

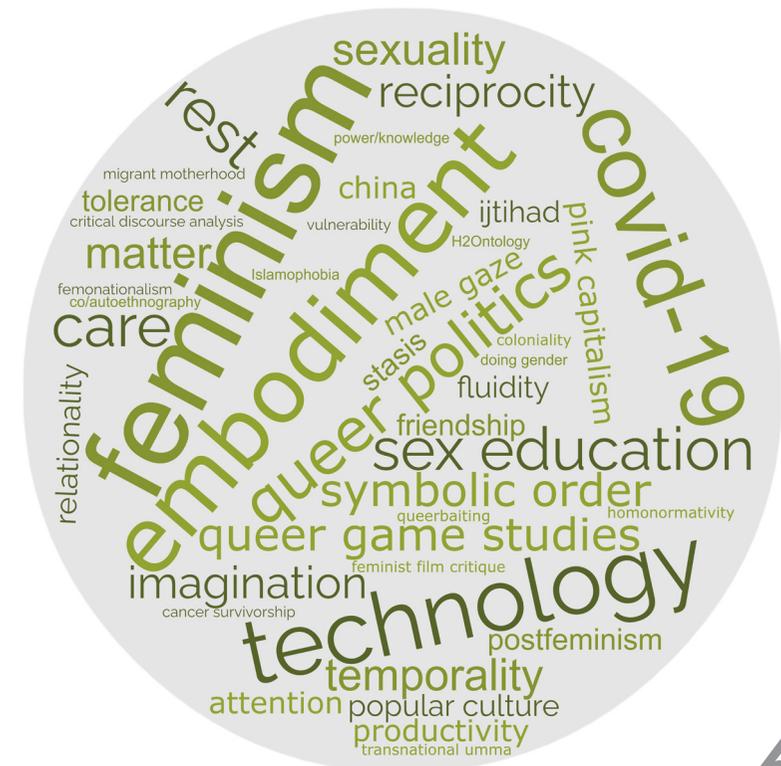
The essays in this collection are the result of more than three years of events organized by SVR Gender Studies, a student-led initiative that began at Humboldt Universität in 2019. SVR – *StudierendenVortragsReihe*, which translates as ‘Student Lecture Series’ – provided a transdisciplinary platform for students at all stages to present, share and discuss their work in an academic setting and to be recognized for their expertise. The aim was to make knowledge production in academia more inclusive and democratic by facilitating peer-to-peer teaching practices and a supportive feedback culture. In this anthology you will find seven diverse essays from nine scholars, spanning the methodological spectrum from auto-ethnography to textual analysis; a showcase of just some of the themes and approaches that Gender Studies students in Europe are engaging with today.

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GenderErträge V

Texts from the SVR Student Lecture Series



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GenderErträge V
*Texts from the SVR Student
Lecture Series*

Edited by
Hazal Kaygusuz & Daniela Petrosino

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Introduction

Hazal Kaygusuz & Daniela Petrosino

SVR Gender Studies¹ was created by students at Berlin's Humboldt University in 2019 as a transdisciplinary platform chiefly for students at all stages of study to showcase their research on gender studies topics. Expertise exists at all levels; by organizing lecture series, conferences and now this publication, SVR Gender Studies has created the space for students to gain experience in presenting, writing and publishing academic work. We are proud of that.

In this anthology you will find a collection of essays gathered from more than three years of events. Some were initially presented at our 2020 digital conference, SVR Breaks the Internet; others first appeared as lectures held as part of the seminars SVR ran at Humboldt University over the past few winters. If you are looking for thematic cohesion, look elsewhere. This is a diverse array of essays encompassing just some of the themes and methodological approaches Gender Studies students in Europe are working on today.

The collection begins with Carmel Cardona and Taey lohe's **When our time is no longer ours: temporality, productivity and reciprocity in migrant motherhood and cancer survivorship**, a beautiful reflection on our expectations of time and our passage through it and how experiences of illness and recovering, gestation and caregiving can up-end our previously-held notions. Taking up an autoethnographic approach to the self and to each other, Carmel and Taey find, in their own lives and the exchange of letters, golden material, which they generously present to you here.

Continuing the autoethnographic mode, nina friedman and ler Vermeulen use a collaborative, poetic writing practice to play with the 'non binary' as a notion and identity in **Trans*formative H2Ontologies: theorizing on non-binary gender embodying**. As slippery, lulling, forceful, calm and exploratory as the water they take as their metaphor, nina and ler's piece is an exploration of the

¹ SVR stands for *Studierendenvortragsreihe*, which translates as 'student lecture series'

theories of scholars such as Astrid Neimanis, Tina Sharpe, and others – an expansive, conceptual contribution grounded by excerpts of their reflections on their own embodied existence on/in this world.

Welcome to my fantasy: queer desires and digital utopias by Daniel Heinz is the third essay in the collection, an offering from the field of queer games studies. In it, Dani puts the remake of the classic and beloved video game *Final Fantasy* under the queer microscope, conducting a close analysis of several scenes from both the original game and the remake to ask whether this particular example of LGBTQ representation has emancipatory potential, or whether it simply reinforces status quo notions of tolerance. Dani's work acknowledges the importance of representation and stresses that it is up to all of us to continue to apply a sustained critique to the media texts we love until these worlds more closely match the ones we want to see.

In the same vein, Oxana Eremin looks at gender representations in her feminist textual analysis, ***Game of Thrones: (re)arranged gender roles on screen?*** Drawing on Mulvey's theory of the male gaze and West and Zimmerman's concept of 'doing gender', Oxana offers a leveled response to claims, from one corner, that the depictions in the show are pure misogyny and the insistence, from another, that its protagonists are feminist heroes. The truth may be somewhere in between.

The fifth essay in this anthology is Wenjia Zhou's discourse analysis of a leading Chinese sex education textbook, ***Sex is beautiful, but we don't recommend it: desire and pleasure in Chinese sex education***. Inspired by Foucault's work on the knowledge-power nexus, Wenjia's paper offers a nuanced examination of the directives around pleasure and desire in the textbook, providing a compelling look at how sexuality is regulated in present-day China.

In **"I won't give you half a mosque": how young Muslims challenge Islamophobic propaganda in Italy**, Alessia Arbustini also uses textual analysis to give us a broad insight into how young Muslims in Italy resist negative normative discourses about their religion and their right to claim an Italian

identity. Rather than focusing on the top-down discourses of Italy's far-right politicians, Alessia cleverly expands her analysis to include *Giovani Musulmani d'Italia*, a transnational organization that works to counter anti-Muslim and anti-Islam sentiment.

The anthology concludes in the spirit with which it commenced. Taylor Gardner's **The myth of neutral tech and the politics of not doing in the attention economy** focuses on a precious commodity – time – and cogently argues for greater awareness of the ways that big tech is commodifying our time and our attention. Inspired by the work of Benjamin, O'Neil and Odell and in homage to the ethics of self-care pioneered by Black thinkers such as Audre Lorde, Taylor casts a spotlight on the forms of technology that have come to dominate our daily lives and urges ask to ask ourselves: is this how we want to live? A timely reminder that though we live in a world constrained by capitalism, we must never forget to recognize these constraints.

When our time is no longer ours: Temporality, productivity and reciprocity in migrant motherhood and cancer survivorship

Carmel Cardona & Taey lohe

This paper employs a co/autoethnographic approach to examine how traumatic bodily experience, and its memory, create a radical rupture in the flow of time. Through the authors' own experiences of migrant motherhood and cancer survivorship, our letter-writing and our collective care, we explore temporality in relation to a selection of moments of commonality, when our time was no longer, completely, freely ours. We both experienced a stasis, a liminal time outside of the linearity of normative time, and discovered instead a polychronic inflection of time. We experienced time as becoming and unbecoming, transforming our notion of 'time well spent', disrupting capitalistic norms of 'productivity'. We lived through precarious and delicate gestational times, literally and metaphorically, which challenged our embodied femininity. While exploring each of these themes, we draw parallels between our shared analysis of our experiences, and the distinct temporal moment of the COVID-19 pandemic, its radical uncertainty and the temporal disturbances it has caused in the lives of billions across the globe. We interrogate our collective autoethnography as a queer methodology of resistance and decoloniality. And we conclude with thoughts about a wider responsibility for care, a carefully constructed solidarity, connectivity and reciprocity, and a move away from stasis, or cyclical time, to our own sense of a nurturing futurity, fecund with potential and possibility.

Temporality, productivity, reciprocity, co/autoethnography, stasis, vulnerability, COVID-19, friendship, migrant motherhood, cancer survivorship

“It took me some time to write to you. It took me some time to embrace and learn, to adjust for my lack of time and focus, as the bulk of my time is spent caring for my child. I imagine you went through an intense adjustment of time too. Please let me listen to your stories and discover how your sense of letting time drift by you has changed over time. This is my experience of time.”

We have lost track of time, though the experience of every minute and day has been abbreviated into a heightened language of ‘lived experience’. We are currently living in the distinct temporal moment of the COVID-19 pandemic, interrupting the usual linearity of life, introducing radical uncertainty, disrupting the capitalistic understanding of productive time and causing temporal disturbances in the lives of billions.

Before this pandemic, we (Carmel and Taey) began discussing our lived experience of care for self and others through migrant motherhood and cancer survivorship. We explored our relationship with time during periods of endurance and transformation. Through different circumstances, in recent years we have shared an experience of time as wasted, disconnected, anxious, yet pregnant with meaning and generative of resilience. Perhaps this lived experience of time trained and taught us to sustain our strength during the difficult times of the pandemic.

Taey experienced a lonely and conflicted time as a migrant mother. She felt alone and helpless as she went through a difficult birth and caring for a baby, far away from her cultural touchstones and safe spaces. Her motherhood speaks to the entanglement of personal and social becoming, where the negotiation of time and space is always contested. Her artistic and political self struggled to find a community of support around motherhood. Taey’s breastfeeding experience was both painful and joyful, private and public: her breasts were no longer organs of her own, but an exclusive food and bonding resource for her dependent baby. Carmel survived two cancer diagnoses, treatment for which included the surgical removal of her breasts, uterus and cervix, the loss of her hair and the triggering of premature menopause. This experience disrupted the normative linear flow of time, led her to question her sense of self and created a new relationship with her body and femininity. While these situations may seem very different, through our

co/autoethnographic reflections we have drawn several parallels between our lived experiences of temporal disturbance and our critical engagement with notions of stasis, gestation, productivity and vulnerability.

We also believe there are parallels to be drawn between these experiences and the “viral time” we are now enduring (Flexer 3). By discussing our own life stories, we wish to demonstrate the transformative power of feminist autoethnographic artistic interventions, and the political impact of theorizing our personal experiences. This paper explores how traumatic bodily experience, and the memory of it, provoke a heightened awareness of vulnerability; a temporal disturbance; and a shift in notions of ‘productivity’. We interrogate our collective autoethnography, or ‘co/autoethnography’, as queer methodology, and consider the potential implications of this method, and the themes we examine, in a move towards a collective notion of care and reciprocity.

Our epistemological and methodological enquiries began as a series of personal letters written to each other in the first half of 2020, recounting and bearing witness to our experiences of cancer and motherhood respectively; our roles as friends in each other’s lives; and a real-time reflection on the memories we read in one another’s letters. We revealed our fears, laid bare our vulnerabilities and spoke openly and in detail about intimate, private and often quite traumatic moments in our lives. We then began collaboratively reflecting on the letters, using these life-writing extracts as a primary reference and discussing their theoretical implications, common themes and affective significance.

We explored the use of autoethnography as feminist method, deeming our “everyday lived experiences as useful, important, and relevant data for academic scholarship” (Boylorn 74). In a conventional sense, ethnography remains concerned with observing and describing another’s culture and life, inherently limiting any intervention of a subjective ‘we’. While early use of the term autoethnography referred to ‘insider’ ethnography, where an anthropologist wrote about their ‘own people’, feminist understandings of ethnography see it as not only writing the ‘self-reflexive self’, but also linking

the personal to the cultural, and, through the exposure of a vulnerable self, as a powerful embodiment of the notion 'the personal is political' (Reed-Danahay 6–9).

In seeking to work collaboratively and collectively, guided by an instinct towards solidarity, we acknowledge that our methodology extends beyond traditional autoethnography. While the socio-political context of autoethnography as method resonated with us, we also felt troubled by the colonial roots of the tradition, specifically its link to economically-driven European expansion into pre-industrial communities. We sought to employ the tools of a tradition based on empirical colonial assumptions and re-deploy them on different terrain. Autoethnography as methodology challenges the dominant paradigm of social science, re-evaluating notions of neutrality, giving precedence to knowledge produced from emotional and bodily experience. In this way, autoethnography, as a cultural, social and ethnographical intervention, can be seen as an act of resistance to established certainties about power in Western empiricism.

We incorporate this spirit of resistance, and extend established definitions of autoethnography, through our collaborative approach. Not only do we reflect on our own experiences, but also each other's. Crucial to the impact of this method is its ability to inspire in readers an affective response: we encourage you to put yourself in our place in bodily and emotional ways, leading you to play a more active and engaged role in constructing meaning from our work (Ellis and Bochner). As filmmaker and post-colonial theorist Trinh Minh-ha writes: "Speaking, writing, and discoursing are not mere acts of communication; they are above all acts of compulsion. Please follow me. Trust me, for deep feeling and understanding require total commitment" (52). We are uniquely placed to tell our own stories, and ask you, as our readers, for this commitment. We aim to create theory from "the location of pain and struggle" (hooks 11), theory which can "break your heart" (Behar 161) and "transcend our traumas" (Giorgio 151).

We place ourselves as the subjects of our writing, but at the same time, as theorists, we analyze this writing as 'other'. We bring to this exploration of our

personal stories our identities as academics, as feminist scholars and as creative practitioners. We embody the position of both ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ in this research: a traditional ethnographic approach would not give the researcher such access to the pain and euphoria of our personal accounts, but we also bring our academic and artistic training to our engagement with our own experiences. We invite the reader to question binary conventions, of self and other, insider and outsider, researcher and researched, objectivity and subjectivity, intellect and aesthetic craft.

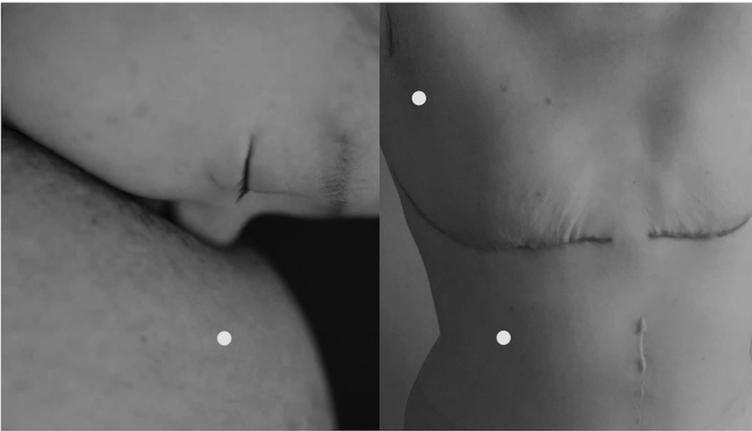
The “dialogical auto-ethnographic methods” Amsler and Motta used in their examination of their own experiences as mother-academics were influential to us, in that they seek to extend their autoethnography beyond reflecting on personal experience in order to analyze cultural experience, and instead co-create knowledge in a truly collective way. For them, “active, dialogical presentations of self and explorations of other” are key because they deconstruct notions of individuality, adopting a collectivity which inherently disrupts and transgresses institutionalised hegemonic logics (5). Similarly, we were drawn to Coia and Taylor’s development of their ‘co/autoethnography’ because of its emphasis on “collaborative self-understanding and reflection on ourselves as people whose lives are constructed in narrative and in community” (9). Inayatullah and Dauphinee’s writing in the International Relations realm confirms to us the inherent inclusivity of using autobiography to address theoretical problems.

Our co/autoethnographic approach seeks to embody many of these methodological strengths and abilities, and while we write collectively, we retain our individual voices. In researching this paper, we sought to find areas of commonality in our experiences, but we acknowledge the elements of each other’s identities that we could not assume to understand, and we respect our differences in positionality and experience.

Temporality

“I grieve for lost time. For the years I feel I have lost through treatment, and for the future, which has been curtailed.”

“That feeling of complete helplessness and darkness – not knowing what is wrong with my mother-body, not knowing where my baby was exactly, not knowing whether I have a serious complication, not knowing whether I have any future left.”



Source: Carmel Cardona & Taey Johe

As our letter-writing progressed, the intimate dialogue between us revealed that, in our different ways, we had both experienced a radical rupture in the flow of time, changing our sense of temporality beyond recognition. This led us to question our understanding of temporality, when our time was no longer, completely, freely ours. We identified moments of commonality: we both experienced a stasis, a liminal time, outside of the linearity of normative time, discovering instead a polychronic inflection of time. We experienced time as becoming and unbecoming, transforming our notion of ‘time well spent’, and disrupting capitalistic norms of ‘productivity’. And we lived through precarious and delicate gestational times, literally and metaphorically, which challenged our embodied femininity. Here, we explore these themes in more detail, and

learn valuable lessons which we can apply to the “waiting times” of the global pandemic (Baraitser and Salisbury).

Stasis

“Before my diagnosis I felt young, excited about the future, and I was always making plans. My sense of self was formed from a combination of my past, present and future. But while I was on the treatment treadmill, I felt as though time was truncated. My sense of future consisted only of the days until my next medical appointment. I stopped talking about the future; stopped making plans; stopped articulating dreams. Instead, I entered a period of stasis: time was suspended.”

Our experiences of our time, in line with our pasts, stopped, and plans were stilled. Our sense of future changed. Notions of temporality are contained within the structure of language: the past, present and future tenses with which we describe our world (Smith). Instead of having a coherent sense of linear self within the continuous sequence of our lives, we opened the possibility of expanding that sense to let another’s existence come into our time. Transgender theorist Jack Halberstam asserts that queer temporalities have the ability to disrupt “normative narratives of time” (266). He argues that time is complicit in creating notions of normativity, while disability theorist Alison Kafer discusses how illness and disability similarly disconnect time from its continuous sequence, casting us out of time. While living in this “liminal temporality” we also have an opportunity to focus mindfully on the present moment (35–37).

Before her second cancer diagnosis, Carmel experienced the challenges that the English language poses when it comes to the clinical uncertainty of cancer. Oncologists refrain from declaring someone ‘cancer free’, as they can never quite be one hundred percent certain that cancer is not present (Adamson). Instead, they use the phrase ‘NED: No Evidence of Disease’. A patient can therefore often find it challenging to know how to talk about their cancer. At what stage is it permissible to talk about the disease in the past tense? As feminist theorist Jackie Stacey describes in *Teratologies*, her cultural study of

cancer, to use the present tense ('I have cancer') can feel pessimistic, as one hopes it has gone for good, while using the past tense ('I had cancer') can feel like tempting fate: can we really be sure it will never return? We are left, then, with the rather clumsy present perfect tense ('I have had cancer'), the only tense to account for the lack of resolution in this situation.

"There was no advice for migrant mothers – what to do when you need help, how to prepare, build and foster your support network. All the advice seemed to be for women who are comfortable around their network of love. I spoke to my belly every day in my language, Korean. I called him 'Dal', which means Moon. I wished him to be a light in the darkness, and a transformer of many shapes through consistent and powerful gravitas in the world."

Taey drew parallels between becoming a mother and learning the future perfect tense in English grammar, foreseeing an event that will happen in the future, only to find that the moment will be already in the past. For example, "I will have learnt how to be a good mother when my child is grown up". In her time as a mother, she feels she must be present at every moment to provide care for her child, while also constantly preparing for the near future. Care theorists like Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher define care as,

a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web". (Tronto and Fisher 40)

This maintaining, continuing and repairing requires a very careful sequence of temporally situated action: planning, delaying, waiting and sharing time together, and all this despite a future that cannot yet be recognized or defined. The language that can voice the experience of motherhood requires learning the history of motherhood. Taey struggled with the combination of the identities of 'migrant mother' and 'mother artist'. These are conflicting commitments and stories, as each job demands temporal, physical and emotional space within limited resources and a lack of support systems. Gradually, she learnt to desire to accept multiple becomings and sought out

means to connect and collectivize with similar mothers, migrants, artists and queer parents in order to create something together.

Mothering time is non-linear; it is disrupted and compounded by the evolving needs of care with constant repetition. Psychosocial theorist Lisa Baraitser points out the limits of defining a care model of the mother-child encounter based on dependency and ethical responsibility governed by “autonomy, independence and justice” (16). Rather it involves “empathic understanding, interdependence, flexibility, relatedness, receptivity, responsiveness, attentive and preservative love, nurturance and training” (16). The American poet Adrienne Rich places the institution of motherhood with all its ambivalence and conflict in a feminist context. Caring takes economic and financial commitment, in emotional and physical ways, and it pulls both autonomy and dependence toward different ends, yet often caring goes unrecognized, even though it is vital work. It is a pole of artistry and motherhood, neither of which can be lived-in and nurtured without frequent immersion in the constrictions and fears of the other. In the caring relationship, the carer and cared-for are both in a position of subject and object. A consciously and actively autonomous carer is an impossibility; just as a dependent artist is. Caring is a necessarily reactive and responsive form of relation, unlike carrying the independent and invocative tone of the artist. The degree of care, and the capacity to continue caring are different in all cases.

In both our experiences, a linear, ‘normative’ sense of time and life course was interrupted. Instead, we entered suspended time, a time which was no longer ours. These kinds of events disrupt the taken-for-granted assumptions we have about our lives. We entered a state of what sociologist Kathy Charmaz refers to as “temporal incongruence” (171), a state in which our perspectives of time were incompatible and inconsistent with the structures of time.

The existential uncertainty brought about by a diagnosis of chronic illness led Carmel to rethink her relationship with futurity. The normative linearity of life had been ruptured, and she could no longer rely on the future to unfold predictably: it had “become emptied of its affective qualities such as hope, anticipation, longing” (Baraitser 16). Instead, she found solace in queer

temporalities, which, as theorists such as Jack Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz and Lee Edelman have explored, resist the dominant temporal order, that which Elizabeth Freeman terms “chrononormativity”, proposing “other possibilities for living in relation to indeterminately past, present, and future others” (xxii). Similarly, disability scholars such as Alison Kafer have challenged the assumed linkages between subjectivity and futurity. Carmel began to shift her focus from “privileging the future”, as Elizabeth Grosz describes, towards privileging the present. As she project-managed her cancer treatment, the future shifted from a great expanse of possibility to smaller increments of time, focussed on treatment and survival.

Meanwhile, Taey’s experience of East Asian queer temporalities was colored and partly structured by the heteronormative society in which motherhood is contingently situated. She felt that her color, race, sexuality and mother tongue were all suddenly incongruous in the public realm, both in the community of parents she had newly joined, and in the queer community in which she felt at home. Scrutinising binary gender institutional concepts in every aspect of her, her partner and her son’s culture and environment, in the colors and contexts of parental duties, stories and media, made her an uncomfortable ally in both Korean mothers’ and British mothers’ groups. Writer Maggie Nelson discusses pregnancy as the work of constantly withdrawing from “falling forever, going to pieces” to keep the gestated one safe inside (144). That very effort of keeping it together is changed permanently when the gestational time ends. In this way, maternal time, truly beginning beyond natality as an inevitable time of caring, under the cost of love, begins as a rupture in the experience of time as a non-carer.

We therefore variously came to find new ways to articulate a futurity that wasn’t rooted in compulsory able-bodiedness or heteronormativity. We embraced a non-linear sense of time which housed new strains of thought and impossible topographies; in this landscape we could perceive a polychronic inflection of time – durations and prolongations that could not be allowed elsewhere.

Productivity and gestation

“I’ve been thinking about the time I spent during cancer treatment as ‘unbecoming time’; as time radically suspended. I have reflected on how this experience has changed my perceptions of ‘time well spent’. Towards the beginning of my treatment, I was frustrated at the amount of time I was spending in waiting rooms, in the chemo ward, in hospital foyers. I viewed this time as ‘unproductive’, and I felt as though I was ‘treading water’, making no progress, and achieving nothing.”

At the same time as experiencing this stasis, ‘unbecoming time’ or time as suspended, we also developed a new understanding of time as ‘productive’. As our temporal relationship with futurity shifted, so too did our ability to participate in a capitalistic notion of the future as “development, growth, expansion and accumulation” (Baraitser 78). Carmel’s cancer treatment significantly impacted her energy and abilities, but her employer’s minimal sick pay provisions meant she had to continue going into work, causing an inner conundrum as to the best ‘use of time’. Eventually, after two years of treatment, she was steadily pushed “out of the logic of capital accumulation and onto the edges of labor and production”, as is common with many disabled individuals (Kafer 40). Deemed by her employer to be unproductive and a drain, she instead went freelance and adjusted her life to a reduced income. This move was partly out of a lack of choice once her body could no longer keep up with the demands of work, and partly a reorientation of priorities, preferencing self-care over ‘productive work’. As Kafer urges in *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, practices of self-care should be employed not for preserving one’s body for its use in the neoliberal machine, but instead to “make room for pleasure” (39).

“I wasn’t in the mode of waiting, I was in the mode of growing. Physically and mentally, I was growing a living being, a new something inside me, and I became another being, in whom dual living co-existed. Time became transformational. What I was mostly afraid of was that I might lose a sense of ‘I am’ when I became a mother to someone. I was afraid that I would be blinded by ‘maternal love’ and be complacent about my own journey. I didn’t see motherhood as an extension of my journey, I saw it as a distraction.”

Taey's sense of productivity lessened from being a part of the creative and critical community to an invisible domestic housewife. Waking up as the baby cries; changing nappies; making breakfast; feeding the baby; cleaning the kitchen; bathing; cuddling; helping the baby have enough stimulation to grow; comforting him toward his nap; attending to his non-verbal communications; wiping the floors as the baby crawls; doing the laundry; sorting out outdated baby items and clothes: the list goes on. When the baby was fourteen months old, Taey decided to find a nursery he could attend, and she went back to the hustle of freelance design work to pay the expensive nursery fees. She was relieved that she could be useful again, in wider society, dealing with adults, discussing non-baby topics, yet the work was far from what she sought to cultivate in her artistic career. Getting paid for freelancing gave her a sense of productivity, but it was deeply unfulfilling as it was almost a direct exchange for her labor to pay for another to care for her son. Sociologists call this the "motherhood penalty": the disadvantage and sacrifice mothers have to make, alongside the sting of motherhood in industrialized nations being perceived as a chosen status (Correll). As Taey found time to escape the crowds and pump her breast milk in a toilet cubicle, she felt a deep sense of relief from extracting the milk from her chest but felt guilty for wasting and flushing the milk away while leaving her baby in someone else's hands. This cycle of relief and guilt continued until she reduced her working hours and nursery time. She started to engage with play groups, actively looking for other migrant mothers and artist mothers. Slowly her time became less productive in the monetary sense, but she has started to find a balance as her baby grows into a child, increasing the production of care.

We started to see this liminal time as 'becoming' rather than 'unbecoming': as gestational. In Taey's sense, this gestation was partly literal, with the birthing of her son. In Carmel's sense it was very much metaphorical, a psychological and political gestation: birthing a new vision of being in the world and relating to productivity, cultivating a renewed sense of self in relation to the future. This new self was a form of resistance against chrononormativity and consisted of the radical act of prioritizing self-care over neoliberal 'productivity' (Freeman; Kafer). This act has been emulated, to an extent, by the distinct temporal moment of the pandemic. The virus has

interrupted social and productive relations, and governments have more or less successfully navigated weighing up the benefits of disease and death prevention with the costs of economic collapse. (Some) citizens have been encouraged to enter a voluntary period of stasis, ‘staying home’ to ‘save lives’, entering “an abrupt amputation of productive work and time” (Flexer 7), while neoliberal economics have been hastily rearranged, relieving individuals from capitalist temporality by forcibly containing and delaying their lives through ‘lockdown’ and ‘shelter-in-place’ orders. These temporary interventions have given a glimpse of alternatives to the productive time of capitalism, and many people with the means and the ability have made significant life choices during this period that have shifted and re-imagined their social relations. Significantly, the ability to realize these social and temporal opportunities is highly unequal, with systemic inequalities to do with class, gender, race and socioeconomic situation determining individual outcomes and temporal impacts, as well as health inequalities. For some, this time is, as we have experienced, ‘gestational’: generative of self-care and self-protection. But while governments compensate non-productively working furloughed workers for work they are not doing, at the same time (largely gendered) care work has increased without commensurate financial compensation for many. Only by looking back from the future will we see the full ramifications of the pandemic on productivity.

Vulnerability

“Vulnerability is a fundamental aspect of our human condition. We are not all vulnerable in the same way, nor is our vulnerability expressed or recognized in the same way. People who are vulnerable are not necessarily weak. In their physical, socioeconomic vulnerability we must protect them as we would protect the naked flesh of our own wounds, or a newborn baby in the filth and blood of a birth. Perhaps these are the letters in which we let ourselves be vulnerable – recognize our emotional holes and find a way to go through them.”

Audre Lorde described herself as “other, deviant, inferior, or just plain wrong” as a “forty-nine-year-old Black lesbian feminist socialist mother of two, including one boy, and a member of an interracial couple” (210), and often

characterized the relationship of racial, generational, gender and class dominance as involving a “depersonalisation” of invisible vulnerability (77). The problem Taey had for four years from the beginning of her motherhood was that she did not wish to be vulnerable, but instead desired that she and her son would belong somewhere and feel safe. Time to reflect upon that vulnerability and the yearning to be strong is absent in early motherhood. Gradually she learned that disguising one’s vulnerability and intersectionality is not necessarily constructive. Instead, she embraced the difference and disparity within her own sense of self and waited to encounter other communities which contain similarly echoing and resonating differences.

“As the months went by, my perception of what constituted a ‘productive’ day shifted, and the relative weight of importance I placed on work outputs vs personal outputs changed. I continued to work all through my treatment, but I set different expectations for myself: I got better at delegating, and I was no longer afraid to be vulnerable, and to admit when there were things I couldn’t achieve.”

Similarly, Carmel’s experience with cancer treatment transformed her attitude towards vulnerability, particularly her own, as she realized its importance in empowering others, enabling them to feel useful and helpful in her time of need. Slowly, over the three years of treatment, she embraced her vulnerability, and started to see its power in building human connections, bonds of trust, and mutual care.

But vulnerability in relation to the “temporality of crisis” is not necessarily a strength (Moore 6). During the pandemic, certain lives have been valued over others, and there is a pernicious and pervasive discourse which deems vulnerable lives, at worst, expendable, and at best, ‘less valuable’ than healthy, productive lives. The waiting and delay brought about by the strain on the NHS due to COVID-19 is causing negative health outcomes for some vulnerable groups, such as palliative patients, the elderly, patients with serious underlying conditions and those with urgent care requirements. While governments urge the vulnerable to ‘shield’ themselves, prioritizing measures to get the economy back on its feet, what emerges instead is a swathe of community care networks, mutual aid groups and local volunteers, carrying out shopping

for the elderly and frail, checking in on neighbours hitherto unknown to them. This community of care, formed during a time of collective pain, is not the sense of community critiqued by Halberstam, with its “nostalgic attempts to return to some fantasized moment of union and unity” (268), but is instead informed by “queer social contours”, or the forging of a collective form of ego which exists beyond family ties (Freeman 12). Vulnerability is at the core of these most meaningful human connections.

The reciprocity of spending time together

“The idea of having someone who would be dependent on me was a terrifying thought, but it was empowering too.”

“I think a lot of the reason why I hid my vulnerability, why I coated it in positivity and strength, was that I was trying to protect other people from the true pain of my experience.”

During the co/autoethnographic process of letter-writing and writing this paper, we have been drawn to the human need and requirement to make connections beyond ourselves. We exposed our vulnerabilities to each other, allowed ourselves to feel uncomfortable, and strove to carefully construct solidarity with each other. We have been sharing that borrowed, suspended, painful time together. We brought meals and books to each other’s homes when the baby was born and when the tumors were removed. We hold space for each other’s frustrations, emotional moments and physical failures, and encourage each other to get up again; even more importantly, we plan what is most needed together. This action is not based on an idea of a common oppression but is formed from a move towards collective care. We acknowledge that our race, background, language and identity are different, and we see that difference as a key, through which we must listen to each other as we experience the intensity of bodily labor and emotional expression. By sharing our grief and pain, our learning and joy, we realized we had an “ethics of responsibility toward the other across time” (Freeman 9). Our suspended time evoked a deepened compassion, building solidarity both inside and outside our friendship. Carmel has been volunteering to counsel

new cancer patients and has further developed her training skills to facilitate resilience and transformation in the wider community; Taey has set up a collective community-oriented healing project that aims to build solidarity and a circle of care specifically for Southeast and East Asian refugees and precarious migrants (Iohe and Choi). The project's focus is on the mental health issues of diasporic communities, which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and consists of creative workshops and visiting forests. The circle of reciprocated relationships has expanded by acknowledging that everyone's suspended time is as different as their past time has been, because of their cultural and psychosocial backgrounds.

