painted as something of the grotesque.vv adrienne

maree brown explores this demonization of periods within *Pleasure Activism*: "Many... have desires programmed by the "period = unclean" narrative that only seems to serve a male supremacist worldview" (adrienne maree brown 2019, 137). Alongside brown, Christine Shio Lim's explanation of "desirability politics" proves useful for understanding social constructions of menstruation (Christine Shio Lim 2019). She defines desirability politics as how "whom we desire—sexually, romantically, and socially—inherently carries political import and is informed by systems of oppression" (Lim 2019, 2012). From patriarchal religious beliefs framing menstruation as a curse to societal blaming of periods for female emotions to secretive communication and codewords, bleeding (unless you're a cisgender man) has been rendered taboo. I would like to take a pause to problematize popular culture discussions of periods, as they tend to center an experience that is dominated by cis women. Menstruation cannot be made synonymous with womanhood as it alienates trans women and men, nonbinary and gender diverse folks, as well as cis women who do not menstruate. Feminist discussions of menstruation are only one step on the road towards dismantling sexism. With rising conversations surrounding period poverty and reproductive justice, blood, guts, and gore are increasingly being utilized by feminists as a means to embody a reclamation of what is considered grotesque.

Most notably, there has been a shift to metaphorizing menstruation as a part of female sexuality through the trope of vampirism. I'd like to begin by noting that female vampirism motifs in the western canon can be traced back to Sheridan Le Fanu's 1872 Gothic novella, *Carmilla*. His motivations were of a more malicious misogyny, attempting to construct a narrative that would warn against overt female sexuality, particularly that of queer women; young, virginal Laura is corrupted by an overly sexual lesbian vampire named Carmilla. While authorial intent is important, what is more crucial is the hermeneutic process of meaning-making that readers engage in. With editors such as Carmen Maria Machado, there is a deliberate reworking by feminists, as they subvert the initial homophobic and misogynistic intentions of these stories, engaging in a resistive rereading rooted in queer theory. For instance, the choice to have Carmilla enter Laura's life during a full moon marks a moment initiating Laura's symptoms of blood loss (Sheridan Le Fanu 2020, 23): denotatively shown as Carmilla sucking her blood yet, could be read as reaching menarche. This choice taps into the widely held cultural belief that menstruation cycles align with that of the moon. With this loss of blood, Laura and Carmilla begin to fall deeply in love with one another as Carmilla declares, "if your dear heart is wounded, my wild heart bleeds with yours" (Le Fanu 2020, 46). To bleed is seen as a grotesque and destructive curse, removing the knowledge that it is a very human bodily process— one that has the potential to be shared and communicated for intimacy and connection. Very akin to brown's position that "because the norm is so anti blood... it can be healing and normalizing to experience a lover on Team Bloody Fetish" (brown 2019, 136), don't you think? Patriarchal desirability politics breed fear and discomfort with bodies—a gendered somatophobia. Engaging with the feminist imagery of blood and gore allow us to question why we have been led to view our bodily processes in a negative light. When we begin to redefine menstruation not as something grotesque but rather as something beautiful in its connectivity, we begin to open doors for better understanding ourselves and others.

Jacqueline: Patriarchal Standards of Beauty, Sashay Away

Building from conversations regarding the vilification of menstruation, I would like to examine what analyzing desirability politics means in connection with the beauty industry. Just as bodily norms are shaped by the attitudes of the time, beauty standards are in flux with ever-changing beauty trends. The industry itself leverages these current trends to profit from insecurity and provide a "remedy" for the socially constructed grotesque. Lindy West articulates this point perfectly:

> *Marketing is power and beauty culture is power and men's control of the narrative is power and a lot of people are making a lot of money teaching us that we live in an unshakable natural hierarchy that bestows peace only upon those who achieve a narrow, subjective (and heavily monetized) version of perfection that just happens to look like white Barbie except less career oriented. (Lindy West 2021, 69)*

There are many ways in which this natural hierarchy of beauty can be disrupted—drag, for example, is just one of them. Mikhail Bakhtin's carnival "celebrate[s] temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order" (Yiorgos Zafiriou 2020, 2). By turning the "established order" of gender binaries upside down, drag can be read as an embodied performance of the carnivalesque which exposes gender as a subjective, social construct (Zafiriou 2020). "The dissolution of [male and female] boundaries in drag is what makes [it] taboo in in nature" and what makes it a disruptive force of dissent (Zafiriou 2020, 32). Beyond destabilizing gender binaries, drag also redefines the roles of performer and audience member; the spectacle of drag, made popular by shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race*, calls into question the spectacle of gender performativity itself—both on and off stage—by allowing non-drag artists to recognize cisheteronormativity as a performance. While cis, straight, white men have dominant control over the beauty industry through the monetization of makeup, clothing, and entertainment, drag artists are reclaiming these material elements as means of queer joy and celebration.

Before we venture further into the realm of reclamation, I would like to preface that while acts of reclamation themselves might be well intentioned, depending on who is doing the reclaiming, they also have the power to reinscribe harm. For example, the movie *Poor Things* (2023), directed by Yorgos Lanthimos, and based on the novel by Alasdair Gray, has been labelled as a feminist masterpiece that subverts the male gaze through a powerful story of sexual liberation. That's right—a movie directed by a man, based on a book written by a man, is a masterpiece of feminist agency. In reality, *Poor Things* reinscribes the same harmful narratives that it appears to be trying to work against. While I have not seen the movie myself, perhaps you can provide greater clarity on how it might be misconstrued as feminist? What I want to make clear is that while individualism can cause immense harm, forgetting about the individual altogether is just as dangerous, since it enables creators to claim stories that don't belong to them. As such, we must critique and question who is allowed to do the reclaiming. To avoid reinforcing dominant ideologies in the media, those impacted by the grotesque must retain creative agency and ownership of their stories. Otherwise, reclamation runs the risk of repackaging and reinscribing the same harmful narratives perpetuated by the grotesque.

Amaya: A Woman Made in His Image? No Thank You

Thank you so much for giving me the opportunity to talk about the complications of Lanthimos' *Poor Things*. When it first came out, the film gained its spot as "*Barbie* for weird people". A story from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* may provide a backdrop for this comparison. Pygmalion, a sculptor who detests women, begins to sculpt a marble woman in his own image, and names her Galatea. Falling in love, he begs Aphrodite to grant Galatea animacy. Aphrodite turns the statue into a living woman and the two lovers live happily ever after. Beautiful romance? I think not. Both *Poor Things* and *Barbie* revolve around representations of the feminine ideal, naïve to complexities of the world around them. At least in *Barbie's* Pygmalion, there is a clearer emphasis on the storytelling of women and girls through doll play. Its creation narrative becomes rooted in the relationships between women. *Poor Things* does not even attempt to disrupt the problematic notions of male-dominated creation narratives. In a surrealist steampunk world, the mad scientist, Dr. Godwin Baxter (Willem Dafoe), takes a pregnant woman (Emma Stone), who has taken her own life, and replaces her brain with that of her unborn child. In short, viewers watch as a man takes a woman's agency and brings her back to life because he deems her autonomous action grotesque. The woman (now named Bella) has her entire reality constructed by Godwin, who she refers to as "God". As Bella begins to mature, she decides to explore the world. She discovers sex, poverty, oppression, and does a stint as a sex worker as a "social experiment" (a framing that only she, as a woman unaware of her privilege, is capable of). When she returns to Godwin's house as a "self-actualized woman", she forgives him for her creation. Bella never rises above her creator, still calling him "God", and at the end she even

takes his place performing horrid experiments on others and staying within the confines of the house. *Barbie* may have its faults, but at least our protagonist chooses to become human; she moves beyond her intended purpose and chooses a new life for herself. While Lanthimos believes he is reclaiming the grotesque through surgical gore, sex work as a choice, and dubious consent, this is not his story to tell. Female characters that are supposed to be read as feminist cannot be created by a man (both Godwin and Lanthimos/McNamara), go on a "journey of self-discovery", only to return to the conditions they attempted to escape in the first place. If "96% of film directors are men" and "76% of writers across all platforms are men" (Lindy West 2021, 74), how can we expect to see accurate and non-offensive portrayals of feminist ideals on screen?

Moving into drag as reclamation due to gender binary blurring, I would like to talk a little bit about how a reclamation of the grotesque (in this case, a muddling of binaries) can be seen through a preservationist lens. We ought to consider Sara Ahmed's conversation about the closing of a door as a means of survival: "A closed door [can] be a complaint, a way of refusing what the institutions demands from you, a way of refusing to disappear" (Sara Ahmed 2022). Bodies that do not fit cisheteronormativity are made to experience disproportionate levels of precarity, especially as we witness an outburst of anti-trans legislation. Safety becomes priority for many gender non-conforming people. As such, gender presentation is a way of covertly refusing to adhere to traditional gender norms while still maintain levels of safety. We can see this through how butches might navigate spaces. Butch is most often understood as a category of lesbian gender identity constituted through the deployment and manipulation of masculine gender codes and symbols (Gayle Rubin 1992, 472). A seminal text in butch-femme culture is Leslie Feinberg's semi-autobiographical novel *Stone Butch Blues*. Especially in the 1940s-50s, many butch lesbians would further blur the lines between gender identity and presentation, often presenting as men to keep themselves and their femme partners safe. When Jess Goldberg, the protagonist of *Stone Butch Blues* asks her femme (Theresa), "What if I don't take the hormones and pass?", Theresa candidly says,

"Then you'll probably be killed on the street or take your own life out of madness, I don't know" (Leslie Feinberg 2014, 165). Jess's identity as a "he-she" (Feinberg 2014, 2) still rings true today with so many butch lesbians being transmasculine, reaching out for gender affirming healthcare, or even borrowing from drag king makeup as a way of making themselves safe against a world that attempts to label them as grotesque. Maybe, it is through complaints that reclamation becomes an epithet of survival.

Jacqueline: Snapping for Space

Your mention of Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* provides a clear path to discussing how queer bodies are problematized and harmed by the grotesque. As we witness Jess and other butches experience police violence, we are made aware of the ways in which the grotesque enforces heteronormativity; by deviating from heteronormativity, queer and transgender bodies are in danger. To unpack this harm, I'd like to turn towards Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* in which sexual orientation manifests in physical spaces; she writes, "if orientation is a matter of how we reside in space, then sexual orientation might also be a matter of residence, of how we inhabit spaces" (Sara Ahmed 2006, 543). Space, within heterosexual culture, is oriented towards straightness. As such, queer bodies—which deviate from this straightness—are "made socially present as a deviant" (Ahmed 2006, 554). We can plot the orientation of spaces towards straightness through the gendering of physical space, such as clothing stores, bathrooms, and changerooms. This orientation can also be more nuanced; it can manifest through language by refusing to use gender neutral pronouns, or it can appear as the assumption that two girls holding hands are close friends rather than a romantic couple. In this sense, orientation towards straightness superimposes straightness onto 2SLGBTQ+ people by refusing to acknowledge queerness entirely. Ahmed describes heteronormativity as a "straightening device which [reroutes] the slant of queer desire" (Ahmed 2006, 562). This rerouting, rooted in social constructions of queer as grotesque, is violent and deadly. In *Stone Butch Blues*, the street itself becomes a place where straightness must be performed, in this case by rerouting the butch self to pass as a man.

A failure to perform straightness may lead to being "killed on the street" (Feinberg 2014, 165). Through this lens, hate crimes can be understood as violent rerouting and punishment for snapping away from heterosexuality. On her blog, Ahmed defines snaps as "what can happen when you are unwilling to meet the conditions for being with others" and queer snaps as "moment[s] you realize what you do not have to be" (Sara Ahmed 2016). This is why queer spaces are so important; while not all queer spaces are necessarily safe spaces, they are environments in which queer people can find community and collectively snap against heteronormativity. Although the grotesque works to reorient the slant of the queerness into a straight line, building out queer communities and existing as queer realigns the very order of space itself.

Amaya: "These Gays! They're Trying to Murder [Cisheteropatriarchy]!"

Your dissection of the street as a space of performance is particularly interesting and I'd like to parse out that metaphor some more. Public protest is painted as grotesque in its disruption, as many argue that "you get things by asking nicely, being loud will just annoy people". Unacknowledged privilege stops people from understanding that the disruption of protest is the driving factor of change. To make yourself heard through protest is to take up space, turning attention away from institutions and towards systemic oppressions. As Shannon Mattern mentions in her chapter "Sidewalks of Concrete and Code":

> The streets were... where the oppressed practiced small acts of resistance or engaged in political demonstrations to demand equality. The sidewalks were sites of contestation and media for resistance." (Shannon Mattern 2022, 42)

Public demonstrations force people to contend with realities they have the privilege of not experiencing. We turn to the efficacy of die-ins and public hunger strikes, as the streets become flooded with reminders of lived experiences. In white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, concepts of death, disruption, chaos, hunger, and sickness are deemed as grotesque and therefore ignored. We can see this through societal

treatment of our houseless population to the western ability to "shut off the TV" when news of state violence becomes too bleak for them to handle. What public protest does is bring these realities back into the spotlight, and with this, taking up space on the street in a world that doesn't want you to be visible becomes a method of reclaiming the grotesque.

When discussing visibility of marginalized people, however, it becomes crucial to think through these portrayals of visibility. In an attempt to reroute queer bodies, dominant ideologies equate queerness to villainy. This dehumanization fuels heteronormative constructs of straightness as good and queerness as evil. Mainstream media benefits from this characterization: they profit off of the queer villain. By making viewers scared of queer and trans folks, the media continues to feed into the societal fear of the grotesque.

While the construction of the queer villain is problematic, I think there is also room to say that a lack of the queer villain might also create issues. This is the line of argumentation that writers, such as Carmen Maria Machado, delineate. Machado states:

> We deserve to have our wrongdoing represented as much as our heroism, because when we refuse wrongdoing as a possibility for a group of people, we refuse their humanity. That is to say, queers—real-life ones—do not deserve representation, protection, and rights because they are morally pure or upright as a people. They deserve those things because they are human beings, and that is enough. (Carmen Maria Machado 2019)

We tend to ignore our own multifacetedness and instead believe that, to gain social respect and rights as marginalized peoples, we must sanitize ourselves to earn respectability. I suppose it comes back to who is doing the reclaiming. In the hands of those with dominant identities, the queer villain perpetuates hegemonic power dynamics. In the hands of queer folks, especially queer people of colour, the queer villain, anti-hero, or anti-villain has the power to remind us that queer wrongdoing exists and is something that needs to be discussed: that queer domestic abuse is

prevalent, that queer violence does happen, that trauma, left unaddressed, can harden any heart. It is through characters such as Jobu Tupaki, Tom Ripley, the queer women of *Yellowjackets*, and more, that queer viewers are able to reclaim their own complexity and therefore their own grotesqueness.

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Jacqueline: It's Alive! Disabled Representation on Screen and on Paper

The media is a malleable tool that can both reinforce and subvert notions of the grotesque. Just as queer bodies have been villainized on screen, so have disabled bodies. The disabled villain trope is a product of ableist society, rooted in the idea that disabled bodies are intrinsically immoral and somehow less valuable than abled bodies. In Biblical contexts, ableness is synonymous with goodness, and disability is viewed as punishment for sin; for example, forsaking God often resulted to sickness and disease. Looking at a more modern example, in the *Star Wars* franchise, Darth Vader's psychological descent into evil is marked by his physical transformation as a "cyborg"; immediately after turning to the dark side, he faces Obi-Wan in battle and suffers from third degree burns. From this point forward, Vader requires a suit to survive, which can be likened to a kind of life support as represented through the mechanical sound of his breathing and voice. As more machine than man, Vader's character dehumanizes disabled peoples by framing disability as villainy. That being said, when looking specifically at the construction of character tropes, it's important to question whether the writer is creating a queer/disabled villain, or if they are villainizing queer/disabled people. As you mentioned, Jobu Tupaki, Tom Ripley, and *Yellowjackets* are excellent examples of characters whose villainy is wholly separate from their queerness. While Darth Vader's character development is rooted in ableist perceptions of disability, his disability is not the root cause of his villainy. In fact, many disabled people have actually reclaimed Darth Vader as a powerful and fearless disabled character. Conversations around tropes and representation are therefore incredibly nuanced, and require a broader evaluation of context, plot, characteristics, and character.

While tropes can surely perpetuate harm, they can also be used to reveal and reassess what is grotesque. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is a critical work in the literary canon of disability fiction. The story itself follows Doctor Victor Frankenstein, who sets out to reanimate a dead body. However, when assembled, Victor's "beauty of [his] dream vanished and breathless horror and disgust" took over instead (Mary Shelley 1818, 36). Frightened by his yellow skin, white sockets, shriveled complexion, and straight black lips, Victor decides to abandon his creation. The Creation's physical appearance, understood by readers as a physical disability, forces him to lead a life of isolation. Whenever the creature attempts to engage with others, they either reject or try to take his life, believing him to be monstrous and grotesque. The Creation's isolation reflects the reality of many disabled peoples, who struggle to connect with non-disabled individuals and might feel the need to distance themselves out of self-preservation. The only bond that the creature forms throughout the novel is with an older, blind man—another disabled person. While short-lived, this connection symbolizes the importance of disabled communities. *Frankenstein* is considered a work of disability fiction not just because of the Creation's lived experience, but because Shelley forces readers to confront what is truly grotesque; ableist society, represented through Victor Frankenstein himself, is the real monster of both Shelley's gothic tale and of our own world.

Amaya: Disabled Considerations of Cyborg Feminism

Your point about the nuances related to disability and villainy is incredibly crucial, and I really enjoyed reading your analysis of the Creation and Darth Vader. We've had many conversations about how feminism has been co-opted and viewed through a white lens, leading to the loss of its original intent. bell hooks outlines this through the idea that "feminist politics is losing momentum because feminist movement has lost clear definitions" (hooks 2000, 6).

As you stated, part of white supremacy is the perpetuation of dis/ableism. I have been thinking a lot about Donna Haraway's concept of Cyborg Feminism, particularly its pitfalls. She attempts to theorize experiences of womanhood through the image of a cyborg. According to Haraway, the cyborg's hybrid nature defies notions of overarching western Enlightenment discourses by confusing and dismantling ostensibly "stable" socio-cultural boundaries, including race, sex, class, and nation; she states, "we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism" (Donna Haraway 1999, 66). By attempting to create a creature that blurs the lines of all these boundaries and identities, Haraway uses a being that is both the biologic and the technologic (similar to Darth Vader). While on the surface, the cyborg might seem like it would lend itself as a useful tool to crip feminism, many disabled thinkers argue that cyborg feminism is "markedly absent in any kind of critical engagement with disability, any analysis of the material realities of disabled people's interactions with technology" (Alison Kafer 2013, 105). As Leah Piepzna-Samarasinha observes, "In mainstream literature [and film], disabled people are inspirations, tragedies, monsters, hermits, cautionary tales, plagues, warnings" (Leah Piepzna-Samarasinha 2022, 199). Within this quotation lies the issues with Haraway's concept; through attempting to offer a feminist epistemology, Haraway, a white, upper-class, able-bodied woman, creates a concept that ignores the heterogenous experiences of disabled life. Haraway's critique of dualistic understandings of human and machine and culture invertedly reifies these binaries. Disabled individuals, particularly those who use assistive technologies or prosthetics, imply that the "human" has been made mixed or impure with machine; this creates binaries of the natural/unnatural. Through the creation of the disabled villain and legislative moves that imply accessibility is a burden, disabled people are indoctrinated with shame regarding their lives. It is crucial that when we have discussions surrounding the grotesque, we make active efforts to include and centre those who have been sidelined, namely disabled people. When we begin to deconstruct social definitions of disability, we ensure that empathy and understanding underscores our praxis, two things that white supremacist capitalist patriarchy attempts to strip us of.

Jacqueline: Standing Up Against Systems of Oppression

Part of reclaiming the grotesque involves reclaiming feelings of shame, assessing both why we feel it and how we can use it to fight against systems of oppression. I'd like to open up our conversation of shame to the realm of stand-up comedy. Historically, stand-up has been used to perpetuate harmful stereotypes and uphold notions of the grotesque. While I'm writing in the past tense, this "humour" is unfortunately still popular within stand-up. At the beginning of 2024, Matt Rife, an emerging comic who gained popularity on TikTok, received backlash for his latest Netflix special where he made offensive jokes directed at victims of domestic violence. In response to the backlash, Rife urged those offended by his routine to purchase "special needs helmets". However, the masquerading of hates speech as jokes is becoming less prevalent as more marginalized comedians enter the world of comedy. The stand-up stage is slowly being reclaimed as a site of dissent, where humour is intended to draw attention towards social issues and dismantle systems of harm. This reimagining of the stand-up stage builds community for individuals that have historically been targeted in comedic spaces. The YouTube comment section of disabled stand-up comic, Josh Blue, is full of love and support: "this cured my heart after a rough couple of weeks", "love seeing someone who is secure in their disability", "you made me smile and laugh and forget about my own crap, even just for a little while" (Dry Bar Comedy 2020).