Feminist theorist Chandra Talpade Mohanty emphasizes the importance of particularities in building solidarity. Our suspended times contain and involve inconsistent experience:

in knowing differences and particularities, we can better see the connections and commonalities because no border or boundary is ever complete or rigidly determined. The challenge is to see how differences allow us to explain the connections and border crossing better and more accurately, how specifying difference allows us to theorize universal concerns more fully. (226)

Reciprocated care, then, is only initiated by understanding each other's different needs, space and time in the past. The act of connecting with others, spending time together and nurturing them through their pain is in itself reciprocated care. Baraitser asks "why give primacy to duration over difference, endurance and persistence over transgression, the slowness of chronic time over rupture?" (11). She pays attention to "our time", how we, as a collective, as a heterogeneous community, are enduring time together. This move away from neoliberal individualism towards collective care and responsibility not only applies to our fellow humans, but also to the natural world around us. We must acknowledge humankind's responsibility for the loss of animal habitats, which itself has increased the probability of the current pandemic through zoonotic disease transfer.

Our necessarily partial accounts of cancer survivorship and migrant motherhood are culturally situated, viscerally learned, and constitutive of lived communitarian knowledge. Through embracing our wider responsibility for care, we can transcend, or exist alongside, chrononormativity and move from stasis, or cyclical time, to our own sense of a nurturing futurity, fecund with potential and possibility.¹

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Trans*formative H2Ontologies: Theorizing on non-binary gender embodying

nina friedman & Ier Vermeulen

What follows is a fluid gathering of thoughts, incomplete journal entries and shared stories that use the material matter of water as both a method and a concept for approaching alternative ways of being *in* and *of* the world. Our shared confrontations with gender and sentiments of exhaustion open up ways for possible imaginings of personal gender embodying and further, of potential entry points towards hacking that which is taken as such. Distinct but not disparate, the words on these pages are meant to be read alongside and through one another, what Karen Barad might call “together-apart” (“Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together-Apart” 168). In section I. we question the body, its situatedness and relationality to/with/through ontological configurations. Section II. troubles these ontological configurations, first by attending to the condensation of ‘non-binary’ as an identity category, then by proposing a non-hegemonic methodological entry point, which we call H2Ontology. Throughout this essay we mobilize poetics in an effort to activate this fluid figuration. We invite you to imagine the words on these pages like water—moving, at times rushing gushing roaring, others morphing, trans*forming always already in constant processes of becoming.

H2Ontology, embodiment, fluidity, relationality, coloniality, symbolic order, matter

Section I: Fluid Be(com)ing

In her seminal piece *My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage*, Susan Stryker beautifully uses the metaphor of water to denounce her rage, her transgender rage: “Why am I not dead if there is no difference between me and what I am in? [...] This water annihilates me. I cannot be, and yet—an excruciating impossibility—I am I will do anything not to be here” (251).

Touched and affected by these words, spoken in a language of both suffocation and surrendering, I recognize Stryker’s frustration,

It is 5am, I shake a(wake) and find myself in a wet sweaty bed, I look down and still see my tits. In my dream, I jumped into a lake and when I got out I had undergone a morphological change; some sort of holy water had dissolved my boobs into a nothingness – a void. Jealous of water, its fluidity, and its capability of turning its liquid into solid into vape into liquid solid vape liquid solid vape solid solid solid is my breast tissue is my body is me.

Despite recognizing ourselves in Stryker’s words, we are also struck by the ambivalence she implies when she says that there is no difference between her and the water: while the water should drown her, it is simultaneously part of her im/possible being and becoming. It is from this ambivalence that we depart, arguing with/in and through water and its fluidity in engaging with trans* non-binary embodiment.

Water is a funny thing. We need it, we inhale and exhale it, we are composed of it, we drink, sweat, pee, wash in it. We mean, ‘we’ is a privileged position – who has access to all these bodily primary necessities? Water is not only beautiful, it is political, it is violent: who swims; who drowns; who is flooded with it: bodies filled with water, transported over it for hundreds of years, over 22,000 missing watery bodies since 2014 who died in their flight, fighting the waters of the Mediterranean Sea (Missing Migrants Project).

Over the course of the past year, we have occupied ourselves with the notion of water, reading contemporary feminist scholarship on all the different ways

in which water *matters*. Mattering not only in the sense of vitality, but also and especially in terms of *materiality* itself. Starting with the materiality of water, one of its prominent characteristics is its fluidity – we can see and feel water, yet it is not graspable – shapeshifting and adjusting to possible containments: lakes & oceans & my body & your body & non-human entities & objects.

In the first part of this essay, we occupy ourselves with the notions of fluidity, relationality and causality, questioning the kind of relationalities that theorizing on non-binary embodiment through water allows for. We do so because, as posthumanist feminist philosopher Astrida Neimanis accurately notes:

to rethink embodiment as watery stirs up considerable trouble for dominant Western and humanist understandings of embodiment, where bodies are figured as discrete and coherent individual subjects, and as fundamentally autonomous. (*Bodies of Water* 2)

Taking a stand against such humanist traditions in which the body is presumed to be a coherent entity, and rather viewing the body as continuously in be(com)ing – as porous, soaking, seething, and leaking – follows our aim of proposing a re-figuration of trans* non-binary embodiment and its relation to the Symbolic Order through water's fluidity. By Symbolic Order we refer to the dominant Western framework of binary cisheteronormativity. While we are wary of reproducing the violence of Western humanist thought, which is based on colonialist logics of praxis, we want to consider our non-binary existence as outside of such an Order, for we feel sceptical towards the potential of staying within the hegemonic Order because it might always define gender as binary. So, on the one hand, because we want to be seen in our non-binaryness, we desire 'independence' from the hegemonic Order. On the other hand, this desire to be seen 'outside' of hegemony is a wish that risks reproducing that same Symbolic Order.

Departing from this ambivalence, we engage with an interview with Gender Studies scholar Gayle Salamon on transpositionality and the mind/body "disjuncture" (221), Astrida Neimanis' theorizations on embodiment by rethinking it through water as explicated on in her book *Bodies of Water*, and

feminist theorist Karen Barad's *Transmaterialities: Trans*/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings*. By critically engaging with the aforementioned authors, this essay is an effort to re/figure non-binary be(com)ing as that which can find both potential in water's fluidity by traversing notions of graspability and solidity, as well as that which is confronted by im/possible imaginations through bounded containability and limited shapeshifting.

28-11-21

Today is my first day on T. nina asked me if I felt excited: I don't really. Rather, it is a feeling of 'finally' – the Dutch health care system sucks – longing for subtle changes that stem from a trans desire; a trans* not as in 'I hate my body', but a trans* in the sense that I want to be(co)me. Smoothly and softly, I apply the gel on my upper arm and let the liquid dry while it soaks into me – my body literally takes in it and transforms the fluid into something more, a different containment.*

We want to consider water as a queer thing. It might evade categorical logics and defy classification through movements, through appearing and moving away from but also with/in 'vastness' or 'solidness': transforming into and from different states – a continuous un/becoming. Neimanis has eloquently drawn upon the relation between water and embodiment. She states that we cannot separate the belief of embodiment or being embodied from the fact that our bodies are comprised of water. We cannot make a distinction as such between a rather socio-cultural understanding of a body and its matter. Instead, as she notes “[w]e are both of these things, inextricably and at once – made mostly of wet matter, but also aswim in discursive flocculations of embodiment as an idea” (*Bodies of Water* 1). In this quote and throughout her text, Neimanis investigates how water is ambivalently relational to embodiment, engaging with the renegotiable dependency between ‘our wet matters’, bodies of water and the hydrological cycle (3). Drawing forth upon these thoughts, we want to continue inquiring as to what fluidity has to offer the notion of non-binary, taking into account that “[w]ater is articulated as both ‘being’ and a process of ‘becoming’ – gathering water from certain bodies and flowing back into other in return” and hence questioning how we can posit non-binary as more than mere embodiment (68). More precisely, we want to explore the way in which non-binary seeks affiliation with fluidity in relation to notions of relationality and causality that underlie this characteristic of water.

Part o: re/figuring relationality and causality

Non-binary, not man nor woman, neither or both – a fluid figuring of masculinity and femininity. Like water, non-binary might be fluid – it might aim to defy categorization and classification through inexhaustive moving and dis/appearing, yet still, “*there is no difference between me and what I am in*” – a body. In a turn to the materiality of a body, while not forgetting the socio-discursive reality of meaning-making processes, we notice ourselves feeling both hopeful and frustrated with the notion of fluidity too, making us wonder: even if *we are* as fluid as water, enabled to change morphologically, who recognizes our *matter*? To move to such ontologico-existential question regarding embodiment requires attending to more than the self. While queer phenomenologist Gayle Salamon says that “[o]ur lives are only thinkable, and livable, through our bodies” (223), bringing our attention to the necessity of not forgetting our matter, the process of our matter being seen depends also on those who might see us. Our same recurring question of “how to be read” does not happen in a vacuum of just our own matter, existing, but instead requires someone else partaking in the act of reading or recognizing. As such, recognition and being does not happen individually and separately but rather relationally and causally. And it is precisely this relationality that causes our frustration. A form of ‘graspability’ bounded to embodiment: a relationality that evokes non-binary subjectivities as categories that are still containable with/in frames of what can be intelligible – *liquid* or *gas* or *solid*.

In her theorization on trans* embodiment, transgenderism and transsexuality, Gayle Salamon talks about relationality and transposition. Transposition, according to Salamon, is the swapping and switching “from one place or state to another” and also refers to “the thing that is produced by such an exchange or switching” (227). Salamon considers the body, through the innumerable amounts and possibilities of transpositions, to always be in relation with the psyche and the world. In other words, it is this relation, the continuing exchange of fleshiness, including sensations, desires and perception as well as the end product of the exchange that makes a body. Here, the body is turning from a noun into a verb – it is an ongoing *becoming*. In our ongoing becoming, perhaps fluidly, we move between adjusting, conforming, refusing,

but still we wonder if and how our different acts and gestures and movements are interpreted. Acts and gestures that make up intentional gender performances, that, as queer theorist Judith Butler has accurately described, through repetition form the idea of a coherent gender “core” (6–10).

Salamon’s idea of relationality seems to defy causality. Presuming a causal relation between the body and the psyche may essentialize identities to certain bodies in a one-way process, leaving little room to self-intervene. Instead Salamon introduces the idea of (trans)forming/transpositional flesh to describe non-normative sexualities as “relationally disassembled” (225). Disassembled relationality can be understood as the manner in which “desire, body, and being are held forward as a series of relational or embodied bids that extend, construct and undo (substitute and reconfigure) sensations, perceptions, and relations” (225). What would it mean for our bodies to be made of transpositional flesh, our bodies as streams of water that are in constant flux? What does it mean for our bodies to claim a notion of fluidity? Containable and definable in categories that *hold*, like a glass holds water and though you pour it into a different shape glass, though it changes its form, adjusting, still it remains containable.

Me and my body are no still waters, we are overflowing rivers.

In the beginning of this essay we acknowledged that we are jealous of water’s fluidity. Honestly, we think we are already fluid. Despite our attempts to overflow – to cause rupturing waves – dams are built and we are pumped away into gutters and even if we vaporize we are still stuck in the same hydrological cycle, knowing we will condensate, fall and start all over. A transpositional relationality that consists of linear, predictable temporalities. Is water’s fluidity really that liberating when non-binary is nonetheless still predicated on and expressed through the logics of binary cisheteronormativity? Our subjectivities are in relational becoming together. From this mutual-becoming, which becomes a question of ethical response-ability, we wonder: is it possible to step outside of this relationality ... in order to become individually? Keen for potentiality, should we defy relationality to become non-dependent, to move beyond the three different states of water?

Our desire to move away from relationality stems from a desire to not be graspable or perceived by the processes of meaning-making and mattering stemming from the cisheterosexual matrix. However, the wish to step outside this relationality, to put ourselves ‘beyond’ the Symbolic Order, would reiterate the dualist mechanisms we want to do away with. That is, the desire to get ‘outside’ innately produces an inside – the very dualistic and separationist logics so typical for hegemonic Western humanist thought.

Now still, we have not found a kind of relationality or oppositional stance to relationality that enables an activation for the specific kind of fluidity we are after. Even though we might want to set ourselves outside the hegemonic order, this might not even be possible. Neimanis states on relationality, embodiment and water “[y]et our bodies of water are neither stagnant, nor separate, nor zipped up in some kind of impermeable sac of skin. These bodies are rather deeply imbricated in the intricate movements of water that create and sustain life on our planet” (*Bodies of Water* 65). Might there be a way to re/think liquid, solid, vape from a relational yet fluid vantage point? It is in such imbricatedness that we must find potential for non-binary embodying.

In line with feminist philosopher Karen Barad’s and Salamon’s ideas about a certain kind of reclaimed relationality, we want to consider a relationality that involves the *intake* or consumption of fluid water – a relationality in which our becoming *becomes* and *is already* part of other bodies and the Symbolic Order. We read Barad’s notion of in/determinacy and im/possibility alongside Salamon’s relationally disassembled transpositional flesh, but whereas Salamon speaks about embodiment, Barad does not specifically do so. Yet, through the metaphor of water, we desire to bring Barad’s onto-epistemological ideas to a more ‘embodied’ level.

In theorizing on queer particles and Quantum Entanglements, Barad uses lightning to examine intra-activity. Barad understands intra-activity as an onto-epistemological framework in which all matter is entangled, and it is only through this intra-activity that matter exists in the first place. According to

them, we are all *of* the world and everything that is of this world is connected, whether we speak of time, of matter and/or of spaces.

Barad notes that: “(...) every finite being is always already threaded through with an infinite alterity diffracted through being and time. Indeterminacy is an un/doing of identity that unsettles the very foundations of non/being” (“Transmaterialities” 401). Barad explains this in/determinacy through lightning. We are not physicists, but we briefly would like to unravel their theorization of lightning because it allows us to think differently about relationality:

1. Lightning is caused by charged particles in the air that want to ‘be released’ by going down to the earth. However, it is not a one-sided process; it is intra-active: the ‘earth’ must also ‘reach out’ to the charged particles in order for lightning to strike.
2. None of these ‘reaches’ can be determined or predicted; there is an infinite amount of indeterminate possibilities in which they can touch each other.
3. But, when the earth and lightning ‘meet’, they do not meet ‘accidentally’ nor by chance or good luck. Instead, we are confronted with an in/determinate ‘intra-activity’ happening between the different charged particles of which lightning is made of.

All of this is difficult to grasp, because do we not all want to make sense of these im/possible in/determinacies, i.e. construct patterns, and be able to predict, categorize and classify. On the contrary, Barad stirs us to trust that we should ‘give in’ to the im/possibilities of in/determinacy and surrender to the ungraspable idea of ‘something being already here’. Following this logic, the idea of a relationality then diffracts into a reality of the now that is also the past *and* the future in which we are already part of something – an intra-activity that is not predictable, not causal nor a two-sided relationship per se, but continuously flowing in us & them & that & this & here & there & then & now. Could we use water’s fluidity and morphology that, despite its changes, is *always* part of the hydrological cycle to think about this kind of relationality? Not a relationality that is outside us, for assigning a potentiality as something

outside the symbolic order would be to 'get away' from the colonial past and deny its contemporary violent effects, but rather one that is already present and continuously streams in and through everything?

If everything is entangled, and flows fluidly in and through us, I and hence this body which perhaps is not recognized as such inevitably is part of you too. Like lightning, my body touches your body and perhaps in this in/determinate moment you too become aware of all im/possibilities.

As mentioned in the beginning, Stryker says "this water annihilates me" (251). But here we say, "let the water annihilate us", because whenever you deny all fluidity, when you try to grasp us, contain us and turn these raging waves into calm waters, we must remember that if this water is part of us it is part of you too and we will not be alone in our suffocation.

Section II: Fluid Desires

For a gender studies student, I have become somewhat disinterested in 'gender'... It could be confrontation fatigue, the sheer exhaustion of constantly trying to explain to myself and others what "it" is I am. It could be a mechanism of disassociation, a self-protective technology. Perhaps, though, this feeling of disinterest might actually be one of desire. A desire stemming from being fed up with personal confrontations of gender "she's in here!", "oh nina, I know her". A desire rooted beyond aspirational yearnings for recognition, "oh nina, I know them", (though, I should mention, such recognition would be nice). Rather, this desire is rooted in a deep longing for the abolishment of the colonial project of gender.

What would it mean, rather than to claim 'non-binary' as a gender identity, to shift focus towards the ways that 'non-binary' evades categorical logic? What does fluid thinking offer up for 'non-binary' embodying? And even further, how might water act as a methodological entry point for thinking differently about practices of embodying, a move that side-steps impositions of categorical logic and divisive and exclusionary identitarian politics? Perhaps there are

ways to highlight the morphological properties of how non-binary, like water, plays with and through ontological presuppositions.

In meditative mediation, the second part of this essay is guided by the potentials and possibilities that staying with this abolitionist desire might enable. Beyond the site of the body, and our personal preoccupations with perception, this section is concerned with what fluid thinking might open up for non-binary embodying. More specifically, this section is both inspired and guided by what Black feminist theorist Denise Ferreira da Silva calls “refusal as a mode of engagement” (“Hacking the Subject” 22). The mode is more than a simple ‘no’. It is a turning down to turn away, a swerving of sorts; a commitment to saying ‘no’ in order to swivel towards the possibility of a *more*. Ferreira da Silva’s mode provides a compass for refusing non-binary as an identity marker, while also seeking to imagine it anew. This two-part move in one gesture – “refusal as a mode of engagement” – guides our desires to both refuse non-binary as merely gender identity and in doing so activates a praxical mode of fluidity. Our desire leads us towards what we are naming ‘fluid thinking’. Fluid thinking considers how water, as more than an abstract quality or metaphor, might trouble contemporary conceptions of categorical thinking and open way for a different way of relating. Importantly, the fluid thinking we aim to activate is neither transparent, nor clear. Like the muddy waters of the Mississippi Ojibwe, connecting rivers, lakes, lands and transporting barges filled with oil to the ocean, the fluid thinking we aim to activate is messy.

Central to activating a mode of fluid thinking is Édouard Glissant’s notion of “opacity” (97). For Glissant, “opacity” is a “poetic force” (190). The poetic force of opacity guides this section and our fluid considerations on embodying non-binary beyond the categorical marker of gender identity. The poetic force of opacity opens way for a fluid figuring, a praxis of non-binary that exists in relation. In part i we think with decolonial feminist scholar Maria Lugones and Black feminist scholars Hortense Spillers, bell hooks, and Audre Lorde in order to explicate our aforementioned concerns with the notion of non-binary as merely the marker of a gender identity. We then turn to the field of trans* studies to explore possibilities of non-binary subjectivities beyond the marker of subjecthood. Part ii continues by considering the potentials of embodying

non-binary as verb versus noun, a decolonial move that aims to attend to what non-binary *does* versus what non-binary *is*. In part iii we affirm the archival and connective properties of water and read the works of Neimanis and Christina Sharpe in order to consider the ethico-political response-ability that fluid thinking lends itself towards and that non-binary might be capable of. Ultimately, and by gratuitous way of the poetic force of opacity, this section culminates in a proposal for what we are naming H2Ontology.

The words on these pages are at best a gesture towards thinking opaquely with/through/in the poetic force of fluidity. What follows is thus a diffractive poetic attempt that considers how water, specifically in its fluid, morphological, and archival dimension, might inform or even invite flight from the hegemonic ways of the World that seek to constrict, control, and oppress through impositions of divisive and dichotomous categories. Through reflecting on personal practices of non-binary embodying, and inspired by brilliant theorists such as Marquis Bey, Christina Sharpe, and Astrida Neimanis, we are motivated by a desire to “think-practice” this world differently (Thiele 202). Water generously lends itself to this sort of inventive thinking, allowing us to ask different questions, to take seriously the stakes of personal practices of embodying and all the while to stay with the desire for decolonization, “which is the only proper name for justice” (Ferreira da Silva, “Hacking the Subject” 22).

Part i: refusing gender, refusing subjecthood

*shifting through indeterminacy
rushing towards some
always unknown.
and still,
this instinctive indistinction
at times trapped
in the cement laden pools
filled now
with chlorine*

Fluid thinking invites an invocative disturbance of constricting impositions of gender, the optics of which are far from innocent. Lugones attests: “the modern, colonial, gender system as a lens through which to theorize further the oppressive logic of colonial modernity, its use of hierarchical dichotomies and categorical logic” (*Toward a Decolonial* 742). For Lugones, gender is understood as a system of categorization which fuels the ongoing project of colonial modernity. Gender, in her own words, is “a central organizational element of the modern neoliberal nation-state” (“Gender and Universality” 26).

The insidious project of colonial modernity works to make sense of embodied knowledge through logic, defining said knowledge against the mythical norm, the Symbolic Order. As noted in Section I, the Symbolic Order is the dominant Western framework of binary cisheteronormativity and it operates through colonial and anti-black logic. Black feminist poet and theorist bell hooks refers to this order as “dominator culture”, which she attests functions through the forces of “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (29). Similarly, poet and scholar Audre Lorde identifies the Symbolic Order, or what she calls the “mythical norm”, as that which our identities are always defined against: white, young, able-bodies, heterosexual, Christian, male (116). This is a disciplinary power that seeks to control fluid figuring, be it through nominalization processes that desire succinct definitions of gender, simple nouns perhaps found in an American grammar book. Here we are referencing Hortense Spillers’ seminal piece *Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book* (1987), in which she speaks of an “American grammar” in order to trace the ways in which US society makes sense of the world through discursively produced rules and structures (68). Taking the symbolic (language) as an entry point enables Spillers to deconstruct the structural while highlighting the role of language in epistemological understandings and worlding practices. In our reading, through acknowledging the coloniality of gender and the notion of the family, Spillers disrupts the symbolic order of things (“American grammar”) as a mode of engagement. That is, she presents a utopic opening by proposing alternative grammar, epistemological entry points oriented toward ontological hacks. Spillers does the crucial work of acknowledging the grammar in order to refuse it. A mode of black feminist

engagement, a troubling refusal that confronts that which is taken as ontological certainty – “refusal as a mode of engagement” (Ferreira da Silva, “Hacking the Subject” 22).

Following Spillers, we aim to trouble the con/re-stricting ways of the World (capital W), or the ontological certainty based on the same grammar writing what Lugones refers to as the “coloniality of gender” (“Coloniality of Gender” 9). For we are concerned that claiming non-binary as gender identity risks an incorporation into the categorical logic that supports the modern neoliberal nation-state that Lugones, Spillers, Lorde, and hooks so carefully attend to. We therefore are disinterested in claiming non-binary as noun, as if there even was such a static thing to take claim to. Rather, we are curious about what thinking non-binary as verb, as a vibrant poetic force versus identity, might open up.

In a recent roundtable discussion, *Thinking with Trans Now*, Aren Z. Aizura, Marquis Bey, Toby Beauchamp, Treva Ellison, Jules Gill-Peterson, and Eliza Steinbock gesture towards the potentials of figuring trans* – which for us very much includes non-binary – beyond the nominalized marker of identity. The discussion attends to the stakes and potentials of figuring trans* non-binary as what Beauchamp calls “a mode of critique rather than a specific subject position” (136). This turn, which in queer, trans*, black feminist and decolonial theory, eco-feminism, and new materialism has been regarded as a ‘subjectless critique’, offers a myriad of mediations on the potentials of and for non-binary beyond the marker of gender identity. Bey regards this type of subjectless critique as “a fundamental critique”, more specifically that which is concerned not with the *who* – or the subject of trans studies – but rather the refusal of the very notion of *whoness* itself (Aizura et al. 130). This concern, or “the imperative to consider the impossible possibility of inhabiting sociality, of relating to others, on nonsubjective grounds, on grounds that allow for subjectivity without being subject” presents a fertile ground for fluid thinking (132). A “fundamental critique” provides a way of thinking about being in subjectivity without reproducing the violent categorical logics of what it means to be a subject. That is, Bey postures a fundamental critique as a means to refuse the grounds of legibility granting subjecthood, and in doing so motion

towards a different kind of subjectivity. This gesture swerves towards an opening for thinking a subjectivity of non-binary on non-subjective grounds. For us, this opens way towards a world in which we can *be* without needing our existence to be authorized by some form of categorical logic, without needing to be made a legible subject within the Symbolic Order of things.

Importantly, in this world subjectivity still exists. That is, *beingness* still exists. The “fundamental critique” that Bey attends to does not do away with the existence of subjectivity. Their critique, while subjectless, moves towards what might become of subjectivity when we release thinking identity from the grip of certainty. Such a fundamental critique might ask what becomes when we think non-binary, not as gender identity, but as fluidity itself? What changes when we allow ourselves the ungrounded freedom to re/figure embodiment as a never-ending process of *embodying*? What happens when we refuse to think of ourselves as sovereign bounded subjects, but rather as always being in subjectivity, changing form, traversing time, space and matter? We move now to explore the tension between embodiment and *embodying* and the potentials that this fundamental critique opens up and for fluid thinking and fluid figurings.

Part ii: refusal as a mode of engagement

When I think about my own embodying nothing seems clear. I suppose the only clarity is the ever-present feeling of ungroundedness. Sometimes I catch a glimpse of myself, shudder in disbelief, a body bag of nouns, seething, hissing for release. Sometimes, no mostly, the boundaries of my skin feel anything but porous. Enclosed in containment by this epidermis, the quintessential devil/angel on my shoulders switch roles between masculinity and femininity, femininity and masculinity, dance like a painfully bad improv show. Sometimes, no mostly, I can drown out the sounds of their spontaneous satire, I can avoid all mirrors and gazes even and especially that of my own. I am told by Susan Stryker that “when one opens oneself to the groundlessness of being, it allows different virtual potentials to manifest through you” (“Somatechnics of Breath” 116). Assuming to be the “you” in question, I try to picture the aforementioned devil/angel as jesters, not competing for lead roles but laughing at the audiences’ inclination to ‘correct’ and ‘figure’ ‘them’ ‘out’. On my better

days I find refuge in the theatrics, anchored by elusive interstitiality of it all. And in hysterics, I laugh, and we laugh, 'ha ha ha', mad in/through ambivalence because we know that the groundlessness of our being is forever in process of becoming.

We are disinterested with/in gender as a means to identify, and yet find an affiliative comfort with the term non-binary. We suppose those nine letters divided into three and six most closely accommodate the type of containment we hope to evade in our gendering praxis. In fact, having access to terminology that semi-sticks have granted us many privileges, for which we are grateful. Non-binary has brought us to friends whom we consider family, to community, to others who too have sought shelter under the combination of these nine letters. And still, we are seeking to find the fluid spaces in which non-binary resides in that suspended place between subjective affiliation and subjecthood. Where does this tension, between embodiment (subjecthood) and embodying (subjectivity) lead us?

So far, we have established our concerns with claiming non-binary as gender identity. We follow critical trans* theorists Eva Hayward and Che Gossett's assertion that the "established categories of sex and gender have always worked to stabilize technologies of colonial racism" (18). And still, in the corporeal sense, we embody non-binary, insofar as non-binary describes the ambivalence between binary gender as male and female. This ambivalence frequently causes pause from our passers-by, confusion at the supermarket checkout, and confrontation when filling out fairly any and all medical and legal forms. But being non-binary for us is not merely about embodiment. Being non-binary for us is bigger than our gender identity; rather, and more significantly, it is a praxis of fluid thinking, a mode of being in the world. Where does our tension, between not wanting to reify by way of embodiment an established category of gender but also wanting to embody the in-between, lead us?

What might it look like to be in a destabilizing praxis of non-binary embodying? To stay in the theatrics of groundlessness? Of that happy place between the violence of word as noun and the capacious capacity of the word as verb? Put

differently, might we find avenues to hack thinking of non-binary in a way that both holds the work and importance it does as category (bringing communities together, perhaps even inspiring recognition), and highlights the forceful fugitivity that non-binary offers through its suggested definition of ambivalence, of in-betweenness? In other words, what would it mean to shift focus away from what non-binary *is* towards what non-binary *does*?

This might be an invitation towards an otherwise in which non-binary cannot be ontologically pinned down as gender identity. Rather, in and through this fluctuation, non-binary might look like a fluid figuring, a jester's jiggle that, following Black feminist theorist Kathrine McKittrick, relishes in a "demonic non-ground" (McKittrick qtd. in Bey, "The Trans*-ness of Blackness" 288). McKittrick offers the demonic non-ground as fleeting and unstable, "a working system that cannot have a determined, or knowable outcome", "a process that is hinged on uncertainty and non-linearity" (*Demonic Grounds* xxiv). Marquis Bey attests that:

If trans is a capacity often affixed to gender (but not reducible to gender), there is a way to think alongside trans a mobilizing gesture, or a modality, that does not succumb to Western parochialism... trans, perhaps, broadens the ambit through which those who are marginalized can find (under)common (demonic) ground – a nod, of course, to Fred Moten, Stefano Harney, and Katherine McKittrick – via a subversive posture that critiques the stifled confined of violent normativity. ("Thinking with Trans" 139)

Bey coos towards the capacious capacity of a trans* non-binary figuring that might only be legible in its illegibility, constantly on the move, constantly in becoming. A trans* non-binary that is too busy relishing in Karen Barad's void entangled/dispersed/diffracted through time and being ("Trans-materialities"). For us, this dizzying turn (and turning) that trans studies (now) seems to be moving through and towards is a critical decolonial move which strongly informs the texture of our engagement with non-binary embodying. That is, this subjectless gesture – which is in fact a 'fundamental critique' – that "does not succumb to Western parochialism" both *refuses* the

violence of colonial categorizing technologies and invents by way of desire a *more* (Bey, “Thinking with Trans” 139).

This jubilant jester’s jiggle that authors like Bey proffer allows us to be more at ease in our own non-binary embodying. Not ease in the sense of existing as legible or recognized, but rather in the sense of what Eva Hayward refers to as the “don’t exist” imperative (“Don’t Exist” 191). That is, by embracing that place of non-existence, non-binary might be able to define itself on its own terms, in its own grammar. Linger in ambivalence, how might figuring non-binary as a fluid force, that in its desires for ungroundedness (evading colonial logic), in fact offer a condition for groundedness? In other words: how can we move away from non-binary as merely a term defining identity towards a realization of fluidity and ambivalence? Beyond the site of the body and our disinterests with/in gender, how might the fluidity of water inform both practices of embodying and of response-ability? This entry point perhaps is the shaky ground, the murky waters, in which we are already wading.

Part iii: fluid figurings & trans*parent waters

*at the edge of the pacific, misty eyed from fog thick & laden with phantom form,
if you listen close enough you can hear california drowning, mesozoic tectonic
shifts all in one beat.*

*this indeterminate haze dances atop the belly of waves, violent & angry, moved
by wriggling wraiths.*

best regard the ocean reverently.

Neimanis suggests bodies of water as a concept to figure a feminist subject attuned to the global flows of political, social, cultural, economic, and colonial planetary power. Her posthumanist project proposes “becoming a body of water as feminist figuration” as a “renegotiation of the relationship between nature and culture within feminist thinking” but overall as a political call for our collective response-abilities to each other as human subjects and to the planet (Neimanis, “Feminist Subjectivity” 39). Key to Neimanis’ project is the activation of water in exploring an ethically oriented politics. Following Barad, Neimanis invokes “response-ability”, that is, a figuring of responsivity that is entangled rather than reactionary. Response-ability, she contends, requires

continuous attention to “the systematic oppression that still affects some humans more than others” (39). Neimanis therefore exposes the neoliberal and anthropocentric façade of boundaries by highlighting porosity; moreover, she orients an ethics that we too are after. She notes that bodies of water such as oceans remind us that the very construction of our bodies, which are two-thirds water, contain histories of geographies of generational violence (“Posthuman Phenomenologies”). Water in its material matter therefore offers a diffractive understanding of time and history, an acknowledgement of the past’s materiality in the present. With this in mind, what would it mean to understand the a-temporal disaster of the trans-Atlantic slave trade as both an always already present undercurrent in social and cultural spheres *and* as present in the very materiality of our bodies? How would this inform a politics of (gender) embodying? How would this inform a politics of response-ability?

The fluid waters we aim to activate are messy. Like the sea, tussling saline and sediment all rough even in those seemingly calm moments, the undertow ever bringing up that which was always already there, the fluid waters we aim to activate are anything but transparent. Glissant offers transparency as “the process of ‘understanding’ people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought” (189–190). For Glissant, transparency is aimed at “grasping”, where “the verb *to grasp* contains the movement of hands that grab their surrounding and bring them back to themselves. A gesture of enclosure if not appropriation” (191–192). For us, this is the same graspability that seeks to make our fluid existence intelligible. The same hands contain and enclose our messily opaque ambivalence. Glissant attests that transparency is the opposite of opacity. Opacity is “that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence” (191). Opacity is what Neimanis refers to as feminist figurations of “bodies of water”, the innate material and boundary shattering connectivity and relationality we have to one another, dispersed through time and space (“Feminist Subjectivity” 103).

In her book Christina Sharpe *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, wades in the opacity of these waters. Similar to Neimanis’ acknowledgement of bodies of water as containing violent droplets of history, Sharpe activates the metaphor and materiality of ‘the wake’, queering a linear understanding of

time and offering a (re)figuring of the past in the thick now of the present. By presenting ‘the wake’, ‘the ship’, ‘the hold’, and ‘the weather’, Sharpe shows how the site of the slave ship and the spectre of the hold haunt contemporary Black life in diaspora, producing conditions of containment and violence and also something in excess of them. Sharpe’s project is interested in a praxis of ‘consciousness’ of Black being in diaspora, which she calls “wake work” (14). “Wake work” is a praxis of staying in and with those murky, opaque, fluid waters. Further, she activates this praxis of consciousness of what it means *to be* in the wake and what it means to be *in* the wake. The wake is therefore a methodological entry point, a way to “occupy that grammar, the infinitive” that “might provide another way of theorizing” (Sharpe 14).

We are very inspired by the ways in which Sharpe’s methodological intervention presents a mode of attending to life that refuses ontological presuppositions. Like Spillers, Sharpe both troubles and refuses that which might be taken as ontologically given. But Sharpe does not present “wake work” as some sort of alternative ontology. Rather, her project presents “wake work” in its own register, in its own praxical mode of theorizing and being. In our reading, Sharpe mobilizes refusal as mode of engagement in order to present a different way of theorizing what it might mean *to be*, with the knowledge that in some ways we are always *in*. She does not simply do away with the ontological violences of the World in which we are in. And still, she refuses to take them as such. She dilutes the onto-epistemic violences writing the ontology of the anti-black World ² and by doing so reveals the paraontological potentials of what might become possible when we say ‘no’ in order to affirm a “modality that does not succumb to Western parochialism” (Bey, “Thinking with Trans” 139). Each of these theorists – Sharpe, Glissant, Bey, Neimanis, Barad, Salamon, Hayward and Gossett – say ‘no’ to the

²For Sharpe, ‘the weather’ is antiblackness. She states that: “[i]n what I am calling the weather, antiblackness is as pervasive as climate” (106). Sharpe explicates the weather through referencing the Middle Passage and chattel slavery, as well as contemporary police murders of black and racialized peoples. For her, the weather – or anti-blackness – is a-temporal. It is “the totality of the environments in which we struggle; the machines in which we live; what I am calling the weather” (111).

ontological givenness of the World. And it is this negation that allows them to affirm other possibilities for *being, in, the world*.

Motivated by a desire to “think-practice” differently and inspired by the projects of these brilliant thinkers (Thiele 202), we do not wish to present some utopic proposition for being non-binary as some ‘alternative’, ‘new’, or ‘outside’ ontology. To propose an ontological intervention would suggest that we can do away with the Symbolic Order. Despite our initial frustrations and exhaustions with this order, our expressed intentions to exist in ambivalence as non-binary ‘outside’ of this order, we must concede that we are in fact implicated in this order. We are intra-active and in/determinate with/in this order. To put ourselves ‘outside’ would be to dismiss the realities of violence imposed by colonialism and the project of modernity. And still, we find ourselves saturated, sodden with a desire to think differently, to practice differently. So where does this lead us?

Part iv: h2Ontology: a paraontological proposition

Rather, we suggest H2Ontology as an entry point that activates a sort of fluid thinking – a way to move through by refusing ontological impositions, by refusing the coloniality of gender, the binary boundaries that so harshly seek to condense our corporeal ambivalence through hierarchical dichotomies of categorical logic. Fluid thinking stems from a desire to learn from the type of scholarship, particularly Black feminist and critical trans* scholarship, that thinks from a non-hegemonic side. This is precisely the work that H2Ontology wants to activate. A type of thought and practice that desires movement, playful and mystic dispersion between the categories that seek to con/define our being. Contrary to the word entangled in its name, H2Ontology does not present another proposition of ‘being’ in the world. This is intentional, because doing so would risk reproducing the very forces of colonialism, hegemony, and modernity that our project desires to evade. H2Ontology is not an ontological proposition.

As such, H2Ontology might be thought of as a paraontological project. We mainly understand paraontology as an entry point towards conceptualizing

ways of being that are not con/de-fined by the contemporary realities of coloniality, and the fixity of racial ontology that structures white supremacy (Black Study Group 2). Might we instead think of H2Ontology as an onto-epistemological fluid thinking: to think through and with water in worlding processes? A type of processual thinking guided by a desire to unravel categorical logics, logics which not only deny our very in-between and ambivalent existences but that work on behalf of the ongoing projects of colonialism and modernity to oppress and control. Might we activate H2Ontology as a side project that takes water as symbolic and material with its opaque messiness, its archival materiality, and its undeniable connectivity?

For us, H2Ontology is a sort of invitation. A “perennial invitation”, to speak with Glissant, for any and every one (191). Glissant regards this kind of invitation as a “right”. More specifically, he regards it as at “the right to opacity” (194). The right to opacity “is not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy but subsistence within an irreducible singularity” (190).

*Our right to embodying,
to being bodies of water,
to being watery bodies.
separate but connected always and still.*

Glissant goes on, “opacities can coexist and converge” (190). Like the water cycle, closed but somehow always indeterminately open, converging and coexisting through time, space, and matter, we figure H2Ontology as the “perennial invitation” towards this opaque right. We figure our non-binary non-beingness as not a denial or negation, but rather as an affirmation towards a *more*. The stakes of activating this sort of opaque thinking expand beyond gender – they are about ways of relation to one-an-other in difference.

H2Ontology means surrendering ourselves to the symbolic ways of the world, soaking in the ambivalence, being okay with not knowing and not making sense of. This is a mode of fluid thinking, an unravelling that need not be confused with a practice of indifference. Rather, it is in the very practice of unravelling that we embody a praxis of disruption, a praxis of refusing the static identities and categorical symbolics that govern the project of modernity

and coloniality. Poetry helps in manoeuvring around these symbolics, in refusing these categorizations.

*deep down, so sea deep it's virtually impossible to see, to discern the real
in/with this level of darkness, & only through its unimaginable potentiality,
& only this opaque confluence
this place of non-existence most definitely exists.*

Soaking in the mess of this cycle, open but closed, phasing through the atmosphere, refusing to be categorized, we exist. The ungraspability of water, fluidly morphological, archival. Open and unfinished. That which exposes the settler colonial attempts to close the open, that which resists such enclosure. When we abide by this atmospheric, which is also metaphysical ambiguity, what opens up?

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Welcome to my fantasy: Queer desires and digital utopias

Daniel Heinz

Throughout the last two decades, the fandom of Final Fantasy VII has discussed whether the infamous cross-dressing quest is homophobic or not, and how to adapt it for a possible remake. Queer and video game scholars, however, have not engaged in the discussion surrounding the cross-dressing protagonist Cloud Strife. In this essay, I intend to fill this gap and argue that the remake fails to redeem the complicated legacy of Final Fantasy VII in terms of LGBT representation. The game, I argue, shifted from modes and techniques of heteronormativity to homonormative power in this process. Through the lens of queer game studies, this paper analyzes interviews conducted with YouTube gamers from the US. In conclusion, I argue that the remake is less an emancipatory representation than a tool of a broader civilizing liberal project that deradicalizes queer action by commodifying it in the video game industry. The text shows that the game, though it tolerates and includes queer characters within the world of Final Fantasy, ultimately enacts a particular notion of tolerance with normative and normalizing implications that exclude marginalized queers who do not fit the homonormative status quo.

Queer Game Studies; Final Fantasy, pink capitalism, queerbaiting, tolerance, homonormativity

Introduction

In recent years, in anticipation of the release of the Final Fantasy VII Remake, the fandom of the original Final Fantasy VII discussed no other question that was so controversial in the context of a possible remake than “Why is a cross-dressing Cloud so damn important?” (The Lifestream, 01:53). Even before the video game company Square Enix, one of the most successful in the field, announced the remake at the 2015 Electronic Entertainment Expo, the legacy of how the original Final Fantasy VII’s “taciturn, hyper-masculine, ex-mercenary protagonist, Cloud, had just donned an *extremely* pretty silk dress” (Houston) dominated discussions in magazines, reviews, forums and Let’s Plays – videos of gamers playing while narrating their experiences. In 2014, one of the biggest video game YouTubers – who plays under the moniker The Game Theorists – stated that the first association he had when thinking about Final Fantasy VII was “girls writing sexual fanfictions about Cloud and Sephiroth [...] Tifa’s boobs, and Cloud’s cross-dressing scene” (The Game Theorists, 00:52). After the remake was announced, however, the gaming community was concerned with how Square Enix would “handle this questionable scene” (Randall). Across multiple platforms some fans, video game journalists and YouTubers argued either that the infamous cross-dressing quest should be included and adapted in the remake for narratological purposes and as a way of honoring the original game, while others demanded a radical change because they saw the quest as an “extended sexual assault joke” (Harper). After director Testuya Nomura announced that game would be made “more modern” (Morgan), some fans feared censorship and suspected that “sexual humor and innuendos will probably disappear entirely” (Kokiden). The ‘cross-dressing Cloud’ seems to have had an impact and continues to influence the world of Final Fantasy – both online and offline.

In this chapter, I would like to follow this more-than-two-decades-old narrative and ask how the cross-dressing quest in Final Fantasy VII regulates and orders bodies and sexual politics, in both the virtual and physical world. The politics of game making seems to have served “imagined white, straight, cisgender male audiences” (Ruberg 3). Yet, LGBT game makers, scholars, and game players have always been part of the gaming community (Shaw et al., *Rainbow*

Arcade). The legacy of Final Fantasy VII illustrates this very well. A video game that was presumably developed for a male audience has attracted women who write gay fanfiction about the protagonist and antagonist, gender fluid cosplay and straight gamers debating about the narratological and moral value of a cross-dressing Cloud Strife. This discourse is overdue for analysis.

This article aims to fill the vacuum between the rich discussion in the digital world and around contemporary identity politics in video games by applying a queer framework that traces the cultural and historical roots of narratives of representation in Final Fantasy VII. Yet, this chapter does not simplistically reject video games as homophobic. Rather, I assess LGBT representation in Final Fantasy VII and consider how it relates to contemporary politics, especially regarding how the notion of tolerance is involved in regulating freedom and power. I am not arguing against certain interpretations of the video game's broader narrative or the particular cross-dressing quest, but I do want to analyze and connect the different affective engagements of journalists, YouTubers and ga(y)mers. With Final Fantasy VII and the Final Fantasy VII Remake, I conceptualize the shift of heteropatriarchal governmentality and capitalist strategy in the video game industry from the late 1990s to today.

Queerness, video games and representation: decoding the digital rainbow

Before discussing queer representation in Final Fantasy VII, it is necessary to look first at the cultural politics of queerness and its representation in video games. Queerness seems to be everywhere nowadays, whether in mainstream games or election campaigns. In fact, it has become hard to avoid some form of LGBT representation in new mainstream video games, even though the stereotypical imagined gamer remains male and straight (see Shaw). Moreover, in the last ten years it has become fashionable and a sign of progress to include LGBT characters and thus the representation of queer lives and desires in video games has increased (Shaw and Friesem 3886ff.). LGBT designers and video game developers have fought for their place in the industry and indie game developers in particular have been using the potential of video games as medium to imagine digital utopias, to experiment with new

worlds, norms and stories (Ruberg). Mainstream action and role-play video games like *Dragon Age*, *Star Wars* or *Assassin's Creed* have included more and more homosexual characters and interactions in their most recent releases. For example, “if you choose the right branches on the dialogue tree, you can enjoy a same-sex hookup with a fellow” (Macklin 250). But not every gay character in a video game leads the gamer to experience multidimensional narratives of what it means to be queer. Their narrative is often reduced to having possible same-sex encounters in the game. These options for romance, however, are reductive, “interchangeable variables [...] leading to slight variations in character skin and animation – and if we are lucky, dialogue” (Macklin 250).

The analytic notion of queerness proposed by *Queer Game Studies* resists the politics of representation in video games; in fact, it goes “beyond flat assessments of good and bad objects, code versus image, and form versus content” (Malkowski and Russworm 3). Queerness thus conceptualized becomes more than just an umbrella term or an identity; it is a way of being or doing something that resists or even dismantles oppressive norms – not only with regard to gender and sexuality. As Jack Halberstam says, queerness is “a basic desire to live life otherwise” (2). This interpretation gives us the possibility not only to question norms attached to LGBT identities, but also to use the concept of queerness as a critique and an action that destabilizes and undoes normativities in general. Queerness so understood is the desire for radical system change and social justice. This notion of queerness, however, is challenged by the neoliberal politics of inclusion in video games (see Voorhees et al.), whereby queer characters become “an object of consumption, an object in which non-queers invest their passions and purchasing power, and an object through which queers constitute their identities” (Cruz and Manalansan IV, 1). But why is inclusion in video games a problem?

First of all, the representation of sexual and gendered difference cannot undo the difference in itself, and thus, the inequality. Sexual and gendered difference requires knowledge of the sexual and gendered other as an identity position in contrast to one's own. My understanding of queerness, as an action and anti-

normative, future-oriented fantasy, requires dismantling the system of sexual and gendered others – and not affirming the ontological assumption of a genuine other. Video games have the world-building potential of deconstructing what Judith Butler has called the heteronormative matrix. Exposing normative assumptions and the dynamics that govern digital and material bodies is what Queer Game Studies attempts. Understanding the medium of game studies through the antinormative framework of queer theory creates opportunities for “exploring difference in games and exploring games as different” (Ruberg and Shaw ix). This difference in the digital sphere can be contradictory, as it offers unimagined possibilities and imposes normative assumptions at the same time. One could argue that the representation of same-sex romance in mainstream games is desirable for a queer politics, however, Adrienne Shaw and Elizaveta Friesem have pointed to the danger of framing “same-sex relationships in games as somehow representative of LGBT people. For one, such representation reduces sexuality to sex, and for another, it rarely makes sexual identity a key component of game narratives or interactions” (Shaw and Friesem 3883). Furthermore, non-heteronormative characters are coded in video games in ways that mark them as recognizably queer. For example, Dorian Pavus, a side character from *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, is coded as “flirtatious, overly concerned with his own appearance” (Arloft and Benkö 4). These codes draw from stereotypical ideas about gay men as vain and lustful.

Every inclusion, then, becomes an exclusion through the heteronormative gaze. Video game developers have a clear understanding of how to code a gay character so that video gamers can recognize them as queer. Dorian does not need to declare his sexuality because the player recognizes the distinct queer codes. The use of queer as an umbrella term proposes a universal category of identity under which all LGBT people can unite. However, this proclaimed universalism turns out to erase difference within LGBT communities because the label ‘queer’ is de-sexed, de-gendered and de-racialized. But who are the characters in the digital and non-digital world who claim *to be* queer? In the beginning of the gay liberation movement, transgender women and gender non-conforming activists of color like Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera fought at the front. But as Rivera stated: “When things started getting more

mainstream, it was like, ‘We don’t need you no more’” (Bronski 11). Women like Marsha or Sylvia do not find representation in video games, even though they fought at the front of Stonewall and undoubtedly contributed immensely to the global pride movement. In the end, however, the commodification and thus capitalization of ‘queer’ as an identity within a wider discourse of inclusion and tolerance benefits and represents first and foremost white cis-gendered gay men in the global north – especially in Northern America and Western Europe. A very specific kind of LGBT person gets to be represented and tolerated in video games. The others remain filthy and intolerable to mainstream consumers. Further, the liberal project of acceptance and legal rights has actually resulted in the policing of sexual and gender expression among certain LGBT individuals and groups. This separation between the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ gays has changed the discussion, which became no longer about dismantling gay oppression by deconstructing heteronormativity but about creating space for tolerable difference within heteronormativity. This idea of fostering inclusivity and tolerance for homosexuality by producing *the right kind of gay* was critically termed “homonormativity” by Lisa Duggan. Homonormativity is grounded in a neoliberal rationality that grants certain individuals outside the heteronormative matrix inclusion in order to stabilize the very core of gendered and sexed social hierarchies; at the same time, it deradicalizes the potency of queer action since “the *new homonormativity* – is a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (Duggan 179). This model of inclusivity privileges white cis-gendered gay men who have the capital to be consumers, a dynamic highlighted by the lack of transgender and intersex characters in mainstream video games. Additionally, non-western, decolonial and non-binary approaches to gender and sexuality continue to be excluded from the video game industry. For example, the games in the genre of fantasy role play like *Dragon Age*, which provides gay romance options, hold on to some form of racial essentialism and hierarchies within their worlds. However, indie game developers and fans do discuss these issues and how to decolonize and queer game mechanics, story tropes and designs (Murthy).

To conclude the theoretical discussion, the queer answer to LGBT representation cannot be homonormativity in digital media. It is important to note that I am not arguing against LGBT representation in general. Rather, I am claiming that the representation of LGBT characters must constantly be the critical object of interventions that deconstruct norms in order to avoid the further commodification and tokenization of queerness. The interdisciplinary framework of Queer Game Studies enables us to understand the complex relationship between ga(y)mer and game: “interface, mechanics, programming, platform, and electromagnetic states simultaneously, ambivalently allow for some flexibility and heterogeneity yet are also determined and controlling, often in unseen and naturalized ways” (Chang 241–242).

A queer game not only includes queer characters and romances, but questions the narratives, actions, locations and artifacts of the game and the economic relationship between game developer and gamer. The individuals coding and the companies capitalizing on LGBT representation are rarely interrogated. It comes as no surprise that more and more game studios are including LGBT storylines or characters; obvious homophobia and the absence of LGBT characters is no longer the most profitable strategy. However, until these studios engage with LGBT developers on the level of production and design and with the situation of LGBT individuals outside the gaming industry, these representations will remain examples of pinkwashing and queerbaiting, a phenomenon described by Jessica Kathryn Needham as “just a new face to the old problem of how to gain the financial support of queer people without providing proper representation in return” (94). Queer scholars must thus find ways of deconstructing the tensions between the desire for representation and potentially damaging homonormativity in video games by applying critical methodologies that enable us to move beyond the question of inclusion.

Queer methodologies and video game culture

First, a video game is a text that “can be used to explore broader social and cultural processes, including identity, agency, community, and consumption in contemporary digital societies” (Kerr qtd. in Muriel and Crawford, i). This

text does not simply become queer randomly, however. Whether intentionally or not, a code of queerness is produced that can be easily recognized by marking ‘the other’ as that which deviates from the norm. As Laurie Essig has pointed out, “sexuality is knowable, visible, written all over the physical and social body” (106). This seems counterintuitive, as one cannot visually discern the sexual preference of another person. However, one does not need to declare their sexuality verbally in order to be visible. Thinking about my own past, people around me knew I was outside the heteronormative matrix even before I was aware of my identity. In the same way, homosexuality is never directly claimed by any character in the original Final Fantasy VII, or in the remake. Yet, the marking of homosexual codes in Final Fantasy VII operates by ignoring that “invisibility is visibility as straight” (Essig 106). Destabilizing the relationship between signifiers and signified of this in/visibility is key to understanding how pinkwashing and queerbaiting in the video game industry works. It is the outcome of “political and economic feasibility (particularly in regard to studio and network financial considerations)” and results here in an “increased paratextual discourse about LGBT content at a specific moment of queer contextuality”, “without the text ever definitely confirming the nonheterosexuality of the relevant characters” (Ng 2ff.) Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model theorizes a way of looking at how messages are encoded in a text – be they verbal or non-verbal – and emphasizes the importance of how these messages are decoded by recipients. Depending on the standpoint of the reader and their context, a text can be read in many different ways. The original and the remake of Final Fantasy VII engage with dominant narratives and readings of queer culture and with its paratextuality. Ng has defined paratextuality as an “environment, in which both producer and consumer participate” (5). These environments can be found in game mechanics and graphics, but not exclusively there.

In my analysis, I will map the relationship between the cultural paratext and the game as the main text and more importantly, examine how cultural shifts contributed to the (re)production of meanings of queerness within Final Fantasy VII. This approach involves “pushing the analysis past a focus on either the player or the game and towards the various forces and connections holding up the assemblage of games as processes” (van Vught and Glas 3).

This framework, then, connects video games, gamers and the cultural industry of video games to an ongoing sociocultural process of ludification (Raessens). In the social context of digital gaming culture, the internet – and especially streaming services like Twitch or YouTube – is crucial to understanding the paratextuality of video games. Famous game reviewers and Let's Players form social relations with their community and educate them about narratology and game mechanics.

My research started with (re)playing the original Final Fantasy VII and the newly released remake, because, as Frans Mäyrä argues, playing games is the “most crucial element in any methodology of game studies” (165). As in a regular ethnographic setting, I wrote my field notes based on what I observed. This process of ethnographic play explored tensions and contradictions in the game, “as ethnography is ultimately concerned with interpretation and experience, it is a fitting tool for those who view games as a place of social interaction, identity formation, and where keen observation in a globalizing technoscape is of special importance” (Chee 5). Moreover, I played the game as a researcher and ga(y)mer. Thus, my perception of the game may vary greatly from that of an ordinary gamer who is neither a researcher nor outside the heteronormative status quo. To go beyond my own standpoint, I reached out to Final Fantasy experts to provide a representative perspective from the fan base and thus of the discourse about Final Fantasy in general. I contacted a total of twenty Let's Players and gaming YouTubers located in the USA and Germany. These experts were selected because of their focus on Final Fantasy VII, evidenced by various videos they have published on YouTube. I contacted these individuals via e-mail and, where possible, via direct social media message. In these messages, I positioned myself as a fan of Final Fantasy and a scholar. My research aim, specifically the infamous cross-dressing Cloud Strife, was transparent from the very beginning. Out of twenty people, only five responded to me – two of them identified as straight cis-women and three as straight cis-men. At the beginning of the e-mail exchange, both women clarified that they have boyfriends and questioned my authenticity, as some followers had tried to scam them in the past with false requests in order to obtain their phone numbers. Ultimately, both women stopped replying to my messages. This, unfortunately, is not an uncommon narrative because women

are “subjected to sexual comments almost 11 times more than their male streamer counterparts” (Fredman 2). Female representation in gaming culture and especially on streaming services, is threatened by hyper-sexualization and misogyny (see Todd). My experience looking for potential interview partners illustrated the real cautiousness of women towards men within gaming culture.

The three men, on the other hand, were extremely interested from the beginning of our exchange and showed no hesitation about our correspondence. Just before the start of our interview, one man wrote that he was “having some second thoughts” and that he himself does not identify as queer.

After talking further with this YouTuber, who has one video online with more than 100,000 views that also discusses Final Fantasy VII’s cross-dressing scene, he explained that he as a straight gamer does not want to have potential rumors circulating about his sexuality, in case trolls or haters find out that he participated in an interview with a gay scholar on “lgbt themes”. The two remaining YouTubers, Oni Black Mage (approx. 90,000 subscribers and 13 million views) and The Night Sky Prince (approx. 83,000 subscribers and 22 million views), did agree to participate in interviews. Oni Black Mage, who allowed me to use his real name, Nicholas, in this publication and The Night Sky Prince, who I will refer to as Prince, indicated in a questionnaire that they both identify as male and straight.

The Trojan Horse: from tragedy to Broadway comedy

Final Fantasy VII is a RPG (Role-Playing Game): the player controls a character and follows their journey in a fantasy world. It tells the epic story of the 21-year-old Cloud Strife. He is described as “outwardly very strong, very good looking [...] they emphasize that other people wish they could be as cool as Cloud is in every single chapter” (Nicholas, 00:06:23). After the first chapters of the game, the main characters are separated due to an explosion. Cloud is then introduced to Aerith, who escorts him to the Wall Market to rescue his childhood friend Tifa from a “sex dungeon” (Nicholas, 0:05:33). After the explosion Tifa is kidnapped by Don Corneo, the criminal boss of the Wall

Market and is trapped in his hideout. Sex workers are given access to his place every evening. At the Wall Market, Cloud and Aerith learn that they can sneak into the hideout if Cloud disguises himself as a woman and thus deceives the guards:

It's a classic Trojan horse story. You have the group that's, you know, figuring that unassuming disguise will get past the gatekeeper in, you know, most stories that would end up being the group maybe portrays themselves as merchants, something that's going to subvert the expectations by disarming the group, basically. In most cases, story wise, I feel that adds tension or it could just be lighthearted. It's playing up for laughs. (Nicholas, 00:05:33)

The cross-dressing quest begins under these conditions. For over twenty years it has been considered a masterpiece within the RPG-genre. Some YouTubers in the field of Final Fantasy argue that the quest should be interpreted “as a method of reinforcing his quest for self-discovery throughout the game” (The Game Theorists 06:05). After the remake was announced in 2015, many male fans voiced their opinions to Square Enix, producing videos and news articles demanding that the cross-dressing quest be carried over into the remake unchanged (e.g. The Lifestream):

the Wall Market is an area that's meant to lift the player's mood, to elevate it because you just had the second reactor explode. And so to go from one sad scene to another sad scene, it's interrupted by the Wall Market, which is an entire area full of bright lights, funny scenes, mini-games, you know, sexy characters. It's meant to lift your mood.

But, also one that really does emotionally impact the player. It has an emotional role more than a practical one. (Nicholas, 00:04:02)

To progress through the chapter, Cloud and Aerith have to get the support of the residents of the Wall Market through mini-games. In these interactions, Cloud has the opportunity to obtain a wig, a dress, underwear and perfume. Depending on how successfully the individual mini-games are completed, the player receives one of three possible dialogue options in the boss's hiding place:

the Wall Market in the original was an opportunity for the players to compete against Aerith or Tifa: “For you be picked versus one of them being picked by the Don. The player has the freedom to choose how much they are going to indulge in this side quest.” (Nicholas, 00:07:00)

The cross-dressing quest is both Princes and Nicholas’ favourite chapter in the game. They were very satisfied with the execution of the quest in the remake. They too feared that it would not be included in the remake as “certain undertones made players uncomfortable” (Prince, 00:07:19). They both often used this and similar formulations. Neither could say exactly what the problem was with the original:

They were very much aware of what those undertones were when they were approaching it. Two and a half decades later from when they created them, it shows how much maybe cultural sensitivity that we’ve gained as a society that they’ve shifted those tones away. And I think that the new Honeybee Inn can be played in such a way that still gets across the intention of the original scene and does it so perhaps maybe even more effective [sic], because people can play through it and maybe not see something that would make them uncomfortable or question what the actual message is behind it. (Prince, 00:08:23)

The undertones mentioned in the original are an extended homophobic sexual assault joke (see Harper). To receive the dialogue option where Cloud is chosen as a sex worker by the Don, the player must complete all four mini-games successfully. One of the mini-games takes place in Jules’ gym. Originally, Jules is a cross-dresser who hands Cloud a wig after completing a mini-game. The mini-game is a squad’s challenge in which Cloud competes against a Black character who is not given a name. If Cloud wins, he gets the best wig available. This is needed in order to receive the dialogue option between Cloud and the Don. Shortly after the Black character loses to Cloud, the game shows Jules knocking the character out. The critical fan base discussed online the homo- and trans-hostility of the original game, but also its interwoven racism and the racialized depiction of certain characters and groups. The debate about race in Final Fantasy VII, however, was not as present in discussions of the elements that might be changed in the remake

as the debate about homophobia in the Wall Market. For example, there was no media outburst or press statement from Square Enix about whether they would ‘modernize’ the name of an antagonistic group called “the Turks”¹. The representation of Black characters in the game is very marginal; they predominantly appear within the Wall Market scene. Black characters can also be seen in the Honeybee Inn, a brothel in the Market. There Cloud receives make-up from a sex worker. The player also has the opportunity to obtain underwear for Cloud. To do so, Cloud has to go to a room in the brothel, whereupon a large number of athletic men enter. The game then presents a scene in which the main protagonist is sexually assaulted by this group of men. The majority of the Black characters encountered in the game are in this scene. The joke in the game therefore works at the expense of Black homosexual men. Even though this scene was not included in the remake, Square Enix’s marketing department still built on the legacy of this particular event with a re-enactment in modern graphics for marketing purposes during the game’s promotion. This intensified the controversy around the remake and the developer’s approach toward the cross-dressing quest.

The portrayal of Black masculine characters as a sexual threat and aggressor against white masculinity is a trope with a colonial legacy (see Binnie; Boykin; Snorton). The original Final Fantasy VII cross-dressing scene made use of and was informed by dominant LGBT discourses from the late 1980s and early 1990s – especially BIPoC subcultures in the US, namely the ballroom scene.³

¹ The Japanese original uses the word タークス, which translates to the English “Turks” and refers to Turkish people. Interestingly, the German translation of the video game does not translate the Japanese word to *Türken* but uses the English term, Turks. Other translations of the game, such as the Russian, translated it accordingly to *Турки*. I assume the English word was chosen in the German translation due to the number of (post)migrants (see Foroutan) from Turkey in Germany and the possible outcry that might result from calling the bad guys ‘Turks’.

³ The ballroom scene stems from the US-American LGBT movement, which emerged during the second half of the twentieth century. Predominantly Black and Latin@ people came together in ‘houses’ to care for each other and find their chosen family beyond their heteronormative birth families and the racist LGBT community in the USA. The ballroom was as safe space where different houses met to celebrate their queerness. For a further understanding, I recommend the fictional television series *Pose* (2018).

Today, drag, cross dressing and trans identities are distinct terms that describe very different experiences. A few years ago, cross dressing and drag served as collective terms for a wide variety of practices and identities. These terms were heavily informed in the global west by discourses and activists in the US. I understand the staging of Black bodies in the original as an adaption of the ballroom scene of the 1980s and 1990s in North America. One might argue that because Final Fantasy is a franchise produced by the Japanese studio Square Enix, its depictions and coding of bodies will be informed by racial and sexual politics in Japan. However, as seen in the depiction of the first playable Black character in the franchise, Barret Wallace from Final Fantasy VII, who has been described by fans as a caricature of the African-American actor Mr. T, it is clear that Square Enix actively uses codes to mirror the assumed western gaze.⁴



Representation of the scene in the Honeybee Inn: Above, a screenshot of the original version (1997) and below a re-enactment with modern

⁴ Barret himself has been the object of critique due to his stereotypical depiction in the original and still-questionable depiction in the remake (see Rousseau; Howard; Wynn-Shirreffs). In the Wall Market, Barret is not part of the incident. Nevertheless, his depiction represents a continuity of how Final Fantasy handles race.

graphics, which does not appear in the remake but was produced for marketing purposes (see Morgan).

Source: DashingDavidYT. "Are We Ready For This?". Reddit, 14 May 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/FFVIIRemake/comments/bomlqd/are_we_ready_for_this. Accessed 2 December 2022.

Even though Final Fantasy VII has an “extensive queer following”, the original has become “infamous for its undercurrent of gay panic” (Wysor); “many people – particularly queer players – have been wondering just how this section of the game would go down” (Harper). The ‘joke’ in the original game was not introduced to us by Square Enix, but has a legacy in the video game industry, most frequently in dating simulators. There, a player can get a so-called “*gay game over*” if they encounter a trans woman (Shaw and Friesem 3884). Nicholas described the plotline as a “Trojan horse” because the game operates within this logic. The ‘funny’ ending is achieved when Cloud follows a number of side quests and collects his cross-dressing items. Having collected the right items to pass as the kind of woman the Don likes, the scene ends with Cloud following the Don to his private room whereupon – after the Don attempts to seduce Cloud, believing him to be a woman – he reveals that he is in fact a man. This joke turns into a ‘gay game over’ for the Don. The remake held on to this plotline but transformed the story: previously framed as a tragic place full of drug addicts, cross-dressing fags and criminals, the Wall Market becomes what Nicholas and Prince described as a glamorous Broadway show. In the remake, the Honeybee Inn is a high-society nightclub operated by a character called Andrea Rhodea. Their identity is not openly talked about or classified within the game; however Prince described Andrea as “a very gay man who could be like a non-binary” (Prince, 00:14:24). Thus, I argue the framing of the Wall Market changed from coding LGBT representation as something tragic to something glamorous – both categories that entertain the viewer in one or another way.