Despite the growing sense of community within standup culture, there is still pressure to conform to a mass audience that wants to hear these kinds of ableist, sexist, racist jokes. This pressure is often realized in the form of self-deprecating humour. Citing comedian Hannah Gadsby, "[when] self-deprecation…comes from somebody who already exists within the margins it's not humility, it's humiliation" (Jenny Hollander 2018). In this sense, self-deprecating humour—in which disabled peoples are made to be the punchline—limits disabled folks to talking about disability in a way that is tolerable for ableist society. Tolerance but a "master's tool" (Audrey Lorde 2007, 112) that perpetuates the grotesque, as violence is hidden just beneath

the surface; this violence echoes in the hearts and bodies of those who are merely tolerated, and manifests psychologically though feelings of shame. This is not to say that disability cannot be joked about. In fact, this approach to "inclusivity" would only work to further isolate and dehumanize disabled peoples. There is a fundamental distinction between laughing at and laughing with someone. When making jokes about his younger sister with cerebral palsy, comedian Daniel Sloss says that "if you're laughing at the disabled person, congratulations, you're a pile of shit. But if you're laughing with them, what a joy" (Likeville 2020). I'd like to acknowledge that Daniel Sloss is a white, cis, straight, abled man—but this highlights that it is possible to joke about disability from outside the community without perpetuating notions of disability as grotesque. Just like the reclamation of slurs, the reclamation of jokes is heavily context dependent. While there are still many comics that perpetuate harm, as more and more marginalized individuals begin to reclaim the stage, stand-up comedy has the potential to turn into *stand-up* comedy: a form of dissent through storytelling and humor that stands up against harmful stereotypes and systems of oppression.

Amaya: The Possibilities of Liberation Theology

To your point on tolerance as a "master's tool", it would be remiss not to discuss the legacy of organized religion both as an oppressive and liberatory force. Religion, and its place in a feminist future, can be a sticky thing to dissect. In *All About Love*, bell hooks says, "fundamentalist thinkers use religion to justify supporting imperialism, militarism, sexism, racism, homophobia. They deny the unifying message of love that is at the heart of every major religious tradition" (bell hooks 2018, 73). When we look at religion, we primarily see the ways in which it has been weaponized to perpetuate harm and violence through colonization; all we must do is look at the treatment of Indigenous peoples in the residential school system. Perhaps redefining what it means to live a spiritual life outside of organized religion, would allow us to reclaim and integrate spirituality into feminist ethic.

Religions of the Global South, such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and more, have been deemed backwards and grotesque because of white supremacy. However, with the increasingly publicized Palestinian liberation movement, more people seem to be participating in Muslim communities. On my own social media, there have been TikToks of white non-Muslim people celebrating Ramadan to pay respects to those being killed by Israel in occupied Palestine. When we turn to institutionalized religion, it is often out of a desire for community. Patricia Hill Collins argues for a recognition of knowledge heterogeneity within hierarchical power relations: "Suppressing the knowledge produced by any oppressed group makes it easier for dominant groups to rule because the seeming absence of dissent suggests that subordinate groups willingly collaborate in their own victimization" (Patricia Hill Collins 2022, 3). Where institutional religion loses sight of true spirituality is the way these religions are practiced within hierarchies that perpetuate the shame and tolerance you were discussing earlier. These institutions also tend to use "conquer and divide" tactics, in which they attempt to diminish or shadow the knowledge that can be found in differing religions, forsaking other religions by labelling them as blasphemous or terroristic. "Our histories never unfold in isolation. We cannot truly tell what we consider to be our own histories without knowing the other stories" (Angela Davis 2016, 135). In a value pluralist society, white supremacist capitalist patriarchy wins by instilling individualistic ideals of superiority over others in practices that are and should be rooted in love and community. The recent spotlight on Islam in the wake of the Palestinian genocide is an apt representation of the reclamation and reconsideration of religions that have been deemed as grotesque. Through witnessing the community support that Muslim folks are providing each other in times of grief, and the strength of Palestinian solidarity and activism, we are beginning to see an uptick in people critically engaging with Islam. Whether it be through attending memorial prayers at local Mosques, learning Arabic to accurately and respectfully engage in protest chants, or reading the Quran, there is a reclamation of religion in the public consciousness. When the "grotesque" is normalized, we demystify and redefine what the grotesque is.

Continuing our conversation on methods of grotesque-ification, I'd like to highlight soul loss and spirit murdering. Through systems such as the military-industrial complex and the education system, white supremacist capitalist patriarchy ushers in a deep dehumanization, both of the self and others. This concept of soul loss is birthed from Indigenous knowledge systems, as Ojibwe ethics argues that "just as the Windigo's bite is infectious... self-destruction drags along many more victims" (Robin Wall Kimmerer 2013, 306). The military-industrial complex creates soldiers who will revel in violence by demonstrating their own soul loss, divorcing their soulbodymind into disparate parts; this fragmentation allows for them to neutralize guilt and justify actions. The spirit is murdered through hierarchies of power and domination. But maybe a reclamation of spirituality is exactly what is needed to dissent from this. As posited by bell hooks, "all around the world liberation theology offers the exploited and oppressed a vision of spiritual freedom that is linked to struggles to end domination" (hooks 2018, 74). To say that feminism requires the equity of all community-based ontologies, but in the same breath, paint it as something wholly secular is disingenuous. Through a reclamation and reframing of how truly community-based spiritual practices can act as dissent against an individualistic society, we would begin to reclaim our own soulbodyminds and work towards radical healing and liberation.

Jacqueline: Intersectionality and Transnationality as Frameworks for Moving Forward

Thank you for highlighting how religious institutions use divide and conquer ideologies to label others as terroristic. Institutions themselves, especially government institutions like the military, are skilled at weaponizing the grotesque to advance their own agendas. We can see this play out in real time through Israel's attempts at pinkwashing. Israel uses 2SLGBTQ+ acceptance and pride within the Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF) to justify colonial acts of violence, and frame Islam as backwards and uncivilized. This reinforces the white saviour complex, distorting Israel's genocide as a means of rescuing Palestinians from themselves. Pinkwashing is typically

executed through news cycles and social media; on Israel's Twitter page, you can find photos of gay marriage proposals between IOF soldiers, and soldiers holding pride flags beside tanks and bombed cities. By seemingly positioning themselves against homophobia, the IOF creates an image of Palestinians as terrorists and of themselves as liberators—framing the very existence of Palestinian people as grotesque. Building on your point of soul loss in the military, queer soldiers use their queer identity as a means of legitimizing harm and interpreting their "fight" against Gaza as a fight against homophobia, with little attention paid to queer Palestinians.

[Queering the Map](#) is an online website that redirects attention back towards invisibilized queer people across the globe, by allowing users to attach anonymous messages to a specific geographical location. While anonymous, Queering the Map is a tool for community building and dissent; it serves as a reminder that there are queer people everywhere, in every nook and cranny of the world, including Palestine. Sites like these demonstrate how social media is integral in creating spaces of community and care— even if that community is faceless and nameless. Davis writes that "the greatest challenge facing us as we attempt to forge international solidarities and connections across national borders is an understanding of what feminists often call intersectionality. Not so much intersectionality of identities, but intersectionality of struggles" (Davis 2016, 144). Looking back on our many discussions, we've covered a lot of ground in this paper. The grotesque, which is constantly in flux with social norms and beliefs, is rooted in almost every aspect of our lives. It is apparent in literature, film, religion, news coverage, all the way to how we take up space in the world. The grotesque is interconnected, and as such, the fight to redefine the grotesque is an interconnected struggle. We cannot talk about streets as places of dissent without talking about the destruction of Palestine's streets; we cannot talk about reclaiming space without talking about Israel's ongoing genocide to eliminate the existence of Palestinian peoples— all of these struggles intersect. So, while the grotesque may aim to alienate and erase, when we resist and reclaim the grotesque, we build communities; communities that are international,

intersectional, and interdependent; communities that have the power to imagine, action, and nourish meaningful change.

The Dreamscape of Reclamation Work: What's Next?

Blood, sexuality, queerness, trans and disabled bodies, community groups, public spaces, and even our basest emotions have been policed and weaponized by systems of oppression. Through reclaiming these facets of being, we work to build a feminist ontology that highlights how social constructionism can be used to abolish and transform our comfortability with ourselves and community. With more space, we would have liked to further dissect what reclamation for the collective means under individualistic institutions (government, military, religion); in particular, Jacqueline would have wanted to discuss cults and communes as a form of longing for the collective and as a means of engaging in socially grotesque behaviours. Amaya would have liked to discuss more examples of false grotesque reclamation, such as cultural appropriation and minimalism discourse which co-opts and markets the grotesque under tripartite understandings of consumerism and materialism. Throughout this discussion, we have also concluded that some aspects of the grotesque cannot be reclaimed within our current systems. For instance, Leonard Cassuto's concept of the *racial grotesque* addresses the way racist political caricatures are used as a method of dehumanization to establish social death for Black and Indigenous peoples (Leonard Cassuto 1997). Due to these roots, it is difficult to see how these representations, and ones like it, could be reclaimed without reinscribing the same harm. As our political, social, and physical landscape continues to change, how do we move forward with defining the grotesque? How do we navigate what we are able to reclaim and what we ought to reject? The waters of moral valence are murky, but it is through discursive interactions that we are able to transform the grotesque nightmares of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy into feminist dreams of reclamation and redefinition.
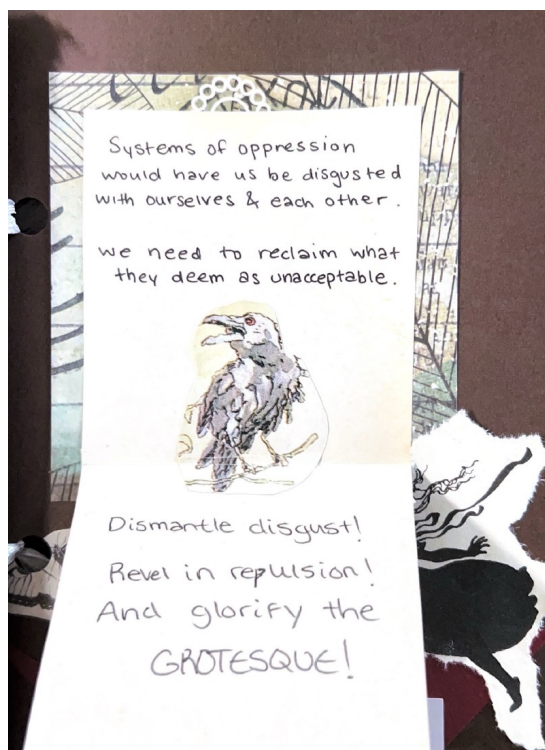
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Glorify the Grotesque: A Feminist Zine

As mentioned, the second part of this project involved creating a physical artifact to convey the themes and topics explored within the co-written paper to a larger audience. The following images are snapshots of said zine, designed to visually communicate feminist reclamations of the grotesque.

made by Jackie and Amaya
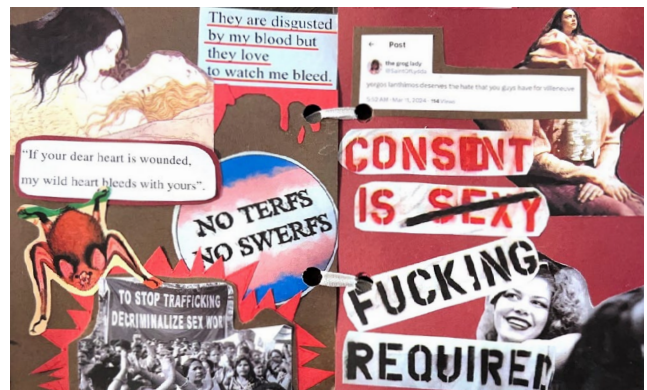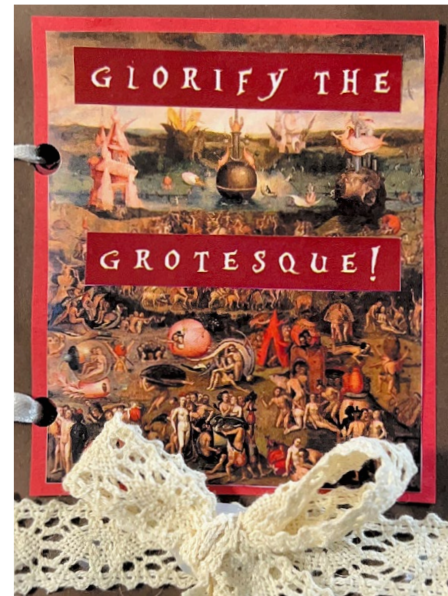
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QUEER SNAPSHOTS

3 Poems

By   Jenna Dobbelsteyn

Esther 4:14 Squandered

My Esther lived across the sea
A westward wake she did not see
I thought that she would set me free
But then instead
She pulled a knife
And sunk her teeth
And ate the very soul of me

An August day I saw her face
A trumpet blast – a rush of grace
I met her with a young embrace
And for a time
She held my hand
And fanned my soul
And in my id she held her place

The colour of our world was bright
A prism – bold and washed with light
The fractals plunging through the night
Her gaze was sun
Her laugh was air
Her arms were ground
Our love a sacred acolyte

Then Xerxes stole her from my side
To be for him his virgin bride
I fell upon my knees and cried
Though she assured
Her heart was mine
And mine was hers
Until I learned that she had lied

A Persian she had posed to be
To stand in place of Queen Vashti
Not Haddasah or myrtle tree
But now a star
To guide herself
Away from death
And everything she was to me

She had the chance to start anew
To speak and to herself be true
But history she threw askew
And so she died
Yet I still live
To look ahead
And find an even brighter hew

Girls Don't

you open your eyes and yawn
the sun gently wavers through the blinds
and falls on your face in subtle warmth
you close your eyes and turn to your
side – a low
pain
in your abdomen

deep breath in
deep breath out

you hug your knees as close
to your chest
as you can
the covers of your bed still pressing their cool
weight upon the side of your body

deep   breath   in
deep   breath   out

you extend your legs out long
you roll onto your back and reach your
arms above your head as far as they will go
s t r e t c h
relax

your mind returns to your belly
and the deep pain within it
you place your hands where it hurts
and breathe
in
and out
before a pang
of thunder shudders through
your thighs and
into your lower
back

de e p   b r e a t h   i   n

it's time to get up

you lift the blankets
swing your legs over the side of your bed
and rise

you reach your arms above your head again and
see your hands extended above
into the totality of your length

you stand and find your slippers
and tiptoe slowly through the kitchen
to the bathroom

you pull down your pants and sit

deep breath in
deep breath out

your bowels empty
easily and completely
from within
relief
a moment of silence for the food of yesterday

a shot of fresh water graces the threshold
in a burst of cold cleanliness
you dry yourself and rise

pull up your pants
wash your hands
and pad delicately back to your bedroom

you remember the pair of jeans
that you've been irrationally avoiding for the last
three months
and decide to try them on
they feel so good against your
still cramping belly

you are ready for the day
now

How Am I Here?

How am I here
now
when then
I was someone else
somewhere else?

How am I here
when then I stood alone
in the kitchen dreaming of the relief found
in the cutlery drawer?
When then I stood alone
in a group of laughing girls
not understanding the ways
I was different but knowing that
I felt it too?

How am I here
when then I stood alone
at the back of the church
with nothing but hate in my heart –
hate for the world
hate for God
hate for myself?
When then I stood alone
on the sidewalk
before the bridge?

How am I here
when then I stood alone
next to her
straddling heaven and hell
and loving the line on which I stood
but never daring to jump from one
side to the other
and then again next to her
or next to her
or next to her?

How am I here
when then I stood alone
on the precipice of
telling someone – freedom
freedom finally found
at the point of no return
but then returning anyway?
When then I stood alone
next to him
through harsh laughs and

tight words and the squirming ache of
inauthenticity everywhere
as the spindly fingers of misery squeezed up
through the floorboards
and tore out my insides?

How am I here
now
standing next to you?

You who comes to me
in all your quiet
strength and gentleness
to pick up one small
fragment at a time
brush it gently off,
hand it to me,
and hold my hand as I
slide it back into place

You whose smile fills
my mind for hours at a time
whose laugh thrums
the rusty strings of my spirit
and teaches me to sing again
whose eyes drip
their amber – honey – burgundy
into the lost greyness of mine
whose voice reaches into
my lungs and traps my breath there

You whose mind caresses
the folds and fabrics
of my awareness and
understanding
whose words wrap me
in gleaming pastel
and flood the darkest
corners with light

You who loves me
You who are my future
How am I here?

✴

STAYING FAT:

The Queer Futurity of Digital Fat Feminist

Anti-Resolutions

By   Mackenzie Edwards
                                 & Mollie Cronin

Introduction: (Anti-)Resolutions

Like clockwork, each year around January 1st, advertisements and social media posts trumpet the promise of a renewed commitment to losing weight, establishing widespread affective associations between this temporal window and the social imperative to avoid fatness at all costs. The normalization of annual weight loss resolutions is produced and maintained by the capitalist system of body-based shame that benefits from it, with this yearly ritual being used to market exercise programs, diet plans, weight loss drugs, gyms, cookbooks, and more (Zaynab Nasurally 2022). This increasingly digital marketing cycle ensures that resolution-makers are perpetually active in the pursuit of weight loss as newly constructed ways to perform thinness and hegemonic ideals of health are developed, "influencing many consumers to purchase commodities that they are convinced they need in order to live up to the slogan 'new year, new you'" (Nassurally 2022).

In recent years, the mass commercialization of diet-related resolutions—especially on social media like Instagram—has expanded to include advertising for injectable GLP-1 agonist weight loss medications like semaglutide, better known by the brand name Ozempic (Phoebe Bain 2024). For those who are fat and/or seek to resist this yearly siren's call of culturally sanctioned weight-loss, the New Year and its resolutions signal an unwelcome public call to once again strive to shrink ourselves.

As a yearly practice wherein people resolve to improve aspects of their life, New Year's resolutions have become codified in many ways as a

performative dieting declaration. Writing from an anti-fat perspective about the (in)effectiveness of weight loss related resolutions, Sophia M. Rössner, Jakob Vikaer Hansen, and Stephan Rössner (2011) reveal more than they perhaps intended about the white Eurocentric underpinnings of fat oppression and how cyclical weight loss resolutions fit into normative temporal traditions, noting "A common point in time to decide to approach the weight problem is around New Year. The tradition to express New Year's resolutions is deeply rooted in the Western civilization, when the change of one year into another offers a given opportunity also to change lifestyle" (3). Given that many of these resolutions fail, yearly intentions to lose weight therefore become somewhat of a recurring temporal marker of the perpetual obligation in Western cultures to be thin and conform. This is especially true for women and even more so for racialized women, whose fatness has been contemporarily and historically constructed as dangerously deviating from oppressive standards of heteronormative desirability (Amy Erdman Farrell 2021; Sabrina Strings 2019). Common Western framings of linear progress toward thinner embodiments have been noted by Rachel Fox (2018) to rely on and reproduce colonial logics that frame history as a continual straightforward march toward Eurocentric notions of "civilization" and "development" (219).

As the diet-centric fanfare of the New Year seems to increase each January, so too does the need for relief from this noise. Through Instagram, many fat artists, activists, creators, and influencers post on social media to assert that their intention for the New Year is to "Stay Fat," disrupting the conformist capitalistic demands of the season in favour of a fat temporality, even despite Instagram itself ironically having various built-in capitalist affordances. In these "anti-resolutions", these fat Instagram users use a variety of tactics including photos, artwork, captions, sharing, and commenting to not only reject the call to succumb to the pressures of New Year's weight loss expectations, but also to insist on the visibility of fat bodies and the possibility of fat futures.

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Heteronormativity, Chrononormativity, and Embodiment

New Year's weight loss resolutions offer the hope of not only a thinner body but also a more hegemonically *acceptable* and *desirable* body, especially for women. Jami McFarland, Van Slothouber, and Allison Taylor (2017) argue that "women are only successful within heteronormative sequential temporal schemes of living if they are normatively sized and shaped" (136). Many aspects of expected heteronormative temporal trajectories, like marriage and childbirth, are associated with weight-based expectations—whether that means the patriarchal pressure on brides to slim down for their weddings or capitalist exhortations for new moms to lose weight post-pregnancy. Like many New Year's resolutions, these time-bound rituals of losing weight to achieve heteronormative desirability represent "an imperative to bring oneself 'back under control' to successfully progress to, and accomplish, the next stage of a chrononormative timeline" (McFarland, Van Slothouber, and Taylor 143). Because of this, publicly proclaiming the intention to remain fat in the New Year is imbued with resistant gendered and queered connotations, due to the intersection of multiple limiting narratives commonly ascribed to fatness. Tracy Tidgwell, May Friedman, Jen Rinaldi, Crystal Kotow, and Emily RM Lind (2018) write that "Fat and queer theorizations of the body help us know that fatness is queer and that the future is fatness's domain" (117). Therefore, we intentionally use a queer framing for our analysis of anti-resolutions to expose and destabilize temporal normativities across multiple axes of embodied marginalization.

Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis

To understand how Instagram posts can be understood as a form of resistance to this cultural climate, we use critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA) to operationalize technology as a cultural text (Brock 2020, 8-10). Theorized by André Brock Jr (2020), CTDA "prioritizes the belief systems of marginalized and underrepresented groups' conceptions of self with respect to their technology use" (241). For me (Mackenzie), CTDA feels crucial when fat people are so drastically underrepresented on popular visually

ly-oriented platforms like Instagram. When I scroll through my Instagram feed—even as someone who is white and has certain other embodied privileges—I still find bodies like mine are often excluded from the app's distinctive representational economy, leading me to seek solace and self-recognition in representations from fellow fat users. CTDA was also used by Apryl Williams (2017) to research fat people of colour's activist representational spaces on Tumblr. Williams writes that "The absence of these discussions in mainstream media is a form of symbolic annihilation [...] Misrepresentation and the absence of representation of fat bodies harms all of us in the long run by presenting outlandish standards for body size and distorted, culturally-insensitive narratives about health" (30). Given the media mis/underrepresentation of fat people, CTDA is a key interpretive method for studying fat activism online because of how it understands technologically mediated communications as cultural texts situated within negotiations of power, in addition to explicitly centering the beliefs of those who are marginalized by hegemonic technological narratives.