“Let’s move on with the adventure” – performing tolerance and tolerating performances

Both Nicholas and Prince spoke of tolerance, modernity and social development when comparing the original with the remake. However, they

were not able to articulate what the intolerant and non-modern content of the original was. Instead, they developed their narrative around positive experiences with the game. Both seemed very deliberate about what they said, using catchphrases like ‘diversity’ and ‘cultural sensitivity’ to describe the remake:

A lot of people were worried that this scene would be removed because we live in a society now that’s a lot more cultural, a lot more sensitive to a diverse group of people. And they were worried that this scene, although not intended to offend, might have had that effect. That came very close to pushing the boundaries, but didn’t really or would be too offensive or too controversial and that it would just be the safe thing to do to remove it out of fear that it can be interpreted the wrong way. So, to a lot of people, this scene in particular represented maybe FF VII as a whole because it represented that FF VII will push boundaries and ideas that other games will not do. (Prince, 00:36:28)

The argument of the two YouTubers illustrates very clearly what Wendy Brown describes as “an ethical, but not a justified moral objection to something” (Brown et al. 15). Nicholas and Prince situate the approach taken in the remake toward the infamous cross-dressing quest as a normative necessity: we have to behave tolerantly toward certain sensitive minorities. This discourse on tolerance ascribes the not-directly-mentioned group “naturalized differences or deviations” (20), but does not question the “naturalized conflicts that are the effect of power and history” (19). Tolerance, then, is not about the active promotion of queer codes in video games, but about indicating approval by not feeling too discomforted by queer content. Nicholas and Prince tolerate the new staging in the remake. At the same time, they distance themselves from the gender and sexual ambiguity represented in the quest:

You did it really well. Let’s move on with the adventure. It was taken as almost like a place of normalcy. It was just accepted. And so we moved on. And that helped that distinctive and stand out among all the other events granted in Final Fantasy VII. There are many unusual events that also stand

out. Many weird. There are a couple other scenes that I can think of that are super unusual, such as when cloud rides a dolphin. (Nicholas, 00:45:08)

The cross-dressing quest is playable for a cis, straight male audience because the main protagonist is unquestionably straight and male. Cloud does not disguise himself for fun or out of desire, but to save his friend Tifa. The remake stages the encounters with queer characters as acts of tolerance through which the male hero can save a kidnaped female and in doing so, reach the next level. The hetero-cis player can thereby continue to identify with the hero.

The re-enactment of the original would not have worked today because it no longer corresponds to the values of a mainstream society. Prince finds Cloud in a dress funny and entertaining. He normalizes the game-play experience but at the same time compares it to “weird” situations like riding a dolphin. The adaptation of the remake describes tolerance as a performance:

I would have to say that the cross-dressing scene itself was a step away from the norm of what you would expect most side quest to be, most side quest to be like, if you if you had taken the same exact scenario and the concept was dress up cloud as a clown to get past on Don and pretend to be a circus actor. It would have been funny for sure, but it also may not have been as memorable because of Clouds persona. Again, as that very stoic mascot like, you know, macho, super-strong amazing, talented wheels, a super heavy sword, like it's no problem mercenary to them be put in such a disarming situation. (Nicholas, 00:43:52)

The joke here is still the feminization of Cloud and the ‘gay game over’ for the Don; it operates through a more tolerant presentation of the queer other. However, according to Suzanna Walters, tolerance is a trap. Modern society positions tolerance as the answer to freedom, yet “tolerance may bring us a modicum of justice [...] But justice is not the same as freedom, just as acceptance is not the same as recognition” (Walters 273). Tolerance is not an affirmative action that aims to change the system. In fact, it sabotages structural change: “the framework of tolerance actively prevents the development of a more inclusive and powerful sexual and gender freedom” (ibid). This new form of queer visibility – especially gay visibility – “creates new

forms of homophobia” by constructing “the good, marriage-loving, sexless gay vs. the bad, liberationist, promiscuous gay” (Walters 10). The idea of progress and tolerance is thus “rather a facet of modernity and a historical shift marked by the entrance of (some) homosexual bodies as worthy of protection by nation-states, a constitutive and fundamental reorientation of the relationship between the state, capitalism, and sexuality” (Puar 337). The remake conveys a very concrete image of the queer other who is being tolerated. However, I argue that the diversity offered in the remake is actually a Trojan horse. The queer visibility in the remake is centered around a gay fantasy of a white middle class character, at the cost of appropriating ballroom culture, which emerged from the struggles of Black people and queers of color. The remake shifted from a sexualized and predatory representation of Black and Brown men to a homonormative representation that erases Black and Brown achievements and queer subcultures – like ballroom culture.

Queerbaiting in the video game industry

The new mini-game in the remake consists of a dance duel against Andrea Rhodea – the proprietor of the new Inn. In the remake the Inn is:

[a] place with various gender identities and it is expressed like in your face. The scene where they dance together is basically a rhythm game, but it's almost like watching a Broadway show. And so, it's very cinematic. It's very uplifting to watch. (Prince, 00:24:06)

This scene, described by Prince as a “show”, is executed like an episode of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. At the end of the mini-game, Cloud receives a drag makeover from Andrea in order to infiltrate the Don's hiding place. The remake focuses strongly on Andrea in this quest:

[t]he person who runs the Honeybee Inn. A very competent man, a very physically fit man and a man who prides himself on beauty. And he does so in a very secure, very confident way. You can see he exudes charisma, competence. And for somebody as quiet and anti-social as Cloud. It's interesting to see them, his dynamic and him managing to not only break Clouds shell about his entire plan. (Nicholas, 00:09:32)

The programmers at Square Enix played with cultural codes in the visualization of the Honeybee Inn. Again, there are more Black characters in the form of dancers than in the rest of the game. Andrea's last words shortly before the mini-game is finished are: "True beauty is an expression of the heart. A thing without shame, to which notions of gender don't apply."

As Nicholas described it, the message seems very 'in your face'. There is no queer content in the game either before or after the Honeybee Inn scenes. Nicholas's Broadway show comparison is accurate because the quest looks staged, while the world of Final Fantasy outside the Honeybee Inn is anything but queer. The video game reproduces the separation between heterosexuality and homosexuality through the separation between the experience in the Honeybee Inn and the experience throughout the rest of the game. The fact that "minor queer characters, particularly in antagonistic roles, are commonly inappropriately sexual or predatory towards other characters" (Arltoft and Benkö 3) reproduces and stabilizes the division between the heterosexual norm and the sexual other through prejudice. Although the marketing of such games propagates tolerance as a motivation, at best it does nothing other than inspiring laughter at the expense of the LGBT community. At worst these forms of representation normalize sexual violence (Pelurson).

The line between stereotyping and emancipation is often narrow. This is clearly shown in the figure of Andrea Rhodea. Their graphics and character representation are problematic because they are overly sexualized. Andrea plays on the tradition of the "'funny sidekick' – a figure, often depicted hanging out with straight women in TV series and movies" (Pelurson). The sidekick gives players with queer experiences in the analog world the opportunity to process these experiences in the digital world (Pelurson). But not every person will be able to identify with Andrea. By using drag as a cultural reference point, the game appropriates the achievements of Black queers and queers of color, yet these communities are not represented in the game, aside from the dancers who do not speak during Cloud's transformation. The game suggests, however, that Andrea's freedoms are accessible to everyone. But this is not the case: "given the new opportunities available to *some* gays and lesbians, the temptation to forget – to forget the outrages and humiliations of gay and

lesbian history and to ignore the ongoing suffering of those not borne up by the rising tide of gay normalization – is stronger than ever” (Love 10).

The companies that benefit from the marketing of queer representation must be viewed critically. Unsurprisingly, more and more studios are programming LGBT characters into their games, as both obvious and latent homophobia and transphobia are no longer the most effective strategy for maximizing sales. This can be linked to a broader development within the media industry. If, for example, the multinational media conglomerate Disney embraced queer characters loudly and proudly, Elsa from the movie *Frozen* (Buck et al.) would have been an out and proud lesbian – as the fan community demanded after the announcement of the second *Frozen* movie (Buck et al.). Furthermore, Disney is a media production company that has promoted and encouraged their teenaged actors to live according to Christian values and not have sex before marriage, not to mention the fascist and propagandistic positions within Disney’s history (Roth; Winters). While it may scare off some potential consumers, the total absence of LGBT characters is less profitable than including a few – no matter the potential backlash. The amnesia regarding racist representations and the concealment of Black history in the cultural reference points of the game is still possible in the video game market. The rapidly increasing number of LGBT characters is by no means a purely positive development. Until studios work with BiPoC programmers in the LGBT community to end heteronormative and racist structures, this trend is mere pinkwashing and queerbaiting.

Homonormativity must not find its way into the digital world. I am in no way arguing against the inclusion of LGBT characters, but suggesting that we have to subject these representations to constant criticism and political intervention. Otherwise, we risk commodifying queer identities.

No happy ending for pink capitalism

Every inclusion in the heteronormative gaze means an exclusion. The increase in less problematic representations of LGBT characters in the digital world is not indicative of changes in the analog world. Video games have the potential

to rethink our world. Queer video game journalists and bloggers have already claimed that the remake has an “empowering potential for trans-people” and offers some scope for interpreting “Cloud’s journey of self-denial and self-discovery” as a metaphor for coming out (Houston). We shouldn’t be satisfied with that, nor does everyone have the opportunity to identify with this fantasy. The remake of Final Fantasy VII has not critically reworked the previous content, but rather complicates the legacy of the original (Wysor). We must remember that Square Enix’s aim is to sell as many copies of the remake as possible and to maintain its image as a brand. It was not necessary to depict the racist and homophobic sexual assault joke in the design of the remake for marketing purposes. At the same time, game mechanics and design seem not to tolerate difference when it comes to the bad guys. The antagonist Don Corneo is described as a “dirty man” (Nicholas, 00:11:33) who could possibly be bisexual and is conspicuous through the graphic representation of his obesity. His body fat moves three-dimensionally in the game. Where formerly only female breasts followed the analogous laws of physics, the Don’s belly moves in the remake to amuse the players. The original mini-game with Jules as a cross-dresser was replaced in the remake with a gender-nonconforming Jules. In the remake, Jules can also be seen in a gym with well-muscled Black characters. In this version, no one is knocked unconscious, but it is one’s own body that is disciplined:

Jules is amazing for us all. He’s a man who takes care of himself physically [...] you can see he has prepared eyebrows and nails... You know, he has a little bit of blush on his lips. You can tell he’s a man who prides himself on beauty. In fact, Andrea, a day comes and works out at that gym. [...] He believes not just muscles are beautiful, but also a person taking care of themselves physically is beautiful.

I felt like I was actually working out in real life, getting encouragement. (Nicholas, 00:22:18)

The healthy and muscular body is more predominant in the remake than in the original. Both Nicholas and Prince described how the mini-game made them expect to get more muscular themselves. This mini-game conveys the disciplining of one’s own body as an ideal. Muscle mania and the regulation

of one's own body can however be a problem, especially in the gay community, where hyper-masculine bodies are celebrated and fat bodies rejected. This idea is reproduced through the homo-normative representation of mostly white, well-trained and beautiful bodies. Neither the hegemonic fan base outside of queer discourse nor Square Enix were critical enough about the homophobic and racist content in the original. On the other hand, change only ever occurs in baby steps, doesn't it? Other game developers and studios have tried to redeem their games with remakes that alter some of their homophobic content, such as the game series Yakuza and the remake of Yakuza 2 (2006), Yakuza Kiwami (2016), but all they have done is replace content that would be considered clearly homophobic today. Additionally, the remake itself also has questionable undertones, besides the issue of homophobia. In a new mini-game, Cloud has to buy a massage with a happy ending from Madam M, an Asian woman in the Wall Market. This alludes to a racist narrative that sexualizes Asian women. These and other passages make it doubtful that Square Enix have done anything groundbreaking with the remake. The Turks are still called Turks and Barret might still be seen as a caricature. However, Black author and gamer Shanna Wynn-Shirreffs argues that the 1997 original "was a first step in the right direction" and the 2020 remake "continues to build upon that with the expanded characterization". In addition, they warn us to not just criticize because "if we as consumers can continue to express the good qualities of POC characters in addition to calling out the bad, it will serve us all better in the end" (Wynn-Shirreffs). To be fair, a revolutionary change will not begin in the mainstream video game industry, as it operates within the logic of market capitalism. It is therefore necessary for critical ga(y)mers to continue voicing their grievances and opposing the pinkwashing of the industry. Resistance and rioting were part of the early Gay Liberation Movement. Ga(y)mers must also resist and agitate against the system:

Let's tap into gamer's unique affinity for turning in to questions of power, balance, and exploitation and the game's unique ability to shape flows of attention, affect, and power [...] Gamers love trouble – perhaps a little too much at times. But gaming the system can cut in multiple directions. (Phillips 183)

Still, there are games inside the mainstream, such as *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) and outside the mainstream, such as *A Summer's End: Hong Kong 1986* (2020), that have offered more nuanced stories and accordingly resonated with marginalized LGBT people and not just white gays.

New technologies and worlds depict previously unforeseen utopias, but also embody new inequalities and power relations. This means that we have to “look for decolonial feminist applications in order to question the codes of algorithmic power and domination and to decode them” (Tuzcu 145) in order to get the happy ending and final fantasy that we deserve.”⁵

⁵ Author's own translation from “nach dekolonialen feministischen Applikationen suchen, um die Kodes der algorithmischen Macht und Herrschaft in Frage zu stellen und sie zu dekodieren.”

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Game of Thrones: (Re)arranged gender roles on screen?

Oxana Eremin

This article focuses on the television series *Game of Thrones* (GoT; 2011–2019). While advocates of the series' feminist credentials argue that its representations of complex female characters differ from traditional depictions of femininities, critics underline the series' misogynistic features. Taking the theoretical concepts of 'doing gender' and the 'male gaze' as a starting point for my discussion, this study seeks to evaluate GoT's feminist potential. Issues that interest me include first, why it is worthwhile to discuss pop cultural products like GoT and secondly, whether representations of gender in GoT indeed diverge from stereotypical images. I ask to what extent is the gaze subverted and its ways of looking challenged. Through a close reading of several scenes, I argue that the show creates a space where feminist and anti-feminist conceptions intertwine.

Postfeminism, popular culture, male gaze, feminist film critique, doing gender

Introduction: *Game of Thrones* and (post)feminism?

Missandei: Valar Morghulis.

Daenerys: Yes, all men must die. But we are not men.

(“Walk of Punishment” 33:38)

Quotes like these are seemingly intended to convey feminist sentiments to viewers of the television series *Game of Thrones* (GoT; 2011-2019). “Valar Morghulis”, or “all men must die,” is a frequently used proverb in the fictional world of GoT. The proper meaning of ‘men’ in this case is actually ‘humans’ or ‘people’ in general, though ‘men’ is also the plural of the noun ‘man’ and can refer explicitly to ‘male human being(s)’. However, a play on words is revealed to the audience through this exchange between the series’ two leading protagonists: Daenerys Targaryen, the Mother of Dragons and contender for the Iron Throne, and Missandei, a formerly enslaved woman who is liberated by Daenerys and subsequently becomes her advisor and closest confidante. The amused look on Missandei’s face, as Daenerys utters the proverb, is supposed to tell the audience: this scene is all about female empowerment.

Another prominent quotation comes from the character Queen Cersei Lannister: “When you play the game of thrones, you win or you die. There is no middle ground.” (“You Win or You Die” 08:59). Set in the pre-modern era, the *Game of Thrones* allegorically represents a brutal (re)allocation of political resources and positions of power, played out in a fictional patriarchal society pervaded by violence and sexism. And yet Cersei lays her claim to the throne. Actively involved in the political events and rancorous rivalries for dynastic legitimacy, Cersei is only one of many female protagonists in the world of GoT who are characterized by their agency. These female characters not only empower themselves to take part in the game but also claim empowerment as individuals. While advocates of the series’ feminist credentials argue that its representations of complex female characters differ from traditional depictions of womanhood and femininity, critics underscore the misogynistic elements of the series, highlighting the explicit depiction of (sexualized) violence and the frequently demeaning and overly sexualized portrayal of

female characters.¹ In short, the women (and girls) of GoT polarize the audience, or to put it differently: “Whether you find the women of GoT subversive, repressive or ambiguously mixed, they are more than mere spectacle” (Gjelsvik & Schubart 2). Or is this reading a feminist fallacy?² This is one question this article seeks to explore. Let us consider some of GoT’s female protagonists: while Cersei appears to be a rather horrifying figure because of her tendency to exert power in a tyrannical way, and while even Daenerys becomes a highly controversial character over the course of the story because of her domineering ruling style, the child Arya Stark seems to inspire admiration. Asking her father Lord Eddard Stark of Winterfell “Can I be lord of a holdfast?”, Arya seems to question the traditional arrangement of gender roles in the world of GoT. Clearly entertained by his daughter’s question, Eddard kisses Arya on her forehead and replies:

“You will marry a high lord and rule his castle. And your sons shall be knights and princes and lords.” Arya simply answers: “No. That’s not me.”
 (“Cripples, Bastards, and Broken Things” 22:55)

¹ Examples of the debate on GoT: Ferreday, Debra. “Game of Thrones, Rape Culture and Feminist Fandom.” *Australian Feminist Studies*, vol. 30, no. 83, April 2015, pp. 21–36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2014.998453>.

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² The term feminist fallacy was coined by Marjorie Ferguson: “Images of Power and the Feminist Fallacy” (1990). Zeisler (2016) picks up on this term (29ff.).

Taking the theoretical concepts of ‘doing gender’ and the ‘male gaze’ as a starting point for my discussion, this study seeks to evaluate GoT’s feminist potential. Issues that interest me include whether representations of gender in GoT indeed diverge from stereotypical images of masculinity and femininity; to what extent is the gaze subverted and its ways of looking challenged? Through a close reading of several scenes, I argue that the show creates a space where feminist and anti-feminist conceptions intertwine and are coupled with a (neo)liberal sensibility. But first it is necessary to clarify why it is worthwhile to discuss pop cultural products like GoT.

Watching television: why popular culture matters

Film and television form an integral part of popular culture and today, in the New Golden Age of Television, both are seen as two of the most influential communication channels in modern societies (Heinze et al). The beginning of this new era is closely entwined with the appearance of quality television series such as *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), commonly referenced as the starting point for this golden age, and *Mad Men* (2007–2015), among others. These series are typically characterized by their ability to reflect upon socio-political and socio-historical phenomena as well as by their complicated and ambiguous characters. During the original Golden Age of Television (from the late 1940s to the late 1950s/early 1960s), the philosopher Edgar Morin theorized the function of film within modern societies and specifically the psychological experience of watching a film. Morin characterizes the medium of film as a “mirror of human participation and realities” (240).³ Accordingly, television shows like GoT seem to make “the invisible visible [and] the unimaginable imaginable” (Schroer 23).⁴ Although television series such as GoT cannot provide a “profound theory of how society functions and how it is built” (Schroer 20),⁵ as a mass medium of communication,

³ Author’s own translation from “Spiegel menschlicher Partizipationen und Realitäten”.

⁴ Author’s own translation from the quote “Unsichtbares sichtbar [und] das Unvorstellbare vorstellbar”.

⁵ Author’s own translation from “keine umfassende Theorie über das Funktionieren und den Aufbau von Gesellschaft”.

television nonetheless makes it possible to understand and assess social arrangements by visualizing them.

The eighth and final season of HBO's GoT was broadcast in April 2019. Although the final season did not live up to the expectations of most of its audience, GoT is still considered one of the most popular US-made television shows and enjoyed considerable international success. Based on the series of fantasy novels *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George R.R. Martin, GoT has certainly entered the canon of contemporary (pop)cultural texts. Because a broad multi-media universe has evolved from and around this epic tale, I argue that GoT is not merely part of contemporary pop culture but in fact has shaped and influenced it since its debut in April 2011. Even though the world of GoT is obviously a fictional one, the show impressed audiences with its thoroughly hyped gritty realism. Although it belongs in the fantasy genre, GoT is frequently read as "a document of the political subconscious" (Koch 129).⁶ Further, GoT has been construed as a distorting mirror of societal concerns and issues, and addressed (geo)political questions of power and questions of social (dis)order (Koch). In regards to this latter point, GoT raises questions about gender politics in particular. Based on the assumption that popular culture represents a mass media intertext that articulates a commentary on society and its underlying symbolic order (Koch), this article suggests that contemporary quality television such as GoT can be read in a political sense rather than merely as a text to be consumed for entertainment purposes (Arenhövel; Besand). In the words of media critic Andi Zeisler, "pop culture, entertainment or not, is absolutely crucial to how people understand and live in the world" (*Feminism* 5).

Looking at the dynamics of mutual influence between feminism and popular culture, Zeisler even wonders if we are currently experiencing a Golden Age of *Feminist TV (We)* – a big question that also comes to mind when considering GoT. But how might 'feminist television' be defined? How can a television

⁶ Author's own translation from "Dokument des politischen Unbewussten".

show or film be classified as '(anti)feminist'? In order to approach these questions, the following section focuses on feminist film theory and criticism.

Approaching GoT through a feminist lens

Feminist film criticism is concerned with gender-specific representations as well as concepts of subjectivity, gender-differentiated modes of production and reception (Gradinari). However, what constitutes a feminist film is as controversial as the concept of feminism itself. After all, if feminism is regarded as an open concept, so too are feminist on-screen media (*Bildschirmmedien*) and analyses (Stöckl). In search of an answer to the question of what makes a film feminist, the filmmaker Ula Stöckl claims that a feminist film channels women's need for representation. She proposes that feminism in film is about "discarding the internalized male gaze, giving women, minorities and subcultures a voice, perceiving gender as constructed, and queering desire" (Stöckl 361).⁷ In short, feminist television is about highlighting patriarchal structures and tackling entrenched gender dynamics and inequalities.

Doing gender: reviewing the social construction of gender arrangements

Doing gender means creating differences between girls and boys and women and men, differences that are not natural, essential, or biological. Once the differences have been constructed, they are used to reinforce the "essentialness" of gender. (West & Zimmerman 137)

Coined by Candace West and Don Zimmerman, the analytical concept of *doing gender* refers to the fact that "gender isn't something that people have but something that they *do*" (Budde 4).⁸ This perspective, in turn, draws on Judith

⁷ Author's own translation from "Den männlich-internalisierten Blick ablegen, Frauen, Minderheiten und Subkulturen eine Stimme geben, Geschlecht als Konstruktion wahrnehmen und das Begehren verqueeren."

⁸ Author's own translation from "dass Geschlecht nichts ist, was Personen haben, sondern etwas, das sie tun".

Butler's notion of gender as performative. The phenomenon and theoretical framework of gender performativity and construction is discussed, inter alia, in GoT's pilot episode, which depicts the children of the noble Stark family undergoing gender-specific education in order to achieve their prescribed status as (fe)male subjects in a binary social system.

As viewers, we are confronted with the following scene: young Brandon Stark is instructed in archery under the supervision of his older brothers, while his parents, Lady Catelyn and Lord Eddard, watch his bumpy attempts at shooting arrows. Now, the camera pans from the courtyard into the interior of the castle where the daughters of the family, Sansa and Arya, are being trained in needlework by their handmaiden. Arya, however, does not approve of this. While Sansa is praised for her skills in embroidery and sewing, Arya casts an annoyed glance at her sister and continues only reluctantly with her own work. From outside, Arya hears laughter and the sounds of archery. Again, the camera pans so that the audience is once again able to follow the events in the courtyard where Bran is making the experienced archers laugh by always missing the target. His father motivates him: "Keep practicing, Bran." We see Bran stretch his bow and shoot. Then, we watch an arrow hitting the very centre of the target. The arrow does not belong to Bran, however, but to his younger sister, Arya. Visibly amused, Arya curtsies to her spectators, which again prompts laughter at Bran's expense. Suddenly there's a call for Eddard – he is expected to carry out an execution. Saddened yet aware of his duties as a ruler and guardian, Lord Stark instructs his vassal to saddle the horses and to "Tell Bran he's coming, too."

Catelyn: Ned, 10 is too young to see such things.

Eddard: He won't be a boy forever. And winter is coming.

("Winter Is Coming" 09:17)

What is striking about this scene is firstly that the setting presents a traditional distribution of gender roles: the daughters are positioned in the interior, where they are taught in private, whereas the sons of the Stark family are positioned outside the castle, where they are exposed to the public. The scene and scenery illustrate that gender-specific roles are not innate to an individual, but are

rather the result of learning processes and social dynamics. Furthermore, the depiction suggests that the concepts of masculinity and femininity are acquired through social negotiation and interaction. These concepts can only become meaningful when related to each other. Therefore, I argue, the characters Bran and Arya reflect a non-essentialist perspective on gender. Whereas Bran is supposed to train and test himself in armed combat, as well as to be familiar with the duties of a ruler, Arya is supposed to excel in handicrafts, although these activities do not match their respective interests at all. Another scene shows Arya alone in her room, looking at the sword she has secretly received as a gift from one of her elder brothers. When her father enters the room, he asks in bewilderment: “Where did you get this? This is not a toy. A lady shouldn’t play with swords.” But Arya insists: “I wasn’t playing. And I don’t want to be a lady” (“Lord Snow” 11:43).

Almost all the characters in GoT are portrayed as restless and distressed at some point, but throughout the entire narrative, the character of Arya in particular is used to display the social construction and performance of gender. Moreover, Arya functions as a symbol of transgression. As a character who is constantly seeking to go beyond gendered modes and norms, she implicitly proves that neither the phenomenon of masculinity nor femininity have an “ontological status” (Butler 136) but are rather positions within a social system which are taken up by repeatedly participating in social patterns. Thus, the supposed naturalness of gender is affirmed through the repetition of performative acts – but as Butler states, this illusion of innate naturalness can also be tested, deconstructed and unmasked. Watching Arya and her fellow characters, it becomes clear that “genders can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent, neither original nor derived. As credible bearers of those attributes, however, genders can also be rendered thoroughly and radically *incredible*” (Butler 141).

Following this, GoT offers room for reflection on gender-specific representations and for perceiving gender (roles) as constructed. Still, GoT also features ambiguous depictions of female characters, which will be discussed in more detail below.

The male gaze: a feminist critique of the visual

To begin with, men do not simply look: their gaze carries with it the power of action and of possession which is lacking in the female gaze. Women receive and return a gaze, but cannot act upon it. (Kaplan 31)

As a means of exposing the androcentric nature of on-screen fictional content, the Bechdel Test asks audiences to consider the following questions: (1) Does the content feature at least two female roles, and do these women have names? (2) Do the women have at least one conversation with each other? (3) And do they talk about something other than a man? (Stöckl 353). Now, if the television series GoT was evaluated using the Bechdel Test, it would surely pass. However, the test was never conceived as an actual evaluation standard (O'Meara). Moreover, it doesn't provide a way to measure ambivalent representations, especially when it comes to female characters. In fact, the Bechdel Test, conceived by cartoonist Alison Bechdel, originally appeared as a comic strip called *The Rule* (1985) within the series *Dykes to Watch Out For* (Zeisler *We*). The punchline of the comic strip merely references the fact that a film which fulfils all three minimal criteria is an absolute rarity in the media landscape (Zeisler *We*). The Bechdel Test may point to gender inequality on screen by indicating to what extent women are represented, but passing this 'test' does not determine if the content of a film or series can be classified as feminist or not. For example, a television show such as GoT may pass the Bechdel Test and still sexualize female characters with its so-called male gaze.

The assumption of internalized 'male' viewing habits and patterns was first highlighted through the concept of the male gaze, a deconstructivist approach and analytical tool coined by film theorist Laura Mulvey in her 1975 essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, now considered a ground-breaking text in feminist film theory. Like Morin, Mulvey examines how society and on-screen media are connected and examines the psychology behind the cinematic experience. Mulvey's psychoanalytic approach to reviewing on-screen media enables an analysis of "gender-related asymmetric gaze relations" and

structures of dominance (Gradinari 3).⁹ Above all, Mulvey's work assumes a patriarchal social order whose subconscious is reflected in cinematic production, action and reception (Mulvey "Visual"). Distinguishing between a male and a female position within a cinematic plot and composition, she states that:

[w]oman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning. (7)

Aiming to break these patriarchal patterns, Mulvey looks at the entanglement between representation, desire, gaze relations and viewing habits in reference to Freud and Lacan, and the phenomenon of scopophilia. Scopophilia describes a voyeuristic process involving an active male heterosexual gaze directed at a passive female object of desire:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire. (11)

The male voyeuristic gaze is understood as a means of control which turns women into objects onto which erotic fantasies can be projected. The women presented on screen are sexualized in two ways: not only do they serve the fictional characters within the cinematic narrative in their role as objects of sexual pleasure, but they also fulfil this function for the audience (11). The

⁹ Author's own translation from "geschlechtlich asymmetrischen Blickverhältnisse."

pivotal moment here is the process in which the audience identifies with the dominant male gaze:

The man controls the film fantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator [...]. This is made possible through the process set in motion by structuring the film around a main controlling figure with whom the spectator can identify. As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look on to that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence. (Mulvey "Visual" 12)

In short, the entire cinematic apparatus and aesthetic transforms the audience into holders of an active voyeuristic male gaze. Applying Mulvey's approach to *GoT* suggests that the series features some striking examples of the scopophilic male gaze.

In one of the most provocative scenes (provocative because of its explicit soft-pornographic depictions), the visual axis of the camera merges with the perspective of a male protagonist, framing the audience's line of sight. The scene in question takes place in a brothel owned by pimp Lord Petyr Baelish, whose manipulative behavior has not only gained him wealth but also the role of chamberlain in the royal council. Over the course of the story, it becomes clear that Baelish is in fact a guiding force behind the brutal dynamics in *GoT* and that his character holds a key position of power. The gaze relations expressed in the scene mirror Baelish's dominant position: first, the spectators perceive how his gaze wanders to two sex workers who are supposed to perform a sexual act 'as a test' at their pimp's instruction ("You Win or You Die" 09:30). Visibly dissatisfied with the sex workers' 'performance', Baelish abandons the act and rebukes the women. Then he orders them to perform again. During the instruction, Baelish takes on the role of a voyeur. The camera constantly switches between framing Baelish and the sex workers, managing to blur the boundaries between the protagonist's gaze and that of the audience. Finally, the audience's line of vision merges with Baelish's visual axis so that the coerced acts are perceived from his point of

view. His monologue (and, partly, dialogue) in the background of the cinematic action underlines the fact that this scene displays an internalized male gaze – Baelish is clearly the one who possesses the gaze and holds the position of power. The crux of this scene is that the audience finally see the sex workers express sexual pleasure in the spectacle Baelish has forced upon them. One of the prostitutes, named Ros, downright advances this coerced spectacle. At this point, Ros is not simply brought on stage by Baelish but she almost directs herself, leading the assigned role during the scene, underlining Mulvey's thesis of *to-be-looked-at-ness*. The boundaries between eroticism and sexualization seem to blur here. Ros' pleasure in the enforced staging evokes a supposedly sex-positive scenario, which actually conceals the structural disadvantages women face in the patriarchal world order of the series. Created through camerawork, the modes of gazing I have described reflect asymmetrical power relations with regard to gender arrangements.

Another scene which exemplifies this apparatus focuses on Queen Daenerys and her admirer, Daario Naharis ("Second Sons" 42:30). Although Daario plays a minor role compared to the queen, he represents agency, driving this particular scene and playing from a position of power, which is again expressed through modes of gaze. Armed, he secretly enters the private chambers of the queen, who is taking a bath. The moment she gets out of the bathtub, Daario's gaze becomes the audience's gaze. As the camera wanders across Daenerys's figure, the audience assumes the position of an active voyeur. Scenes like these illustrate how stereotypical gender roles are conducted but above all, that these are perpetuated by cinematic aesthetics. Considering that women are still heavily underrepresented as directors, camerawomen and creative professionals in the film and media industries,¹⁰ Mulvey's thesis of a dominant male gaze that forms a whole apparatus which appeals to society's subconscious seems quite plausible in these examples.

¹⁰ A total of eighteen male directors and one female director worked on the entire series: four out of seventy-three episodes were directed by Michelle McLaren. A total of four male scriptwriters and two female scriptwriters worked on GoT: four of the seventy-three episodes were written by Jane Espenson (1) and Vanessa Taylor (3).