In using CTDA, we can analyze how anti-resolutions intervene in the ways established weight loss discourses circulate on Instagram, because "CTDA, as a methodology or technique, highlights the relationship and power negotiations that occur on, and through, technology. It also specifically looks at how a particular aspect of technology facilitates certain discourse" (Williams 2017, 21). We argue that these social media interventions visibilize alternative fat futurities in a way that is resistant and collective by positing fatness as not being in need of resolution. This aligns with Tosha Yingling (2016), who writes that "This movement of digitizing oneself to claim fatness—manipulating the perceived screen divide between the user and their cyber-self to actualize fatness as part of their embodied identity—is the concept and process of fat futurity. In this movement, fat users can reinstate the future of their bodies, provide stability to claim and experience fatness, and make a process of self-actualization away from the thin-body ideal" (29). Virtually queering and rejecting cyclical annual imperatives to biopolitically regulate our size opens up public space for narratives where fatness is a worthwhile embodied experience, rather than an undesirable

transient state before achieving thinness.

The Ozempic Era

Fatness is often connoted as a transient state in mainstream rhetoric, and popular acceptance of fatness has also been similarly transient, waxing and waning with cultural trends. The last decade was marked by the rise of body positivity in popular culture (Sastre 2014), a veritable if imperfect oasis for many after thin-centric beauty ideals of the heroin chic '90s and diet-centric Y2K era (Grose 2022). Capitalist culture reflected this: clothing brands adopted larger sizes, campaigns included a wider range of models, and songs about self-love topped the charts (Cwynar-Horta 2016; Senyonga and Luna 2021). There seemed to be a zeitgeist shift, one that offered the promise of broader fat acceptance at a cultural (if perhaps superficial) level. However, since the aforementioned rise of weight loss injectables, the media discourse about body and size politics has once again been reshaped.

As purported "miracle" drugs become more widely marketed (especially via social media), intentional weight loss is once again trending (if it ever really stopped, behind the glittery screen of body positivity) and with it, a resurgence of unabashed fatphobia. Flora Oswald (2024) identifies that this new "Ozempic Era" situates us in "shifting landscapes" (129) where rapid weight loss narratives have eclipsed mainstream attempts at fat acceptance, re-invigorating anti-fat discourses in dominant culture. Like New Year's resolutions, the shifting temporal boundaries of hegemonic size acceptability are also cyclical imperatives to regulate our bodies to meet a capitalistically imposed standard of acceptability.

With the advent of a new generation of weight loss medications, the supposed efficacy and availability of these drugs is promoted as offering a "cure" to fatness and implicitly the promise of a future without fatness (Fady Shanouda and Michael Orsini 2023). Such promises ignore the long-term ramifications and efficacy of these drugs as well as the costs associated.

Anti-resolutions' vision of a future that includes fatness becomes radical in this particular cultural moment wherein formerly fat celebrities

are shedding pounds, body positive influencers are denouncing their online body positive communities, and social media feeds are saturated with weight loss advertising (Nassurally 2022; Shanouda and Orsini 2023). Carefully cultivated fat digital spaces feel less safe, but the work of fat activists persists.

Art Brat Comics
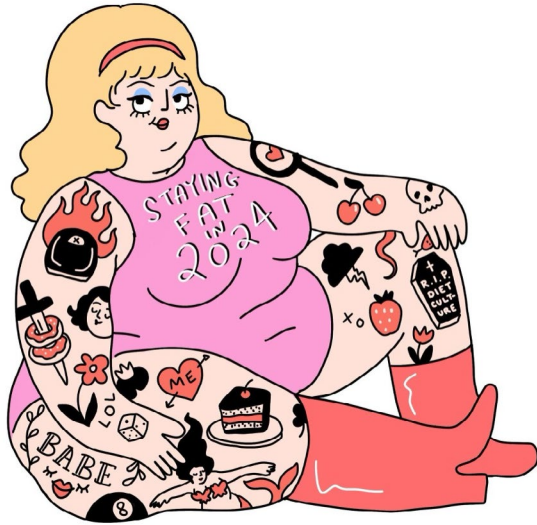
"Staying Fat in 2024," Mollie Cronin, digital illustration, 2024

In the ten years that I, Mollie, have been making art under the name Art Brat Comics, I have made the art that I needed to see in the world (Cronin 2025). This included the positive, celebratory, or neutral representation of fat bodies that I had not seen in my fat childhood and adolescence. Creating these images offered me a chance to project imaginings of my own fat future and possibilities for adulthood as a fat woman. This also meant cultivating an art practice that served as active, intentional pushback against diet culture. In this spirit, I drew characters who were fat, hairy, tattooed, characters who were both beautiful and abject, and who rallied against the narrow scope of acceptability that we as fat people are culturally prescribed. To borrow from José Esteban Muñoz (2009), this type of representation "provides an affective enclave in the present that staves off the sense of 'bad feelings' that mark the affective

disjuncture of being queer in straight time" (24).

In my illustrations, these figures would often be accompanied by text with simple but provocative sayings—written across their t-shirts, as tattoos, or circling them in banners—demanding recognition as fat people and pushing against diet culture and other norms. Some of these stood as gentle reminders to those of us struggling with fatphobia and self-hatred, with semi-nude figures in soft poses under banners that read "Your Body is Not a Measure of Success" or "Your Body is Not a Problem to Be Solved." Others were more confrontational, like a kneeling woman in sunglasses and a crop top which reads "Glorious," as she raises both middle fingers to the sky, a sly smile on her face (Cronin 2025). Here, the powerful nature of fat bodies is asserted, as the figure reclaims the "glory" of fatness in the face of accusations that fat liberationist rhetoric and representations "glorify obesity", which is an especially common critique on social media when fatness is performed in ways that reject neoliberal moralizations (Cat Pausé 2015).

I continued this method of pairing simple but effective sayings with my figures to communicate a message in my anti-resolution illustrations that I produce and share every late December/early January, a time when New Year's weight loss centred advertising is at its peak. Each year, from 2018 to now, I create a character wearing a piece of clothing that reads "Staying Fat in [insert year]" across their chest. Without fail these Instagram posts garner a significant amount of engagement, with my 2025 post reaching an audience of over 153,000 views, nearly 20 times the engagement of an average Art Brat Comics Instagram post (Cronin 2025). The consistent popularity of my anti-resolution posts signals to me that many others are also in need of an anti-diet counter-discourse in the New Year.

"Staying Fat" is both an assertive and permissive saying: it informs viewers that the speaker is not seeking to lose weight, and it gives the speaker permission to stay as fat as they are while inviting their audience to do the same. Many fat women, myself included, have experienced that the only times our bodies are socially acceptable are when we are actively trying to lose weight. Kathleen Lebesco describes this as

fat people's "efforts to pass," borrowing from queer terminology of "passing" (Lebesco 95). To reject the societally conditioned expectation to "pass" as normative is to "come out" as fat.

The notion of "coming out" of course alludes to a prior concealment. While to "come out of the closet" is to make one's queerness known and visible, the act of coming out as fat is not revealing previously hidden fatness, as "body size is hypervisible" (Saguy and Ward 2011, 54). By coming out as fat, Abigail C. Saguy and Anna Ward (2011) write that "fat rights activists are not disclosing, as much as affirming, their fatness," (54). More than that, they are affirming a relationship of acceptance towards their fat body and a rejection of the diet culture ideals that encourage perpetual striving for weight loss and "acceptable" body size. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Michael Moon (1993) write that this coming out also communicates a rejection of the sociality of diet culture.

In this way, anti-resolutions engage with "coming out as fat" as a queer tactic, utilizing "the radical potential of queerness to challenge and bring together all those deemed marginal and all those committed to liberatory politics" (Cathy Cohen 2001, 203). Anti-resolutions' virtual fat coming outs move to make "clear to the people around one that their cultural meanings will be, and will be heard as, assaultive and diminishing to the degree that they are not fat-affirmative" (Sedgwick and Moon 1993, 225). Because these conversations (and the diet culture and fatphobia that inform them) are so normalized, coming out as fat is a continual and cyclical process, made over and over again in online and real-world spaces. Just as the New Year will continue to be rung in with a flood of weight loss ads and social media posts, so too will I and other fat activists continue to digitally come out as fat and publicly announce our anti-resolution of "staying fat".

More Instagram Anti–Resolutions

Mollie's artwork is a powerful voice amongst a chorus of other defiant Instagram users declaring their own fat anti-resolutions. In a post published just before the New Year, fat-owned brand Chub Rub (2024) joyfully proclaims (through chunky rainbow lettering with hearts) a simple anti-resolution: Staying Fat in 2025.

This graphic is part of a carousel with multiple images, wherein Chub Rub highlights their fat intentions, fat art, and plus size apparel offerings as euphoric, sexy, and vivid. The post is bookended with a similar graphic to the first image, reading "Staying Fat in 2024", encapsulating their consistent rejection of time-bound weight loss imperatives. The brand's inclusion of their similar statement from 2024 underscores that their commitment to espousing liberatory fat futurities is long-term, not just a fleeting fashion trend to profit from and discard when convenient.

The unchanging commitment to liberation is reinforced by the caption of the post, which reads in part: "Fat yesterday. Fat today. Fat forever" (Chub Rub 2024). Fox (2018) observes the estranged instability of the fat present in the progress-oriented dieting mindset (223), which treats fatness like an unfortunate stepping stone to a thin end-goal. When this post's caption declares an intention of being "Fat forever", it opens virtual space for a deeper and less transient connection with one's own fat identity. Social media posts honouring fatness as a perpetually valid way to exist constitute a self-caring form of deliberate stasis, where we can reconnect with "intimate and affective embodiments and rhythms that are in time with the capaciousness of fat" (Tidgwell et al., 121). This is especially true when so many social media users are forcibly interpellated through advertising into diet industry discourses year after year.

While the photos in the carousel of Chub Rub's post feature strappy lingerie, shiny manicures, sensual food play, and other erotic aspects, they center a multi-sensorial engagement with fatness that noticeably eschews many visual tropes associated with the male gaze. The emphasis in the images is on the individual, subjective phenomenological and affective experience of being defiantly fat in a world that does not want you to be, communicated through intimate photographic close-ups, illustrations, and artistic text. Images like these illuminate how fat conceptions of self can contain pleasures that exist outside of straight time and straight desirability: colourful visuals, haptic squishes of flesh, cake's taste and texture against skin. Rather than catering to respectability politics of "flattering" matronly clothing (far too common

in plus size fashion), Chub Rub shows a fat fashionable life as messy, sensual, and pleasurable: a forward-looking continuum of gratifying experience rather than a spectre haunting our annual traditions.

In various ways, many other fat Instagram users employ their platforms to push back against harmful yearly expectations. In a short form "reel" video, Virgie Tovar (2025) presents a blossoming flower superimposed with the text "There are other reasons a new year can be exciting that have nothing to do with 'transforming' your body". The visual imagery of fatness as flourishing and natural contrasts with common alarmist rhetoric in which "Today, fat bodies are often maligned as having no future at all. In this paradigm, a fat life is a miserably failed one, if not a fast track toward death itself" (Tidgwell et al. 2016, 116). Instead, staying fat is aesthetically associated in the reel with growth and life: being in full bloom.

Being in full bloom means celebrating multidimensional fat vitality. A January 1st post by Jordan Underwood (2025), features a carousel of photos and short videos showing them being visibly fat and getting the most out of life. Their body is not minimized, but is the focal point of the images and videos: dancing, swimming, modelling, partying. Many of these represent their fat body in movement, contradicting dominant stereotypes of fatness as lazy or unathletic (Pausé 2016). Yingling (2016) writes about the power that fat social media representations hold: "For fat futurists, these images of self reclaim fatness as a desirable position and aim to change our conceptions of bodies. Fat is flesh, reduced to its contours, but cyberspace has no linearity and digitization has no physical space" (37).

Through cyberspace then, it becomes possible to actualize, as Jordan Underwood (2025) boldly states in their caption, a desire to actually "GET FATTER IN 2025". This brashly flouts and reverses the logic of yearly diet industry imperatives, interpellating the reader into a different futurity of idealized fatness. Beyond "staying fat," Underwood calls on their audience to join them in becoming even fatter. By doing so they are insisting on their own fat futurity and inviting us into ours. They draw us in with sumptuous

images of fat bodies, joy, and community. In doing so, they join other digital creators whose representations help us to "imagine a better, fatter world" (Edwards 2023, 507). This posits new queer temporal horizons, in which "straight time is interrupted or stepped out of" (Muñoz 2009, 32).

There is an inherently oppositional and transformative political orientation to these representational resistances. In their New Year's post caption, Angelina[1] (2025) speaks to a revolutionary vision: "To 2025, let there be liberation. To be fat in public, unapologetically. To being empathetic. To fighting facism. To ending fatphobia. To remembering that being fatter isn't a moral failing." The caption, recognizing fat liberation as part of the larger project of liberation, accompanies a photo of Angelina dressed as a sparkly Troll Doll surrounded by graffitied garbage dumpsters. Cat Pausé (2016) explains how queer fat activists in cyberspace interrogate and defy sociocultural stereotypes: "By queering fatness, they challenge expected ideas about fatness. They present a picture of fat life that deviates from the norm and they encourage alternative constructions of fat identity" (84). In this post, the campy contrast between the hyper-femme bejeweled hot pink attire and the literally trashy surroundings destabilizes familiar visual norms and tropes, queerly and playfully throwing idealized aesthetic norms into question.

In the photo, they are surrounded by superimposed text similar to the caption, formatted as stark calls to action: "BE FAT IN PUBLIC 2025, FIGHT FASCISM 2025, ADVOCATE FOR LIBERATION 2025" and more. Theirs is not simply a call to remain fat, but to be fat both publicly and politically. This call insists on insistence on fat people's rights to exist visibly and publicly without shame, but also invites fat accomplices (Senyonga and Luna 270) to engage with anti-oppressive praxis.

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[1] This user's name is formatted in a stylized way as "A N G E L I N A🍒", but we have reproduced it here in the text as "Angelina" for accessible readability.

Fighting fascism and advocating for liberation inherently attacks the aforementioned colonial ideologies that underpin linear narratives of weight loss "progress", which diet-related resolutions rely on. These exhortations remind Instagram users who might see this post in their feed that while individually unlearning anti-fatness is important, fat liberation is inherently enmeshed with intersecting liberatory movements. Posts like these go beyond individual neoliberal modes of empowerment in gesturing to how fat self-actualization is intertwined with and facilitated by fighting against systemic violence and oppression. Despite the commodification inherent to the platform, Instagram interventions like these show that the revolution needs fat people, and fat people need the revolution.

It is worth noting that however radical these proclamations may be, that even in fat spaces there are systemic tensions and limits to these anti-resolutions. Like much of body positive and fat liberationist work, many of the most visible advocates for anti-resolutions are white fat people, a trend that persists despite the foundational and ongoing work of fat Black and fat women of colour in the fight for fat liberation. Because of how culturally and historically bound together anti-Blackness and anti-fatness are, Da'Shaun Harrison (2021) has noted "Out there is a reality where fat Black folks are experiencing the harms of anti-Blackness as anti-fatness" (17), which can compound systemic exclusion if a movement does not fundamentally integrate both race *and* size in its critiques of normativity.

Harrison has observed how despite the prevalence of the body positivity movement on social media, when a fat person posts a picture of themselves in a bathing suit at the beach (for example) "comments intended to do harm" are more prevalent on Black people's posts (17). This established tendency necessarily means race is a factor which impacts the ways fat social media users represent themselves. It is not a coincidence then that the majority of these examples taken from Instagram, my own (Mollie) work included, are made by white Instagram users. Rather, this is a reflection of the pervasive dynamics of privilege in digital discourses, even outside of the mainstream. Race—as well as intersecting factors like sexuality, ability, immigration status, and class—continue to shape who is safer in publicly "staying fat".

Fat Futurity, Limitations, and Community

The proliferation of anti-resolutions on social media can provide an escape from an anti-fat present. Muñoz (2009) tells us that "The present is not enough. It is impoverished and toxic for queers and other people who do not feel the privilege of majoritarian belonging, normative tastes, and 'rational' expectations" (27). Fat people very visibly do not fit into heteronormatively desirable tastes and "rational" expectations, including the perpetual pressure to strive toward thinness (and the annual performative commitments to thinness as a goal).

As discussed, fatness and queerness are intimately and temporally connected, as neoliberal capitalist notions of "success" and its timelines are conceived of as out of reach for fat people. Fat temporality offers a queer and anti-capitalist conceptualization of time, one that envisions "fat embodied experience in its fullness: as fleeting not fixed, boundless not narrow, and productive in the sense that fatness matters" (Tidgwell et al. 121). Radically, this rejection and expanding of narrow conceptions insists on the possibilities of fat futurity, even in a time where Ozempic rhetoric promises a future without fat people and healthism posits that fat people have "no future at all" (Tidgwell et al.) Anti-resolutions uproot the compelled erasure of fat presents to usher in fat futurities, queering long-cemented New Year's narratives.

While the resistance offered by anti-resolutions is crucial, their home being on Instagram is somewhat ironic. While Instagram is a social media platform, it is also in many ways an e-commerce platform—with capitalist affordances built into its very structure—making it a somewhat conflicted space in which to push back against capitalist imperatives. Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield, and Crystal Abidin (2020) have described how "As Instagram Stories increased in popularity, specific advertising tools were released for Stories, with Shopping Stickers rolling out in 2018, as well as direct sales links also in 2018, allowing Instagram users to make purchases without leaving the platform at all", while Instagram also simultaneously became a thriving economic hub for paid influencer-sponsored posts that are often murky when it comes

to disclosing that the content is a paid adver-tisement (38). This baked-in revenue-generating climate can make trying to draw boundaries between activism and commercialism on In-stagram at times challenging. An example of this is how the aforementioned Chub Rub use their account not only to promote fat liberation but also to drive customers toward their brand, blurring the line between resistance and retail. Although an Instagram post may proclaim re-sistance to capitalist logics, it is still produced within a capitalist system, which presents some platform-based limitations to the possibilities for producing transformative systemic change.

Despite these limitations, even those who do not post their own anti-resolutions can create community and utilize the participatory affor-dances of Instagram to amplify the validity of staying fat in the New Year and provide balance to the flood of weight loss resolutions. By lik-ing, saving, and commenting on anti-resolution posts, fat Instagram users algorithmically con-tribute to the spread of anti-resolutions, boost-ing a critical counter-discourse in the feeds of many users who would likely otherwise only be shown diet-related resolution content. Pausé (2016) describes how "The Internet also allows for the exposure of the fat community to the rest of the world. Someone may stumble upon the fat-o-sphere, and be introduced to ideas and perspectives they have never considered. Others may actively seek out this space of pos-itivity, seeking a different discourse of fatness" (76-77). Therefore, it is through social media users' engagement and support that fat activist content (like anti-resolutions) is able to reach a variety of audiences, including those who are not fat and/or who may be unfamiliar with fat liberation.

Many Instagram users also agentically and pur-posefully share anti-resolution posts to their stories and with their friends, creating networks of community and connection. In this way, "The intentions of the fat author and the fat com-munity blend and meld into an assemblage of meaning-making and subversive knowledge. In these spaces, fat shame is slowly eroded, so one can feel pride in and love for one's current skin. A community which supports a fat user is created in a digitization that greatly contrasts the policing expectations of the physical world"

(Yingling 2016, 36). By engaging with the an-ti-resolution content, these posts' Instagram audiences actively participate in fostering the collective claiming of a fat futurity that diverges from standard societal scripts of size and suc-cess.

"Staying Fat in 2024," Mollie Cronin, ink on paper and digi-tal illustration, 2023.

"Staying Fat in 2025," Mollie Cronin, digital illustration, 2025.

Connection and Collaboration

It is through this type of virtual community building that I, Mackenzie, initially found Mollie's artwork. Her bold yearly anti-resolutions caught my interest, leading to me sharing them repeatedly not just through my own account but also through the Instagram account of the *Excessive Bodies* journal. I was able to find Mollie's anti-resolutions because of the generative digital networks that fat Instagram users have helped sustain and nourish, elevating posts like these beyond mainstream margins. While her art contributed to my own critical perspective on New Year's weight loss resolutions, so too did the act of sharing her art with others.

In following her Instagram, I felt an intrinsic sense of technologically mediated connection to Mollie as a fellow fat feminist Maritimer. It was through checking her updated Instagram profile that I discovered the serendipitous news that Mollie had joined the same Gender, Feminist, and Women's Studies PhD program at York University that I myself am a PhD Candidate in, which is what led me to invite her to co-author this piece. Now that we have met in person, our online fat community building has laid the foundation for an additional analog layer to our collaboration. Our connection turned to praxis: Mollie has taken a fat feminist course I helped create, and we attended an anti-austerity decolonial action together. The nature of our continued collaborative relationship complicates often ableist narratives that frame digital activism as "slacktivism" (Henrik Serup Christensen 2011), never transcending into offline action. Our shared pursuit of fat liberation in both virtual and physical spaces blurs the perceived boundaries of what is possible in today's social media age.

As a first year PhD student, I (Mollie) was thrilled just to hear that my artwork was being featured in an academic text. By being invited into the writing process and mentored by Mackenzie, I have felt welcomed into a fat academic space with generosity and patience. Through this project, I have been able to bridge my artistic work and my developing academic discipline, as well as glimpse potential futures as a scholar of fat studies. In building relationships on and offline, in long conversations on subway rides, over coffees, on Instagram, and in edits on shared

documents, this connection made by "staying fat" has confirmed that my future is not just fat but it is made in fat community. Staying fat has enriched my life in meaningful ways, and coming out as fat continues to carve new temporalities for me and others who dare to do so.

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DIGITAL RECEPTACLE

By   Evangeline (Vange)
                                      Holtz-Schramek

*"Perhaps there is no correlation between textual
references to a concept and the transformative role
of that concept" – (Lily Cho 2024, 161)*

diminutive bin into which all is draggable i
contemplated ditching what i had only surface-
read as feminism:

blue pools dead locked like the house
wives i leave
in moore park, oak bay, vaucroft

i induced vomiting, caused a scene, learned how to say "pray
in a closet" in aramaic, cooed it in my "christy" voice, the one used
to wait tables when men ordered the wrong thing and needed someone
else to apologize for it

war-markings like a linebacker's, images
course: wwii beachheads, stonewall riots, but here the cause is some
how only myself.
lipstick sears my mouth together, zippers restrain myself inside me, reading court
ship patterns in binary fight or flight: a food shortage, inflation, penile
vascularization, a tainted scent in the air before a gale-
force onset.
getting hyped like a welterweight at the mgm grand only to come
to in droves of expunged
passion and those costumed
pieces, forcing them into a shared washing machine

it was a hotel elevator, winnipeg, 2016, cusp-#metoo.
usually my terminator glasses would just register "old
man" when the entity got on at a different floor, but this was an academic conference so "old
man" could mean "tenured expert i must supplicate to."
he delivered his injunction with
out a prefatory greeting: i was to smile at him.
i remembered Mari Ruti (may she rest in power) teaching me Sara Ahmed (2017): "*What is at
stake here is not so much which feelings bring us to action but how to respond to 'the injunction'
to feel a certain way.*"
i sucked
dead air, "tired," was what came out. i stared
hard enough at the swirls on the carpet to animate them.
sure enough, he sat there glaring at me throughout the entire duration of my talk the next day.
he will be sure to cockblock my next job application

it was an office building, the bmo tower in the FiDi, toronto, 2018.
the piece of mail, which i retrieved from a downton-
abbey underground via a servants' elevator, had the man's
name on it. i handed it to him once i re-
ascended to the glossy-desked offices.
he handed it back, "you're probably better at opening this than me."
in my head I quit the job. *it's an envelope,* i reeled into
the recesses of my prefrontal cortex. i had three
degrees at the time, i was pregnant with my first child

it was a subway station, there was a fire, i had a stroller with a baby in it. there were many exits but all were staired; there was only one accessible ramp, and it was laden with men in suits with little beans in their ears, eyes transfixed on their phones. they were late for drinks, or squash. i had one baby with me, the other uptown, which i would have to run to get now (uphill with a stroll-er with a baby in it), what with the fire; the daycare closes at 5:45, they charge you a late fee for every minute after, the women of colour who work there need to pick up their own children, and *i am never late*. my older one lives with some spectrum rigidity – i can *never be late* or there will be more soothing required than the well of my body holds, long into the night, and i still have to work later, after i get them fed and read to and down. the baby felt my anxiety, started to rise in pitch. i said "excuse me" to the men occupying the ramp. i said it again. i said it again. i began to turn up my own volume. i began to tap arms, "can you please let us use the ramp?" my knob quivered and rose again. the man three men ahead noticed, "watch out there's a hysterical woman." i thought of Judith Herman (1992): *"hysteria was 'a dramatic medical metaphor for everything that men found mysterious or unmanageable in the opposite sex'"* (10). my rage and anxiety blooming, i began to move forwards, i wheeled at a few of them, nipping their ankles

it was a family event. i was called out for not hugging an older male in-law upon arrival. was the curtsy not implied? how many dependents and their various accoutrements must i be carrying to be rendered visible as *hands full?* i was 36 and a half years old, an almost mother of two. it was a global pandemic

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<p style="text-align:center">✳</p>

"I AM DAUGHTERHOOD, BUT I'M NON-BINARY:"

Mothers and Daughters on Gender, the Family and their Feminist Futures

By   Hannah Maitland

Introduction

Although "daughter" has many normative, gendered connotations, the subjectivities and relationalities associated with the "daughter" identity have an underexplored plasticity, where longstanding bonds can stretch to contain differently gendered and familial futurities. Grade 12 student Stea[1] was one of my first interviewees. Stea is nonbinary and enjoys a community of other trans and nonbinary peers at school and the local 2SLGBTQ+ youth center. Though they felt generally supported by their parents, their two mothers often struggled to grasp their transness. As Stea held their identity and various relationships together, they came to their own negotiated theory of daughterhood:

> *Stea (daughter) 47:12*
> *Yeah, it's definitely a unique thing. Like how I said, like, I'm okay with the concept of daughterhood, because that is tied to who I am. And my experience as a person. If, another person, a stranger said, "Oh, you are a daughter," I'd be like, "No, I'm not really okay with you saying that about me without knowing the context of who I am, and about knowing that I'm also a non-binary person." Um, it's fine in this study, because it's daughterhood, but also, I am daughterhood, but I'm non-binary. But yeah [laughs], (Stea solo interview)*

Stea takes pride in their status as an eldest daughter, something they feel encompasses a sense of duty and responsibility that extends not only beyond the home but also beyond any singular gender identity. . No other term seemed to reflect their familial relationships: Stea felt no attraction to the term "son," found "offspring" unpleasant, and felt that "child," while gender neutral, was simply too childlike. Stea was not the only participant with a lived experience and political outlook that involved questioning how gender situated them in the world and their relationships.

This paper draws on my dissertation study, where I interviewed politically engaged girls and their mothers and mother figures to explore a contextual and intergenerational approach to girls' activism. From September 2021 to April 2022, I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews over Zoom with eleven activist daughters (aged 11-20) and their mothers and mother figures. The overarching goal of this project is to complicate popular images of girl activists as singular, heroic, and exceptional (Jessica Taft 2020; Lyn Mikel Brown 2016). Mothering, daughtering, and activism are social roles and practices—not innate, but learned in relation to other people. I wanted to explore what kinds of affective landscapes would emerge when interviewing girls not only about their mothers, but with their mothers when they described their politics, as a way to centre everyday girls' activist efforts without isolating their political actions from their family and community contexts. I argue that exploring close relationships and the interior and affective features of political life is necessary to understand girls' politics holistically.

To engage with the affects that emerge at the intersection of the personal and political for activist girls, I draw on feminist affect theory, particularly approaches that take feelings seriously as a site of knowledge production and do not separate affect and emotion (Sara Ahmed 2014; 2004; Monica Swindle 2011). When mothers and daughters stretch and reify the familiar borders of "mother" and "daughter" they are negotiating their feelings toward other people, social expectations, and their own sense of self. For example, a particularly salient feeling that emerged across the interviews was desire as mothers and daughters hoped for a better

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[1] All participants are represented by pseudonyms

future for themselves and each other. Activists are very explicitly wanting subjects who point out that something is lacking in our world and needs to change. Girls are constantly rendered through a matrix of errant desire, vulnerability, and risk, which sees them as always inadequate and in need of adult rescue or correction (Sara McClelland and Michelle Fine, 2008). In her book *Future Girl* (2004), Anita Harris notes that girls are overwhelmingly expected to take on the responsibility of securing society's future and meet contradictory expectations of both preserving traditions and leading the way to new and progressive norms. Wanting is not a problem to solve, but it often feels that way for daughters who are caught between what they want and what is wanted for them.

One particularly salient site of this negotiation in the interviews was when participants queried what the future could look like, and their responsibility to secure that future by conceptualizing gender in trans-inclusive ways. Across the interviews, both trans and cisgender participants expressed hopes for truly trans-inclusive feminisms and concerns about rising transphobia. These hopes and anxieties are animated by their close relationships with trans loved ones and their own lived experiences as trans people as they desire feminist futures but struggle with the cruel optimism (Lauren Berlant 2011; Andrea Long Chu 2019) of striving for a future they may never reach. This paper examines how trans-inclusivity and more flexible notions of gender, particularly gendered relationships like those between mothers and daughters, became recurring themes across the interviews as participants imagined a feminist future. Though this analysis is based on a small study whose limited set of interviews cannot be generalized to all mothers, daughters, activists, or trans people, these vignettes still offer an opportunity to explore the cruel optimism (Berlant 2011; Chu 2019) of striving for optimistic horizons that we may never reach.

Context and Theory

I locate my work in girls' studies, a field where mothers and mothering are rarely a point of focus. This constitutes a notable gap in a field that often stresses the importance of intergenerational relationships, solidarity between girls

and adults, and the need for community-focused approaches to girls' lives (Emily Bent 2016; Brown 2016; Ruth Nicole. Brown 2009; Sandrina de Finney 2014; Sarah Winstanley and Alexe Bernier 2022; Kari Dawn Wuttunee, Jennifer Altenberg, and Sarah Flicker 2019). In fact, the adults who carry out girls' studies research generally avoid anything that could be perceived as replicating the inequality of a mother-daughter relationship between themselves and the girls with whom they work. Emily Bent (2016) explains that when the youth delegates she was working with at the United Nations began to perceive that their adult mentors were not taking them seriously, they rebuked them with a letter that accused the women of being too maternal and "momsplaining" over them (114).

This long-standing reticence emerged out of a resistance to the dominance of mother-daughter thinking when the field was initially taking shape. In the Anglosphere, girls' studies scholars often describe the field as originating from the so-called feminist third wave of the 1990s (Victoria Cann, Sarah Godfrey, and Helen Warner 2018; Elline Lipkin 2009; Claudia Mitchell 2016; Donna Marie Johnson and Alice Ginsberg 2015). Astrid Henry (2003) argued that the '90s were a decade where notions of feminist generations were the de facto way to describe differences among feminists, and these dyadic "matrophors" soon proved problematic (212). Henry cites Mary Russo (1999), who critiques the reliance on mother-daughter metaphors as replicating power imbalances and limiting the feminist imagination of what intergenerational relationships could be, intersectionally and otherwise (24). As a result, though a few studies take up mothers and mothering as a topic (Melissa Swauger 2010; Renata Ferdinand 2022), parent-child interviews are not common in girls' studies.

Queerness and transness, which are so often met with familial rejection, are one area where emphasizing the gendered mother-daughter relationship can seem particularly unappealing. As feminists have long argued, families are frequently significant sites of violence against women and girls regardless of sexuality or gender identity (Alyosxa Tudor 2023, 293). In *The Promise of Happiness and All About Love*, Sara Ahmed (2010) and bell hooks (2001),

respectively, point out that it is precisely because the patriarchal family is supposed to be the site of love, happiness, and sustaining relationships that its inequalities remain violently enforced. More often than not, people are expected to bend to conform to the kinds of normative happiness that families are supposed to provide, rather than allow the family to bend in its structure. Children, particularly girls, are often mistreated as familial property (Celia Bardwell-Jones 2021; Hazel Woodrow 2023). This ownership dynamic is antithetical to the kind of love that hooks argues is necessary for liberation (2001, 87, 221).

Transphobic rhetoric often invokes the tropes of protecting families, women, and girls (Julia Serano 2023; 2018; Susan Stryker and Talia Bettcher 2016; Stryker and V Varun Chaudhry 2022; Tudor 2023; Judith Butler 2024). The growing conservative "parents' rights" movement in the United States and Canada exemplifies this as it positions transgender identity as uniquely threatening and destabilizing to young people (Jenna Benchetrit 2023; Lauren Gambino 2023; Woodrow 2023). As Julia Serano (2023) explains, parents seeking information about their trans children are increasingly encountering online communities that radicalize them to see their child's transness as a sickness or threat. Serano describes how this dynamic is further compounded by media bias that credulously repeats concerned parents' stories while disregarding the scientific consensus that gender-affirming approaches are beneficial.

As a queer researcher, I do not hold a romantic view of the family as a site of unoppressive love and support. In pointing out that intergenerational and familial relationships are often violent, I acknowledge that the limited interest in interviewing children alongside their parents in girls' studies is not an oversight but a reaction to these marginalizing dynamics. However, despite this wariness, I refuse to cede the family as an institution with no liberatory queer or feminist potential. My interest in engaging with girls and their mothers has persisted despite the reasonable notion that the hierarchies of mothers and daughters act as a barrier to solidarity rather than a positive feminist organizing or pedagogical principle, and despite the recent retrenchment of the family as a place of rigid cis

and heteronormativity. Girls' political perspectives emerge from their unique social location at the intersection of their age and gender, and power systems like race, class, and ability further inform their political worldviews. It follows that if we understand girls' politics as intersectional, we should also contextualize them as intergenerational. Queer and trans people have long traditions of creating chosen families where gendered and familial attachments, like Stea's notion of daughtering, can be reinterpreted and re-negotiated.

Patriarchal family structures are neither natural nor eternal, and systems of domination like colonization enforce their confining gendered and sexual binaries. Indigenous feminists point out that decolonization offers a liberatory framework where intergenerational relationships can exist without being constrained by oppressive hierarchies or relying on biological essentialism. For example, Kari Dawn Wuttunee and Jennifer Altenberg (Wuttunee, Altenberg, and Flicker 2019) describe how a small group of Indigenous girls and women came together as nieces, aunties, and grandmothers to reclaim matrilineal teachings and how embracing these roles was essential to the group's decolonial work. However, this was not a conservative reclamation. Wuttunee et al. noted that the group also acknowledged that their practice should and could be adapted to reflect a diversity of gender roles and expressions (74).

This interplay between past and future, as well as existing attachments and new possibilities, drew me to affect theory to analyze how mothers and daughters maintain and reimagine their familial relationships. As Sara Ahmed (2014) points out, politics and emotions are always intertwined; emotions are crucial to the self and the social in ways that both constitute and blur the boundaries between the two (4). How people feel about their current roles and relationships informs their political imaginings, and though these attachments might not be rational, they are deeply felt and consequential. Attachments like "mother" and "daughter" resonate as roles and identities, but also represent direct attachments to other people. These connections inform how people conceptualize the future and the kinds of possibilities it could contain.

For José Estaban Muñoz (2009), queerness is a way of drawing from the past to imagine, feel, and strive for a future world where we never arrive but which lies "always on the horizon." (11) This striving is not escapist or wishful but an enactment of potentiality based on an awareness of collective historical struggle. This is what Lisa Duggan and Muñoz (2009) call "educated hope" (3). Hope, like fear, is an anticipatory feeling concerned with a possibility that is present yet does not yet exist and may never exist. However, these hopeful desires can be painful. Lauren Berlant (2011) describes this dynamic as "cruel optimism," where your desires, or the channels you expect to fulfill your desires, act as an obstacle to your flourishing. In "The Impossibility of Feminism," Andrea Long Chu (2019) extends this idea, asserting that disappointment is the governing affect of feminism. The disappointment is not the failure to achieve feminism but the painful repeated encounters with your own desires and optimism for something that may never arrive.

Materials and Methods

After receiving ethics approval from York University, I began recruiting and interviewing girls and their mothers and mother figures across Canada between September 2021 and April 2022. To recognize this spectrum of access to activist opportunities, I tried to avoid creating a hierarchy of what "counts" as activism. I essentially left "activism" as an open concept and allowed any girl who identified as an activist between the ages of 13 and 20 to participate and explain what this term meant to them in their lives. With this approach, I conceptualize youth activism as a broad category of political engagement where young people participate in direct and public initiatives to enact social change (see: Taft 2006; Jessalynn Keller 2012; Laura Rapp et al. 2010; Julia Schuster 2013).

The daughter's activist commitments spanned various social issues, from sex education to the environment, and they worked at different scales. All of the daughters identified themselves as white, except for Danielle, who was white and Filipina; Daisy, who was Caribbean and Southeast Asian; and Daisy's sister Nicole, who identified as Black and Scottish/English. One girl, Buffy, identified as transgender, and the others either described themselves as cisgender or did not discuss their gender identity beyond identifying as a girl. Stea, who was non-binary, identified as a daughter but not a girl. The mothers were similar to their daughters, with all currently residing in Canada, and most were either working in education in some capacity or were enrolled as graduate students. All of the mothers identified as white, except Daisy and Nicole's mother, Jessica, who identified as Black.

Findings ✳

In my broad call for participants, I was not explicitly recruiting people who identified as trans or were active in trans activism. However, both transgender and cisgender participants frequently discussed the importance of including trans perspectives, the use of gender-neutral pronouns, and the need to actively combat transphobia. Across all nineteen total participants, two daughters identified themselves as transgender, four of the mothers/mother figures had a trans or questioning child, two daughters had a trans or questioning sibling, and five daughters had one or more close trans friends. Because of these close relationships and lived experiences, many of the participants felt that combating transphobia was important. Still, they did not want to over-politicize what they viewed as benign variations and a natural progression toward a society where greater self-determination should be the norm.

While many of the mothers admitted they did not always feel well-informed about how their daughters' generation conceptualized and expressed gender identity, they tended to position this as a bemusing but ultimately normal generational difference. When I asked the mothers if they felt society had changed since they were their daughters' age, they would explain that many social issues like racism, homophobia, sexual harassment, and sexist workplaces were just as significant as ever. Still, their daughters had much more language at their disposal to express and confront these issues. Participants often cited pronouns and gender identity labels as the most significant examples of this change, noting that they exemplified young people's enhanced ability to articulate variations that had always existed.

Daughters used openness to gender-neutral language and new pronouns as examples of their mothers' general progressiveness and willingness to learn from them. Amy, an anti-sexual violence activist, reassuringly noted during the pair interview that despite their more conservative upbringings, her parents were receptive to learning more about gender expression. To this, Amy's mother, Lizette, a retired Catholic school principal, replied:

> *Lizette (mother) 48:15*
> *I'm still struggling with "they" because it's plural. I would be so much happier if it was a different word and you know how they did "Miss" and "Mrs" and then they created which was "Ms." So I still struggle with "they."*

This comparison between "they" pronouns and the emergence of "Ms." actually came up a few times, with mothers expressing how gendered language had shifted across their lifetimes. In an essay exploring the benefits and limitations of inclusive language, Alexander Pershai (2006) makes a similar connection between the shared goals of trans and feminist thinkers who deploy non-sexist language. However, Pershai also points out that a fixation on language can be a way to avoid, rather than meaningfully engage with, inequality. Modifying words feels more actionable than altering material conditions. Among the cisgender participants, pronouns emerged as a kind of tactile signifier that could convey the broader concept of a world where gendered boundaries are more porous.

Discussion

Trans people, particularly trans children, are often imagined as a new sort of problem or possibility that is always imminent, but, as Muñoz (2009) puts it, a horizon that never arrives. Transness is positioned as either a sign of progress or a threat by cisgender people, even though trans people and trans feminism are neither new nor theoretical (Stryker and Bettcher 2016; Jules Gill-Peterson 2018; Talia Bhatt 2025). Harper Keenan (2022) notes that education scholars often entrench notions of trans newness in ways that erase the histories of trans cultures and their resilience. He notes that perpetually framing trans people as a new

social phenomenon maintains a status quo where ignorant hostility toward trans communities is excusable. Furthermore, the constant framing of trans people as a political or social crisis often serves to erase the everyday lives and relationships that trans people already have.

However, the current social and political conditions for trans people are not ideal, and this led my participants to turn their attention to aspirational futures where the systems that perpetuate transphobia have been transformed and their conditions are improved. This is the kind of aspiration that Ahmed (2010) describes, where the struggle for a bearable life means queer people need space to breathe now and making life bearable in the present makes it possible in the future (120). As I noted earlier, the participants' investments in activism in general and combating transphobia in particular emerged from their own experiences and the experiences of their loved ones. These are not distant politics, and this closeness came with vivid emotional investment. They negotiated the emotional labour of navigating the present, holding onto hopeful futures, and encountering the repeated frustrations, compromises, and ambivalences of both.

One response to this tension was the persistent question about whether or not it was even helpful to politicize transness. Both participants who identified as transgender, Stea and Buffy, were the daughters of queer mothers and experienced a family life where queerness was not a new consideration but something they inherited. Many of the young people I interviewed had never known a life without openly trans friends and family. As much as these close relationships could motivate political action, they also made participants either consider gender identity a personal matter they had not regarded as political or were wary of dignifying the transphobic assertion that people's gender identity is up for public debate.