The male gaze is still a source of inspiration for (feminist) film critics. Nonetheless, the concept has also been subject to much criticism, which commonly claims that Mulvey ignores the role of female spectatorship. In *Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'* (1981) Mulvey responds to this accusation:

I have been asked why I only used the *male* third person singular to stand in for the spectator. At the same time, I was interested in the relationship between the image of woman on the screen and the 'masculinisation' of the spectator position, regardless of the actual sex (or possible deviance) of any real live movie-goer. (12)

Although she focuses on the process of masculinization, Mulvey does not deny female spectatorship. In fact, she doesn't deny any kind of viewer. Since the process of masculinization proceeds by means of "trans-sex identification" regardless of the viewer's actual gender (13), she argues that the viewers' perspective is masculinized. In this way, all viewers may acquire a male gaze through cinematic aesthetics. But still – what about a female gaze? Can't there be an active, powerful, voyeuristic female view of a sexualized (male) body? Mulvey writes that the "male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like" ("Visual" 12). However, by confronting the audience with a shift in gaze arrangements, some scenes in GoT put Mulvey's assumptions to the test. In the context of the aforementioned constellation of Daario and Daenerys, the audience's axis of vision also merges with Daenerys' perspective as she assumes the dominant position. Daario, seeking the queen's affections, enters Daenerys' private chambers without permission once more:

Daario: I came to ask a favour. I only have two talents in this world: war and women. You are staying here in Meereen to rule, this is a wise decision, I respect it. But here in Meereen I cannot pursue my talents.

[...]

Daario: I stay in Meereen and patrol the streets. Send me to kill your enemies, any enemy, anywhere. Let me do what I do best.

Daenerys: Very well. Do what you do best. Take off your clothes.

("Mockingbird" 17:25)

Although Daario once again appears as the leading figure who advances the subsequent events, a strategy is presented to infiltrate the male gaze as soon as the audience sees Daario undressing. This time, the audience adopts the queen's gaze. In terms of gaze relations, the show features a second similar scene: the Red Priestess Melisandre seduces Gendry, a captive, in order to lure him into an ambush ("Second Sons" 26:15). In this case, the female character Melisandre possesses the active, action-guiding gaze that drives the scene. It is her perspective that merges with the audience's visual frame and exposes the sexualized male body. Moreover, the gaze relations reflect a social hierarchy in which the Priestess occupies a more privileged position than Gendry. In response to Mulvey's essay, cultural studies scholar E. Ann Kaplan asks a legitimate question: "is the gaze *necessarily* male?" (24) This question leads to another: "when women are in the dominant position, are they in the *masculine* position?" (28). Kaplan assigns the concept of the male gaze to a masculine position within a binary coded system. The masculine position, which needs to be understood as a synonym for dominance, needs to be separated from the actual gender – of the fictional characters and the audience. Kaplan claims that "the gaze is not necessarily male (literally), but to own and activate the gaze, given our language and the structure of unconscious, is to be in the 'masculine' position" (30) – or in an oppressive one, a position where one has the power to dominate others.

In order to explain and support Kaplan's thesis, I present another scene from GoT, showing the character Yara Greyjoy and her brother Theon in a brothel. The events in the brothel are seen through Theon's point of view, who feels visibly uncomfortable and intimidated while Yara enjoys the attention of a sex worker.

Theon: Why do we have to come here?

Yara: Because some of us still like it. [Theon averts his eyes.] Have a drink at least.

Theon: I don't want one. [Yara sends the prostitute away.]

Yara: Nothing on the Iron Islands has an ass like that. But it doesn't interest you anymore. [Theon lowers his head.] I'm sorry. I won't joke about it. [Yara is alluding to Theon's violent castration. She then has a conversation with

him about his experiences of violence and their future plan of action. After talking to him, she declares:] Now, since it's my last night ashore for a long while I'm gonna go fuck the tits off this one.

(“The Broken Man” 34:20)

Yara's macho demeanor and her daring manner, expressed through her presence and her choice of words, catch the viewers' attention. Not only does she take a dominant masculine position towards the prostitute, but also towards her brother. She seems to embody a form of hegemonic masculinity. Although the audience initially perceives the events through Theon's perspective, his gaze doesn't appear powerful in this scene. He even averts it, putting himself in an inferior position characterized by vulnerability and impotence. Presented as a broken man, Theon takes the feminine position in relation to Yara who is bursting with self-confidence. In this scene, the attributes masculine and feminine function as stand-ins for qualities such as strength/dominance/agency and impotence/submissiveness/passivity. While qualities like strength are usually assigned to men and passivity is typically associated with women, this scene illustrates a reversal of gendered roles. It emphasizes that these attributes are not tied to any particular sex; that there is no natural correlation. By redistributing socially constructed positions that are connoted as masculine or feminine, the scene disrupts typical viewing patterns and challenges heteronormative stereotypes in particular. Although this is certainly not the only way to read Yara, she still provocatively defies the supposedly natural causality of sex, gender, identity and desire. In short, the depiction of her reveals a non-essentialist perspective toward the categories of sex and gender. Still, Kaplan raises the following issue:

Can we envisage a female dominant position that would differ qualitatively from the male form of dominance? Or is there merely the possibility of both sex genders occupying the positions we know as “masculine” and “feminine?” (28)

To summarize so far: the series does contain patriarchal imagery, but it is also challenged throughout the narrative. Yet internalized androcentric viewing habits and patterns are not completely discarded. Might it not be that

nowadays the male gaze is closely interwoven with a new phenomenon symptomatic of a postfeminist era? The cultural theorist Angela McRobbie claims that “(y)oung women are being put under a spotlight so that they become visible in a certain kind of way” (54). The following sections zoom in on these “spaces of attention” (McRobbie 58), keeping McRobbie’s considerations about a new form of sexual contract in mind.

The undoing of feminism: the ambiguous visibility of top girls

If making women visible was an aim of feminism, it was successful, very successful indeed. In any case, women today are more visible than ever, and on the surface, they are more successful than ever.¹¹ (Hark & Villa 7)

In the first season of the show, it is predominantly the male characters who appear as representatives of power. For example, the young princess Daenerys must submit to the oppressive care of her elder brother Viserys and is exposed to his physical and psychological abuse. Viserys uses Daenerys as a trophy in order to assert his claim to the Iron Throne, arranging a forced marriage between his sister and Khal Drogo, the ruler of a nomadic warrior people. When Daenerys tries to object, Viserys brutally tells her that she has no say in the matter: “I would let his whole tribe fuck you. All 40000 men. And their horses, too, if that’s what it took.” (“Winter is Coming” 36:58) Season seven paints a different picture. Daenerys, long since elevated to rival queen, now tries to assert her claim to the Iron Throne. Her circle of allies consists almost exclusively of powerful women and marginalized characters who have suffered from social stigma and suppression. Even her counterpart and holder of the Iron Throne, Cersei, is a woman. In the same season, maltreated Sansa Stark is made deputy queen and young ruler Lyanna Mormont announces loudly:

I don’t plan on knitting by the fire while men fight for me. I might be small, Lord Glover, and I might be a girl but I am every bit as much a Northerner

¹¹ Author’s own translation from “Wenn es ein Ziel von Feminismus war, Frauen sichtbar zu machen, so war er erfolgreich, sehr sogar. Jedenfalls sind Frauen heute sichtbarer denn je und vordergründig sind sie auch so erfolgreich wie nie.”

as you. [...] And I don't need your permission to defend the North. We begin training every man, woman, boy and girl on Bear Island.

(“Dragonstone” 09:28)

Her announcement is welcomed. Yet it should not be forgotten that all these events take place in a world organized by sexual inequality, where women and girls are relegated to a subordinate place within the patriarchal order. For example, the noblewoman and knight Brienne of Tarth is forced to fight a bear in ladylike clothes, not only to amuse other warriors, but also to remind her of her social standing as a woman (“The Bear and the Maiden Fair” 50:33). Nonetheless, GoT features multiple (anti)heroines who are on par with the series’ (anti)heroes. They appear self-confident and fearless, but they are not actually equal, but rather symptomatic of a postfeminist era.

The cultural theorists Angela McRobbie and Rosalind Gill both emphasize that the 1990s are a turning point with regard to the portrayal of women in media culture. According to McRobbie, feminist themes and values of the 1970s and 1980s were taken up and subsequently integrated into media and popular culture during this decade; at the same time, feminist ideals were reinterpreted into an individualistic discourse, which eventually led to an “undoing of feminism”, or the dismantling of feminist politics (11). This effect is particularly noticeable in the rhetoric and vocabulary around concepts like ‘empowerment’ and ‘freedom of choice’, which reduces feminism to a lifestyle choice and undermines its political objectives as a social movement (McRobbie). According to Rosalind Gill, the phenomenon of postfeminism is both characterized by the entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas and linked to a neoliberal sensibility, both of which find their expression in the ongoing trend towards an entrepreneurial self and in the portrayal of female sexuality. Specifically, Gill points to a cultural shift concerning the objectification of women. While early media analyses like Mulvey’s demonstrated that women on screen were ascribed the role of passive sexualized objects, the arrival of feminist ideals in popular culture turned them into active and desiring, yet still sexualized subjects (Gill). In this way, some parts of feminism have been adopted, namely the demand for sexual self-determination and freedom, but this transformation has created a “hyper-

culture of commercial sexuality” (McRobbie 18). Using GoT as an example, I show that the male gaze has not been discarded but merely shifted. “The idea that the value of women in the heterosexual market (and beyond) is measured by their innocence and virginity has been replaced by an emphasis on sexual knowledge, experience and skill [...]”¹² (Gill 16).

The following example is demonstrative. In GoT, the emancipation of the character Daenerys begins with the following question: “Can you teach me how to make the Khal happy?” (“The Kingsroad” 32:08) Having been repeatedly raped by her husband Khal Drogo¹³, Daenerys turns to one of her maids to teach her ‘the art of love’: “I don’t think that Drogo will like it with me on top.”

Doreah: You will make him like it, Khaleesi. Men want what they’ve never had. And the Dothraki take slaves like a hound takes a bitch. Are you a slave, Khaleesi? – Then don’t make love like a slave.

(“The Kingsroad” 37:26)

The very moment Daenerys learns how to seduce her husband, her fate begins to improve, helping her to become one of the show’s fan favourites. The perfidious thing about this development is that postfeminist discourses about choice, freedom, empowerment and change not only drive these cinematic actions but also conceal the patriarchal system in which both Daenerys and her maid, an enslaved woman who has been forced into prostitution since childhood, are trapped. Although Daenerys was married by force and has been exposed to sexualized violence, her relationship to Drogo is transformed into

¹² Author’s own translation from “Anstelle der Vorstellung, der Wert von Frauen auf dem heterosexuellen Markt (und darüber hinaus) bemesse sich an ihrer Unschuld und ihren jungfräulichen Eigenschaften, ist eine Betonung von sexueller Kenntnis, Erfahrung und Geschicklichkeit getreten [...]”

¹³ The pilot episode of GoT shows Daenerys being raped on her wedding night, which is a questionable dramaturgical decision, since the novel *A Game of Thrones* (1996) doesn’t feature such a scene, but describes how Daenerys is seduced by Drogo. See pp.99–108.

a consensual and romantic love affair over the course of the narrative. First, she has to learn how to objectify herself in order to be recognized as an actual individual by her husband – and by the audience. Hence, her path to independence is controlled by the male gaze, symbolized here by the character of Drogo. When she learns how to position herself as a self-reliant sexual subject, she appears equal to Drogo, a depiction which seems to coincide with postfeminist discourses on female autonomy and individualization which endorse “a new regime of sexual meanings based on female consent, equality, participation and pleasure”, while remaining apolitical (McRobbie 18).

I therefore argue that an unbroken patriarchal system of power and domination underlies the so-called new deal – “a new form of sexual contract”¹⁴ (McRobbie 2) – that is displayed in GoT. Termed “liberal sexism/sexist liberalism” by Stéphanie Genz, this postfeminist phenomenon also comes into play elsewhere during the series (244). For instance, the young, inexperienced Sansa is told by the powerful Cersei: “Tears aren’t a woman’s only weapon. The best one’s between your legs. Learn how to use it.” (“Blackwater” 28:56) Elsewhere, mighty Lady Olenna Tyrell reveals to her granddaughter how she achieved and held her dominant position as ruler: “I was good. I was very, very good” (“Oathkeeper” 18:42) – alluding here to her sexual prowess. These moments can neither be understood as sex-positive nor as subversive, but rather as a perfidious form of gender (a)politics, one that can be observed throughout the epic tale:

Caught in a field of contradictory political forces, women specifically are subjected to relentless abuse and violence, their principal resources tied to their fertility and sexuality. In this context, “fucking” comes to be seen as a survival strategy in the game of self-interest, a carnal tactic that allows them to negotiate exploitation and rape that loom large throughout Westeros. (Genz 244)

¹⁴ McRobbie formulates her idea of a new sexual contract on the basis of Carole Pateman’s book *The Sexual Contract* (1988), a feminist critique of social contract theory.

It should be noted that although it is chiefly the female characters who adopt such tactics, so too does the male character Lord Baelish, who embodies the neoliberal figure of the entrepreneurial self. The image of the entrepreneurial self is closely related to the “power of erotic capital”¹⁵, in which one negotiates power by (unwittingly) making use of one’s erotic appeal (Zeisler *We* 221). These phenomena are linked to a postfeminist, (neo)liberal version of feminism which, although it strives for equal opportunities and displays female success, does not actually articulate any demands for fundamental structural changes (McRobbie). It is a version of feminism that combines feminist and anti-feminist features. Ultimately, GoT exemplifies the complicating effects of postfeminist tendencies represented in popular culture. McRobbie states that an “anti-feminist endorsement of female individualisation is embodied in the figure of the ambitious ‘TV blonde’” (15), which is also true for GoT. The characters of Cersei and Daenerys – queen and counter-queen – are tropes of this archetype.

In particular, Cersei symbolizes the “double entanglement” (McRobbie 12) typical of postfeminist tendencies. On the one hand, she stands for radical liberalization in sexual and kinship relations (even though she has to hide her love affair with her brother). At the same time, she represents (neo)conservative values, especially in terms of dynastic rule, since she continues ‘the rule of the fathers’, first as queen-mother and later as holder of the Iron Throne, which is *the* symbol of patriarchy in the fictional world of GoT. Cersei, who pushes dynastic rivalries to the extreme, establishes a reign of terror over men and women alike and pursues her patriarchal rule consistently and violently. Known as the “breaker of chains”, Daenerys is one of the figures who was given the possibility to (unwittingly) deploy her erotic capital, which enables her rise to power (for example, Daario subjects voluntarily to her rule because of her beauty). Nonetheless, her depiction initially suggested that her character would reflect a radical social critique, despite her controversial development and rise to power. Unfortunately, the plotline of season eight sends Daenerys back into the overt and stereotypically gendered trope of the ‘irrational woman’. GoT “does not allow her a straightforward victory” (Tasker

¹⁵ Zeisler critiques Catherine Hakim’s controversial book *Erotic Capital* (2010).

& Steenberg 188). Still, Daenerys perpetuates pop cultural discourses as a symbol of female empowerment and freedom of choice.

Another female character who seems to underpin these discourses is Brienne of Tarth. Having (supposedly) freely chosen the path of a noble knight, she functions as a counterpart to the male knight, Jaimie Lannister. While Jaimie is introduced as an amoral and disreputable character, Brienne stands for all the gallantry and virtue that Jaimie lacks. Jaimie falls into a deep crisis of masculinity as the story unfolds. But his growing friendship with Brienne allows him to work towards self-realization and gradually free himself from the social pressure that weighs him down. Just like Daenerys and Cersei, Brienne can be read as a newer version of “the ambitious ‘TV blonde’” (McRobbie 15). However, she exemplifies a breach with the (neo)liberal rhetoric of female freedom of choice and empowerment. In contrast to Daenerys, Brienne fails at deploying ‘the power of erotic capital’, which, as already outlined, plays a pivotal role in the world of GoT. Allegedly not blessed with beauty, Brienne cannot or does not know how to use her erotic appeal to her advantage. When asked why she has chosen the path of a chivalrous noblewoman, she reveals that she has always been mocked for her alleged ‘unfemininity’ because of her physique and reputed lack of gracefulness (“High Sparrow” 20:10). Throughout the narrative, Brienne is insulted as “a great beast of a woman,” “if you can call that a woman” (“Dark Wings, Dark Words” 51:02). Because Brienne doesn’t adhere to common ideals of beauty, she isn’t recognized or accepted as a lady. Instead, she chooses to become a knight, protecting the ones she cares about, rather than being pitied. Her character thus subtly critiques the gender regime that looms throughout GoT. The examples of Brienne and Jaimie in particular demonstrate that the mere “idea of gender” may lead an individual to fail at ‘performing’ a prescribed gender (role), since gender is still bound to (hetero)normative expectations (Butler 140).

Summarizing remarks

This article argued that the television program GoT created a pop cultural space where feminist and anti-feminist conceptions intertwine and are coupled with a (neo)liberal sensibility. GoT offers room to critique entrenched

patriarchal gender regimes and power dynamics, while at the same time, it perpetuates patriarchal imagery, an argument exemplified by the rise and fall of the character Daenerys, among others. Gender norms and stereotypes are simultaneously challenged and reproduced in the show. While female characters are given key roles, they are often highly sexualized. However, as McRobbie and Gill have stated, a cultural shift regarding the representation and objectification of women on screen has taken place since the 1990s. My analysis of several scenes from GoT has shown that even though internalized androcentric viewing patterns were not completely discarded in the show, they have changed due to the emergence of postfeminism. Finally, I argued that though Mulvey's assumptions are challenged throughout the series' narrative, her thesis about a dominant male gaze is still relevant.

Pop culture clearly matters. GoT offers room for discussion and reflection on societal issues and concerns, and a platform to educate ourselves via the medium of popular culture. Yet the extent to which this takes place depends on the spectator and their interests. It remains unclear if the content of on-screen media has any educational effect on its audience, for example, with regard to gender politics. What remains open, too, is the question of what actually makes a film or television series feminist. Simply displaying and featuring lots of female characters is not enough. Furthermore, this article only outlines a fraction of what could be covered in reviewing GoT as a media text, but it shows the potential applications of (feminist) film theory, the study of popular culture and postfeminist media landscapes.

I conclude this study with Zeisler's words:

Treating feminism as a fixed metric flattens out the narrative possibilities that make people want to see movies in the first place. Seeing a movie that's not feminist doesn't keep anyone from watching it through a feminist lens (*We*).

So, keep watching.

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Sex is beautiful, but we don't recommend it: Desire and pleasure in Chinese sex education

Wenjia Zhou

The departure point for this article was a national online debate about Chinese sex education. In spring 2017, beginning with a mother complaining about the “explicit” contents of a sex education textbook on Sina Weibo, thousands of Chinese netizens joined in the discussion about the textbook, *Cherish Lives* (珍爱生命), and sex education for Chinese youth in general. Some netizens criticized the textbook for being problematic and misleading, while others considered *Cherish Lives* the best sex education textbook China had ever had. I set out to use *Cherish Lives* as a case for investigating the complex issues at play when it comes to sex education in present-day China. Through a close reading of the contested textbook, I find that even though it can be regarded as radical in the Chinese context, it also displays the marked continuation of disciplinary aspects – but in a less direct way compared to earlier sex education traditions. Drawing on Foucault’s understanding of knowledge and power, I argue that the textbook can be considered an example of modern disciplinary power that functions through producing “official knowledge” to shape everyday practices and discourses.

“Is it OK for elementary school students to read such a book?” In February 2017, a mother in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province posted on Sina Weibo¹ about how appalled she was to read her daughter’s sex education textbook. Her daughter, a second-grade elementary school student, had brought the textbook home from school and asked her how to pronounce “jing” in the term “yinjing” (penis). The mother was shocked. She felt that the textbook was too explicit for her daughter and posted her thoughts online. Her post soon went viral and was covered by several news outlets. After that, Chinese netizens joined the discussion about the sex education textbook, *Cherish Lives* (Feng). Some netizens criticized the textbook for being problematic and misleading, while others regarded *Cherish Lives* as the best sex education textbook China had ever had. The heated online debate made me wonder if there was something more at stake in sex education in China. Consequently, I set out to study what understandings of sex and sexuality are presented in the book. It should be noted that the use of this particular textbook is not meant to be representative of all Chinese sex education textbooks, as the lack of a national curriculum in China means there are different approaches to sex education across the country (Liu and Yuan 51). Rather, my aim is to use it as a case study to investigate the complex issues at play in present-day sex education in China. In order to understand the notions of sex and sexuality presented in *Cherish Lives*, I will look into one issue in particular – the discourse of desire and pleasure in the textbook.

In the following sections, I present my reading of the textbook in terms of the discourse of desire and pleasure. By highlighting dominant articulations as well as absent, marginal and alternative ones, I discuss what kinds of understandings of sex and sexuality are produced for the textbook’s target reader.

¹ The Chinese equivalent of Twitter; one of the most popular Chinese social media platforms.

1. *Cherish Lives*: the controversial Chinese sex education textbook

Created by the Research Group of Sex Education for Children at Beijing Normal University (hereafter called “the Research Group”), *Cherish Lives* is a series of sex education textbooks designed for elementary school students. *Cherish Lives* includes twelve volumes in total, for students aged from six to twelve years old. The first and second edition of *Cherish Lives* was published in 2010 and 2014 by Beijing Normal University Publishing Group (Liu and Su; Liu).² It is important to keep in mind that due to censorship, editors and publishers in China have always acted as gatekeepers who decide what can be known by the public and what cannot (MacKinnon). In other words, the very fact of its publication means that *Cherish Lives* is considered acceptable by officials.

The composition of *Cherish Lives* adheres to both an official guideline issued in China and one provided by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). In 2008, the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China issued the *Guidelines for Health Education in Elementary School and Middle School*. The *Guidelines* provide concrete requirements in terms of health education, including content related to sex education. The contents of *Cherish Lives* are predominantly based on the *Guidelines*. According to the *Guidelines*, students should learn two kinds of information regarding sex: human biology and instructions concerning attitudes and behaviors. They also need to know how to maintain a hygienic lifestyle, protect themselves from sexual abuse and avoid premarital sex. These guidelines were adapted from the UNESCO *International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education*. The basic framework of the textbook is based on six key elements from the UNESCO *Guidance*: 1) Relationships; 2) Values, attitudes, and skills; 3) Culture, society, and human rights; 4) Human development; 5) Sexual behaviors; and 6) Sexual and reproductive health.

² The analysis of *Cherish Lives* in this article is based on its second edition. Largely similar to the first edition, the second edition made small adjustments and included a twelfth volume that was not available in the first edition.

I would also like to express my thanks to Wenli Liu and her team for issuing permission to reproduce illustrations from *Cherish Lives* in this article.

Cherish Lives, in comparison, contains six units: 1) Family and friends; 2) Life and skills; 3) Gender and rights; 4) Body development; 5) Sexual and healthy behavior; and 6) Sexual and reproductive health. Students of all grades are required to study each of the six units to varying degrees depending on age (Liu). According to the Research Group, *Cherish Lives* has been used as the standard textbook in eighteen non-state elementary schools for the children of rural-urban migrant workers in Beijing. The textbook series has not been widely used as the official textbook in public schools, but has been recommended by some schools as extracurricular reading and subsequently purchased by many parents for their children. Compared to *Cherish Lives*, many other sex education textbooks in China show much more conservative attitudes towards sex and sexuality. For example, a 2016 textbook named *Scientific Sex Education for High School Students* claims that premarital sex causes young women's deprivation (Zhou).

In March 2017, after the Zhejiang mother complained about the textbook, the discussion about it went viral. The mother posted an image of one page from the textbook, which introduces the process of conception (Figure 1). Two illustrations depict heterosexual intercourse, including one close-up picture showing the sexual organs. The description under the close up reads: "father puts his penis into mother's vagina".



Figure 1: *Cherish Lives*, Section 1 Birth of human beings, Unit 1 Body Development, Second semester, Grade 2, 2
Source: (*Cherish Lives 2*)

Based on this post, some Chinese netizens questioned whether the contents of *Cherish Lives* were suitable for elementary school students, as they believed that learning about sex would lead to sexual activity. Many others voiced their support for *Cherish Lives*, wondering what a sex education textbook should include, if not sex. Replying to the heated online discussion, a representative from the Department of Education in Zhejiang province commented that the book was not a textbook but extracurricular reading; therefore, it required less rigorous official inspection.³ The representative stated that even though the Department of Education could not comment on its contents, there should be no problem with *Cherish Lives* since the book was edited by professionals and published by a proper publishing press (Lu). On June 2, 2017, China Central Television (CCTV) interviewed the chief editor of *Cherish Lives*, Liu Wenli, as part of a special program for International Children's Day.⁴ The program affirmed the Research Group's research on sex education for children. However, following the dispute, *Cherish Lives* disappeared from online stores for a long time. In August 2021, Liu Wenli posted on her social media account, stating that Beijing Normal University Publishing Group has ceased to sell the textbook since January 2019.⁵

There is a contradiction at work here. Since *Cherish Lives* has provoked plenty of criticism online, there must be something radical about the textbook; and yet, given that it was successfully published and officially acknowledged, its contents have proven to be moderate at least to some extent. It is this subtle balance between radicalness and moderateness that inspires my research. Referring to the mother's criticism of the straightforward description of the human body and sex, I focus particularly on discourses of desire and pleasure in the textbook. I ask: How are desire and pleasure presented in *Cherish Lives*? What kind of desire and pleasure is recognized, and what is not approved or absent? Since the initial publication of *Cherish Lives* in 2010, China has gradually turned into a more authoritarian regime with tightened state control

³ Zhejiang Province is one of the wealthiest and most developed provinces in China.

⁴ The most influential state television station in China.

⁵ Starting in 2020, searches in Chinese online stores yielded no results.

and censorship under Xi Jinping's presidency, which means there is more repression and surveillance of expressions of sex and sexuality (Ho et al., 492). Therefore, my interpretation of the textbook is based on and limited to the discussion on sex education in China up to 2017 only.

2. Theoretical and methodological approach

In this section, I introduce the Foucauldian view of power and knowledge production as my main theoretical perspective, and Critical Discourse Analysis as my analytical approach. As my focus in this article is on knowledge production around sex and sexuality in the context of educating students, Foucault's theories about the regulation of the individual's body and sexuality and the relationship between knowledge and power are useful. In this section, I draw on Foucault's notions of power, especially bio-power and the power-knowledge nexus.

Power is a key notion in Foucault's work and he noted in particular the rise of a modern form of power in Western Europe in the eighteenth century (*History of Sexuality 1*). Modern power functions at two poles – the individual body and the population. Sexuality, which connects both, has therefore become a central target of modern power (*History of Sexuality 1*). Foucault terms the regulation of the population as bio-power. Bio-power manages the human collective through scientific interventions at every stage of biological life, such as birth, mortality and morbidity. Foucault emphasizes that rather than being repressive and negative, modern power is omnipresent and productive (*Power/Knowledge*). It is dispersed throughout all kinds of social relations, daily practices and disciplinary institutions. Power does not use forms such as prohibitions or censorship, rather, it operates by producing pleasure, knowledge and discourse.⁶ For example, Foucault claims that understandings of sex and sexuality are always historically situated and constituted by power relations. While certain kinds of knowledge about sex and sexuality are

⁶ Power here refers to the modern form of power, though both sovereign and bio-power exist in China. Sex education can be regarded as one example of non-violent power, but this is not the only kind of power in China.

legitimized as “knowable” and “official” in everyday discourses and practices, others are marginalized and silenced.⁷ Inspired by the Foucauldian perspective, I acknowledge that rather than being natural and value-free, the statements about sex and sexuality in *Cherish Lives* were produced under the influence of specific power structures. Through examining the textual materials in *Cherish Lives* and drawing on the broader social context in contemporary China, I attend to the process of discursive formation in the textbook's production.

To do so, I use Norman Fairclough's approach to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Fairclough conceives a three-dimensional analytical framework for assessing discourse as shown in Figure 2.

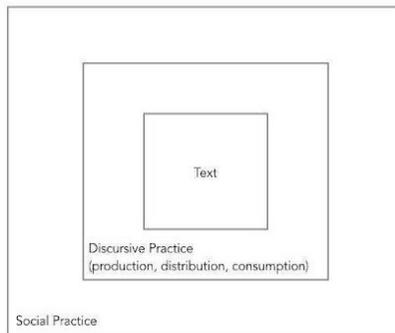


Figure 2: Three-dimensional model for CDA
Source: (Fairclough 73)

He suggests that the analysis of discourse should combine three analytical traditions: 1) close textual analysis focusing on the linguistic features of the text; 2) the microsociological tradition that analyses social practice in relation to people's involvement in understanding as well as making the social world; 3) the macro-sociological tradition that examines social practice along with

⁷ By using knowledges instead of knowledge, I indicate that there are different kinds of knowledge.

grand social structures (Fairclough). By relating language use to social practice, the three-dimensional model underscores that texts can only be understood and interpreted within specific social contexts.

CDA pays attention to how discursive practices contribute to the production and reproduction of power relations, which makes it suitable for this study. Even though the three-dimensional model for CDA suggests analyzing discourse as text, discursive practice and social practice, the application of the method varies depending on the specific research context (Jørgensen and Phillips). As my research question investigates understandings of sex and sexuality in *Cherish Lives*, this article will predominantly focus on the texts in the textbook. By analyzing the textual materials concerning sex and sexuality in the textbook and relating the book to broader social conditions in contemporary China, I investigate the power relations in its production.

3. Sex education and social transition in contemporary China

Beginning in the Republican period in the 1910s, the Chinese population has become a central target of political management within a wider plan for national modernization. Since then, sex education in China has been regarded as an apparatus for regulating the individual body, as well as the population, in order to improve national prosperity. After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, there have been a series of scientific instructions and institutional regulations issued to control young people's sexuality. It is assumed that medical experts are responsible for producing educational texts, thereby making the scientific construction of sexuality a dominant narrative. In these "scientific" texts, the sexual difference between females and males is naturalized based on biological arguments, resulting in a heteronormative understanding of gender and sexuality, framing heterosexuality as the only normal sexual orientation and marginalizing homosexuality as abnormal. In works published after the 1990s, content around sex and gender has become more fluid and diverse but is still confined to the dominant social and moral concerns that validate the heterosexual reproductive marital model. Through reiterating and legitimizing biological differences and gender hierarchies, this "scientific" approach aims to provide young people with "correct" knowledge

about sex and hygiene and a “proper” understanding of relationships and family (Aresu 534; Evans, *Women & Sexuality* 37).

With a focus on moral and social supervision, sex education has not been primarily used as a channel for providing scientific knowledge of sex, but for preventing young people from engaging in undesired sexual practices. Content pertaining to sexual intercourse and contraception is rarely included in Chinese texts. According to Yao Peikuan, one of the pioneers of sex education in China, the major goal of sex education is to make young people “respond to the needs of social development and the principles of social morality” and to help them “build up the correct outlook on sex, friendship and love, and to make them sound and developed in body and mind” (qtd. in Evans, *Women & Sexuality* 40). The primary goal of sex education, in other words, is to offer young people moral guidance, not sexual knowledge. Sexual knowledge only functions in the form of instruction for young people to establish a healthy lifestyle and prepare for marriage and reproduction.

Starting in the early 1980s, pilot sex-education programs started to be implemented in China. These programs highlighted information on population control; sexual hygiene was mentioned as well. In 1988, the Chinese Ministry of Education and the National Health and Family Planning Commission jointly issued *The Notification on the Development of Adolescent Education in Middle Schools*, which stipulated the national implementation of sex education in middle schools. This goal remains unachieved. As a result, most Chinese young people have limited access to sexual knowledge because sex education is not available either at school or at home (Zarafonitis).

Sex education in China, largely dominated by the state, has been deployed as a way of disciplining Chinese youth and aims to produce healthy and moral bodies. In addition, starting from the late 1970s, the Chinese government has introduced the ‘one-child policy’ to control population growth, itself a strong example of bio-power.⁸ In spite of its aim, the one-child policy has unwittingly

⁸ It should be noted that the population control policy was a combination of the modern form of bio-power and sovereignty, as it involved brutal sterilizations and abortions and caused a large number of deaths of fetuses and infants.

promoted sexual pleasure, since sex is to a large degree separated from its reproductive function (Pan). Another perspective on this is that, from the late 1970s, the Chinese government introduced an economic reform and opening-up policy, which has resulted in social transformations that go beyond the control of even China's leaders, such as individualization, commercialization and globalization (Yan, Rofel, Davis, Hansen). Along with these social changes, sexual culture in Chinese society has also undergone significant shifts. The open expression and pursuit of sexual desire has become more socially accepted, and sexual minorities are increasingly visible in Chinese society (Farrer, Zhang, Jeffreys and Yu); these changes are often referred to as "China's sexual revolution" (Pan 22). Accordingly, a tension emerges – between the state power that seeks to regulate its people by controlling their sexuality and individuals' growing inclination to explore their sexuality freely.