One participant actively resisted politicizing transness through her activism as a strategic framing. Seventeen-year-old Elizabeth, who often went by Ellie, identified as straight and cis but was deeply involved with trying to combat transphobia in her local community. She conflicted with her conservative small town, where

trans identity was at the centre of a political conflict so rancorous that students physically attacked a trans peer at her school. Rather than simply not noticing or experiencing queerness as political, Ellie had witnessed the adverse effects of what happens when queerness becomes politicized. Ellie was actively trying to frame her activism as non-political as a way to confront and de-escalate the recent violence against trans people in her school and community. She had reasoned that trying to depoliticize transness and transphobia into matters of inclusion and kindness would be the more effective strategy. If politicizing something makes it a problem, then depoliticizing it must be the solution:

> *Elizabeth (daughter) 15:36*
> *…when I created the pledge, I created it to be something that wasn't political. So I wanted it to be that regardless of the political party you supported, you could commit to being kind and inclusive so I could include many people. But I didn't expect people to still take it as like, a very left-leaning cause and be almost like taken back by it. Because in my mind kindness and inclusion isn't political and it's just basic human rights. But other people took it in kind of like a "Why do I have to like, I'm not signing that like I, I don't want to be perceived, as the as this like snowflake, libtard" um [laughs], for lack of better words. (Elizabeth solo interview)*

Ellie was frustrated by her community's interpretation of her work as a partisan political action instead of the basic desire to ensure everyone has safety and dignity. Unlike other participants, who believed in a naturally growing tolerance of more diverse gender expressions, Ellie was witnessing peers who refused to accept this kind of tolerance out of fear that it would reflect poorly on how others perceived their own gender and political alignments.

I often asked mothers and daughters how they envisioned a feminist future. I usually prefaced this question by saying they did not need to be practical and could be free to speculate wildly about their best possible scenario. Ellie replied to this question by saying that she would like to see "less hate crimes." She did not say *no* hate crimes and indeed did not venture to allow

herself to imagine a world where gender liberation had been achieved.

Even when just speculating about the best possible future, Ellie struggled to see anything beyond a reduction in the familiar violence. Even though Ellie was actively involved in trying to improve conditions for her trans peers in ways that required a hopeful belief in a better horizon for her community, she would not allow herself to fully embrace a hope that was so often frustrated. The cruel optimism emerges here as she tempers her expectations for her work to avoid the painful possibility that her friends will never be truly safe despite their best efforts to secure a better future. This is both a matter of being practical with her hopes for social change and an emotional negotiation with how much she desires a kind of future that feels impossible. Ellie's resistance to politicizing transness reveals this affective negotiation. Suppose the intense and unyielding emotions of bipartisan political conflicts could be removed. In that case, the desire to remove transness from political struggle and violence altogether is a hopeful but ultimately cruel attachment—one that imagines safety could be achieved by retreating from the very political arena where rights are contested and won. This fantasy of depoliticization maintains the attachment to a world where trans existence could be normalized without confrontation. Still, this very desire for withdrawal from politics prevents the sustained engagement necessary to transform the conditions that make trans lives precarious in the first place.

Returning to family life, even in less volatile circumstances, just because something is a normal part of everyday life does not make it uncomplicated. During our interview, Stea noted that they had not considered their participation in the queer community to be activist work or even especially political. They saw working with an Indigenous community fighting for clean water as actual activism, whereas volunteering at Out Loud, the local queer youth centre, was more of a mentoring role. It is not that Stea had no concept of the idea that queerness was political or that queer people had to struggle for their rights. In fact, their parents only met because one of her mothers, Claire, was involved in an organization that supported queer people immigrating to Canada. However, despite this

generational queerness, Stea's parents still struggled to grasp their gender identity.

It was not until our interview drew to a close that Stea's mother, Claire, admitted that Stea's pronouns were difficult for her. Notably, she could adopt other people's new or gender-neutral pronouns, but could not seem to do this for Stea:

> *Claire (mother) 51:21*
> *…we have a hard time developing that language, it's like, okay, let's just talk Finnish. And I'll just call you, you know, I'll just speak to you in Finnish and we don't have to worry about it…So that's, you know, a way of me kind of sidestepping the commitment to actually using "they" instead of "she," whereas I do it for her friends who are "they." And at work I do it for the child, I actually have to teach, I adopted "she" pronouns immediately. (Claire solo interview)*

Claire also used language, though in a more stark way than other participants, as a signifier of a more profound discomfort with her child's gender expression. Her wife and children all spoke Finnish, and the language's lack of gendered pronouns offered a reprieve from what Claire admitted was her commitment to using "they" instead of "she," as Stea preferred. Claire did not consider herself unsupportive of Stea and did not actively forbid them from expressing themselves as they pleased. Still, she held on to the idea that there was something uniquely temporary about Stea's identity and that one day, they would return to their assigned gender. All children change as they grow, but Claire could not seem to let go of the trajectory she had imagined for Stea.

Even though Stea retained pride and affinity towards their role as an eldest daughter and had made an exception about their pronouns for their parents, this was clearly still frustrating for them:

> *Stea (daughter) 39:02*
> *…it can be very frustrating at times. Constantly advocating for myself as a non-binary person is fantastic, and I love doing it. But then it's just like you tell someone, and you're like, "Hey, can you use they/them pronouns for me," and they learn, but then they still don't use those pronouns for you.*

> *It can get very frustrating, and this isn't talking specifically about my parents, because I'm fine with them not using they/them pronouns. It's a little bit annoying, but it's something I've accepted. (Stea solo interview)*

Like Claire, Stea navigated the tension of making private exceptions they would not allow in public. This required a great deal of emotional negotiation, where they were left to sort through contradictory emotions, such as feeling exhausted from constantly having to explain themselves, yet also loving the opportunity to embrace their role as an expert on their experience and share it with others. This also extended to their relationship with their parents, where they both wanted to preserve a positive relationship with them, but felt this required "accepting" misgendering and imperfect parents. This is not just a practical matter of maintaining peace, but an emotional process that requires sustained effort. Wanting their parents to use they/them pronouns all the time was perhaps its own cruel optimism. They had come to reconcile this thwarted hope by positioning daughtering as an exceptional kind of role that did not have to align with how they expected people outside their family to treat them.

Eleanor, a university professor, and her seventeen-year-old daughter Buffy were among the last mother-daughter pairs I interviewed, and they had a different dynamic from Claire and Stea. They both identified as queer feminists and were both involved in various kinds of activist work. Buffy transitioned in her early teens, and in both her solo and pair interviews, she expressed that she always felt that her mother trusted her to make her own decisions. As we discussed the possibilities for a feminist future, Buffy said that she and her mother already had the kind of relationship that could be the model for a feminist future:

> *Hannah 18:42*
> *If we're thinking about that, a dismantling of gender and of capitalism, what do you think mother-daughter relationships would look like in that world?*

> *Eleanor (mother) 18:57*
> *That's interesting.*

Buffy (daughter) 18:58
That is interesting. I mean, honestly, hopefully, similar to ours [laughs].

…Buffy (daughter) 19:04
I think not a lot of mothers and daughters have, like, the same relationship as us where my mom is really, supportive and always, on board with me and my decisions. Whether she understands or agrees with them, she's always just like, "Do what you want to do," which is what mother-daughter and gender relationship would look like in like, the perfect like, feminist world, And I think in a world where with years of progress and feminism I think mother-daughter relationships look like, you know, both of you are always trying to like grow and change, which is what I think we have. Whereas I know some people, like especially in parent- or parental roles, where it's easy to think like you are, you know, the rightest. (Buffy Eleanor pair interview)

In contrast, though Buffy self-assuredly discussed gender and the possibilities for a feminist future, her mother, Eleanor, consistently subtly rebuffed the premise of my questions. She tended to reject the idea that gender was significant or that it would persist in an ideal world. Eleanor also rescheduled both the pair interview and her solo interview several times, giving me the impression that she was wary of what kinds of gendered implications I was trying to convey with my research. As I noted earlier, the mother-daughter relationship is haunted by gender essentialism and, like other family relationships, often mobilized to reassert conservative social values. In what I believe were efforts to protect and affirm her daughter, Eleanor always rejected the idea that gender would impact her relationships with her children. After Buffy explained why she thought their relationship was uniquely positive, Eleanor responded by critiquing the idea that mother-daughter relationships would even exist in an ideal feminist future:

Eleanor (mother) 20:55
Yeah, and it speaks to the kind of way that feminism seems to need women. But I would argue that feminism doesn't need women. It needs humans, and it needs a future without gender oppression.

So a mother-daughter relationship in this future might not even exist, because it would just be a human relationship, it would be a parent-child relationship, you know, rather than this kind of special gendered kind of logic that's sometimes attributed to like mothers and daughters, because some mothers, maybe were, you know, were assigned male at birth and they're mothers…

I agree with Eleanor's assertion that in a liberated feminist future, gender would be less significant and have far more porous boundaries. However, she seemed attached to this notion of needing to protect her daughter from the confines of gendered roles, relationships, and expectations to the point that she struggled to share in the moments of gendered connection that her daughter, Buffy, was happy to embrace. In the pair interview, these arguments made for an interesting contrast with Buffy, who was considerably less anxious about the idea that a close mother-daughter bond was not open to her as a trans girl. Buffy was politically aligned with much of her mother's thinking, but was also attached to the idea that there was something special about their shared identity as women:

…Eleanor (mother) 26:29
Yeah. And we each identify as women, you know, so we do identify as women, but I just don't know that, you know, I would say that's the key to our relationship.

Buffy (daughter) 26:39
No, I think, well it's interesting because I think me, like transitioning, in some ways did bring me closer to my mom. I think with the expectation of being closer to her, I grew closer to her, which is a good thing, but I think I still feel like, you know, sort of my strings being pulled slightly by societal norms. (Buffy Eleanor pair interview)

Though Eleanor quickly dismissed the notion that gender was, or had to be, significant to her relationship with her daughter, Buffy felt that their shared identity as women brought them closer. She notes that this could be a social expectation, but this does not dismiss the fact that she did feel closer to her as she transitioned.

In her solo interview, Eleanor said that her parents had "nothing but expectations," and now that she was on the other side of this parent-child relationship, she did not want to repeat the pressures of her own childhood. Eleanor instead repeated the expected refrain that she only wants her children to be happy, and their happiness does not require them to be similar to her. At the same time, Buffy is similar to her mother, and Eleanor often revealed that she is pleased to have a daughter who shares many of her values and interests. Still, it was difficult for Eleanor to express this without feeling like she was making some kind of imposition that would make Buffy feel that she could not express herself as she pleased. A loving mother who embraces her daughter no matter who she is does not sound like the kind of disposition that fosters cruel optimism. If anything, it sounds like Eleanor is trying very hard to pre-emptively give up any attachment to any particular vision of Buffy's present or future, explicitly to avoid the cruel optimism that Claire experiences. However, Eleanor's attachment to the ideal of unconditional parental acceptance still prevents her from acknowledging the pleasure she derived from having a close relationship with a daughter similar to her, with whom she could share many of her interests.

Conclusion

Though I argue that the organic participation of trans people and the emergence of trans-related discussions in this study could be indicative of a broader pattern of trans acceptance and expansive gendered thinking among young feminists, this was still a small study. Ten families for a total of eleven young activists and eight mothers and mother figures are far too few people to draw generalizable conclusions about how activist girls and their mothers discuss and feel about the increasing visibility of transgender people and our society's escalating transphobia. These families also all involved mothers and daughters who had a positive enough relationship to openly discuss it in front of each other with a researcher. It goes without saying that this comfort level is not a universal feature among mother-daughter relationships.

However, this handful of interviews still reveals some of the complexities of mothers and daughters trying to navigate the interplay between past and future, as well as existing attachments and new possibilities when they imagined the kinds of feminist futures that might hold space for newly gendered subjectivities. This was not always an easy task, and asking about feminist futures in the context of mother-daughter relationships often served to reveal the tensions between past attachments and future horizons. For some participants, these attachments to their understanding of gender made it difficult to imagine a world or even a sense of self where these identities shifted. Still, a more gender-expansive future proved exciting for many interviewees, and they could envision a feminist future where trans-inclusive mother-daughter relationships are not only possible but desirable.

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PHARMAKON, MY BECOMING-TOXIC

By   Viridian Sylvae

Introduction

Pharmakon, my Becoming-Toxic is a transfeminist artwork mediated via a multi-channel audio/video projection-mapped installation, the form of which serves as an interactive display interrogating and confronting sociocultural narratives of *toxic sex*[1] and toxicity, specifically engaging with transsexual embodiment and its relation to media, health and "care". I offer here an autotheoretical radical transfeminist

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[1] Malin Ah-King and Eva Hayward [2022].

media theory that is specific to my methods. By extrapolating sex-divergence as a potentiated site of corporeal, sociocultural and artistic mediation I develop a framework for understanding my own transsexual body as an entanglement of artistic medium and flesh, down to the microcellular level. The chemical messaging of hormone transition, the disruption of "sex" through technology and pollution, and the general toxicity of 21st century Earth are central interrogations of this effort.

The term "transsexual" is utilized herein as culturally recognizable shorthand for a categorization some may find contestable or problematic. "Transsexual" is culturally and medically defined yet cannot itself define a static category of trans existence; it functions primarily within a framework of the Western transnormative subject[2] to define a specific form-of-trans-life. A transsexual person alters their body to generate chosen secondary sex characteristics through an effort of calculated body modification techniques, utilizing technology such as exogenous hormones or plastic surgery. A transsexual body is permanently changed in this fashion and even highly normative practices of transsexuality carry unique social consequences depending on a given transsexual's cultural background and transition outcomes. Many share the common experience of spending some or all of one's life in a state of transition—a time where one cannot possibly meet gender expectations demanded by cissexual normativity—often experiencing extreme social precarity from this "trans maladjustment"[3], or discordantly staying perpetually closeted— "pre-transition" —in agonizing dysphoria.

My transsexual experience is highlighted in this work because it is an embodied example of intentional sex disruption, and not because I claim any authority to speak for transsexuals in general. As an autotheorist, I find importance in establishing my transfeminism through play within the space of differentiation between embodied expressions of transsexuality and more ephemeral, identity-driven or liberal expressions of trans-ness, such as transgender cissexuality. It is not my intention to exclude from my work or critique any subset of trans-ness, rather my intentions with this work are personal expression and therefore it deals primarily with my own transsexual body and is complicated by the politics and policies that surround and subsume my being. In the United States, the increasingly authoritarian home country from which I have fled, these politics have recently taken a drastic turn toward disallowing or even criminalizing trans existence in the public and medical spheres[4] marking the end-point of whatever shallow inclusions were achieved through the failed efforts of hegemonic liberal representational queer politics.

The history of choice in sex has been explored by several leading trans scholars and holds great significance in *Pharmakon*. Geertje Mak's *Doubting Sex*[5] demonstrates 19th C. examples of intersex transsexual medical interventions and offers an elaborate analysis of the historical genesis of technological sex inscription and alteration. C. Riley Snorton, in his work *Black on Both Sides*[6], offers an historical analysis of 19th C. Black gender divergence and the entanglement of transness with racial politics in America. Racist associations between sex divergence, gender, and Black fugitivity[7] developed alongside the creation of intersex medical interventions[8] which then developed into countless double-binds at the intersections of Black health and "care" in the United States and elsewhere. Medical interventions in sex disruption have created opportunities for intersex and transsexual people to physically modify their bodies to a shape and form they desire, while the same technology has also allowed for surgical interventions to be performed on intersex babies and children to forcibly conform their bodies to align with cissexual standards without their consent. Thus, whether the affinity of technological sex inscription is aligned with a

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[2]Awkward-Rich 2022 p.9.
[3]Awkward-Rich 2022
[4]Federal Register 2025.
[5]Geertje Mak 2012.
[6]C. Riley Snorton 2017.
[7]Snorton 2017. 55-97.
[8]Mak 2012. 43-65.

treatment of consent, through personal sovereignty, madness, pollution, and illness. My work investigates this relation as one with the *toxic*.

While transgender and gender-nonconforming people also utilize their bodies as expressive media through fashion and gender-expression; the transsexual experience contrasts by intentionally inscribing one's interior *and* exterior body; altering the endocrine system and the central nervous system; altering permanently the cellular makeup of ones' body through medicinal, surgical or dietary interventions. The difference between the experience of a transsexual woman who feels a vital need to modify her body in order to remain alive and an externally defined, cissexual, transgender experience is notable because such externalized trans-ness can be shed in moments of need for gender opacity, while the external/internal transsexual body is irrevocably altered; that is, transsexuality inscribes *permanent*, *noticeable*, and *physical* changes to one's body, regardless of any efforts to detransition thereafter. Our bodies, permanently intelligible as trans, if maladjusted to our social environment through transition, become publicly communicative of our precarious positioning.[9]

An aesthetic treatment of transsexuality in *Pharmakon* is defined by *projection*, the piece is composed of projected light on plastic. I use projection-mapping in my artwork in a highly ironic sense; the social projection of Otherness is mirrored by projection-as-medium. The intangibility and temporary nature of light highlights the precarious nature of transitory periods, the surveillance camera within captures light and infrared radiation—highlighting our "era of trans hypervisibility".[10] As queer artist Tyler Matheson notes in his review of the artist exhibition *Indiscernible thresholds, escaped veillances* in the Barnicke Gallery at University of Toronto, trans artists "evade extractive desires for trans bodies as evidence by offering, instead, invisibility."[11] *Pharmakon* is an attempt to elaborate on transsexual bodily communication without using my body to communicate, an act of artistic opacity

and spatial severance between the my body and a piece which studies my body. The piece takes place after the extraction of my corporeality; my body becomes only a gruesome bleeding plastic tit—a metaphor for representationism.

While my work here deals with transsexual bodily communication, I question any conflation of transsexuality and radicality or social refusal without adequate social context. To quote Emmet Harsin Drager, "some types of body modification are made to reflect free will, critical thinking, and subversive politics while other types of body modification are made to symbolize indoctrination, false consciousness, and the status quo"[12] Transsexuals are not monolithic, we do not all share common goals, common politics, or a common consciousness. I absolutely question the idea that "transsexual" as a term can ever constitute a cohesive social class or subdivision of liberal trans identity. Many trans women have never had to turn tricks for rent. Some surely hold six figure salaries. Their life experiences are as foreign to me as mine would be to theirs. Thus, my work reflects only my own transsexual experience: one steeped in chronic violence and chronic illness, *consequences of transsexuality*. I was buoyed for most of my transition by an unchosen career in full-service sex work, going through motions of addiction, semi-homelessness, recovery, survival, and criminality. This is not an uncommon transfeminine experience; it is so often much worse for trans women of color targeted by the carceral state.[13]

Despite my reliance on technology for expression, *Pharmakon* is not a work appreciative of cyborgic feminism. Much like Andrea Long Chu and Emmet Harsin Drager[14], I take issue with a format of trans studies emergent a brand of feminist studies inspired by Donna Haraway which draws strange parallels between the transsexual and technologic—using such nightmarish terminology as "techgender"—what I see as an ontological distancing of trans from "woman" and from "human". I see such technologic positivist de-gendering of trans as a fetishistic flight

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[9]Awkward-Rich 2022.
[10]Jules Gill-Peterson. 2024.
[11]Tyler Matheson 2024.
[12]Chu and Drager 2019, 110.
[13]Dilara Yarbrough 2023.
[14]Chu and Drager 2019, 109-111.

of postfeminist fancy—divorced from precarious trans life and hyperbolic in nature. Foreclosing on such desolate futures that cis, liberal, and representational transgender studies/politics represent, my radical transfeminist intervention is to embrace the toxicity of the transsexual and the malignant, the maligned; I reject purity politics and assimilationist trans-ness, and seek a future where toxic sex and filthy queerness create new trajectories toward a precarity-aware feminist praxis aligned with the subaltern and the sick—where you find the sex working, disabled, racialized, unemployed, precarious, multiply-marginal trannies. Dismissing purity fetishism as the pursuit of a laughable impossibility of being for the 21st century is also an impetus driving *Pharmakon*. My toxicity is derived from the filth and chaos of a precarious transsexual life. I hold no interest in creating tech-heavy new-media artworks regarding transsexuality that do not reflect this; my work in multimedia and computer-dependent formats has more to do with my own multiplicity of media skills and artistic interests than any intent of conflation between trans and tech. To convey this through metaphor, I utilize materiality in counterpoint. Without the projector you have only a blank canvas, an empty body. What is projected onto the body is what is most often seen. Projection is an event; the piece only *becomes* the piece while light is being cast. The blank shell left without projection is naught but an assemblage of toxic plastics. Projection-mapping is a continuous reconfiguration of an object's appearance without reconfiguring its form. Rear-projection, shining the light through the material to project off the opposite surface internalizes this reconfiguration of light into the object during its brief tenure. Metaphor mixes with irony, sarcasm, and filth, cast in bleeding red light.