A few sex-positive educators have been calling for a comprehensive approach to sex education. In Taiwan, Ning and He have called for sex education to be part of *xing/bie jiaoyu* (sex/gender education). They state that instead of instilling morality in the students, *xing/bie jiaoyu* should acknowledge students' subjectivity and respect diversity; rather than assuming a neutral, objective opinion towards different sexual practices, various ideas should be displayed and discussed in the classroom. Following Ning and He, sex educators in mainland China have called for the inclusion of gender-related topics in sex education. Fang points out that in China sex education mainly refers to education about human biology, while current international practices discuss both sexuality and gender. Fang suggests that sex education should reflect on social power relations so students can learn about social justice, especially gender justice. Huang and Pan also propose that in mainland China, gender-related topics should be included in sex education for young people, introducing concepts about gender identity, sexual orientation and gender expression.

It is within this social and cultural context that *Cherish Lives* was published. According to the regulatory tradition of sex education in China, *Cherish Lives* may be too radical, but examining *Cherish Lives* in a freer social context, the content about sex and body parts seem appropriate. In online debates, both

sides have noticed that some of the textbook's contents are different from the traditional discipline-centered sex education in China. However, my reading of *Cherish Lives* suggests that neither side sees the whole picture.

4. The discourse of desire and pleasure in *Cherish Lives*

In this section, I examine the presentation of desire and pleasure in *Cherish Lives*. By analyzing the contents regarding masturbation, attitudes towards sex, sexual decision-making and sexual arousal, I investigate how the desire and pleasure of adolescents is presented and regulated in the textbook.

4.1 If one can study, live, and work normally, then one hasn't masturbated too much

For students in the fifth grade, there is one section about masturbation in *Cherish Lives*. The first part of this section is titled 'Masturbation Is a Normal Sexual Behavior':

Masturbation is a solo sexual behavior. The frequency of masturbation varies among people. It is normal not to masturbate as well. Masturbation is not harmful to the body.⁹

(Section 1 Masturbation, Unit 2 Sexual and Health Behavior, Second semester, Grade 5, 21–23)

On the first page, a paragraph introduces masturbation techniques:

The most common masturbation technique for males is to use the hand(s) to hold the penis, and then to move the hand(s) up and down the shaft for sexual stimulation. With the increase of sexual tension, the feeling of pleasure will come along with ejaculation, and then sexual satisfaction is achieved. The most common masturbation technique for females is to use the finger(s) to rub and stroke the clitoris. With the increase of sexual arousal, there will be secretions in the vagina. When reaching orgasm, one

⁹ Author's own translation from “自慰是自体性行为。每个人自慰的频率并不相同。没有自慰也是正常的。自慰对身体无害。”

usually feels the muscular contraction first and then it relaxes, that's how one achieves sexual satisfaction. Masturbation is the sexual stimulation by oneself without involving others.¹⁰ (21)

Next to the description of masturbation techniques are two illustrations depicting a boy and a girl washing their hands (Figure 3), both thinking “it felt so good to masturbate just now.”



Figure 3: Illustrations of a boy and a girl after masturbation

Source: *Cherish Lives* 21

In this section, *Cherish Lives* assures its readers that masturbation is normal and natural. Both girls' and boys' desire and pleasure is acknowledged. The introduction also recognizes variabilities: the frequency of masturbation varies, and not masturbating is normal as well. The inclusion of masturbation techniques in this section is quite noteworthy, as it is the only section that offers young people instructions for sexual fulfilment in *Cherish Lives*. It is also the first time that the phrase “sexual satisfaction” is mentioned. By describing masturbation techniques, the textbook acknowledges young people's wish to know some basic mechanics about “how to do it”, and thus recognizes young

¹⁰ Author's own translation from “男性自慰大都是用手握住阴茎，上下抽动刺激阴茎。随着性兴奋感的提升，最终会以伴随射精而出现身体愉快的感受，达到性满足。女性自慰大都是用手指轻揉、按摩阴蒂。随着性兴奋感的提升，阴道会出现湿滑的分泌物。到达高潮时通常会感到全身肌肉紧张，然后放松，达到性满足。自慰是只有自己参与的，不涉及他人的自体性行为。”

people's subjectivity. In this narrative, male and female genitalia are presented as organs for sexual pleasure rather than reproduction.

Cherish Lives further introduces certain hygienic guidelines for masturbation:

Protect yourself from harm when you masturbate.

Masturbation is normal, but do mind your own safety. Before masturbation, wash both hands first in order to prevent reproductive tract infections. During masturbation, do not put unclean or unsafe things into the reproductive organs so as not to hurt them. After masturbation, remember to wash the reproductive organs and hands. When you make your own body feel comfortable, do protect your body from harm.

Do not have any concerns due to masturbation.¹¹ (226–28)

Along with the description, there are two illustrations (Figure 4) depicting a boy and a girl asking their parents about masturbation:



Figure 4: A boy and a girl asking their parents about masturbation

Source: (*Cherish Lives* 27–28)

(Left frame) Son: Father and mother, someone says that masturbating too much will have adverse consequences. Is that true?

¹¹ Author's own translation from “自慰时不让身体受到伤害。自慰是正常行为, 但一定要注意人身安全。自慰前, 要把手洗干净, 避免手上带有的细菌感染生殖器官。自慰中, 一定不要将不干净、不安全的物品放入生殖器官内, 以免伤害到生殖器官。自慰后, 要清洗生殖器官和双手。在让身体感到舒服的同时, 一定要保护好身体不受到伤害。不因自慰有心理负担。”

Father: This is not true. After masturbation, if one can study, live, and work normally, then one hasn't masturbated too much.

Mother: Each person has a different bodily condition, so the frequency of masturbation varies. As long as one does not harm the body, masturbation is not harmful.

(Right frame) Daughter: Father and mother, someone says that a girl who masturbates is a bad girl. Is that true?

Mother: That is wrong. Masturbation is normal. Each person can choose whether to masturbate or not. It is one's personal choice.

Father: Boys and girls are the same. It is normal to masturbate. (27–28)

Cherish Lives uses medicalized language to emphasize that masturbation is a normal behavior and provides scientific hygienic advice for young people who masturbate.

According to the textbook, masturbation will not result in harmful consequences as long as young people know how to protect themselves. The sentiments behind statements like “(one) masturbates too much”, “masturbation is harmful”, and “masturbation is immoral” are refuted in *Cherish Lives* (23). By claiming that masturbation is normal for both girls and boys, the textbook also acknowledges female desire. For a long time in China, masturbation was a taboo subject, especially for women, since it does not lead to procreation (Pei and Ho). Additionally, it was widely argued that masturbation harmed the body. It was not until recently that sex educators began to acknowledge masturbation as normal and harmless (Evans, *Women & Sexuality*). It is therefore an improvement that the textbook regards masturbation as normal and recognizes female subjectivity. However, masturbation as a behavior is still subject to medicalized discourses in *Cherish Lives*. The textbook claims that only when young people masturbate in a “healthy” and “safe” way, and know about masturbation “scientifically”, is masturbation not harmful. These scientific suggestions focus on ensuring that young people stay away from potential harm that might result from their desire. Sexual satisfaction is presented as a goal in this narrative, but sexual desire and pleasure are not major concerns. The ultimate goal is for masturbation to “reduce the sex drive and relieve the sexual tension” through

achieving sexual satisfaction, so that young people do “not want it again right away”, and can continue with their study and work (*Cherish Lives*26-8).

By asserting that masturbation is normal and explaining basic techniques, the section on masturbation destigmatizes the act and acknowledges the desire and subjectivity of young people. Meanwhile, the medicalized tips in this section for young people serve to regulate young people's sexuality and bodies. The mention of desire and pleasure in this section serves as a tool for achieving the overarching goal: to make sure that young people contribute to daily production and reproduction (in the future). By relating masturbation to production and reproduction, the textbook associates individual behavior with broader social well-being.

4.2 Sex is beautiful. So, how do we deal with sexual arousal?

For students in the first semester of sixth grade, *Cherish Lives* talks about attitudes towards sex and sexual decision-making in the section ‘Learning about Values’, which promotes a positive outlook on sex:

Values influence people's attitude towards sex. Some people believe that sex is obscure and negative, and some people believe that sex is beautiful and positive. We advocate a positive attitude towards sex.¹²

(Section 1, To Know about Values, Unit 2 Life and Skills, First semester, Grade 6. 25)

¹² Author's own translation from “价值观影响我们对各种事物的看法，包括对性的看法。有人认为性是隐晦的，是消极的；也有人认为性是美好的，是积极的。我们提倡积极的性态度。”



● 价值观影响人们对性的态度

Figure 5: Values influence attitudes towards sex

Source: (*Cherish Lives* 25)

In the illustration (Figure 5), a teacher asks how students view sex:

Female student: Starting from we were born, sex accompanies us for our whole life.

Male student: I think sex is beautiful. (25)

Clearly, *Cherish Lives* presents an affirmative attitude towards sex. The textbook provides an ideal situation in the illustration: students talk about sex with their teacher and classmates in the classroom, and sex is described as beautiful. Sex is not a taboo topic when it is discussed openly and regarded as beautiful. But what is sex? What is recognized as sex in the textbook, and what is not? In this section, sex is presented as an abstract concept without a concrete definition. To some extent, this framing encourages young people to view sex from a positive perspective. The description does not define what sex is, which leaves space for different interpretations.¹³

¹³ The textbook introduces non-heteronormative lifestyles and sexual orientations, which is progressive, but they are mostly presented as alternatives of the marital, reproductive, heterosexual norm.



● 价值观影响性决策

Figure 6: Values influence sexual decision-making

Source: (*Cherish Lives 27*)

In the illustration (Figure 6), the textbook introduces the concept of sexual decision-making by showing a boy talking with his parents.

Father: Different people have different values, so they act differently when they make sexual decisions. Your mom and I would like to know how you think about it.

Boy: To have sexual intercourse must be a careful decision.

Mother: Yes, think through it before you make decisions. It reflects one's values, and you need to make the decision carefully. (27)

Next to the illustration, there is a brief description:

Based on one's own values, one chooses a specific person to establish an intimate relationship with, and then decides when to have intimate behaviors with the one s/he loves. We suggest making responsible decisions in terms of having intimate behaviors. (27)

For most Chinese youth, sex is a taboo topic. Talking about sex with others, especially with parents, yields embarrassing and uncomfortable feelings (Evans, *Subject of Gender*; Zarafonetis). But in the illustration, the boy holds a positive attitude towards sex: sex is not a taboo subject, and it is possible to discuss it with parents. Moreover, the discussion happens in a democratic way: the parents are not instilling their ideas in their son but asking him what he thinks about sexual decision-making. The family comes to an agreement

that one should make responsible and careful decisions about sex based on one's own values. However, the result of the discussion is still somewhat ambiguous. What kinds of decisions are responsible and careful? How and why should one make decisions based on one's values? What kinds of values are promoted by the textbook? By introducing a relationship between one's values and sexual decision-making, the textbook creates a connection between sex and morality. Although the mother advises (potential readers) to "think it through", a simple decision that leads to a sexual act might not be the answer that the textbook indicates. In the textbook for sixth-grade students in the second semester, a clearer answer is provided. In a section on sexual arousal, students are advised to deal with sexual stimulation and arousal correctly and rationally:

Human beings' reaction to sexual stimulations is the foundation of the existence and development of human beings. How to deal with sexual stimulation and sexual reaction correctly is a significant lesson during puberty.

It is normal to feel sexually aroused sometimes, but we need to learn to control it when we do not want it at some point.

Tips for controlling ourselves: 1. Leave the place where we feel sexual stimulation. 2. Turn to someone who is trustworthy and willing to keep your secret for help. 3. Masturbation can release the sexual desire.¹⁴

(Section 2, Sexual Arousal and the Countermeasures,
Unit 2 Sexual and Healthy Behaviors, Second semester,
Grade 6. 42-43)

This section describes sexual arousal quite abstractly. In the beginning, one's reaction to sexual stimulations is presented as a grand issue that matters to

¹⁴ Author's own translation from "人类对性刺激的反应是人类生存和发展的基础，正确对待性刺激和性反应是青春期的一门重要功课。

性反应很正常，但当我们不希望在某个时刻发生时要学会控制，知道该如何处理。

小贴士：调节的方法 1. 离开感受性刺激的环境。2. 向信赖的原意保守秘密的人倾诉，寻求帮助。3. 自慰可以纾解性欲望。”

the “existence and development” of all humans, rather than just a personal one. There is only one person in this narrative, the one who is sexually stimulated, feels her/his sexual desire, and is able to eliminate the desire without having sexual intercourse with others through solo masturbation. Therefore, the representation of one's sexual desire is considerably desexualized. Readers are told to control their sexual arousal when they “do not want it”, while situations in which they might want it are not discussed.

In the following paragraph, *Cherish Lives* introduces the notion of a desirable sexual life, which requires the reader's preparation and maturity, both “physically and psychologically”:

An enjoyable sexual life requires harmonious sexual relationships. In general, a sexual relationship refers to the sexual behaviors and interaction between sexual partners.

A sexual relationship is established between two persons who are sexually mature. Harmonious sexual relationships enable people to have an enjoyable sexual life.

An enjoyable sexual life and harmonious sexual relationship depends on our preparation and maturation both physically and psychologically. As adolescents, we need to acquire more knowledge, know ourselves and others better, and know our needs better.¹⁵ (42–43)

There are three major narratives here. First, an enjoyable sexual life is based on a certain kind of established relationship between two persons. The text recognizes same-sex sexual lives, which is a progressive step compared to other textbooks that seldom address same-sex sexual activity or even regard homosexuality as abnormal (Zhou). At the same time, sex is limited to a fixed

¹⁵ Author's own translation from “美好的性生活需要和谐的性关系。性关系是指异性或同性双方发生性行为后所形成的关系。

性关系是在性生理成熟期以后两人之间发展起来的。美好的性关系，能够让人们享受美好的性生活。

美好的性生活与和谐的性关系，需要我们身心的准备和成熟。处于青春发育期的我们，要学习更多知识，更深入了解自己与他人，更准确把握自己的需求。”

relationship between two individuals. Second, a sexual life is portrayed as enjoyable and necessary but only for people who are mature; in other words, adults. Finally, because the readers are not mature, the message is that they should avoid sex and sexual relationships. If, however, they acquire more knowledge and prepare themselves well, they can have a desirable sexual life in the future. A sexual life is thus defined as something only for adults, despite the fact that sex is described in the previous text as something that accompanies you for your whole life. By promising students that they can have enjoyable sex in the future, the textbook directs teenagers away from pursuing sexual desire to focus on their studies instead. Moreover, in this narrative, a stable, monogamous adult relationship is the only legitimate place for sex.

This subsection suggests that although *Cherish Lives* expresses a positive attitude towards sex and attempts to remove the taboo from sex, it nevertheless discourages young people from engaging in any kind of sexual activity except for masturbation. Both heterosexual and same-sex sexual behaviors between two people are recognized, but they are for adults, not adolescents. Even though solo masturbation is recognized as normal and sex is regarded as beautiful in *Cherish Lives*, the textbook presents sexual desire as something that should be suppressed or eliminated. Young people are discouraged from having sex, as they are expected to focus on their studies and work; if they do experience sexual desire, they should try to eliminate the desire without having intercourse and then continue with their other tasks.

5. Conclusion: the disciplinary and liberating sides of sex education

In the online discussion about *Cherish Lives*, both sides focused on the textbook's "radical" content, such as the "explicit" description of sexual behaviors. As most netizens in China have likely never received proper sex education, this content might appear new and different from their perception of traditional sex education, which is characterized by the regulation of sexuality. However, by examining text and illustrations related to desire and pleasure, I argue that even though the textbook has included content regarded as "radical" by some, it remains within the framework of normative sexuality. The inclusion of seemingly radical content in *Cherish Lives* represents the

changing social situation in contemporary China, but the textbook is still in line with the Chinese sex education tradition that regulates young people's sexuality and educates the youth to contribute to national development.

As I have elaborated, the textbook enables autonomy to some extent while also reinforcing regulatory discourses. Autonomy is enabled by providing young people with masturbation tips and offering them the freedom to make their own decisions about sex. This is quite radical and liberating in the current Chinese social context, where, for example, masturbation is commonly seen as harmful. While the textbook incorporates such liberating themes, it also communicates regulatory techniques. By normalizing masturbation, the textbook depicts solo sex as a viable and preferable alternative for achieving sexual satisfaction. Moreover, students are guided to make "careful" sexual decisions based on their values. In short, even though the textbook suggests a positive attitude towards sex, it still discourages premarital sex. My close reading of the text indicates that the textbook simultaneously represents the disciplinary sex education tradition and attempts to suggest alternative ways of being a sexual subject for its young readers. As an officially published sex education textbook, its content was approved by the state's censors. To a large extent, it continues with the Chinese sex education tradition by setting certain norms for young readers to adapt to. Meanwhile, its positive attitudes towards masturbation and sex showcase the influence of changing sexual mores: sex should not be a taboo topic – especially in a sex education textbook – and young people's desire should be recognized (as long as it does not violate the state's population control policy). Situating the textbook in the context of the social transformations – primarily the sexual revolution – that have taken place since the late 1970s generally and within the Chinese sex education tradition specifically, the textbook can be understood as a compromise between the new sexual cultures in present-day China and the state's need to control young people's sexuality.

Drawing on Foucault's notion of power and knowledge, *Cherish Lives* can be regarded as an example of bio-power. Instead of using prohibitive techniques, the textbook produces a scientific discourse that constructs an ideal model for the students to conform to: a healthy and responsible young person who

remains abstinent and focuses on her/his study and work; if sexual desire is present, s/he seeks to eliminate it without having intercourse and continues with her/his assignments so that s/he can prepare for her/his and the nation's future. Consequently, students are 'free' to make responsible sexual decisions and concentrate on academic pursuits. The textbook produces young docile bodies who should avoid becoming social burdens on the state (teenage pregnancy, for example, violates the population control policy) while inducing them to become productive and reproductive citizens.

However, as Foucault notes, power and resistance are always connected. Resistance is inherent to power relations. In certain contexts, multiple discursive elements can "come into play in various strategies" (Foucault 100). There is no concrete division between the dominant, accepted discourse and the subordinated, excluded discourse. Thus, the contents of *Cherish Lives* do not guarantee their intended effects. While the textbook legitimizes the regulation of young people's sexuality, it may also be used to contest the ideas it tries to validate. By asking young people to make responsible sexual decisions, *Cherish Lives* may help to reduce sexual activity among teenagers, but it may also enable young people to make their own decisions, which could lead to them becoming sexually active.

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“I won’t give you half a mosque”: How young Muslims challenge Islamophobic propaganda in Italy¹

Alessia Arbustini

In this work, I argue that young Muslims can challenge the construction of an Italian national identity based on Islamophobic propaganda. I draw on intersectionality, transnational feminist approaches and queer and diaspora lenses to conduct a textual analysis of several media: from social media posts to online newspapers and speeches. I first analyze a speech given by Matteo Salvini, leader of the Northern League party, to explain the connection between gender and right-wing narratives. Then, to answer the question of how young Muslims can challenge nationalist and Islamophobic propaganda, I turn to the organization *Giovani Musulmani d’Italia* (‘Young Muslims of Italy’) as an example of Muslim activism in Italy. I demonstrate how its members fight back, against both an anti-Islam discourse and the construction of fictional national borders. The organization is able to challenge right-wing propaganda at a structural level, making their presence felt within a system that identifies them as outsiders. These young activists are working to transform the cultural and symbolic meanings attached to Islam in the national context in which they live. At the same time, they are creating a transnational network where young Muslims can share their values, moving beyond forms of identification based on national borders.

Islamophobia, femonationalism, queer politics, Giovani Musulmani d’Italia, Ijtihad, transnational umma, The Northern League.

¹ Quote taken from the original Italian passage: “Non ti do mezza moschea.” The phrase was part of a speech given by the former deputy Vice Minister of the Council of Ministers as well as former Minister of the Interior Matteo Salvini on 8 May 2018 in Brescia. He was supporting the campaign of Paola Vilardi during the city council elections (“Governo, il ministro dell’Interno Salvini”). All translations excerpted here are my own.

Everyone can believe in the God they want, it is not a problem of religious belief, as long as that God speaks to your heart and to your soul and does not impose a way of living in contrast with our rights and our freedoms. Because, if for that God woman means less than man, it is not my God, and therefore I won’t give you half a Mosque [cheering]. Because in Italy, we have that phenomenon of the left-wing who are feminists and supporting Islam. Come to an agreement with yourselves! Either you are a feminist, or you wear the burqa.²

(“Governo, il ministro dell’Interno Salvini”)

The text above is a fragment of a speech given by Matteo Salvini, former deputy Vice Minister of the Ministerial Council and Minister of the Interior in 2018. Salvini’s right-wing party is no stranger to Islamophobic arguments. Indeed, the Northern League has become famous over the years for its anti-Muslim and anti-immigration rhetoric, combined with strong Catholic morality (“Europee, Salvini bacia il rosario”). When I started writing my study in the summer of 2019, Italy was governed by a center-right coalition led by two anti-migrant and populist parties: the Northern League headed by Matteo Salvini, and the Five-Star Movement (M5S) by Luigi Di Maio (“Decreto del presidente della Repubblica”). They supported anti-migrant policies and promoted a nationalist discourse successfully criminalizing migrants and NGOs (Fiore and Ialongo). It is in this context that the instrumentalization of Muslim women illustrated in the opening quote unfolded. The representation of oppressed Muslim women assumes a crucial role in the construction of a homogenous Italian national identity, where Islam becomes antithetical to Italian values. In this regard, the question that drives my research is: how can young Italian Muslims challenge this nationalist and Islamophobic propaganda? I argue that young Muslims raised or born in Italy are able to challenge Islamophobic propaganda as well as the construction of national

² Author’s own translation from “Ognuno può credere nel Dio che vuole, non è un problema di confessione religiosa, basta che quel dio parli al tuo cuore e alla tua anima e non mi imponga un modo di vivere incompatibile con i nostri diritti e le nostre libertà. Perché se per quel dio la donna vale meno dell’uomo non è il mio dio e quindi non ti do mezza moschea. Questo... perché poi in Italia abbiamo i fenomeni a sinistra che sono femministe e a favore dell’Islam. Mettetevi d’accordo con voi stessi, o fai la femminista o ti metti il burqa.”

borders precisely through the use of Islam. In the first part of this paper, I will explore the process of constructing Italian national identity. Taking as a case study Salvini’s speech, I will analyze the different elements and processes behind the creation of national borders. Then I will discuss the development of Otherness, exploring the rhetoric of Europe as the guardian of women’s rights, which also poses veiled women as a symbol of women’s oppression and backward societies. In order to explain why such rhetoric is so important for national identity, I will concentrate on the intersection of gender and race in racial border construction, showing how Islamophobic discourse is in fact linked to the role of women as national reproducers. A crucial aspect of this rhetoric is the representation of Islam as being in sharp opposition to Italian and Western values. In the second part of the paper, I will demonstrate how Islam can be used to challenge this right-wing narrative. To do this, I will introduce the work of the association *Giovani Musulmani d’Italia* (GMI), which actively engages with civil society to boost the image and treatment of Muslims in the country. For this reason, I will analyze their work in the public space and in the media, where I claim they don’t just fight Islamophobic propaganda, but also its racist nature. I will then show how Islam shifts from being a reason for stigmatization to a tool to challenge xenophobic discourse and a form of resistance. Having demonstrated how Islamophobic propaganda is resisted, in the last part I argue that GMI are not just challenging right-wing rhetoric, but also its purpose: the creation of static national borders.

Gender nationalism and religion

The studies that I will address are part of wider debate around the connection between gender and nationalism. Decisive in my research is the idea of women as central for national biological, cultural and symbolic reproduction. The work of Nira Yuval-Davis is specifically focused on the role of women and how they are represented in nationalist propaganda and in the construction of “boundaries of inclusion and exclusion that they construct” (*Ethnic and Racial Studies* 621). Yuval-Davis’ work is therefore useful for understanding the role played by narratives about gender in the construction of national borders, which can be applied to the Italian context. In this regard, Sara Farris’ work

looks at the rise of a gender equality narrative in nationalist propaganda, focusing on three examples: France, Italy and the Netherlands. The study discusses the ideology of Islamophobic nationalist parties and analyzes the representation of Muslim men as rapists and oppressors. Farris highlights the case of the Northern League in Italy and demonstrates how this narrative is produced by a convergence of forces, which include neoliberal economics. Unlike Farris, I won’t investigate the economic nature of this discourse, but I will focus on how femonationalism has been used for nationalist purposes. I will use her work to illustrate the consistent application of women’s equality narratives by the Northern League against migrants and as a useful theoretical framework to understand the increasing instrumentalization of women’s rights by nationalist parties. Fatima El-Tayeb’s work is particularly relevant for understanding Italian nationalist identity construction. Based on minority cultures in Europe and grounded in queer of color critique, her *European Others* aims to highlight the ideology of colorblindness in narratives of European identity and show how minority youth – who supposedly fail to meet the criteria for Europeanness – are eternally represented as migrants. El-Tayeb aims to demonstrate the unstable nature of identity and how minority young people apply forms of resistance that can destabilize the dichotomy between the West and Others. Within this debate, in *The Backward and the New: Transnational and Post-national-Islam in Europe*, Ruba Salih highlights the contradictions and experiences of young Muslims in Italy, analyzing the way in which they renegotiate their identities and challenge essentialist categorizations implemented by European nationalisms. I will use another of Salih’s works to stress the influence of Catholicism on the construction of Otherness, pointing out the important contribution of young Muslims in the creation of a more secular public sphere. Indeed, in *Muslim women, fragmented secularism and the construction of interconnected ‘publics’ in Italy*, Salih addresses the peculiarity of the Italian Christian Catholic type of secularism and the perception of Islam as a threat to it. The author argues that rather than being a threat, by using public spaces to talk about their Islamic faith, young Muslim women and men are actually contributing to the creation of a true Italian secularism through their social engagement.

A recent work edited by Ivana Acocella and Renata Pepicelli highlights the construction of alternative identities and the possible fight against Islamophobic stereotypes perpetuated by right-wing propaganda. In *Transnazionalismo, cittadinanza pensiero islamico, Forme di attivismo dei giovani musulmani in Italia*, the authors focus on the different forms of activism done by young Muslims in the Italian context. Their study investigates various forms of involvement in the national and transnational public sphere by young Muslims in Italy, and pays particular attention to the construction of identity and multiple belongings. The authors emphasize how these forms of transnational identity can represent an alternative to a national identity, focusing, among others, on the association *Giovani Musulmani d'Italia* and its work in the media and public spheres to dismantle Islamophobia. Similar to Acocella and Pepicelli's previous work, the study highlights the construction of multiple identities, but this time specifically looks at young Muslim women born or raised in Italy. In this work, the authors give more space to the connection between gender and religion, in particular to how they are performed and negotiated in the public sphere. In both these studies the construction of a transnational identity is connected to the notion of a transnational *umma* and the notion of *ijtihad*, which are paramount for understanding the transnational dimension of young Muslims' identity (Acocella and Pepicelli, *Giovani Musulmane in Italia*). *Ijtihad* allows young Muslim women to reinterpret Islam and challenge the Islamophobic narratives that represent them as victims of a misogynistic religion. *Umma* is related to the construction of a community that contributes to multiple belongings that go beyond geographical borders and social commitment in order to dismantle racist stereotypes (Frisina). Overall, these studies raise important points in terms of identity and challenge national identity and propaganda, which is exactly my interest here. However, my contribution is to bring together these studies and analyze the deeper connections between gender and the construction of nationalist ideology, to pinpoint where Muslims become Others and where gender assumes an important role. Using the work of the last three authors, I want to stress how the voices of young Muslims have the power to go beyond such fictive borders, but differently from these authors, I will do so through a queer identity approach. This aims to underline what goes outside the norm. Here, 'queer' is not necessarily

connected to homosexuality, but “references processes of construction of normative and nonnormative behaviours and population” (El-Tayeb ch. Introduction).

Notes on methodology and methods

I developed this work based on transnational feminist approaches, a queer diaspora lens and intersectional theory. Intersectionality as a concept was developed to investigate how “race and gender intersect in shaping structural, political, and representational aspects of violence against women of color” (Crenshaw 1244). It also enables an investigation of “multiple modes of discrimination and oppression” and of what kind of power relations are involved (Lewis, “Unsafe Travel” 870).

Intersectionality tells us that race, gender and class are interconnected; it depicts a more complex notion of identity, and allows us to recognize the complexity and multiplicity of power relations (Brah and Phoenix). For this reason, this approach is essential for highlighting the fluidity and never-ending nature of identity formation. On this subject, another important tool is a transnational feminism practice. This is a form of critical awareness in terms of our positionality and privileges, knowledge production and power structures. Indeed, positioning myself is an essential part of my work, since my identity is an inherent part of my interests and research aims (Haritaworn). I grew up in a small village in Northeast Italy and during my childhood, almost all the recreational activities I participated in revolved around religion and religious places. Before moving abroad, I had never thought about myself as being Italian, something I took for granted for most of my life. Growing up in such a small town, “being Italian” conjures for me a very religious conservative culture, patriarchy and racism, things that I really want to distance myself from. Coming from a cultural environment in which I didn’t feel I fit pushed me to investigate how to deconstruct narratives of power. In fact, the way in which I define and perform my identity as a white, straight, cisgender woman plays a role in my choice of topic. It is indeed a response to my need to overcome a patriarchal structure that has led me to find alternative voices that

are challenging nationalist, racist and conservative narratives and propaganda.

My positionality is also strongly involved in the process of knowledge production. Indeed, being able to access higher education, and to speak English, carries an important weight. Knowledge, and therefore academia, has always been a powerful tool that has been used to legitimize imperialist views and promote Western superiority. Academia is the home of the scholarly elite who have the authority to define what counts as knowledge and what does not (Kapoor). According to feminist and queer methodologies, positionality is fundamental to deconstructing this power dynamic, as well as for developing critical self-reflection on the danger of reproducing white supremacy (Haritaworn). This work is no exception and even though it points out power relations, it can still reinforce them. In fact, it is important to take into account that the simple assertion of our positionality does not guarantee the destruction – or the overcoming – of certain forms of power (Ahmed, “Declaration of Whiteness”). I am stressing this point to highlight one of the main limitations of my research: is it in fact possible to deconstruct and dismantle power when we speak from the heart of Western hegemony?

In order to take into account the complexity of power relations in society, I will use a queer migration and diasporic lens, where ‘migration’ and ‘diaspora’ are used as analytical categories to identify the position of power. First of all, queer methodology sheds light on how “overlapping regimes of power and knowledge generate and transform identity categories” (Luibheid 170). Indeed, the use of the term queer is not necessarily related to sexuality but can be used to analyze all non-normative behaviors (El-Tayeb). Furthermore, queer methodology helps us to investigate the possible way to deconstruct and go beyond such power structures. In this regard, I will use Muñoz’s concept of the disidentificatory performances of politics (Muñoz). Muñoz works with those identities that fail to be read by the public sphere, what he calls “identities in difference”.

“Disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes

it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology.” (Muñoz 11)

Muñoz’s term enables me to understand the challenge that young Muslims in the GMI association pose to the homophobic and nationalist propaganda of the Northern League.

Methods

I applied these approaches to a qualitative research project based on textual analysis and secondary sources. The work combines two different topics. I will start by examining the role of gender and race in Italian nationalist propaganda, and then turn to the critique of such Islamophobic propaganda posed by *Giovani Musulmani d’Italia*, an organization which demonstrates the rise of a different form of identity that goes beyond nationalist borders. In order to do that, I will contextualize the discourse of the Interior Minister, Matteo Salvini, which I will use as an example of nationalist propaganda, and then compare it to the work of *Giovani Musulmani d’Italia*. I will consider media materials, such as online newspaper articles (mainly in Italian), YouTube and social network platforms (such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram) and textual materials in both English and Italian. In terms of literature, I chose to focus on works that avoid the notion of objectivity and use intersectionality and positionality as theoretical frameworks. I also value non-academic material, such as books and videos created by GMI activists, which I believe are vital for an accurate understanding of their work and for going beyond hierarchical notions of academic production. Finally, I will use the Arabic word *ijtihad* to mean the active interpretation and the interpretative effort of the Islamic sacred texts by young Muslims, and the term *umma* to refer to the construction of a community of believers.