Pharmakon is most interested in my breasts, specifically the textured silicone implants installed within them. Textured breast implants, first implemented with a 2mm polyurethane foam coating, were meant to improve an implant's adherence within its "capsule", the web of flesh that forms around the implant and adheres it to the implantee's body.[15] In 1991, over fears that this urethane lining could be carcinogenic, such surfacing was voluntarily recalled in the United States and, over time, manufacturers began texturing the silicone surfaces of the implants themselves.[16] 1997 saw the first reported case of breast-implant associated anaplastic large-cell lymphoma (BIA-ALCL), a form of cancer "uniquely iatrogenic in nature with indisputable evidence to its direct association with breast implants, in particular, those with a textured outer shell".[17] *Figure 1.* shows an electron microscope scan of such surfacing on an Allergan Biocell textured silicone implant, the same model recalled in 2019 after the FDA linked their surfacing to an especially increased risk of BIA-ALCL.[18] The surfacing technology utilized creates jagged microscopic pockets across the whole of the implant's surface, influencing the growth of fibroblasts onto the capsule, but their efficacy at this is considered "controversial".[19]
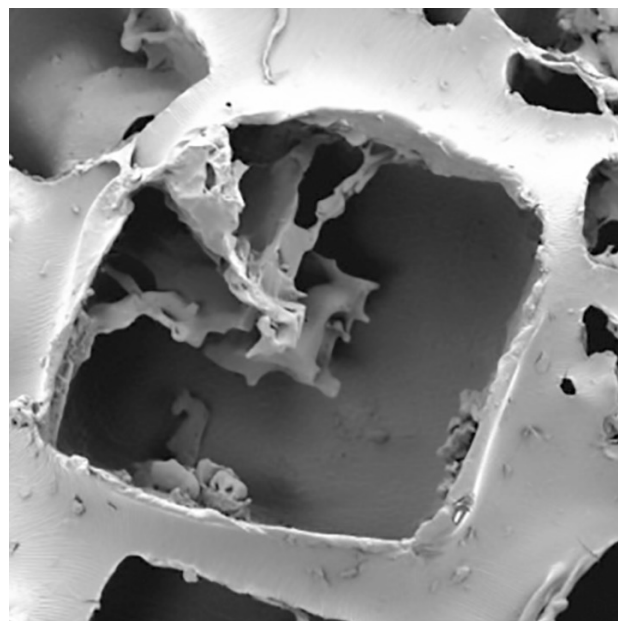

*Figure 1. Allergan Biocell (Santa Barbara, Calif)
in scanning electron microscopy…
(Simon Barr, Ernie Hill, Ardeshir Bayat 2009, F. 10)
CC BY 2.0*

[15]David J. Collett, Hinne Rakhorst, Peter Lennox, Mark Magnusson, Rodney Cooter, Anand K. Deva 2019, 31-32.
[16]Collett, Rakhorst, Lennox, Magnusson, Cooter, Deva 2019, 32.
[17]Collett, Rakhorst, Lennox, Magnusson, Cooter, Deva 2019, 30
[18]Center for Devices and Radiological Health. 2024.
[19]Collett, Rakhorst, Lennox, Magnusson, Cooter, Deva 2019, 32

I accessed breast augmentation under the Medicaid-based Oregon Health Plan (OHP) in 2016. Such luck in accessing an expensive surgery under state funding can only be attributed to my chronic precarity and a departure from California to Oregon in 2015: the year I came out, and the year I was also queerbashed and rendered legally disabled. To say that having access to gender affirming care (GAC) saved my life during these years is an understatement. Psychic distress from PTSD following being bashed, the difficult precarity of early-transition, and a body that couldn't change quickly enough from hormones alone all left me desperate for more drastic interventions, for more drastic change. At the advice of my surgeon, I chose "teardrop" Allergan Biocell implants at my pre-op, oblivious to any risk of toxicity or carcinogenicity.

Three years later, in 2019, I received a letter from my surgeon's office notifying me that my specific model of breast implant had been recalled worldwide by Allergan and informing me of the existence of BIA-ALCL. They also let me know that since they won't recommend replacing the implants just because of a recall, under Medicaid I would not have any insurance to cover an exchange for a different model. Essentially, I was too poor to worry about BIA-ALCL; I was told I must wait until I either contract lymphoma or experience a capsular contracture (a break in the flesh capsule surrounding the implants) before the state would fund any operation involving my breast implants. Still now, almost a decade after their installation, they remain in my chest.

Synthetic breasts cause synthetic cancer; synthetic becoming, *becoming-toxic*, affirms my sex. The history of my own transsexual affirmation is toxic. The socialization of transsexual women is achieved through social environments toxic to us, which we are toxic to. The gender affirming "care" we receive is often double bound as a *pharmakon*: a poisonous cure. Poisonous to us, perhaps, but especially poisonous to cisgender society. Transsexuals are often messengers of autonomous, embodied refusal. The precarious among us pursue desperate and sometimes dangerous attempts at sexual sovereignty under a fascist, racist, cissexual hegemony vehemently opposed to such action, regardless of personal risk. Those whose bodies manifest

intersex characteristics, myself included, often have little choice in the matter.

Theory

A central inspiration for *Pharmakon* is a collection of essays titled *Synthetic Becoming*[20], most specifically Malin Ah-King and Eva Hayward's essay within, titled "Toxic Sexes: Perverting Pollution and Queering Hormone Disruption". *Synthetic Becoming* builds on Celia Roberts' conceptualization of hormones as "messengers of sex",[21] the authors "interrogate signals—chemical and cultural—transmitted and communicated within planetary-wide infrastructures of hormones and hormone-disrupting chemicals".[22] The print version itself is toxic, as editor Lenka Veselá reveals even the heavily processed recycled paper chosen for its pressing was selected because it contained the highest available content of endocrine-disrupting chemicals within plastic fibers interwoven throughout.[23]

Endocrine disruption, an ongoing, inevitable process in the toxic 21st century[24] is central to a figuration of *synthetic becoming*—"the figuration of synthetic becoming emphasizes that we are not only synthetic but also constantly being synthesized".[25] To Ah-King and Hayward, "endocrine disruption is an unavoidable co-presence in the liveliness of organisms",[26] endocrine disruption is so widespread that our presence on this planet necessitates some level of sexual/endocrine disruption taking place in the body of every living being, the only conceivable variable being one's direct proximity to chemical disasters and pollution. One could surmise this to be mediated primarily through environmental racism and the governance of planetary annihilation through the constant pollution of the biosphere by Western militaries, governments and corporations. The contributions that *Synthetic Becoming* make to trans studies are directly confrontational to a "disavowal of the sick"[27] and a "disavowal of the transsexual"[28], those

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[20] ed. Lenka Veselá 2022.
[21] Celia Roberts 2007.
[22] Vesela 2022. 13.
[23] Vesela 2022. 8.
[24] Malin Ah-King and Eva Hayward 2022. 23.
[25] Vesela 2022. 13.
[26] Ah King and Hayward 2022. 29.
[27] Cameron Awkward-Rich 2022. 15.
[28] Andrea Long Chu and Emmet Harsin Drager 2019. 106.

abandonments Cameron Awkward-Rich shows are foundational to trans studies' inception into the academy. He also demonstrates that trans scholars have long strived to disassociate themselves from a conflation between trans and the toxic in a bid for acceptance and authority within academic spheres.[29] My intervention here asserting transsexual toxicity as an inevitable and ongoing process is purposefully contrary to such liberal abandonments of the precarious and marginal, choosing instead to embrace our synthetic toxicity, to uphold the oft-forgotten milieu of maladjusted trans women whose efforts toward continued survival deserve only the highest honor.

Materiality

Much like *Synthetic Becoming*'s toxic binding, *Pharmakon* plays with toxic themes in parallel with toxic materials. Each component of the piece was selected for its toxicity: synthetic fabrics made of micro-fine plastics line the walls, suspended from the ceiling; blood red, tacky spandex lines the floor; an old lead-painted stool is the only provided seating. A flash photography umbrella made of finely textured plastic is draped in reflective plastic projection fabric. The texture of a flash umbrella is unique in that it's designed to spread light most effectively, causing a "soft-box" effect on its outer surface when light is shined through. Not only is this an ideal rear-projection material, but such chemically or mechanically abraded plastic surfaces are also more prone to shedding microplastics than glossy-surfaces.[30] As the umbrella is a stand-in for my breast, the metaphor is made complete.

Pharmakon is programmed and projection-mapped entirely within TouchDesigner, a visual node-based programming environment useful for creative multimedia expression, a new-media environment that emphasizes interactivity and real-time. The audio elements beside the recorded narrative are synthesized in real-time within Ableton Live. All visual programming was done by me in TouchDesigner, using electron microscopy scans of breast implants[31] as imagery, modified in use as secondary materials under Creative Commons licensing, culminating in two video feeds to be projected onto the installation. *Figure 2* is a screenshot of my network, demonstrating the modular nature of TouchDesigner programming.
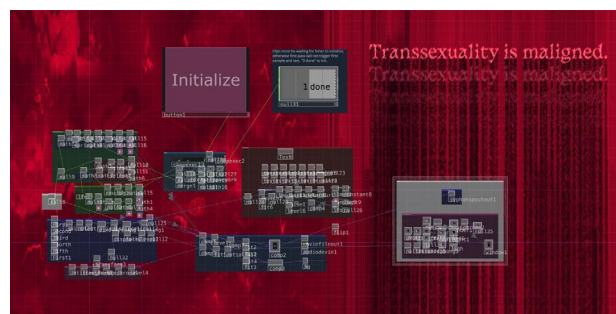

Figure 2. TouchDesigner Network

Pharmakon's installation can be seen in *Figures 3 and 4*. and the video feed in *Figure 5*. It features a large, opaque, white, textured flash umbrella suspended in midair with a rear-projection cloth draped from its bottom edge. The projector points onto these surfaces from above and behind, casting onto them a seeping, undulating image of textured breast implant microscopy in the shape of a breast. A semi-transparent displacement layer made from an image of my right nipple is superimposed. The image grows and melts and seems to pulsate endlessly, moving, jiggling, in response to motion. It is blood red in stark monochrome. The umbrella-breast stands alone above a projected rainfall of blood onto the floor, constructed from a TouchDesigner network that mimics the visual effect of pixel sorting. The sound of rainfall being synthesized fills the room alongside an ominous droning bass. Upward motion increases the appearance and sound of rainfall. Downward motion causes it to waver. Words appear and disappear across the surface of the rainfall's fabric as a recording of my voice speaks aloud lines from these stanzas in a seemingly random order:

"Transsexual life is toxic.
Toxicity is transsexual life.
Toxicity is maligned.
Transsexuality is maligned.
Toxic sex is a *PHARMAKON*.
A poisonous cure.
Toxic to a dying empire.

A politician signing our death warrants is logging on to

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[29]Awkward-Rich 2022. 27.
[30]Simone Kefer, Oliber Miesbauer, Horst-Christian Langowski 2021
[31]Simon Barr, Ernie Hill, Ardeshir Bayat 2009, F. 10. CC BY 2.0.

TS4rent.com after the legislative session ends.
His wife will never know.
He fucks these girls in his car on the way home.
He sucks their dicks and swallows their estro-genated cum.
It's not gay, because they're women.
His son is drinking oat milk and dancing on Tik-Tok like a faggot again…

Endocrine disrupting chemicals are everywhere.
In rain this umbrella sheds endocrine disrupting chemicals from its surface to keep me dry.
The plastic particles wash into the waterways to turn the frogs gay.
We are one in the same, this umbrella and I.
When I piss and flush the toilet,
I imagine a thousand fish in Lake Ontario be-coming beautiful Vyvanse-addicted mermaids.
I am become corporeal environmental toxici-ty, fundamentally foreign from and disastrous to my surroundings; a statement not meant to emasculate the steel foundry a few blocks from my door.

Show me a transsexual woman who hasn't been called toxic to her face,
and I will show you a coward.
Transsexuals intoxicate everything we touch,
like a wicked Midas turning everything to drugs.
We represent the many possibilities hiding be-hind a doorway
of absolute refusal that few could ever dare to open.

This umbrella is my tit.
My motherly love.
My nourishing mother.
She is shedding silicone into my lymphatic sys-tem from her textured surface. She sheds into me and the waterways and in this way, I am one with the earth through our collective poisonings.
My plastic mother is so very deep inside me.
My motherly plastics, my toxic becoming, my becoming-toxic,
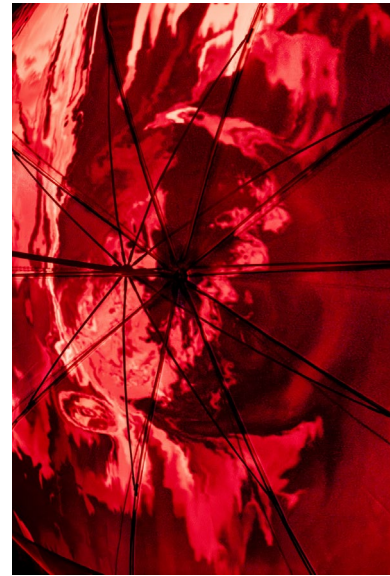potentially fatal and always deadly.
I suckle at her nipple and drink deep."

Figure 3. Pharmakon (closeup)

Figure 4. Pharmakon (closeup)

Figure 5. Pharmakon, cropped still from combined feed

The space is dominated by contradictory feelings of vastness and enclosure. The viewer is not necessarily a passive actor in the work. They are invited to sit on a lead-painted black piano bench that disappears into its background. Behind the projection is an OAK-D depth sensing camera attuned to measure human motion directionality on 3 axes. Gesture potentiates movement within the projection, it affects the audio mix, the volume of the spoken word, the volume of the sound of rain, but most importantly has an additive effect on the algorithm determining the stanza of the spoken word track armed for playback. If a viewer moves at the right moment, the piece progresses; if they do not it maintains the current stanza. The viewer can choose to be a passive actor and witness the piece unfold, never knowing their inaction is preventing them from viewing its entirety.

Much like transsexual becoming, inaction is rewarded with incoherence and monotony. Action has a favorable or unfavorable effect to the viewer; it either disrupts their ability to witness the entire piece or enables it but is never transparent about the mechanism of action required to work it with intention. In a sense, this article is a cheat-sheet to my artistic rendition of a double-bind that's intentionally constricting, oppressive and opaque, but offers some ephemeral solution. Jiggling the representative tit is its intended control schema. The user can hold their hand before the piece, and it will seem to move in sync with the gesture. This causes the projection to bounce, the stanza to shift, and the horrors to continue unfolding in an uncertain manner. A pathetic kind of bare life lies within this tit endlessly bleeding out on the floor like Sun Yuan and Peng Yu's *Can't Help Myself*,[32] seeping its bloody carcinogenicity, meaninglessly jiggled only to produce more and more expositions of transsexual despair in a toxic embrace of a depressive experience.

Conclusion

This work is a confrontational intervention in trans studies and research-creation utilizing an autotheoretical basis, an invitational peek into transsexual queer otherworlding, and an interrogation of the concepts of toxicity, queer gesture, and trans precarity. New media methods involving real-time audio-visual synthesis techniques in TouchDesigner provide an interactive and

This work is a confrontational intervention in trans studies and research-creation utilizing an autotheoretical basis, an invitational peek into transsexual queer otherworlding, and an interrogation of the concepts of toxicity, queer gesture, and trans precarity. New media methods involving real-time audio-visual synthesis techniques in TouchDesigner provide an interactive and gesture-dependent viewer experience meant to invoke sensations of surveillance, contradiction, despair, and enclosure. In place of justifying or explaining the meaning of my work, this article presents its underlying theories, experiences and thought processes. My friend Catherine Swan developed an autotheoretical research practice she calls *Surrealist Fantasies*—methodology as "a path of knowing, not a scientific method."[33] Katie's work inspires me to never defang my adversarial, anarchic creative expression of lived precarity, to always choose confrontation over capitulation, engaging between the Surreal and material to synthesize acts of creation. With *Pharmakon* I dip my toes into exhibition and publication as an early-career scholar hoping to do those notions justice. I derive my transfeminism from history, my experiences, and surroundings; and take to heart the teachings and example set by my teacher McKenzie Wark, who instructed me in autotheory and authorship at The New School. She often mashes autotheory and autofiction together, as she explains in her 2023 missive on the topic *Critical (Auto) Theory,*

> *"I think of autotheory as not too different from autofiction. Both are interested in the perceptual. Autofiction is more interested in the affective dimensions of what's perceived; autotheory more the conceptual. It's more interesting to think of autofiction/autotheory as tactics rather than genres, and as a continuity of tactics."* [34]

Autotheoretical research-creation in *Pharmakon* is a tactical synthesis between qualitative analysis and memory, and corporeality, as media. The tactics of using memory and corporeality to assert the reliability of one's words feel core to Wark's definition of autotheory as something "interested in the perceptual." This is precisely

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[32]Guggenheim Foundation 2013.
[33]Catherine Swan forthcoming.
[34]McKenzie Wark 2023, emphasis hers.

why I rely on these tactics. For the transsexual labeled insane, doubly abandoned by an academic turn from sickness and transsexuality,[35] autotheory is a lifeline from the margins to scholarship and credibility without sacrificing the toxic qualities that make us who we truly are. To create art that *does theory or produces theory* is confounding, but with success it transforms our oppression-borne hardships to reproducible knowledges as theory in a way that directly challenges suffocating liberal paradigms within queer and trans studies.

I originally created this piece as my final project for a course taught by Christine Quail at McMaster University as part of its graduate program in Gender and Social Justice. Titled "Critical Hope," this course focused on a topic and positioning of queer theory I knew I would struggle with as a transsexual pessimist. Queer theory that celebrates life under racial capitalism pains me. Expressions of queer hope feel alienating to me at times, as divorced as the feeling is from my experience. Gender and sexuality to me are mundane and rudimentary, punishing, not a constant source of intrinsic joy or hope but often the opposite. My transition wasn't freeing; it replaced an insufferable problem with somewhat more sufferable ones. As I lay *Pharmakon* to rest, I will pose one final assertion: Transness alone cannot save us; queer joy does not remove our Damocles' sword of impending legal and carceral enclosure. We need new theories, new positions, new tactics.

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[35]Awkward-Rich 2022. 27.

BODIES LEAK | BLOOD SPEAKS:

Exploring Feminist and Queer Perspectives on Menstrual Taboos and Menstrual Activism through Mary Douglas' Purity and Danger

By   Ayra Alex Thomas

Introduction: Body Politics and Blood Sport

> "Why bloody your hands on another's blood-body journey?"
> — Jihyun Yun, "Menstruation Triptych,"
> *Some Are Always Hungry*

In the contemporary linguistic landscape of menstruation codes and idioms, we see blood take on a distinctly dangerous, yet powerful, life force: *Code Red. The Crimson Tide. Shark Week. A Bloody Scourge. The Curse of Womanhood.* Such lexis employed to taboo menstruation and the menstruating body not only reveals but propagates socio-cultural and psycho-social frameworks of menstruation as symbolic of disease, dirt, or disorder (Fahs 2016; Green-Cole 2020). In societies where menstrual taboos proliferate, cultural avoidance and indoctrinated shame of menstruation are often rooted by ideas of periods as a waste of or break from productivity, a shedding of toxic blood, a lack/absence of something, and, all-inclusively, a form of pollution (Bobel 2010; Donmall 2013; Newton 2016). Insofar as menstruation rests intricately connected to societal expectations, stigmatizations, and regulations of femininity,

the menstruating body thus becomes the subject of Otherness or exclusion, and menstrual blood more generally takes the form of 'gendered' blood (Lupton 1993). As such, dominant strains of critical discourse regarding the body politics of menstruation often posits the menstruating body as a uniquely female suffering, where menstrual taboos may be interpreted as figurative metaphors for women's real absence, marginalization, and misrepresentation in society (Turner 2003; Kerkham 2010).

In my paper, I turn to cultural theorist Mary Douglas' most influential work, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966), in order to investigate the religio-historical and sociocultural structures underpinning menstrual taboos; rendering the self-contained 'male' body as pure, orderly, and clean, while characterizing the bleeding/leaking 'female' body as impure, disorderly, and dirty. Through my analysis of Douglas's theorization on dirt, I aim to reveal the ways in which menstrual blood is bestowed (symbolic) meaning based on ideals of cis-heteronormative biology, desire, and patriarchy.

In recognizing menstrual blood as 'dirt,' this essay not only critiques how menstrual taboos uphold repressive gendered norms but also asks us to consider dirt itself as creatively potent and transformative. Dirt destabilizes structures precisely through its capacity for decomposition; as dirt rots away any rigid categories governing cleanliness, gender, and social order, it fertilizes the ground for alternative forms of bodily existence and new possibilities for queer embodiment. While I delve into Douglas' assertions to unveil how menstrual blood may be regarded as a *gendered* bodily substance, I ultimately advocate for a *de*-gendering of menstruation. In an effort to move away from analyses which posit bodily fluids as inherently indicative of physiological or biological gender/sex binaries (and therefore perpetuate contemporary gender inequalities), I use Douglas' work as a departure point to broaden our understandings of how menstruating bodies are policed and concealed by gender/sex binaries.

Effectively, I hope to demonstrate how radically capsizing menstrual taboos to resist and challenge oppressive ideologies which subordinate

menstruating bodies necessarily requires the inclusion of bodies who themselves do not identify as women, but still bleed. Rather than presenting any singular 'truth' about gender-queer menstruation, I wish to offer, through my analysis, critique on dominant critical discourse which situates menstruation as a cisgendered phenomenon.[1] The main objective of my essay will be to contribute to scholarly discourse regarding genderqueer body politics and reproductive justice in order to advance queer and feminist transformative theories of menstruation that disrupt ideas of the menstruating body as inherently taboo and exclusively feminine.

Bodily Disorder: Douglas' Theory of Dirt as a Pollution Belief

In examining cross-cultural ideas of pollution, Douglas (1966) emphasizes how pollution beliefs carry immense symbolic weight in shaping, organizing, and governing the social order and values within a given society. Objects, subjects, and substances identified as polluted or pollutants are categorized as such according to a collective perception that regards them as either anomalous or ambiguous to the established cultural order. In this way, Douglas (1966) argues that pollution beliefs function to both regulate and reinforce ideas of dirtiness, contamination, and (im)purity in social life by operating at both "instrumental" and "expressive" levels (3-4). At an instrumental level, moral codes and cultural values can be defined and upheld through beliefs regarding what is considered unclean, dangerous, or contaminating; at an expressive level, pollution beliefs may also be used to support claims or counter-claims to social status. Importantly then, pollution (more than merely a material or physical concept) is symbolically regarded as both a product of and danger to

social order (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988, 26). Thus, pollution *beliefs* carry with them pollution *rules* (i.e. to protect and maintain the social order) and pollution *dangers* (i.e. that which disrupts the social order).