In my choice of secondary sources, I also selected studies that take into account intersectionality, positionality and agency in their methodology. Unfortunately, a lot of the literature available still reproduces the gender dichotomy between women and men. In saying this, I am particularly referring to the work of Acocelli and Pepicelli, which, while it speaks about

intersectionality, I believe doesn’t sufficiently problematize the gender binary as a construction. Another important point to highlight is the complexity of the role played by gender in the construction of national identity. I decided to focus in particular on its use by a nationalist right-wing party with a focus on the Northern League’s propaganda. In the same way, it would be interesting to look at the rise of young Muslim activist movements more broadly, beyond national borders and in a more horizontal and transnational way as El-Tayeb suggests. Another limit that I want to acknowledge is the risk of representing young Muslims as Others, perpetuating the representation of migrants as eternal wire-walkers between cultures and never fully recognized as Italian and European citizens. I claim that this implicitly arises in the choice of terminology used to discuss young Muslims in Italy, which goes from the use of ‘second generation’ – which takes as unquestioned the stigmatization of migrants as it still refers to them as such – to “daughters and sons of migration”, as proposed by Acocella and Pepicelli. The authors decided to use “daughters of migration” (“figlie dell’immigrazione”) to emphasize the fluidity and complexity of the phenomenon and to try to avoid a stigmatizing use of the term ‘migration’ (*Giovani Musulmane*). However, even if their choice of terms implies careful reflection on the issue, I believe it still has its limitations. Indeed, even if the term focuses more on the lack of terminology to understand the complexity of the issue, it seems not to give enough attention to the ideology of colorblindness that creates ethnic borders and keeps reproducing people as migrants even when they acquire citizenship (El-Tayeb). Furthermore, I claim the use of the term ‘daughters and sons of migration’ reinforces a binary notion of gender and needs to be further problematized.

“If for that God woman means less than man, I won’t give you half a mosque”

In this section, I am going to address the use of women’s rights within Islamophobic discourse and how an anti-Islam agenda functions to create the Other and ethnic borders. To do this I will start with this sentence from Salvini’s speech “If for that God woman means less than man, I won’t give you half a mosque” (“Governo, il ministro dell’Interno Salvini: ‘Femministe pro Islam? Si mettano il burqa”). The leader of the Northern League is clearly

making the assumption that Islam defines women as less than men. To analyze the historical and socio-cultural background that makes possible such a statement, we need to take a step back. Indeed, the juxtaposition between West and East has been foundational to the creation of a strong Western identity. Edward Said defines this process as Orientalism: the representation of Eastern countries by colonial and Euro-American domains, which creates a power dynamic that assumes Western superiority compared to other cultures. Unlike Said, Abu-Lughod places the use of women’s rights within the Western dominant discourse on the East and describes it as part of a long and widespread tradition. Starting in the colonial period, Oriental women have been represented as the victims of savage cultures. Wearing a veil or burqa has been seen as a symbol of oppression, justifying political and military interventions by Western countries (Abu-Lughod). Going back to the Italian context, from the 1970s, migrant women have been viewed as a symbol of the dichotomy between modernity and tradition; within a decade, Muslim women became visible in the media as victims of “genital mutilations, honor killings, forced veiling and arranged marriages” (Farris ch. 1 *Figures of Femonationalism*). On this subject, Farris and Salih remind us of some cases that have had a huge media impact. For instance, the case of the woman of Moroccan origin, Sanaa Dafani, who was killed by her father in 2009 or the murder of Hina Saleem, whose family came from Pakistan (Farris; Salih “Muslim Women”). The cases fuelled a media fixation on reporting stories of women killed by Muslim men. In this regard, Daniela Santanchè, former member of the postfascist party Alleanza Nazionale, started a hate campaign against Islam, calling for the veil to be banned in schools after the murder of Hina Saleem (Farris). Following this trend, since the 2000s, the use of gender rights in the name of nationalist and xenophobic propaganda has become part of the right-wing agenda in Italy, exemplified by the anti-burqa campaigns spearheaded by the Northern League (Farris). A clear example is the 2005 campaign against Turkey’s proposed entry into the EU, which according to the Northern League would have meant exposing European women to the threat of Islam:

The poster portrays three women: the one on the left is veiled and appears behind prison bars. She is surrounded by darkness, but her state of

suffering is clearly discernible. On the righthand side are two women with short hair and western clothes, both sitting at an office desk and seemingly discussing work issues [...]. The caption on the left says "Them..."; the one on the right, "Us..." Beneath the image is an almost rhetorical question: "Are you willing to take the risk? No to Turkey in Europe."

(Farris ch. 1 Figures of Femonationalism)

To describe this process, Farris coined the term femonationalism, "short for 'feminist and femocrat nationalism'" (ch. 1):

Femonationalism thus describes, on the one hand, the attempts of Western European right-wing parties and neoliberals to advance xenophobic and racist politics through the touting of gender equality while, on the other hand, it captures the involvement of various well-known and quite visible feminists and femocrats in the current framing of Islam as a quintessentially misogynistic religion and culture. (ch. 1)

For this reason, it is important to turn our attention now to the second part of Salvini's speech, in which he mentions the contrast between Islam and Western freedom and rights: "...everyone can believe in the God that they want, it is not a problem of religious belief, as long as that God speaks to your heart and to your soul and does not impose a way of living in contrast with our rights and our freedoms"³ ("Governo, il ministro dell'Interno Salvini: 'Femministe pro Islam? Si mettano il burqa'"). Salvini's mention of Western values aims to emphasize the incompatibility of Islam with Italian religious tradition. In this regard, I agree with Salih's argument, which pays particular attention to the influence of Christianity in Italy. In fact, the Italian context is strongly linked to the Catholic Church, which differs from other European countries, and where religion has been essential for the construction of a "homogeneous moral community" (Salih, "Muslim Women"). Therefore,

³ Author's own translation from "Ognuno può credere nel Dio che vuole, non è un problema di confessione religiosa, basta che quel dio parli al tuo cuore e alla tua anima e non mi imponga un modo di vivere incompatibile con i nostri diritti e le nostre libertà".

I argue that the creation of Italian ethnic borders – supported by this “moral community” – is linked to anti-migration and national security rhetoric. As Brah remind us, ethnicity is racialized for border security and strongly connected to gender narratives (“Re-Framing Europe”). I place Salvini’s speech within this framework. I posit that Salvini’s narrative around Italian ethnic borders is based on the dichotomy between Christianity versus Islam, where Islam is represented as incompatible with Italian values. It is in this context that femonationalism occurs. Moreover, the instrumentalization of women’s rights in the name of Christian values highlights the role played by gender in nationalism. The use of a discourse about oppressed Muslim women is mirrored by the representation of Muslim men as dangerous. In the next paragraph, I will explain why Muslim masculinity is seen as a threat and the relevance of gender for national border construction (Brah, “Re-Framing Europe”).

“Either you are feminist, or you wear the burqa”

The apparent incompatibility of Islam and Italian values is further demonstrated in the second part of Salvini’s speech, when he makes a joke highlighting the incoherence of being both a Western feminist and pro-Islam. He advises feminists to wear a burqa, implying that they probably look better covered up. I want to underscore here that the Interior Minister’s suggestion that feminists who support Islam should wear a burqa wasn’t just a bad joke. Indeed, it implies that left-wing feminists with their pro-Islam discourse are boycotting and resisting the idea of a mother nation as the custodian of ethnic borders. This is not accidental; on the contrary, it should be framed within the femonationalist discursive trend. As Farris points out, many European right-wing parties have started using women’s rights for nationalist purposes, while simultaneously depicting the family and women’s roles in very traditional ways). Their interest in women’s rights is in fact in sharp contradiction with their traditional antifeminist ideology (Farris).

But why is it in contradiction? The representation of oppressed women is matched by the representation of migrant men as oppressive and dangerous (dangerous masculinity). In this regard, the oppressive Muslim men is the

result of a xenophobic and orientalist rhetoric that sees them as bearers of a retrograde culture. In this framing, non-Western men become a threat, not just to Christian Italian values but also to Italian women (Farris). But why are Muslim and migrant men a threat exactly? Following Brah, the “desire for the racialized ‘Other’ is constructed and codified in and through patriarchal regimes of power” (Brah, “Re-framing Europe” 11). Consequently, the construction of race is always articulated around patriarchal power, gender and class (Brah, “Re-framing Europe” 12). Constructing a national identity means assuming a shared history and a supposed ancestral myth, common social customs and so on. Nira Yuval-Davis clarifies the central role of women’s sexuality in this narrative. Her work on women and nationalism has highlighted the central role that women’s sexuality plays in national building and nationalist ideologies. Anne McClintock elaborated on this topic in her 1993 essay, highlighting the five main ways women are involved in nationalism according to Yuval Davis and Floya Anthias’s study:

as biological reproducers of the members of national collectivities; as reproducers of the boundaries of national groups (through restrictions on sexual or marital relations); as active transmitters and producers of the national culture; as symbolic signifiers of national difference; as active participants in national struggles. (McClintock 62–63)

As Brah also underlines, this construction of an imagined community is strongly linked to women’s sexuality and concerns about racial purity. It is no coincidence that Islamophobic propaganda in Italy is often associated with calls for an increase in the birth rate (Farris). The specific interest in women’s health and birth rates on the part of the Northern League is, I claim, rooted in the goal of racial purity. The representation of dangerous Muslim men comes from the threat to the racial purity of the nation by impregnating women with ‘Muslim babies’ and thus producing not-Italian-enough children, which would lead to a so-called possible “invasion”.

One example is the video of an interview with a member of the Northern League, Alberto Zelger, from 7 October 2018. Zelger put forward a motion – which was approved – at the city council of Verona that aimed to increase

funding for a pro-life association. He claimed that not enough babies are born in Italy, meaning that Italian children may be outnumbered by Muslim offspring. He also added that Muslims are ready to invade “us and apply Sharia law” (“Verona, il leghista della mozione anti-aborto”). His claim put womanhood and sexuality at the heart of the construction of ethnic borders and national identity, a national resource that is threatened by the Other.

Giovani Musulmani D’Italia and public space

Salvini’s speech can be positioned within a wider process of European ethnicization and racialization in which whiteness is the dominant yet unseen racial identity (El-Tayeb). El-Tayeb has highlighted how European colorblindness (the refusal to acknowledge racial difference in order to reify the image that Europe is a homogenous continent) marks as different “visible minorities” who don’t perform whiteness and are distinguishable from the “real” Europeans (ch. Introduction). This colorblindness reinforces the eternal Otherness of non-white or migrant-background Europeans, who are marked as Other through the use of “terms like ‘third-generation migrant’, ‘integration’, and ‘xenophobia’”, which stress how these populations remain “‘aliens from elsewhere’” (El-Tayeb ch. Introduction).

As Salih discusses, the Christian Catholic Church has a deep influence in Italy, reinforcing the supposed incompatibility of Islam with Italian values and the othering of young Muslims. I stress this point because it is within this framework that the involvement of young Muslims in the public sphere takes place. This is an important part of the fight against different forms of stigmatization and othering (Salih, “The Backward and the New”). In addition to different types of associations, activism also occurs within mosques and cultural centres, where young Muslims act as spokespeople and mediators between civil society and political institutions (Acocella and Pepicelli, *Transnazionalismo, Cittadinanza*). Moreover, their involvement in the public sphere is not limited to physical spaces, but also includes the media (Salih, “Muslim Women”). One association that is particularly active is *Giovani Musulmani d’Italia*. GMI was born in 2001 out of other Islamic youth associations. The group promotes the civic engagement of young Muslims

(between 14 and 30 years of age), supports active citizenship and encourages social involvement. Unlike other groups that have a more transnational view, GMI is very focused on the Italian context. All its members are linked by their Islamic faith and their self-identification as Italian citizens (Acocella and Pepicelli, *Transnazionalismo, Cittadinanza*). Indeed, GMI is different from other associations because it grounds its involvement in matters such as identity and the recognition of religious diversity in order to work against the stereotyping and stigmatization of Muslims prevalent among the public (Acocella and Pepicelli, *Transnazionalismo, Cittadinanza*).

As I mentioned in the previous section, anti-Islam discourse is often reproduced through a dichotomy of oppressed femininity vs. dangerous masculinity, a dichotomy which is reiterated in public space. As Allievi points out, the media is fundamental to the social construction of Islamophobia, but it just reproduces a discourse that is already embedded in the social structure and in political propaganda (Allievi 76). Therefore, GMI concentrates on changing the media discourse through its participation in television programs and by promoting its events and principles on social networks like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The work of Saif Abouabid – a former member of GMI – is emblematic. Around 2015, Abouabid appeared on talk shows clearly predicated on Islamophobic discourse. During a program with the subtitle “Is it impossible to hold a conversation with Muslims?”, Saif had to respond to provocative comments such as the accusation that Muslims are terrorists and oppress women (“Impossibile dialogare con gli Islamici?”). Another slightly different example is a video interview with Sumayah Ahmad al-Helu in 2015, at that time coordinator of the Rome branch of GMI. The title of the interview was “Muslim or Italian? Two identities that can be easily reconciled.” The video starts by asking questions about identity and then investigates the possible presence of Islamic terrorists in the Muslim community (“Musulmana e Italiana?”). Another example is the public letter sent by a former member of GMI, Chaimaa Fatihi, to the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*. After the Bataclan terrorist attack in France on 13 November 2015, Chaimaa felt the need to mark what is Islam and what is not, condemning terrorism first of all as a human being. In doing this Chaimaa directly addressed the terrorists. The letter starts by saying:

My name is Chaimaa Fatihi, I am twenty-two years old, I am Italian, Muslim and European. I am writing to you so that you can understand. That you will never have us, that you won’t make of Islam what it is not, that you won’t make of Europe a place of massacre and your project of terror will never be effective.⁴ (Fatihi 9)

Following El-Tayeb’s concept of European colorblindness, the second and third generation of minorities are often invisible, since they cannot perform whiteness within a white hegemonic discourse and are not seen as ‘native’ to the European country they were born in. Being invisible is the consequence of structural violence based on race, gender and other categories, which Lewis connects to the “imperial and neo-colonial present”, and – I would add – on nationalist ideology (Lewis, “Questions of Presence” 8). In Lewis’ work, “‘presence’ is always constituted in relation to loss and ‘absence’” (“Questions of Presence” 3). Lewis illustrates how black women are rendered invisible in the hegemonic discourse at the same time as being present through their stigmatized representation. I suggest that the media representation of Muslims in Italy follows the same pattern. Media and nationalist propaganda give visibility to young Muslims, but predominantly by depicting them as potential terrorists and a threat to women’s freedom (Salih, “The Backward and the New”). This also becomes clear in the frequency of questions that revolve around the assumption of possible terrorist affiliations among young Muslims and in the recurrence of the topic of oppression in relation to women wearing burqas and the veil during interviews and talk shows (“Forte & Chiaro - Impossibile Dialogare Con Gli Islamici?”). In becoming active subjects in the media, Muslim activists are raising their voices and claiming the power of recognizing themselves both as Muslims and as a part of Italy (“Chaimaa Fatihi sul Terrorismo”). Paramount is the work of female members of the association, who are at the forefront of fighting

⁴ Author’s own translation from “Sono Chaimaa Fatihi, ho ventidue anni, sono italiana musulmana ed europea. Vi scrivo perché possiate comprendere che non ci avrete mai, che non farete dell’Islam ciò che non è, non farete dell’Europa un luogo di massacri e non avrà efficacia il vostro progetto di terrore.”

stigmatization based on the wearing of the veil, challenging the secular discourse that sees them as passive objects within an Islamophobic narrative (“Giacalone: il velo per le donne”). Therefore, I agree with Acocella and Pepicelli in saying that daughters and sons of migration can fight nationalist propaganda, but I would also add that young Muslims are represented and become visible in the media through an Islamophobic lens, which mirrors their physical absence from a discourse of European identity based on colorblindness. For this reason, I argue that GMI’s media involvement, in addition to reclaiming visibility and recognition, also works to give ‘young Muslims’ a presence on a hegemonic and structural level. By doing so, GMI members are not just fighting Islamophobic propaganda but also the structural violence behind it.

Ijtihād

GMI challenges Islamophobic propaganda in the public space through the use of Islam. Indeed, GMI aims for the recognition of their ‘difference’, turning the cause of their stigmatization into a tool to deconstruct it. As I underlined earlier, supposedly traditional and backward Islam has historically been contrasted with the civilized Western world. The apparently oppressed veiled women are the main objects of this discourse, yet their agency is rarely considered (Acocella and Pepicelli, *Giovani Musulmane*). And yet, individual agency plays an important role in young Muslim women’s religious practice, supporting the creation of new religious meanings that don’t necessarily follow the ones of the previous generation. This individual interpretation of young Muslims is based on the notion of *ijtihād*: the active interpretation and the interpretative effort of the sacred texts of Islam (Frisina).

Salih takes as an example Yasmina, a university student of Moroccan origin who wears *hijab* (the veil) and who is actively involved in the GMI association:

Yasmina’s activism is in no way in contradiction with her pious self, which she displays in public, performing a strict observance of religious duties. During the refreshment that was offered after the conference, Yasmina was curiously the only Muslim abstaining from food, in contrast to the other Muslim veiled and non-veiled women. Later, Yasmina explained to me that

according to her own interpretation of one hadith, all practicing and devout Muslims should fast on Ashura, which was of course occurring that very same day. (Salih, “Muslim Women”)

The reading and interpretation of the Quran is a key religious practice for young Muslims, driven by the need to understand more about Islam, even independently from traditional religious authorities. Daughters of migration are thus using *ijtihad* to distance themselves from patriarchal interpretations and claim their presence within hegemonic discourses (Acocella and Pepicelli, *Giovani Musulmane*). Indeed, women are the majority in GMI and are actively involved in the public sphere, not just through their contributions in the media, but also through their activities within the community (Frisina). They claim their religious identity, recognition and their choice to wear the *hijab* by taking the floor in the debates happening around them. For instance, Chaimaa Fatihi has been writing since high school about themes such as immigration and citizenship for second generation individuals. In her book, she points out the stigmatization and stereotypes around the use of the *hijab* and how she has experienced it instead as a personal choice (Fatihi).

The *hijab* can be an identity tool that is used to create visibility in the public space (Acocella and Pepicelli). It is a marker of religious practice in a society, and at the same time it represents the re-appropriation by Muslim women of their bodies in public discourse (*Giovani Musulmane*). What I want to point out here – following Acocella and Pepicelli – is that the *hijab*, and the work of interpreting Islam, can be forms of resistance in the face of Islamophobic propaganda. Young Muslim women are at the forefront of efforts to resist racist discourse, the same discourse that silences their voices. However, this resistance is somewhat peculiar in that, rather than working against the Islamophobic system, it acts from inside it. The young Muslims of GMI don’t validate hegemonic representations, but they act against them within the dominant structure using the same symbolic system (Muñoz). Muñoz – who sees this process in queer-of-color modalities of resistance – suggests here the term disidentification: “a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology” (11). Therefore, instead of choosing to renounce their identity to achieve supposed integration or assimilation – which in this case would mean

giving up wearing the veil and practicing Islam, as well as estrangement from their parents' origins – or even choosing to pursue the goal of finding a way out of the hegemonic structure, daughters of migration use the symbol of their oppression to transform cultural meanings and challenge the Islamophobic system from the inside.

Transnational *umma*

GMI's work is not just directed at Islamophobic discourse, but also aims to challenge national borders. Indeed, one of the elements that characterizes *Giovani Musulmani d'Italia* is the creation of a space where it is possible to reconcile the fictive dichotomy of being Muslim and being Italian and/or European (Acocella and Pepicelli, *Transnazionalismo, Cittadinanza*).

GMI gave me the possibility to express myself, it gave me the possibility to open myself to the world [...], but first, of knowing myself, defining and processing better my identity «who am I?»». Because there's always the question «but am I Muslim? Am I Moroccan? Am I Italian? Am I an Arab? Am I European? Am I a citizen of the world? That means, who am I?» [...] In conclusion, I struggled to define myself, but at some point, I found an identity balance. [...]. GMI is a passage association because it just helps you to know yourself and understand what you could do not just for yourself, but for the community and not just for the community, but also for Italy. (Rashid 30 years old, of Moroccan origin).⁵

(Acocella and Pepicelli, *Transnazionalismo, Cittadinanza* 75)

⁵ Author's own translation from “GMI mi ha dato la possibilità di esprimermi, mi ha dato la possibilità di aprirmi al mondo, [...], ma ancora prima di conoscere anche me stesso, di definire e di elaborare meglio la mia identità. «Chi sono io?». Perché c'è sempre la domanda «ma io sono musulmano? Sono marocchino? Sono italiano? Sono arabo? Sono europeo? Sono cittadino del mondo? Cioè chi sono io?» [...] Insomma facevo un po' fatica a definire me stesso, però a un certo punto ho trovato un equilibrio identitario. [...] GMI è un'associazione di passaggio perché si occupa semplicemente di aiutarti a conoscere te stesso e a capire che cosa potresti fare non solo per te stesso, ma per la comunità e non solo per la comunità, ma anche per l'Italia”.

The same concept is expressed by Aya Basha, a 21-year-old Egyptian Italian member of GMI. In a promotional video she says:

GMI really helps us be muslim whilst trying to conciliate our spiritual identity with our social and cultural one at the same time [...]. The GMI as an association really does play a crucial role in the education or more appropriate upbringing of muslim Italian youth and this happens through the many opportunities that they offer in order to grow spiritually, but also it teaches us how to balance our Muslim and European identities at the same time. [...]

(“Aya Basha for GMI”)

On this theme, Salih points out how “the emergence among second-generation Muslims of so-called ‘neo-communities’ underlines their distinctiveness from the first generation where ethnicity and traditions imported from the countries of origin formed the basis of identification” (Salih, “The Backward and the New” 1008). Indeed, GMI hyphenates identity, in the form of ‘Italian-Moroccan’, ‘Italian-Tunisian’ and so forth. In this sense, even if GMI’s work focuses on the national and Italian level, the practice of Islam links them to a transnational community, as shown in a promotional video from 2011, where involvement in the organization is associated with “Feeling part of a group, a community, an *umma*” (“Spot GMI”). This transnational identification is also evidenced by the fact that members of GMI often end up working with other transnational associations (Acocella and Pepicelli, *Transnazionalismo, Cittadinanza*). For many, being Muslim means adhering to the message of God, but it is also embedded in daily life in terms of space (praying towards Mecca) and time (the timing of prayers), which leads to the construction of a community of believers, an *umma* (Acocella and Pepicelli, *Transnazionalismo, Cittadinanza*). This creates an overlap between religious identity and community belonging that doesn’t necessarily adhere to national borders. In this way, a transnational community can become a site of resistance to forms of essentialization. It can also become a cognitive network, linking knowledge and experiences and creating shared meanings and a feeling of common belonging (Acocella and Pepicelli, *Transnazionalismo, Cittadinanza*). Daughters and sons of migration can thus recreate a sense of

belonging through Islam that is capable of destabilizing hegemonic representations and a structure that places them in static categories (Salih, “The Backward and the New”). I agree with Acocella and Pepicelli in saying that transnationalism is an important mark of Islam since “the believers are siblings”, creating relationships that go beyond national borders (*Transnazionalismo, Cittadinanza* 26–33), though I suggest a different approach. Turning back to El-Tayeb, Europeans with visual markers that are seen from the perspective of the hegemonic white discourse as a symbol of Otherness – such as the veil – are treated as “eternal newcomers” on the continent (ch. Introduction). For this reason, transnational *umma*, besides being a form of resistance to Islamophobic propaganda, works as a form of resistance to the colorblind European discourse on race, migration and belonging. This *umma* – combined with the use of media and activism in the public space in general – can rewrite this European narrative through a queer practice, by which I mean a practice that subverts the “relationship between community, space, and identity in a postethnic and translocal context” (El-Tayeb ch. Introduction). In fact, in calling the process a “queering of ethnicity”, El-Tayeb is suggesting the creation of something that goes beyond the norm, in this case the normative construction of ethnicity and ethnic borders. This queering of ethnicity involves using a diasporic space to overcome the dichotomy of national insider/outsider, composing new identities and meanings that go beyond national borders and simultaneously creating new forms of resistance (El-Tayeb ch. Introduction). Following Acocella and Pepicelli, I have argued that *Giovani Musulmani d’Italia* is practicing forms of resistance to Islamophobic discourse. But I would also add that belonging to a transnational *umma* is facilitated by the queering of ethnicity. Through transnational *umma*, GMI – like other young Muslims who identify as part of a transnational community – create a way out of an essentialist dilemma, overcoming national borders while revealing their fictional character.

Conclusion

I began this paper by analyzing excerpts of a speech by Matteo Salvini, showing how a right-wing party such as the Northern League uses Islamophobic rhetoric to create a homogenous national identity. In this rhetoric, Islam becomes a symbol of otherness, in complete contrast to Italian and Western values. What I aimed to demonstrate here is how nationalism can be challenged, and I argued that this is being done by young Muslims who were born or raised in Italy. In particular, I found the work of *Giovani Musulmani d'Italia* emblematic for the way it explicitly challenges racist propaganda through activism in the public sphere and in particular in the media, where Islamophobia is a widespread discourse. GMI is not just trying to fight racist stigmatization, but also claiming a presence within a white, non-Muslim hegemonic discourse. This claim is based on Islam, which is the very element used by right-wing politicians as a marker of their Otherness. In this respect, I underlined the activism of daughters of migration who, through *ijtihad* and the wearing of the *hijab*, and in contrast with Islamophobic narratives that see them as oppressed victims of a misogynistic religion, speak up to actively tackle racism. This has the interesting effect of being an act of resistance that doesn't aim to dismantle the dominant system, but to reformulate new meanings using the very element that has been used to oppress them. I argued that this might be defined as a disidentification practice. Finally, I highlighted how the creation of a transnational *umma* by GMI enables a form of identification that overcomes narratives that seek to essentialize young Muslims' identities. This process of queering ethnicity is one that acts outside the norms of a hegemonic system and illuminates its fictional character. Although I am aware of the need to investigate further the work of different young Muslim associations and groups – in particular how gender influences their activities and internal structures construction – what I hope to have raised here is the existence of alternative voices that are able to work against the construction of Italian nationalism.

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The myth of neutral tech and the politics of not doing in the attention economy

Taylor Gardner

In our hyper-productive, individualized, digitally-saturated environment, rest is a luxury afforded to few. When output and achievement are rewarded and glorified, the sacrifices of 'choosing not to' are potent. This essay argues that pausing, resting, refusing and reorienting our care can be political acts, particularly for those disenfranchised by the racial/gender inequalities of neoliberal capitalism. The politics of rest was a popular topic for marginalized communities and feminists even prior to Lorde's 1988 articulation: "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare." Beginning from this lineage, I will discuss how rest becomes increasingly unattainable in the face of addictive tech, techno-determinism and enduring narratives of progress and success, and ask what it means to reclaim our attention when the technology that demands it is such an overpowering presence in how we work, play and love. Using the work of Benjamin, O'Neil and Odell, I discuss the threat to our attention posed by an abundance of digital technologies and outline feminist methods of resistance. I will focus on two current dangers within the digital sphere: the coding of bias into algorithms and subsequent perpetuation of inequalities, and the attack on our attention driven by the infiltration of corporate, profit-driven values into our technologies. I will consider questions including: In what ways does technology reproduce violence and inequality? How is our attention and imagination impacted by digital mediums that have become part of our everyday? How can we incorporate ideas of slowness and 'not doing' to encourage conscious, engaged and communal futures? I will discuss liberatory aspects of tech and current work in this field, emphasizing the crucial role of hope, imagination and creativity when conjuring alternative techno-social futures.

Feminism, technology, care, rest, attention, productivity, imagination.

What counterspell is powerful enough to break the prison stranglehold on our imaginations?

-Jackie Wang

I consider 'doing nothing' both as a kind of deprogramming device and assuagement for those feeling too disassembled to act meaningfully.

-Jenny Odell

Our current moment is characterized by the valorization of busyness, productivity, competition and 'progress,' while the privilege of rest (or the time to do nothing) is a luxury afforded to few. When performance is increasingly monitored, output and achievement glorified, inactivity deemed laziness and laziness deemed undesirable, *doing nothing* can be a radical act. The concept of not doing as a form of resistance stems from the notion of 'self-care' attributed to radical black and brown feminists, including Audre Lorde and Sara Ahmed. 'Not doing' can more accurately be described as 'not doing that which exhausts, exploits and depletes'; indeed, self-care originated as a survival strategy utilized specifically by those marginalized due to race, gender or sexuality. Self-care was intended as a tool to protect one's welfare in the face of violent, oppressive and debilitating structures, as articulated by Lorde: 'Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare' (ch. A Burst of Light)

Despite the rise in movements that oppose production, work and output and center on slowness, sustainability and compassion, the concept of self-care as it was originally intended by black feminism is often skewed. The increased popularity and predictable marketization of self-care practices that has followed demonstrates a collective desire for rest and time out from the increasingly depleting professional, emotional, affective and reproductive pressures of the labor market. However, mainstream appropriations of these once-radical ideas fail to criticize or challenge the system at the center of these precarious conditions. As our lives become increasingly digitized, an additional concern to our wellbeing arises: the threat to our attention posed by the abundance of digital technologies and the constant flow of information available to us. Writer, academic and expert in the ethics of attention and persuasion in technology design, James Williams, states "as digital

technologies have made information abundant, our attention has become the scarce resource and in the digital ‘attention economy,’ technologies compete to capture and exploit our mere attention, rather than supporting the true goals we have for our lives” (i).

‘The information age’ is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as “a time in which information has become a commodity that is quickly and widely disseminated and easily available especially through the use of computer technology”. The period has inarguably brought numerous benefits: the ease of accessing and sharing information, instant communication with friends and strangers across continents, and for some, the ability to study, work, shop or pay your bills wherever you happen to be. At the same time, anxiety and stress levels are at an all-time high and our ability to focus (or even pause) is being increasingly incapacitated. The aim of this essay is to draw what may be an unlikely connection between critical feminist understandings of self-care and our engagement and relations with technology today. Putting down your phone may not seem like a political act, but when algorithms dominate aspects of our lives they previously had no control over, from which medication or diagnosis we receive to who gets a job or who ends up in prison, and when our attention becomes a scarce resource for which companies bid, the usefulness of *choosing not to* goes far beyond the self. ‘Not doing’, as I will define it, is less about empty expanses of time and more about considering the importance of resisting the impulse for constant distraction when imagining and creating liberatory futures. As our world becomes more digitized and the lines between the offline and the online increasingly blurred, any movement towards liberatory futures must focus on our digital as well as our analog lives.

In resisting the ubiquity and widespread acceptance of the absence of ethics programmed into our technology as ‘just the way things are’, my aim is to highlight the importance of disengaging and taking time to do nothing, while praising the feminist work being done to disrupt digital inequality and carve radical, ethical and just technological futures. In this sense, this essay should not be read as an anti-technology manifesto. Retaining one’s energy and attention so that it can be dispersed on *our own terms* is a resting point we

may inhabit while dreaming of a conscientious, democratic, human-centred digital future. Unproductivity, rest and “pleasure activism” (Brown) work as tools for harm reduction and self-preservation against the violence of patriarchy. Not doing is about resisting the pressures for self-optimization, reclaiming our attention and nurturing our imagination to create sustainable visions of alternative futures.

The attention economy refers to the economic period that follows the agricultural economy, the industrial economy and the information economy. Though many scholars have offered varying definitions of this period, I rely on the definition given by academic Claudio Celis Bueno in *The Attention Economy: Labour, Time and Power in Cognitive Capitalism*. Celis Beuno states that the attention economy has “created both an abundance of information and a demand for new forms of organizing and allocating attention” (ch. Introduction). He uses the definition of the attention economy as first introduced by Herbert A. Simon in 1969, explaining that knowledge and information have become central aspects of an economic model where “surplus value is produced and exploited” (ch. Introduction). He continues:

Using straightforward supply and demand logic, Simon argues that the abundance of knowledge and information that characterizes knowledge-based economies ‘creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate the attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it’ (ch. Introduction).

In the attention economy, human attention becomes the scarcest and most valuable resource in an increasingly saturated consumer market. Jonathan Crary describes how this leads to a situation where we struggle to fully switch off “an attention economy dissolves the separation between the personal and professional, between entertainment and information, all overridden by a compulsory functionality of communication that is inherently and inescapably 24/7” (ch. 3).