From this, Douglas (1966) provides a theory of dirt as a pollution belief, arguing that dirt, symbolic of "matter out of place," is essentially disorder (44). Seemingly, dirt infiltrates spaces or spheres which are 'ideally' kept separated, and in doing so, dirt threatens to dismantle established orders.[2] As such, dirt not only implies a pre-existing impression of ideal order, but also signifies a transgression or violation against it:

> *Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the byproduct of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, insofar as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. This idea of dirt … promises a link-up with more obviously symbolic systems of purity… In short, our pollution behavior is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications. (Douglas 1966, 44-45)*

In essence, dirt becomes both a sign (i.e. that which conveys meaning) and signifier (i.e. that which attributes meaning) for the same religious, political, or socio-cultural systems which thereby label dirt as dangerous and taboo. Then, a primary function behind practices of segregation, purification, or demarcation is not only to impose structure and respond to dirt, but also to avoid dirt and prevent dirtiness from entering a system. Herein also lies an understanding of dirt as contagious, posing a risk to others who come into close proximity with it (Persdotter 2022). Douglas (1966) notes how such appearance of

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[1]Throughout this essay, I use the term "trans" or "transgender" to generally describe those individuals whose internal sense of gender diverges from the sex they were assigned at birth. Transgender identities take form within a broad spectrum of gender-diverse experiences requiring nuanced, affirming care (World Professional Association for Transgender Health, 2012). Conversely, I employ the terms "non-binary" and "genderqueer" as umbrella designations for those who live outside—or between—the traditional male/female divide, whether feeling simultaneously "both," "neither," or dynamically shifting across gendered expressions (Richards et al., 2018).

[2] Here, we might imagine some literal understandings of dirt (e.g. tracking mud onto a freshly polished floor); or contagion (e.g. mixing raw foods with cooked foods); or uncleanness (e.g. leaving used dinnerware in the bedroom) to understand how dirt threatens boundaries. Douglas (1966) offers further, more culturally specific, examples of how dirt presents pollution symbolism regarding food (e.g. Indian traditions which maintain the right hand must be used for eating as the left hand is used for cleaning after defecating) and childbirth (e.g. Judeo-Christian beliefs of women requiring to be purified after giving birth) amongst many others (41; 64-75).

order is created "only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, about and below, male and female, with and against…" and if we are to truthfully view our rituals of washing, scrubbing, disinfecting, and isolating, we see that these are ideas of "separating, placing boundaries, making visible statements" on orders of society (85).[3] In such light, Mark Murphy (2021) aptly reads Douglas as translating "the sacred and the profane… into notions of purity and danger, or between the clean and pure and the dirty and polluted" (230).

As meditations on dirt prompt reflections on the relationship between sacred and profane, order and disorder, internal and external, form and formlessness, pure and polluted, Douglas observes that religious and ritual responses "giv[e] these relations visible expression," allowing the collective (or cultural) body to know their own society; thereby, "rituals work upon the body politic through the symbolic medium of the physical body" (1966, 159). Thus, the body, as both a symbol and form of cultural text, becomes central to (de)constructions of social structure.[4] As the 'ideal' body, akin to an ideal society, retains distinct and impermeable classifications, we might understand bodily pollution in the same vein as social pollution: wherein pollution dangers (or fear of pollution dangers) lurk in fragile margins; or distend internal appendages of the system outward; or demonstrate contradictory, ambiguous, or anomalous, qualities:

> *The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious… The functions of its different parts and their relation afford a source of symbols for other complex structures. We cannot possibly interpret rituals concerning excreta, breast milk, saliva and the rest unless we are prepared to see in the body a symbol of society, and to see the powers [...]*

> *[...] and dangers to social structure reproduced in small on the human body (Douglas 1966, 142).*

In recognizing the body as a socio-symbolic system, we distinguish how bodily pollution bespeaks disorder by repeatedly blurring, crossing, and collapsing boundaries which are otherwise symbolic of orderliness. Bodily 'matter *out* of place' breaches the divisions between inside/outside, wet/dry, private/public, visible/invisible, etc., and therefore renders the body as uncontainable, unstable or inadequate.[5] Bodily orifices, viewed themselves as vulnerable margins by Douglas, serve as entry and exit points through which bodily fluids spill, leak, and seep past fleshly boundaries. Consider, for instance, how skin and hair sheds; saliva infects; semen ejects; sweat leaves residue; pus oozes; and bile corrodes. Here, we reconcile with the body as, at once, both invaded and invasive, and therein we see how bodily dirt mirrors larger symbols of both danger and power.

Bodily dirt, then, cannot simply be framed as contamination to be cleansed or expelled, but as an active agent of disruption, injecting ambiguity into what otherwise appear to be stable, impermeable categories governing social, cultural, and bodily norms. Still, as dirt loosens these seemingly fixed boundaries, its decomposition cultivates fertile ground upon which alternative and fluid modes of social life may flourish, inherently subverting the strictures of normative containment. In its refusal to stay in place, dirt retains the capacity to reorient social meaning precisely at the points where boundaries dissolve; through this disruption, we begin to see how the body unmakes the very structures that seek to confine it.

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[3] Insofar as perceptions or evaluations of dirt differ according to religio-historical and cultural contexts, Douglas (1966) is firm when she maintains there is "no such thing as absolute dirt" (3). Still, following Émile Durkheim's analysis of ritual(s) as symbolic of social processes, Douglas notes that, in our efforts to eliminate dirt from our environment, our "rituals of purity and impurity create unity in experience" (3).

[4] See: Williams 1998, 67; Murphy 2021, 230.

[5] Addressing early Christian and Hebrew perspectives on impurity taboos, and particularly their association with bodily inferiority, Douglas (1966) clarifies how "the idea of holiness was given an external, physical expression in the wholeness of the body seen as a perfect container," and therein, such wholeness extended to symbolize "completeness" within a social framework (65).

Menstrual blood as bodily dirt: gendered symbols of menstrual pollution & menstrual blood as gendered substance

Menstrual blood, more than any other bodily fluid or discharge, frequently triggers a blend of shock, discomfort, and revulsion in global communities, reflecting some of our cultures' deep-rooted associations to danger and power in the context of bodily pollution (Lupton 1993; Patterson 2014; Fahs 2016; Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler 2020). As a bodily fluid, menstrual blood aligns with Douglas' theorization of dirt as 'matter out of place' insofar as it ruptures through the natural confines of the body and bestows upon the body an 'uncontrollable' physiological process. Indeed, the very viscosity of menstrual blood, as a median state between solid and liquid, challenges easy classification and serves as a metaphor for a permeable or pliant bodily disposition.[6] If we adopt Douglas's framework and regard the self-contained body as a microcosm representing the larger social system, or, if we consider bodily functions as a synecdoche for broader social structures, then, within this framework, the menstruating body symbolizes a vulnerable body politic, lacking control and/or stability. Therein, menstrual dirt beliefs often conceive the menstruating body as an imperfect and leaky container, posing a risk not only to the individual but also endangering others.

Certainly, Douglas (1966) sheds light on various cultures and religious knowledge systems that adhere to dirt-rejecting ideologies, particularly with regards to menstruation and the associated beliefs, rules, and dangers related to menstrual blood. For instance, Havik Brahmin pollution rules restrict menstruating women from entering a temple (ibid., 42).[7] In Western-European secular cultures, menstruation is frequently perceived and remedied in terms of pathogenicity and hygiene, however, menstruating bodies are susceptible to "social sanctions, contempt, ostracism, gossips, even police action" (ibid., 92).

In Judeo-Christian traditions, as reinforced by the Old Testament, menstruation is configured as a part of God's punishment toward women, or the '*curse* of Eve' for causing the fall of mankind (ibid., 52-55).[8] Certain Māori people regard menstrual blood as a form of miscarriage, and thus consider menstruation as a harbinger of spirits related to death (ibid., 119). Mae Engan groups of Papua New Guinea believe that men who come into contact with menstrual blood, without the "appropriate counter-magic," suffer severe consequences, including persistent vomiting, discoloration of blood, and mental impairment (ibid., 182).[9] Lele attitudes preserve that menstrual dangers are "only risked by men" however, if a menstruating woman sets foot in a forest, she poses a danger to the entire community by disrupting favorable hunting conditions (ibid., 187).

In all these instances, menstrual blood is categorized as bodily dirt and the menstruant is deemed both the receiver and transmitter of such pollution. As blood taints, defiles, and clings to things, menstrual pollution affirms the ways in which dirty substances do not conform to rigid boundaries. The capacity to understand menstrual pollution as embodied pollution is twofold: menstruation not only instigates bodily fears such as infection, hunger, and death, but also prompts physical control or concealment of the body such as through restrictions on access to sacred sites, practices of bodily penance, hormonal medication, hygiene technologies like tampons and sanitary napkins.

In cultures where we witness the menstruating body become the subject of taboo or danger, Douglas (1966) is certain we also find "pollution ideas enlisted to bind men and women to their allotted roles," and therein we observe how gender distinctions and inequalities continue to play a central role in constructing societal divisions (174). Among psycho-sociologists, anthropologists, and feminist theorists alike, much scholarly ink has been spilled regarding the intricate connections between women's bodies, menstruation, and the ways in which menstrual

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[6] Douglas (1966) notes Jean-Paul Sartre's anxieties of "stickiness" being "soft, yielding and compressible … long columns falling off my fingers suggest my own substance flowing into the pool of stickiness" (47).
[7] See also: Puri (1999); Cohen (2020).
[8] See also: Delaney, Lupton, and Toth (1988); Dawson (2005); Štante (2013); Newton (2016).
[9] See also: Delaney, Lupton, and Toth (1988); Baldy (2017).

blood more specifically takes the form of a '*gendered*' bodily substance that symbolically enacts (and attacks) oppressive, misogynistic, or patriarchal social structures.

In the wake of modern psychoanalytic theory, indoctrinated shame and cultural avoidance of menstruation may be anchored by Freudian theories of penis envy or castration anxiety (Lupton 1993; Donmall 2013). Under this phallocentric framework, the menstruating body is ascribed both the capacity to reproduce as well as an internal inadequacy or bodily deficiency for failing to do so. Menstruation is thus seen as a waste/break from productivity as well as a shedding of toxic/useless blood. Patterson (2014) argues that the post-menarcheal body gradually acquires sexual meaning through the development of larger breasts and wider hips (i.e. conditions sufficient for pregnancy and motherhood) and girls, often influenced by media representations, are taught to strictly manage and discipline their bodies in order to conform to expectations of (cis-heterosexual) male desire.[10] The sexual differentiation between men and women becomes invariably hinged on the symbolic absence or presence of a penis, with menstruation, in particular, symbolizing what is perceived as most lacking in women: self-control, the phallus, and offspring.

Conversely, many analysts have also framed symbolism of menstrual pollution vis à vis Simone de Beauvoir's conceptualization of women's bodies as *Other* or *Othered* (Chiwengo 2003; Piran 2020; Wood 2020). In *The Second Sex* (1989) de Beauvoir argues that 'women are not born' but rather 'made' by societal expectations and then constrained to the conditions of their biology and physiology. A menstruating woman is accordingly seen as undesirable or unruly due to her uncontrollable nature. Along these lines, menstrual taboos also reserve some potency by ensuring that women actively participate in the process of Othering themselves, monitoring and regulating menstrual dirt through routine self- checks or controls (e.g. surveying for stains and leaks, keeping hygiene products on hand, and tracking period cycles). Taking stock of the main analytical threads in (post-)modern

discourse regarding menstrual taboos, women's bodies are chiefly tied to pollution beliefs through—evidently industrial—notions of reproduction and production. The menstruating uterus is understood to be in *want* of something or completely out of order; the menstruating body is laden with the implications of a (re)productive system that has fallen short in producing.

What becomes abundantly clear through such analyses of dirt-rejecting dogmas and rituals is that within the *social* body politic (and *social* politics of the body), we principally observe anti-social mechanisms of power and control. Under a patriarchal society, the non-menstruating and self-contained male body is rendered ideal, pure, clean, and thus, orderly, while the menstruating and leaking female body is framed as dangerous, impure, unclean, and thus, disorderly. Certainly, the question lingers, as observed by Elizabeth Grosz (1994), regarding why menstrual blood (i.e. a 'polluting' bodily fluid) poses a danger to social order in a way that tears or, more significantly, semen (i.e. a 'nonpolluting' bodily fluid) does not. Grosz (1994) hints at a plausible answer: "Is it that paternity is less threatening, less dangerous, less vulnerable, than maternity? Or rather, is it less dangerous and threatening for men?" (207). Menstrual taboos, which work to systemically conceal or control women's bodies, reinforce menstruation as a uniquely female suffering and therein function as *figurative* metaphors for women's *literal* absence, marginalization, repression, and misrepresentation in society (Turner 2003; Kerkham 2010). As Meta Mazaj (1998) declares:

> "*Menstruation thus remains buried, sunk deep in the vaginal cave… It is hidden in a culture which associates the male with admirable normative principles and the female with the vague and indeterminate, the unbounded and formless, the irregular and disorderly… To recognize women's bleeding is to assess the consequence of gender in its biological, societal, and psychological representation (273-274).*"

While we may challenge earlier arguments on the gendered double standards of menstruation

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[10] Importantly, menarche (i.e. the first menstrual cycle), in various cultures and religious systems, continues to be the most pervasive gender marker that propels the socialization of young women into an 'ideal' form of adulthood.

by pointing out their reductionist, flattening, or myopic approaches, which frame menstruation solely through (cis-heteronormative) reproductive lenses and assume the female body acts as incubatory vessel, there is indeed no denying that menstruation plays a significant role in both shaping and disrupting constructions of the gendered self.

Still, the lacunas remain glaringly clear: What about those women who do not menstruate and those men who do? How do we challenge perceptions of menstruation as a *women's* issue to foreground individual experiences across the gender spectrum? What about the distinct struggles faced by menstruating bodies that do not identify as female, or menstruants who are not women? Indeed, how do we unsettle—or rather, transform—ideas of the menstruating body as inherently taboo and intuitively feminine?

While Douglas's (1966) framework remains foundational in thinking about pollution, boundary maintenance, and socio-symbolic order, it is not without its limits, particularly when placed in conversation with queer and trans embodiment. Douglas' analysis is firmly rooted in provisional (and performative) binary structures: clean/dirty, male/female, inside/outside. These dualisms, though instrumental in illuminating the ideological rigidity of social systems, can themselves replicate the exclusions they describe. As scholars such as Judith Butler (1990) and Jasbir Puar (2007) argue, binary logics often fail to accommodate the layered, lived realities of bodies that do not conform to cisnormative or heteronormative expectations. Gender, Butler reminds us, is never a fixed essence but an ongoing series of transgressive acts that defy tidy classification. Thus, to fully mobilize Douglas in the service of a queer politics of menstruation, then, may require queering her theory itself and reading against the grain of her structuralism to imagine dirt not just as a threat to order, but as a site where normative frameworks collapse under the weight of what they cannot categorize. In this light, menstrual blood does not merely mark "matter out of place," but reveals that the very places—and the meanings assigned to them—are unstable, historically contingent, and open to radical reordering.

Menstrual blood, precisely because it is a bodily fluid that refuses neat categorization, exposes the instability—and thus vulnerability—of rigid gender binaries. Menstruation embodies dirt's intrinsic capacity for decay insofar as menstrual blood corrodes symbolic boundaries constructed around the cisheteronormative body. Rather than seeing menstrual blood's unruliness as a social liability, we might instead interpret such bodily dirt as a site of political possibility—as ongoing resistance—against the binary logics of femininity or masculinity.

Menstrual resistance: dirt as art & towards a genderqueer body politics of menstruation

In recognizing the menstruating body as a particular locus for gender-based discrimination and governance, it becomes imperative to explore (re-)configurations of menstrual symbolism and, more broadly, strategies for gender justice that actively subvert and resist these dictates. The task, therefore, is not only to evolve our conscious acts of resistance to reconcile with dirt-*affirming* ideologies, but to also mobilize a notion of resistance which continues to empower the vulnerable margins and threatened borders of the body politic. Douglas (1966) offers some fundamental groundwork for this charge, emphasizing that dirt maintains immense creative power insofar as "dirt shows itself as an apt symbol of creative formlessness," and such formlessness is "an apt symbol of beginning and of growth as it is of decay" (198-199). On the power of disorder, Douglas (1966) writes:

> Granted that disorder spoils pattern, it also provides the material of pattern. Order implies restriction; from all possible materials, a limited selection has been made and from all possible relations a limited set has been used. So disorder by implication is unlimited, no pattern has been realized in it, but its potential for patterning is indefinite. This is why, though we seek to create order, we do not simply condemn disorder. We recognize that it is destructive to existing patterns; also that it has potentiality (117).

If borderline functions and ambiguous states are seen as threatening to societies where ideas of danger are based on form and cohesion

(or a lack thereof), then surely this is sufficient criteria to claim that immense energy and agential power exists in margins and unstructured areas. Ironically, the very semantics and polysemic capacities of the terms 'taboo,' 'danger,' and 'power' offer ambivalent connotations that wield menstruation as a tool for both reinforcing hegemony and engaging in counter-hegemonic resistance.

The 'potentiality' of dirt, therefore, is neither passive nor purely destructive, but generative. Building on this, we might consider rot (in its symbolic and literal sense) to be perhaps the most powerful expression of dirt, marked by its slow and deliberate labor of undoing. Where dirt marks the transgression of boundaries, rot begins to erode the foundations themselves. In the context of menstruation, rot becomes a political force: it decomposes the rigid, cisheteronormative categories that frame bleeding as biologically deterministic. Menstrual blood, often treated as taboo, performs this rot in real time—it seeps, stains, and refuses containment, challenging the fixity of gendered embodiment. To frame menstruation through the lens of rot is to recognize (and continue to mobilize) a politics of deviance that finds its momentum in the breakdown, in ambiguity and transformation.

On the heels of legislative change catalyzed by the Equal Pay Act, Griswold v. Connecticut, and Roe v. Wade in America during the 1960s and 1970s, the second-wave feminist movement increasingly supplied artists and creators with a platform to envision a world where menstruants are liberated from the influence of (heteronormative) gender constructs and constraints. Douglas (1966) herself contends that art "enable[s] us to go behind the explicit structures of our normal experience" and aesthetic pleasure often arises "from the perceiving of inarticulate forms" (47). In this way, art not only offers a gateway for exploring—indeed, actualizing—the ineffable, but art fundamentally implores both the artist and viewer to confront the symbolic potential of ambiguity or disorder.
According to Breanne Fahs (2016), menstrual art in particular, "more than other forms of art aimed at deconstructing notions of embodiment," distinctly challenges and attacks notions of the 'dirty' (107). Significantly, menstrual art (i.e. art focused on themes directly related to menstruation; art which employs menstrual blood or menstrual management devices as a medium; and/or art incorporating the menstruating body) invites violation of menstrual taboos by radically challenging ideas of menstruation as private, feminine, and disorderly (Fahs 2016; Kutis 2019; Green-Cole 2020; Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler 2020; Lewis 2020). Moreover, considering Judith Butler's (1988) notions *of* performativity and gender constitution(s), menstruation itself can be viewed as a performative act, consciously displayed or kept concealed by the theatrical body-stage. As "the body is always an embodying of possibilities both conditioned and circumscribed by historical convention" (Butler 1988, 521), artworks that recognize menstrual blood as *gendered* blood arguably deconstruct and re-evaluate the disorderly positioning of the leaking female body to instead portray a more positive, subjective, ambiguous, or riotous perspective on menstruation.

In 1971, Judy Chicago's Red Flag—a lithograph of herself extracting a tampon—shattered the taboo surrounding menstrual blood by placing it firmly within the "high art" canon. By co-opting the conventions of fine art, Chicago lent menstrual blood the gravitas usually reserved for male-coded subjects, forcing viewers to confront what has been hidden or sanitized. From 2000 to 2003, Vanessa Tiegs painted over eighty canvases using her own menstrual blood, creating abstract, phoenix-like compositions she dubbed *Menstrala*. Over a 28-day performance in 2013, Casey Jenkins sat knitting in a gallery with yarn drawn from her vagina—some days tinted with menstrual blood. The piece centered the menstruating body as both site and medium, refusing the discreet containment and privacy society demands from bleeding bodies.
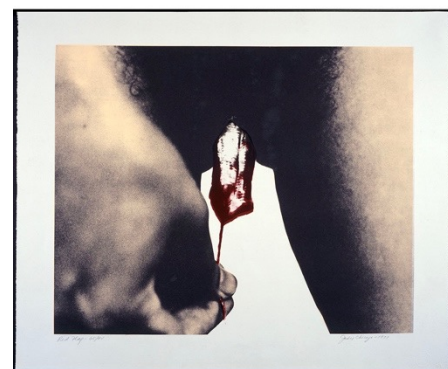

Figure 1. Judy Chicago "Red Flag" (1971)

Figure 2. Vanessa Tieg "Silverfish Spirits" as part of the Menstrala Series (2000-2003)

Figure 3. Casey Jenkins' Casting Off My Womb (2013)

Understood through this vein, menstrual art enacts a *further* disordering of the originally perceived disorder, and by doing so, metamorphizes symbols of bodily dirt into tools for bodily resistance. To the extent that menstrual art transforms stigma into creative resistance, it remains a cornerstone in radical menstrual activism. Still, to date, menstrual art has been predominantly produced by cis-gender and (self-identified) heterosexual women. To date, there are very few examples of trans and non-binary menstrual activism, a gap that highlights how bleeding bodies outside the cisfemale paradigm are routinely overlooked. To date, there are very few examples of trans and non-binary menstrual activism, a gap that highlights how bleeding bodies outside the cisfemale paradigm are routinely overlooked. In 2017, trans artist Cass Clemmer disrupted this erasure by publicly posting their free-bleeding self-portraits on Instagram under the banner #PeriodsAreNotJustForWomen. Such an intervention demonstrates

the power of menstrual art to contest and expand ideas of menstrual normativity, however—as Clemmer themselves emphasize—true liberation demands moving past overly romanticized or homogenized views of menstruation as celebratory for and central to ideas of womanhood and femininity, and rather, embrace its subversive potential across all gendered identities (Bobel 2010; Frank 2020).[11]

As scholarship and awareness surrounding queer menstrual activism *gradually* infiltrate contemporary discourse, we become better equipped to fill the cavities of cis-heteronormative body politics. Arguably, the fact that trans and non-binary menstrual experience (still) remains greatly under-studied, under-spoken, and under-advocated seems inherently tied to ideas of menstruation as a uniquely female suffering, and the genderqueer menstruant as even more 'dirty' or 'disorderly' than the cis-hetero menstruant. Indeed, in various western cultures, genderqueer menstruation remains a twofold state of marginalized Otherness; and both trans and/or non-binary menstruants, in particular, remain at risk of gender-based violence and reproductive injustice (Bobel 2010; Fahs 2016; Frank and Dellaria 2020; Bobel and Fahs 2020). Sarah E. Frank (2020) argues that menstruation and current types of menstrual management are significant sources of anxiety and dysphoria for those outside the gender binary, insofar as the incongruence between the gendered identity felt by trans and non-binary individuals, the lived experience of menstruation, and the socio-symbolic construction of menstruation as inherently feminine all work to fracture a sense of self. Frank (2020) notes how bathroom spaces, professional healthcare sites, and menstrual hygiene products serve as inherently cis-gendered institutions to further stigmatize and socio-symbolically reject trans and non-binary menstruants. Indeed, there is a way in which the very shaping of cultural artifacts associated with menstruation (for instance, women's *healthcare* centers or *feminine* hygiene products) strengthen biologically reductive notions of menstruation and therein reinforce binary understandings of

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[10] As Butler (1988) posits: "It remains politically important to represent women, but to do that in a way that does not distort and reify the very collectivity the theory is supposed to emancipate… my only concern is that sexual difference not become a reification which unwittingly preserves a binary restriction on gender identity and an implicitly heterosexual framework for the description of gender, gender identity, and sexuality" (530-531).

gender.

Viewed from this perspective, it may be tempting to emphasize the ways in which genderqueer menstruants are forced to negotiate with their identities and bodies within the confines of cis-heteronormative spaces and structures, however, as Klara Rydström (2020) notes, dysphoria related to menstruation is not a universal trans experience. For instance, studies have shown that some trans and non-binary menstruants react more positively towards menstrual suppression and regulation than cisgender menstruants (Rydström 2020; Chrisler et al. 2016). In this context, we grasp how transnormativity and queernormativity, too, enact structures of exclusion and Othering which ironically mirror the hierarchical ordering of heteronormativity, and in doing so, reify static and 'containable' gender norms.

So then, to radically move away from cis-heteronormative expectations, hyper-disciplines, and socio-cultural or religio-historical constructions of menstruation which posit the body as indicative of physiological or 'biological' gender/sex binaries (and thus, perpetuate contemporary gender inequalities), would certainly entail a *de*-gendering of menstruating bodies and menstrual blood. Fundamentally capsizing menstrual pollution beliefs, dangers, and rules in order to *resist* patriarchal ideologies which subordinate menstruating bodies, and rather propel activist-based research into equal reproductive justice rights and genderqueer body politics, necessarily requires recognition and inclusion of those (intersex, agender, bigender, non-binary, trans) menstruants who themselves do not identify as cis-gender women but still bleed. As Chris Bobel (2015) notes:

> *"…the entire black body, trans body, disabled body, and fat body, for example, are read as abject, as deficit, and thus, at risk… So while we are celebrating a new era of menstrual awareness, we need to be mindful of who is authorized to dance at the new party… [we must] consider the lived realities of those of us who occupy a social space that vibrates—all day, every day—with peril…[...]*

> *[...]If not, we merely prescribe a one-size-fits-all kind of new menstrual consciousness that keeps the movement small and fringy" (Gender & Society).*

Put simply, there is no one experience of inhabiting a menstruating body and menstrual realities differ among menstruants and non-menstruants alike. Within this comprehension, there exists a compelling argument for the de-gendering of menstruation, menstrual body politics, and menstrual activism more generally. In the phraseology of Jennifer Tyburczy (2017), it is only through "multiple individual's new identities, communities, and politics" that both space and force emerges "where seemingly deviant, unconnected behavior might evolve into conscious acts of resistance that serve as the basis for a mobilized politics of deviance" (52). In reconciling with the fact that the menstruating body may signify (and be signified through) diverse gendered experiences, we thus embark on the task of decomposing, ploughing back, and harvesting the full creative potential of "that which is rejected" (Douglas 1966, 207). It is from this transformative and powerful rot that both resistance and renewal of life burgeons forth, crawls out from the center, and ultimately flourishes in the margins and boundaries.

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QUEERING PUBLIC SPACES:

Spoken Word Performances as Acts of Resistance, Hope, and Community-Building

By   Jessica Van de Kemp

I. Poetry in Performance

Imagine stepping onto a stage, at your local bar or café. The ambient lights dim to a glow and the audience falls silent, waiting. Your heart pounds in your chest as you take a deep breath and then begin to speak. You perform a poem about growing up queer in a small town. Time slows down to a beat, with all eyes on you, and in telling the story of your first soul-bending love and heartbreak—true words whispered from real love letters—you open your eyes, which had closed in the memory of her, tears welling as the audience applauds. In the moments after, warmth floods through you, as if the glow of the lights has taken residence in your chest. You can breathe again, as if stepping into the spring air after a long winter, soothed by the tender sound of poetry.

In my long experience as a poet regularly attending open mics, I have seen the power of public spaces as they turn into welcoming stages for feminist, queer voices when the performance of a true story (sometimes heartwarming; sometimes heartbreaking) results in the spoken word artist and their audience collectively cry, exhale, shout, or dare I say it: pray together—the kind of prayer that is inner quiet, like skipping a stone across the surface of a lake and suddenly feeling calm, still, and at peace with life and self. Spoken word poetry and open mics give me a way to talk about my queerness, something that I experienced as loneliness growing up in a small town; by performing my poetry for others,

my loneliness has evolved from self-hate into self-love. Every time that I step onto a stage at a live show, and share my truth with strangers, I "heal by experiencing the power of poetry through [my] own voice" (Carroll, 2005).

I write this original research paper, which mixes personal reflection with academic analysis, to show how performances of spoken word poetry, especially within rural areas, uplift feminist, queer voices by cultivating a powerful sense of community, hope, and resistance to oppression. The way we engage with space, both physically and symbolically, shapes identity; as Kelly Baker observes, "rural space is often [. . .] characterized by highly traditional gender roles and compulsory heterosexuality" (2011). In this context, "queerness and localness" (Baker, 2011) exist in tension, reinforcing the association or spatialization of queerness with urbanity. In rural areas, where queer folks may struggle to find belonging, performing spoken word poetry can be a bold declaration of presence and identity. Among the many voices calling for justice, such as community activists and leaders, I join the conversation as a queer poet working from the perspective of *art-as-activism*, fighting for gender equality and LGBT+ rights through my word-based performance art. This raises an important question: "What does meaningful activism look like for [you]" (Friesen, 2018)? For me, it means taking up space, holding space to empower others, and using my voice for social justice.

Even as an undergraduate student, now many years ago, I remember sitting in a creative writing workshop where the professor made us feel profoundly safe in the classroom to share aspects of our personal experiences and identities within our work. It was the first time, in my young adult life, that someone besides my loving family and friends had validated and affirmed my queerness; the professor often left hand-scribbled notes in the margins of my typed poems and short stories, finding all the deeper meanings that I had hidden inside of their stanzas and paragraphs. She even invited us to a showcase and open mic, on the last day of term, for a celebration of our creative writing. Among my incredibly supportive classmates, I performed an original poem for the first time in front of a live audience. I remember, in that moment, feeling an overwhelming sense of freedom in being

able to finally live my truth, comfortable enough to say aloud: *this is who I am.*

In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks emphasizes that an "engaged pedagogy" (13) thrives on vulnerability, fostering growth for both teachers and students. Similarly, my first open mic night deeply affected me, as that was the precise moment I chose self-acceptance and found my voice as a poet. A decade later, I joined the volunteer team of a feminist, grassroots, community organization in the same small town I grew up in, hosting events for anyone who identified as a woman (e.g., cis, trans, non-binary, etc). That small team of big 'changemakers' invited me to perform original spoken word poetry at numerous events, such as for *International Women's Day* and the *National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence against Women*. This ultimately led to a 'Person of the Year' award nomination by a Pride organization and an invitation to a public celebration of over 150 activists in Ontario fighting for LGBT+ rights.

A caring professor, a classroom filled with students who believed, and a devoted team of community volunteers each saw something in me before I fully saw it in myself. Now, as an instructor, I carry forward those lessons of care, solidarity, and upliftment as my own pedagogical values, transforming classrooms into spaces of vulnerability. As I have shown in the telling of this true story, spoken word poetry is a tool for taking up space—with your body, words, and actions—in the community. These performances go beyond traditional academic boundaries, enabling queer folks to craft "*counter-narratives*, defined as acts of resisting an oppressive identity and demanding the respect of those within the dominant culture" (Trew, 2019), through artistic expression.

II. Open Mic Liminality

So, what do art galleries, bars, bookstores, cafés, classrooms, community centres, libraries, music stores, parks, theatres and more, have in common? They are all potential venues for a spoken word open mic—a one-night show where both emerging and established artists perform their poetry in front of a live audience. Spoken word, as the name suggests, is a performance art that focuses less on poetry in the traditional sense (words in a book to be silently read), and more on poetry as performance (the voice to be heard). Like other performance arts "engaged directly with social reality, the specifics of space, and the politics of identity" (Tate Modern, n.d.), such as body art, spoken word is meant to be experienced live; it is also culturally rooted in the oral tradition and, in more recent times, has been digitally archived as audio or video recordings. Often, like music and theatre, performances of spoken word poetry hold the audience's attention using "emotion, voice, and presence" (Brooks-Motl, 2019). When a spoken word artist takes the stage, they also use their own body and voice as poetic instruments, and so their performance is marked by experimentation (such as the coupling of poetry and music), improvisation, movement, repetition, rhyme, rhythm, slang, strong feelings, theatrics, vivid imagery, and wordplay, among the more widely known oral storytelling or vocal delivery techniques of varied pacing, pauses, pitch, tone, and volume.

There is also something to be said about the liminality of the spaces themselves, as potential venues for a spoken word open mic are all meeting places, where people come and go. If you have ever sat in silence at a coffee or tea house by yourself, and felt time slip away, you have experienced that mystical or uncanny sense of the present moment feeling slowed or suspended—a perpetual 'now' between the 'before' and the 'after.' Liminal spaces allow for an 'in-between' state to exist. For the spoken word artist, this makes possible the performance of identity as a process of becoming or continuing discovery, where one does not have to express a fixed self if they do not wish to but may instead move and speak in ways that are multiple—fluid; flow; flux. The second time that I performed spoken word was at an academic conference, and I went the route of experimentation, coupling original poetry and music. I remember one attendee lowering their face into their hands, *double facepalm*, clearly embarrassed, disappointed, frustrated, surprised, or otherwise disapproving of my advocacy for gender equality. I also remember another attendee squeezing my shoulder afterward, in a sign of solidarity, and offering supportive words of encouragement.

Over the next couple of years (before the global

COVID-19 pandemic), I performed that same queer feminist anthem, titled "Sisters," in rural areas and was met with varying levels of acceptance and discrimination. Every time I print my name on an open mic night sign-up sheet, and am eventually called to the makeshift stage, I get scared. *What if people laugh at me? What if they ask me to leave? What if someone tries to hurt me?* These are not questions someone should have to think about when taking the microphone for their 10-to-15-minute time slot, but it occurs to me that some members of the audience may find my queerness downright offensive. I get scared and perform my poems anyway because it also occurs to me that there is immense power in taking up space, especially in rural areas where feminism and queerness are sometimes eschewed. Spoken word poetry in rural areas makes queer visibility an act of resistance. I get on stage and take up space so other queer folks in the audience, particularly those who are closeted or young, can recognize themselves in me and feel a sense of acceptance and belonging. "Everyone needs community," including queer folks, who are at a higher risk for "feelings of depression, stress, and anxiety" (Cofer, 2024). The question becomes: How can spoken word poetry, performed in liminal spaces, give agency to queer experience and radical acts of love for both self and community?

The answer lies in the power of shared moments. In those 10-to-15-minutes, voicing your truth before a live audience and feeling it met with empathy can be extremely validating. This sense of belongingness is particularly important because queer folks often experience significant judgment and social disconnection (Elmer, van Tilburg, and Fokkema, 2022). Of course, it can also be challenging if the audience is not listening attentively, loses interest, or otherwise chooses to disengage; it takes immense courage to stand in front of a crowd of strangers and be vulnerable with them. The true power of performance poetry is in freeing yourself from judgment; it is well-known to "offer insight into racism, sexism, queer rights, and [other] issues of social justice" (Silverberg, 2025). Meeting places offer poets a stage for their performances, on the surface, but they offer the freedom to explore and express identity, on the deepest level. These liminal spaces dismantle the traditional performer-audience divide, reminding us

that the spoken word artist is not an actor on a distant stage, but rather one of, and among, the crowd—actively driving change, with their voice and lived experiences, *from within* the heart of the community.

III. Digital Poetry Platforms

Rainbow Intimacies

Next, I draw your attention to *Poetry in Voice*, which is an online resource that, true to its mission statement, "provides educators with engaging content and experiences, in English and French, to inspire their students to read, recite, and write poetry" ("About Us," 2024). A strong example of Poetry in Voice's mission in action is their *Rainbow Intimacies*[1] anthology of 2SLGBTQQIA+ voices. This "poetry mixtape," curated by Angelic Goldsky, a queer non-binary Jewish spoken word poet, explores queer intimacy. Goldsky describes it as a space where "we still find our self-love, the apologies we deserve, and we reclaim who we were always meant to be as queer people connected to our radical and authentic truth" ("Rainbow Intimacies," 2023). The mixtape assembles a well-known group of poets, including Billy-Ray Belcourt, Ocean Vuong, Lucia Misch, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Amber Dawn, Arielle Twist, Kai Cheng Thom, Lindsay Nixon, Jason Purcell, Joshua Whitehead, Bernard Ferguson, and Cassandra Myers. These contributors, from Canada, the United States, and various other regions, many of whom are BIPOC artists, share, through their poetry, a commitment to gaining insight into, understanding, and affirming queer identities and experiences.

Feminist futurities encourage questioning across time (past and present) toward future possibilities; spoken word poetry, whether on stage, mixtape, screen, or another medium, has the power to start conversations and build solidarities. With the poetry mixtape fresh in our ears, let us turn our attention to its atmosphere, and then explore a specific poem. The mixtape's soundscape is striking: a single voice delivers all the poems against a backdrop of instrumental music, in slow-shifting minor and major keys.

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[1] For 16 minutes and 53 seconds of powerful poetry, listen to the mixtape on SoundCloud here: https://soundcloud.com/oetrynoiceesvoixdelaposie/rainbow-intimacies-poems-file.

The music almost sounds like chiming bells, electronic piano notes, or those long, relaxing sounds that you hear in meditation or sound healing. Poetry and music are blended—sounds made by a human being and sounds made by musical instruments or digital/electronic equipment—and this makes the words and their meaning amplified by the music's emotional depth. One of the poems on the mixtape that particularly resonates emotionally is "Another Set of Instructions" by Alexis Pauline Gumbs, a queer Black feminist writer and scholar. Gumbs opens her poem with these compelling lines:

> *we are asking you to trust your hands. put them on your heart. trust your heart. hear what we are saying. trust what you hear. we are asking you to build a circle. always a circle.not almost a circle. face each other. we are asking you to trust the faces. face the truth. it's round. we are asking you to make a sound. make the sound you need by breathing. make the sound that calls us in. we are asking you. not telling you. listen. we will not yell. well. not yet. (Rainbow Intimacies Poems File, 2023)*

These lines evoke intimacy between queer lovers, heightening bodily awareness through words like "hands," "heart," "hear," "faces," "sound," "breathing," "listen," and "yell," while also deepening themes of trust and unity. The repetition of "a circle" reinforces the poem's call for vulnerability by urging the listener to "face the truth." Gumb's phrasing, especially "make the sound you need," captures the power of voice as a tool for reflection, healing, and even pleasure. Lowercase text in the printed version signals an intimate connection, but the mixtape's audio delivery transforms it into a liminal moment, making the words feel directly spoken to the listener. Within queer intimacies, this poetic insistence on "trust" resonates with feminist futures where queer folks create spaces of safety and support for each other. This poem, in one sense, becomes a place where those futures feel possible.

✳

Button Poetry

Instead of just live shows, online channels now make performance poetry into videos that anyone can watch, anywhere—a shift that resonates with Mirona Magearu's exploration of "poetry as an exhibition" (Magearu, 2012). In "Making Digital Poetry: Writing with and through Spaces," Magearu describes "the poem in performance" as akin to "an installed artwork [that] always requires being in the space and in the presence of the work" (Magearu, 2012). While she primarily examines the manifestation of text in digital formats, for the sake of our understanding, the invocation of 'exhibition' and 'installation' implies that poetry goes beyond mere text, positioning it as a performative medium. Button Poetry is a prime example of this and another online resource that I recommend. Their YouTube channel hosts a rich collection of Internet-famous slam poetry recordings; for instance, the Live playlist has amassed over 1,000 viral videos, and acts as a stage for a wide range of spoken word artists, amplifying many queer voices such as Denice Frohman ("Dear Straight People"), Zenaida Peterson ("Pride/Proud"), Andrea Gibson ("Queer Youth Are Five Times More Likely to Die by Suicide"), and many others. Those three videos illustrate the multiple facets of queer identity, exploring them through performance and extending their reach online. Of the many powerful performances available, one video (with 4.1 million views) that stands out to me for both its transformative quality and emotional honesty, is Edwin Bodney's "When A Boy Tells You He Loves You,"[2] which explores the theme of queer intimacy. Bodney, a Black queer non-binary educator and writer, delivers each word of this poem with such precision that they command attention, creating an immersive experience.

Bodney's performance is an affecting illustration of queer intimacies, especially the liminal space between public and private selves often found in queer relationships. When Bodney delivers the line "when a boy says, 'I love you,' he

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[2] This is an impressive 2 minute and 41 second performance, recorded live at Da Poetry Lounge in Los Angeles, California. You can watch it here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sq1l-19pwS4.

means 'I am getting ready to be inconsistent with you now'" (Button Poetry, 2014), it gives a deep feeling of tentative affection, a kind of fleeting moment in time. This is not a promise of forever love, but more like a feeling suspended in that 'maybe' space, a thought that hangs in the air, delicate and not quite real. This evocative expression of emotional uncertainty draws my attention to another powerful moment of raw vulnerability at the end of the performance:

> *When a boy tells you he loves you, only to become silent like a folded sheet of tissue paper not wanting you to decrease him into the truth, do not crack your face into the fullest crescent moon at the tapered bottom of a blackened sky—he never meant a single word of any of it. (Button Poetry, 2014)*

A clear tension emerges between Bodney's confident delivery of the poem and the underlying anxiety that spreads through the words themselves. This tension pushes back against comedic views of queer relationships; it says that queer intimacy, like any other, is not a constant state of happiness, but rather a lively and sometimes unsteady back-and-forth between power, vulnerability, and moments of brief connection. Bodney's spoken word performance engages not only *of* queerness but also *within* queerness, as both artist and audience inhabit "this trans-medial space [that] is self-transformative and transforming" (Magearu, 2012). Performance poetry allows for a public acknowledgment of the validity of queer experiences, including the ongoing process of working through self-acceptance, and invites the audience to bear witness and participate in that embrace. Raw vulnerability in online spaces, like Button Poetry's YouTube channel of spoken word performances, builds feminist futures where marginalized voices are really *felt*.

IV. Final Takeaways

In this original research paper, which mixes personal reflection with academic analysis, I have explored how spoken word performances craft counter-narratives to oppression. Spoken word poetry has always been about turning personal experiences into collective (and often political) action. Live performances invite vulnerability

and, in that openness, radical self-acceptance can emerge. At the same time, online spaces forge new pathways to spread messages of resistance, hope, and community; projects like *Rainbow Intimacies* and platforms like Button Poetry's YouTube channel show how going online amplifies queer voices, reaching far beyond in-person possibilities. Whether performed live or online, spoken word poetry creates space for queerness to thrive, in all its expressions. Even "the classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility" (hooks 207) where I can "reinvent" (3) myself as a teacher and artist by embedding feminist theory and praxis into my everyday work and life. To build feminist futures, we need to embrace vulnerability as a powerful act of resistance against systems and patterns of mistreatment, strengthening our collective fight for equity across identities. Even when you get scared, speak. Your voice is power!

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