By considering the shift towards an attention economy, where individual attention is co-opted for capitalist pursuits and exploited accordingly, my aim is to open space for more ethical and intentional relations with technology and

more hopeful digital futures. I will do this by focusing on the idea of not doing as a way of reclaiming attention and a form of self-care, in the radical sense. Amid continuing climate, racial and gender crises, the COVID-19 pandemic and what feels like a shared atmosphere of anxiety, hopelessness and instability, the importance of caring for the self feels more urgent than ever. Guided by the work of feminist writers on care as a means of resisting violent power structures, and disability justice scholars and activists who criticize able-bodied notions of 'resistance', the first section of this essay will provide an introduction to the notion of 'self-care' and the disability justice movement from which my work stems. I am heavily influenced by previous research in this field and writers and activists who have responded to questions including: Who is afforded the luxury of not doing (Hedva)? Who is excluded from traditional conceptions of activism (Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha)? How has mainstream culture and white liberal feminism appropriated these concepts (Rothenburg)? How can we resist these notions of productivity and centre pleasure and sustainability (Brown; Budge)? I will consider these questions in relation to the attention economy that saturates our online and offline worlds and provide an overview of current issues at the intersection of technology, surveillance and justice.

I will stress two current dangers within the digital sphere: the coding of bias into algorithms and subsequent perpetuation of inequalities, and the attack on our attention driven by the infiltration of corporate, profit-driven values into our technologies and specifically how this stifles our ability to imagine otherwise. The purpose of this essay will be to think through the following questions: In what ways does technology reproduce violence and inequality? How is our attention and imagination influenced by the digital mediums that have become part of our everyday? How can we incorporate ideas of slowness and not doing to encourage conscious, engaged and communal futures? To conclude, I will point to some of the liberatory possibilities of tech and the work being done in this field, emphasizing the crucial role of hope and creativity when considering ethical and just technological futures.

1. Self-care and rest as activist practice

Radical feminists and disability justice activists founded and championed the idea of unproductivity as an activist practice. For Lorde, self-care was a way for women, BIPOC and LGBTQI+ communities to carve out care practices to resist systems built upon the pillars of their oppression. Discussing the revolutionary legacy of Lorde's words, Sara Ahmed describes racial capitalism as a health system that makes it harder for some people to survive.¹ She writes:

Being poor, being black, puts your life at risk. Your health is compromised when you do not have the external resources to support a life in all of its contingencies. And then of course, you are deemed responsible for your own ill-health, for your own failure to look after yourself better. When you refer to structures, to systems, to power relations, to walls, you are assumed to be making others responsible for the situation you have failed to get yourself out of. 'You should have tried harder'. (Ahmed, "Selfcare As Warfare")

Ahmed reminds us that self-care is a matter of life and death for some, highlighting the violence of a system built on the birth-right to welfare for some and the slow death of others. The radical roots of self-care are often forgotten amid the watered-down ideas promoted by the wellness industry, such as Gwyneth Paltrow's controversial jade egg; women were told "(...) to insert said eggs into their vaginas — and keep them there for varying periods of time, sometimes overnight — to 'get better connected to the power within'" (Wang, A.). These products are usually driven by a marketing strategy that promises the reward of *feeling better*, aligning one's proximity to good feeling with the amount of disposable income they have to purchase these remedies. Additionally, the market for such products is tainted by neoliberal narratives

¹ I refer to the term 'racial capitalism' popularized by Cedric J. Robinson in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* where he argues that the historical developments of racism and capitalism are inseparable.

of self-care as a way to shape yourself into a more productive member of an oppressive society.

The market's co-option of self-care practices transforms them into the antithesis of their original purpose. This dubious marriage of self-care and consumerism allows those with extra cash to engage in self-maintenance as if it were a financial transaction, rather than a radical act of resistance as both Lorde and Ahmed originally defined it. Noticing this shift is not about critiquing those who engage in consumerist self-care practices such as purchasing fancy candles and face creams, it is about challenging corporations who continue to profit from self-care as a marketing strategy while upholding racial capitalism, unequal distribution of profit and inhumane working conditions. By prioritizing the neoliberal desire for productivity and becoming *the best versions of ourselves*, we ignore the inaccessibility of this belief of self-care as self-optimization and forget the radical roots of feminist care praxis.

What counts as resistance?

Traditional (substitute: ableist, whiteness-centring, cis-centring, masculinist and exclusionary) notions of the word 'resistance' conjure up images of action. We visualize protests, speeches, chaos, crowds; a collective sea of bodies united by a commitment to a better world and an energetic refusal to endure. Radical feminists, crip theorists and disability justice activists have highlighted the ableist limitations that shape this romanticized portrait of resistance and have worked to reconstitute the boundaries of activist work. Artist, musician and energizing feminist writer, Johanna Hedva, speaks to these concerns in her disruptive 2016 essay, "Sick Woman Theory":

I started to think about what modes of protest are afforded to sick people – it seemed to me that many for whom Black Lives Matter is especially in service, might not be able to be present for the marches because they were imprisoned by a job, the threat of being fired from their job if they marched, or literal incarceration, and of course the threat of violence and police brutality – but also because of illness or disability, or because they were caring for someone with an illness or disability.

I thought of all the other invisible bodies, with their fists up, tucked away and out of sight.

Hedva contests Hannah Arendt's widely accepted definition of the political as "any action that is performed in public". Hedva demands that we "contend with the implications of what that excludes". It is important to keep this public/private binary in mind as we work to re-establish agency in the 'private' parts of our life, including our technology use. Furthermore, activist and writer Leah Lakshmi cites Sins Invalid cofounder and executive director Patty Berne:

Disability Justice activists, organizers, and cultural workers understand that able-bodied supremacy has been formed in relation to other systems of domination and exploitation. The histories of white supremacy and ableism are inextricably entwined, both forged in the crucible of colonial conquest and capitalist domination. One cannot look at the history of US slavery, the stealing of indigenous lands, and US imperialism without seeing the way that white supremacy leverages ableism to create a subjugated 'other' that is deemed less worthy/abled/smart/capable. (qtd. in Preface)

Disability justice activists shine a light on the tight, interlocking connections between ableism, racism, Christian supremacy, sexism, and queer and transphobia. The disability justice movement should be credited for challenging the able-bodied infrastructure of what we deem activism, for encouraging us to look at unproductivity as an activist practice and consider how caring, resting, pausing and suspending can be reconstituted as political acts. Recently, a number of movements influenced by disability justice epistemologies and anti-capitalist refusals have focused on the importance of redirecting care, attention and pleasure towards the self, especially for those who are continually marginalized. These include: Black Power Naps, a sculptural installation that "reclaims laziness and idleness as power"; The Nap Ministry, "an organization that examines the liberating power of naps", and Slow Factory Foundation, an "open-education platform which transforms socially and environmentally harmful systems by designing models that are good for the Earth and good for people". Despite the immense legacies and continued knowledge-making of radical feminists and disability justice activists, the very injustices their work is resisting are being coded into our

technology through gendered and racialized algorithms, which I will explore in the next section.

2. Tools of seduction: undemocratic tech and distraction-based design

Attention is a scarce resource. As humans we are trained where to allocate it. In busy cities we stay alert to dangers such as moving cars; at school we learn to pay attention to the teacher (while acts such as daydreaming or looking out the window are punished); at work we listen intently during meetings with colleagues. For Big Tech, Big Data, social media giants, app developers and companies operating online, attention is a sought-after commodity that fuels the digital economy. From the moment we pick up our phones in the morning, we are subject to a range of stimuli competing for our attention in the name of profit. The technology industry is designed around and thrives through sustaining human attention. Economist and psychologist Simon Herbert explains what is at stake:

In an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it. (40)

As our world has become more digitized, the difficulty of exerting control over what we pay attention to has increased (Parasuraman et al.). Former employees of some of the world's largest tech companies have pointed to the danger of users becoming products and the exploitation of attention for economic gain (Weller). We should be wary that Steve Jobs supposedly never let his children use an iPad, and other chief executives and venture capitalists have stated that they heavily restrict their children's tech use (Bilton). Furthermore, while tech giants are conscious of the detrimental impact of the technologies they are creating and choose to restrict their personal engagement, there are many people who don't have access to technology in

the first place. Digital access is presumed to be standard and those without access are disenfranchised (consider the NHS COVID-19 Track and Trace app, which asks customers to check-in to venues using a QR code on their phones). The perimeters of one's access to technology is one obvious illustration of how power infiltrates and shapes our engagement with tech, whether that is an addiction that means our days are filled with fighting the impulse to click, scroll or view; a refusal to engage due to a succinct awareness of the dangers; or complete disenfranchisement.

If we have the ability to access tech, we can inform ourselves, communicate with others and fulfil our desires almost instantaneously, but the feeling of constant distraction seeps into our everyday. We trust our technologies to be loyal companions, but an overflow of information is useless when these systems derail our attention, create a pervasive feeling of anxiety and perpetuate gender, racial and class discrimination. Technology has inarguably improved our lives in many ways, but Williams notes that our constant engagement with it may not increase efficiency as much as we think: "There's a deep misalignment between the goals we have for ourselves and the goals our technologies have for us" (9).

He states that most digital technologies (whether iPhones or social media platforms) desire passive engagement. The aim is to maximize the time spent with the product. This is often achieved by increasing clicking, tapping and scrolling features and subjecting users to as many ads and pages as possible. Motivated by a stream of instantaneous but short-lived rewards, this keeps us operating on a low-level, rather than encouraging deep and reflective engagement. Although it is not the purpose of this essay to explore these connections in depth, it is important to remember that the issue of redirecting our attention is not new, and traditional Zen and Buddhist understandings of meditation as a way to (re)connect with the present moment are antithetical to the goals of the attention economy. It is also important to note the hypocrisy of the number of 'mindfulness' apps that appropriate meditation practices

from precolonial contexts and turn them into mainstream commodities to sell.²

Algorithms of inequality

The increased digitization of our everyday and the difficulty of refusal means we are constantly surrounded by and susceptible to algorithmic authority. Algorithms are everywhere: in the ads, news and social media we view, the TV programs we watch, the books we read; they play a determining role in our dating lives, the hiring and firing process, policing of criminal justice outcomes and access to health care and education.³ Though we are told they are objective, the reality is that “algorithms are opinions embedded in code” as put by data scientist Cathy O’Neil (“The era of blind faith” 1:48–1:52).

The last decade has seen a rise in scholarship critiquing the racial and gender biases being encoded in digital platforms. In *Algorithms of Oppression*, Information Studies Professor Safiya Umoja Noble destroys the myth that Google and other search engines offer an equal playing field and explains the pressing social problem of data discrimination. She terms these new modes of racial profiling “technological redlining” (ch. Introduction). In *Invisible Women*, Caroline Criado-Perez speaks to the “gender data gap”, arguing that “The stories we tell ourselves about our past, present and future. They are all marked – disfigured – by a female-shaped ‘absent presence’” (Preface). She highlights how men are treated as the human default and the subsequent influence this has on the gendered structuring of our society, from the size of our phones to decisions about what drugs we will be prescribed. Furthermore,

² See Doran, P. “Mindfulness is just buddhism sold to you by Neoliberals” *The Independent*. 25 February 2018. <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/healthy-living/mindfulness-sells-buddhist-meditation-teachings-neoliberalism-attention-economy-a8225676.html>. Accessed 20 November 2020.

³ Algorithms are defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as ‘a set of mathematical instructions or rules that, especially if given to a computer, will help to calculate an answer to the problem.’ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/algorithm?q=algorithm>.

Ruha Benjamin explores how technologies pose as “*objective, scientific and progressive,*” while reinforcing racism and other forms of inequality (*Race*, ch. Introduction). She speaks to the systemic bias and increased monitoring and measuring of black people in the age of Big Data which she calls “the New Jim Code” (ch. Introduction). The same coded discrimination is discussed by O’Neil in *Weapons of Math Destruction*: “[r]acism is the most slovenly of predictive models. It is powered by haphazard data gathering and spurious correlations, reinforced by institutional inequities, and polluted by confirmation bias” (*Weapons* ch. 1).

O’Neil uncovers the use of these discriminatory algorithms in evaluating job applications. The determination of whether a potential applicant will be ‘successful’ is often based on previous candidates and does not consider the racial/gender privileges that originally helped that employee get the job and allowed them to progress and succeed. In this sense, using historical data about previously successful employees in the hiring process often filters out women and people of color who are traditionally underrepresented high-power, high-paying roles. O’Neil states that “If algorithms repeat our past practices, our patterns. They automate the status quo. They would be great if we had a perfect world, but we don’t. (...)” (“The era of blind faith”, 5:58–6:08). This is not to say that humans working in AI or data science are intentionally coding discriminatory practices, but that racist/sexist/homophobic biases are so deeply ingrained in our culture that these opinions naturally become encoded.

Privacy and surveillance

Amid these algorithmic concerns and the increased presence of technology in our lives, the radical concept of self-care as an ‘act of political warfare’ (Lorde ch. A Burst of Light) holds new relevance. In the digital economy we have little opportunity to exert agency when it comes to deciding where our attention should go. This is why it is important that we are conscious of the scale of the mechanisms of power at play and aware of the options that *are* available in terms of resisting the co-option of our attention and imagining just technological futures.

Another threat of the digital sphere is the closely connected issue of constant surveillance and data breaching policies. In *Radical Technologies: The Design of Everyday Life*, Adam Greenfield uses the image of a city filled with people carrying out their everyday activities while leaving seemingly innocent digital trails behind them to demonstrate how “*networked digital information technology has become the dominant mode through which we experience the everyday*” (ch. Introduction). There is no way to escape the traces of tech; “It is simultaneously the conduit through which our choices are delivered to us, the mirror by which we see ourselves reflected, and the lens that lets others see us on a level previously unimagined” (ch. Introduction). Greenfield speaks to the way that our technological use has reshaped not only how we live our lives but we how we perceive and are perceived and is interested in the costs which come from constant connection and smartphone dependence.

For Greenfield, if we want to combat exploitation and create alternative digital futures, the first step is to understand the level of surveillance, inequality and deception programmed into our current techno-social frameworks and how these processes work:

We need to furnish ourselves with a deeper account of the institutional processes by way of which technology is actually produced in our world, or the powerful entrenched interests that are dedicated to preventing any such thing as a post-scarcity commons from taking root. It is only by understanding these factors from the outset, and learning to anticipate their influence, that our designs might have any chance of being able to counter them. (ch. Conclusion)

The constant monitoring of human behavior Greenfield speaks of is called ‘surveillance capitalism’. Leading scholar in the field, Shoshana Zuboff, states that surveillance capitalism (led by Google, Facebook, Amazon etc) “unilaterally claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data” (Channel 4 News). Rather than condemning global digitization as fatal, she argues that the issue is that the road to the digital future we are on right now has been hijacked by a “rogue economic logic, called surveillance capitalism” (0:40–0:50). Our private, personal experiences are claimed as a free source of raw materials; the predictive signals in our

behavior are extracted and turned into data. This data is then used to create algorithms that predict our future behavior and sold to businesses who want to manage their products and services around our predicted emotional and behavioral patterns. Zuboff argues that we are so entrapped in this ecosystem of surveillance that we have little choice about whether or not we participate. However, she also states that although surveillance capitalists have tried to get us to believe that current mechanisms of surveillance are inevitable, we still have the “ability to resist, neutralize, and ultimately vanquish its potency” (671). It is our responsibility to understand how these mechanisms work and do what we can to resist in small ways, while fighting for a more democratic technological future.

3. Not doing as resistance and creating liberatory technological futures

Indebted to the disability justice movement for teaching us how many different shapes resistance can take, this final section will bring together contemporary injustices propagated by Big Tech, feminist notions of self-care and ‘not doing’ and the imagination as a tool for creating liberatory technological futures. Inspired by artist and teacher Odell, I use ‘not doing’ as a metaphor for disengaging with the attention economy and the pressure to achieve economic, personal, professional and social growth at all costs, in favor of creating space to rest and reengage with something different.

In defence of slowness: defining ‘not doing’

Our current use of technology goes hand-in-hand with a marketplace that operates around the clock, allowing us to work, engage, produce and consume at all hours. This is a double-edged sword; we are pushed into continuous activity, operating at a high-intensity, passive, low-vibrational level, where our wants and desires are dictated while the speed, and enduring sense of competition (whether for career success, or performative happiness online) often keeps us too detached from our true desires to demand or even imagine something different. Art critic and writer Jonathon Crary explores some of the

destructive consequences of this non-stop ethos, and has focused specifically on what he calls the “end of sleep”:

Recent research has shown that the number of people who wake themselves up once or more at night to check their messages or data is growing exponentially. One seemingly inconsequential but prevalent linguistic figure is the machine-based designation of ‘sleep mode.’ The notion of an apparatus in a state of low-power readiness remakes the larger sense of sleep into simply a deferred or diminished condition of operability and access. It supersedes an off/on logic, so that nothing is ever fundamentally ‘off’ and there is never an actual state of rest. (ch. 1)

“Sleep mode” that “supersedes an off/on logic” is an appropriate metaphor for the tendency to be “always switched on” that permeates our culture. Most of us can relate to the difficulty of sleeping when we are anxious about something the next day or are familiar with sleep stolen from late-night scrolling or the exhausting demands to be productive even when we are ill, grieving, tired or overworked. When our culture valorizes activity at all costs, our personal goals and desires become inseparable from this logic, so much so that we become partly responsible for our own injury. We want to achieve, we want to succeed, we want happiness and fulfilment and we are taught that if we could just work harder, longer or more efficiently, these things could be ours (Ahmed *Happiness*; Berlant). The shift to perceiving sleep as a mode of self-regulation is an intrinsic aspect of the corporatization of the wellness industry. Capitalism disrupts our natural rhythms and it becomes our responsibility, a neoliberal self-project, to adjust, overcome and prosper (Wolf). When we fail to do so, we redirect our frustration inwards rather than towards the systems often responsible.

In the face of these pressures, ‘not doing’ is about the right to care for one’s needs and desires *first*, the refusal of guilt in the absence of productivity or wellness, a resistance to the seduction of avoidance and distraction, the right to pleasure over survival, the importance of community and kinship, an ethics of care and maintenance and the importance of tech-free time – at least until its mechanisms stop perpetuating racism, sexism, destruction, inequality and exploitation. Odell writes:

I think that “doing nothing” – in the sense of refusing productivity and stopping to listen – entails an active process of listening that seeks out the effects of racial, environmental and economic injustice and brings about real change. I consider “doing nothing” both as a kind of deprogramming device and as sustenance for those feeling too disassembled to act meaningfully. (22)

Odell asserts the collective potential of a seemingly self-indulgent and solitary act and stresses the liberatory power of listening. Despite the undeniable privileges currently required to pause, slow-down and take time out, doing nothing should be repurposed as a right for all, not a self-indulgent luxury afforded to the few. In this sense, it is essential to think of ‘self-care’ as originally conceived by Lorde; the importance of *not doing* is about moving towards restructuring a society where rest is no longer a privilege. This ‘always switched on’ logic is integral to capitalist ideologies, and along with other violences like racism and sexism, has been encoded into our technologies.

Rather than a stubborn refusal to participate, ‘not doing’ is a way of resisting prevalent and enduring colonial notions of ‘growth’: the hyper-productive activity that characterizes our age and often leaves us drained and detached from ourselves and our kin. It is a rejection of the hegemonic appropriation of time through technological governance. It is a rejection of the sensation of feeling ungrounded or absent. It is a rejection of feeling captive to a stream of notifications, while losing out on moments of true joy beyond the two dimensional. This slowing down and redirection of attention is vital for social progress and human-centred digital futures.

Birdwatching is Odell’s chosen ‘not doing’ activity, a hobby that has improved the ‘granularity’ of her perception. Perception and attention are integral to fostering care-centred practices. If we cannot see, listen and observe without the impulse to comment, resist or argue (or post, like, share) then we have little hope of truly engaging in anything beyond a superficial level. Odell states that “the platforms that we use to communicate with each other do not encourage listening” (23), speaking to the irony of the fact we are constantly connected yet stripped of meaningful ways to hear and engage with one another. However, the Feminist Internet, “a collective of designers, academics

and activists that aims to disrupt inequalities in internet products and services”, have stressed the importance of abolishing binaries of online/offline. Arguably if this disconnection occurs online it can easily occur offline too, though through different forms of mediation (Feminist Internet) (Somerset 7:20–7:45). In this sense, it is not the act that is important but the quality of listening and observation that follows; it is about intentional communication and the commitment to fostering alternative futures together. Additionally, ‘not doing’ is not about spaces of nothing, but tuning in to that which exists in seemingly empty spaces. This is particularly important when rethinking the Anthropocene and our relationality with the Earth. Drawing this link between the personal, the ecological and the digital, Odell notes:

It’s important for me to link the critique of the attention economy to the promise of bioregional awareness, because I believe that capitalism, colonialist thinking, loneliness and an abusive stance towards the environment all coproduce one another. It’s also important because of the parallels between what the economy does to an ecological system and what the attention economy does to our attention. (xxvii)

A comparison can be made between planetary destruction and the stresses and expectations we place on our bodies. Maintenance and care are not regarded as ‘productive’ in the same way as growth and innovation, even though they are necessary for sustaining ourselves and our Earth. These patterns flow from capitalism and consumerism, where we are constantly sold images of that which is better or newer and encouraged to spend and consume. Slowness enables reconfiguration and a redirection towards care as a way to protect ourselves and each other, our time and our consciousness. Carving out time for rest and maintenance provides the space to protect our wellbeing against systems and tech that disregards the body and the Earth.

Breaking the stranglehold of the imagination

This experience of struggling to assert control over our attention unfolds in mundane, everyday ways. Writing this essay has often felt like a battle in which I am constantly striving to maintain control over my attention. I am at war with technological programmers who have reshaped my cognitive patterns over the

past years. While writing I become confused, bored, frustrated, anxious, tired of being at my desk. I turn to my phone ‘for a break’, maybe I will find a message from someone that makes me feel wanted or comforted, or a video of a cute cat that brings me joy. I am not really sure what I am looking for, but I condemn myself for it, my inability to resist distraction, my failure to be disciplined enough to focus on one task for twenty minutes. But there are ways around this. Put your phone in another room where you can’t reach it, lock it in a ‘digital detox box’ that only opens when the set timer is up, download a website-blocking program or perhaps embark on a ‘digital detox mindfulness retreat’ somewhere beneath the warm Greek sun, where you can pay hundreds of pounds for a break from the phone that probably cost you hundreds of pounds to buy. Irony aside, I have utilized at least one of these mechanisms myself, and the fact that they exist shows the difficulty of resisting the attention economy through sheer will alone.

Although the liberatory potential of tech is infinite, algorithmic oppression and racialized surveillance mean that presently, it often hinders rather than aids us. On an everyday level, the addictive nature of technology robs us of three necessities for social change: time, space and imagination. The normalization of carrying a small computer in our pockets everywhere we go has created fertile ground for the appropriation of our minds, and often distracts us from deep and meaningful engagement with the material and embodied world around us. We are not only robbed of the agency to direct our attention where we choose, but we also lose hours, days and weeks to endless cycles of mindless scrolling, clicking and surface-level ‘engagement’. However, this point should not be read as promoting a binary between ‘time-wasted’ and ‘time well-spent’; criticizing ‘mindless scrolling’ is about drawing attention to the power structures at play behind this seemingly innocent act. In this sense, the issues are not necessarily with technology itself, but with the huge power held by Big Tech and Big Data, who aim to turn our attention into a resource that can be captured and utilized for financial gain.

Simultaneously, when our time and attention is co-opted by these platforms, we have less energy to imagine alternative modes of living. Odell specifically mentions the climate crisis as one of the many areas our attention could be

redirected, asking, “What does it mean to construct digital worlds while the actual world is crumbling before our eyes?” (xiv). Although the digital space is a vital and transformative space for organizing, and many movements, collectives and protests would not have been possible without the internet (e.g. the role of social media in the Arab Spring protests, the ‘Bring Back Our Girls’ campaign in Nigeria and the Libyan slave trade), the issue Odell is pointing to is that of ‘performative activism’. Consider the ‘racial awakening’ of many white people following George Floyd’s death in 2020, which sparked Instagram users to share black squares, anti-racist infographics and anti-racist reading lists. Often, infographics reinforce the echo chamber of social media and reduce complicated, tenuous problems into shareable, short copy. Although the intention in sharing these things may not be bad, infographics and anti-racist reading lists can be used as a kind of woke-posturing tool and don’t always indicate an active involvement in anti-racist action. American cultural critic and writer, Lauren Michelle Jackson speaks to this issue in her article “What Is an Anti-Racist Reading List For?": “The word and its nominal equivalent, ‘anti-racist,’ suggests something of a vanity project, where the goal is no longer to learn more about race, power, and capital, but to spring closer to the enlightened order of the antiracist” (Vulture, 2020).

Despite these complexities, technology still plays a vital and undeniable role in fostering feminist futures. While being aware of the myth of neutral technology and the profit-driven power dynamics at play in the attention economy, rather than fighting to resist the digital, it is essential we work towards active opposition through engagement with and the redesign of technology. Along with redirecting our focus, one of the goals of reclaiming our attention from technology’s grip is creating space to nurture our imaginations to allow for the formations of how our digital futures could look different.

The imagination as a tool for social change has long been discussed in feminist and black radical traditions. Feminist writers including Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa have been fighting to resist the patriarchal, masculine, Western split between the ‘concrete’ material and the ‘elusive’ imagination, the real and the felt, for decades. Consider Lorde’s words in her famous *Poetry*

is *Not a Luxury*, “Poetry is the way we help to give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest external horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives” (Sister Outsider 37).

Tending to the poetic, the imagined, the idealist can help us realize what shapes alternative futures could take and experience how they could feel. Imagination allows us to conjure up alternative modes of existence, including labor, governance, social organizing, the economy, gender and racial identities, sexuality, types of relationships and technology. In *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, Robert Kelley demonstrates that by taking dreams seriously, we better position ourselves to articulate and actualize our political demands in the present. Kelley discusses the role of the surrealist movement in this endeavor and the driving potential of art: “Contrary to popular belief, surrealism is not an aesthetic doctrine but an international revolutionary movement concerned with the emancipation of thought” (5).

Conversations about the usefulness of the imagination as a tool for social change have been criticized as ‘too Utopian’ and ‘too disconnected from *real* change’, as noted by Kelley, “There are very few contemporary political spaces where the energies of love and imagination are understood and respected as powerful social forces” (4). But when our attention becomes the most sought-after resource in the digital economy, taking time to redirect that attention and nurturing our imagination can have real material effects. Furthermore, feminist epistemologies know better than to draw fixed lines between the ‘elusive’ imagination and ‘concrete’ material life. Choosing what we pay attention to orientates us towards the ultimate goal of concrete social change, while simultaneously protecting the enduring energy we need to demand that change.

Reflecting on mass incarceration and abolition and the normalization of current power structures, Angela Davis speaks to the importance of imagining differently “Dangerous limits have been placed on the very possibility of imagining alternatives. These ideological limits have to be contested. We have to begin to think in different ways. Our future is at stake” (30). Feminist

researchers indebted to the notion that 'the personal is political' stress the importance of paying attention to the everyday: that which is deemed frivolous, unimportant, disconnected from *real* political work. There is power in imagining beyond the stories we are sold as truths and power in embodying alternative realities in our everyday. If we did not take the time to imagine alternatives, then what blueprints would we have to convince ourselves that another world is possible? Also discussing prison abolition and the uses of the imagination in transformative justice, Alexis Pauline Gumbs writes:

First of all, I would say that prison is an accurate name for our contemporary culture, and prison as culture presumes a certain set of problems and reinforces a dominant reaction in our imaginations. (...) And, I would also say that the moments in which prisons became a dominant feature of the U.S., our imaginations (for all, not just those of us disproportionately imprisoned) also became imprisoned. The way we imagine work, our relationships, the future, family, everything, is locked down.

Drawing a parallel between bodies confined within prison walls and the ideological confines restricting how we live, work and love, Gumbs calls attention to the debilitating effects of contemporary culture on the imagination. Injuries to the imagination are not a side effect of the capitalist, white supremacist, neoliberal, cis-heteropatriarchy we live in, but rather one of its key mechanisms of survival.

The violence of the attack on the imagination coincides with the co-option of our attention in the digital economy, which makes the work being done to resist inhumane tech design even more urgent. The liberatory possibilities of social media are endless: in terms of reaching and engaging with communities we would not be able to 'IRL', through distributing information, giving a platform to those who are underrepresented in mainstream media, and fostering creative self-expression. In a 2017 Feminist Internet talk at Somerset House, artist, activist and writer Travis Alabanza outlined the positive ways that queer, trans, POC communities gather, resist violence and support each other online through the creation of alternative modes of internet, e.g. alternative online social spaces away from Facebook, away from Twitter and

the associated rules and regulations (Somerset 1:06–1:08). Given what I have discussed about algorithms of inequality, along with Instagram’s algorithmic censoring and shadowbanning of women and vulnerable users (Are; Middlebrook), the lack of diversity among influencers and spy cam epidemics (Glatt; Bicker) – the creation of alternative online social spaces that aren’t governed by Big Tech is one method of resisting unethical technology and fostering digital futures grounded in equality and liberation.

Future ethics: tech’s liberatory potential

Although I have spoken at length on the violence propagated by Big Tech and Big Data and the risk of allowing our attention to be consumed by our devices, rather than shunning technology completely I am arguing for developing a consciousness of these issues and reframing our uses of tech to move towards more just digital futures. Conversations regarding the debilitating, violent, oppressive and omnipresent nature of surveillance capitalism, the attention economy and addictive tech can contribute to an already bloated affective landscape of fear; anxiety can inspire inaction and hinder our ability to demand change. In this sense, returning to Lorde’s framing of self-care as a means of resistance rather than a form of self-maintenance for capitalist pursuit is vital. It is important to think of ‘not doing’ as a way of resisting pressures for constant engagement and activity while developing a conscious awareness of the role of power in technology.

While it is easy to become submerged in this fear, holding on to the creative potential of our imaginations is essential to carving out alternative futures. When profit and productivity are prioritized above all else, imagination (for the sake of imagining) is devalued, play is relegated to the confines of childhood and creativity is replaced by professionalism. While our imaginations are being stifled, many industries that are not traditionally deemed creative (including banking and finance) have begun to demand ‘creativity’ as a required skill from employees. It is no longer just our time which is seized, now it is our passion and creativity too (Hochschild; McRobbie); our ability to imagine becomes another product within the labor market. Despite the weight of these

conditions, there is room for resistance by reclaiming the will to create differently, as Lola Olufemi puts it:

Creativity is at the heart of any new world we seek to build. Without the demands placed on our body by capital, by gender and by race – we could be freed up to read, write and to create. ... Every time we engage our creative faculties, we are going against a logic that places work and the nuclear family at the centre of our existence. Art is threatening because when produced under the right conditions, it cannot be controlled. (84)

Olufemi posits utilizing creative expression for the sole sake of creating as a form of resistance, in a world that favors production, profit and reproduction above all else. Expressive acts can aid us in reconnecting with ourselves, our planet and those around us, reigniting a sense of joy and ease that is in opposition to cultural anxiety. Honing our creativity can entail both disrupting the attention-hijacking processes rife in the digital economy and imagining how alternative ways of living both online and offline might look.

Thinking of the benefits that can come from investing in socially-just imaginaries in relation to retraining algorithms, O'Neil states: "Big Data processes codify the past. They do not invent the future. Doing that requires moral imagination, and that's something only humans can provide" (ch. Conclusion). A socially conscious approach to tech development would prioritize "equity over efficiency (and) social good over market imperatives" (397). Although this would require a huge shift in the tech industry, these changes can be implemented through widespread understanding of current issues, putting the right people in the right jobs, and nurturing hope, imagination and creativity.

Currently, the work is already being done to reappropriate tech for liberatory ends. 'Hyphen-Labs',⁴ a WoC collective which explores planetary design through a focus on technology, art, science and futurism, are experimenting with subversive designs in their 'Not Safe as Fuck' project. Another project

⁴ Hyphen-Labs. <http://www.hyphen-labs.com/index.html>. Accessed 15 Nov 2020.

includes earrings for recording police altercations, visors and other clothing that prevents facial recognition. A parody project that subverts anti-black stereotypes, called ‘White-Collar Early Warning System’, alerts users to locations where financial crimes are likely to occur (Lewis). Dr. Kortney Ziegler has created an app called ‘Appolition’ that converts small change into bail money to free black people who cannot afford to pay bail bonds (Benjamin, *Race* ch. 5), while Odell describes the iNaturalist app, which allows users to identify plant species and connect with nature in ways that were previously less accessible (122). Activists working to create technologies *for the good of the people* give us hope about how digital futures can look. The shift to non-exploitative relationships with technology should begin by reframing the question to consider what *we* want from technology, what do we want our technology to do and how can it help rather than hinder us? As Benjamin states:

The key is that all this takes time and intention, which runs against the rush to innovate that pervades the ethos of tech marketing campaigns. But, if we are not simply “users” but people committed to building a more just society, it is vital that we demand a slower and more socially conscious innovation. (*Race*, ch. 5)

Slowing down, pausing, listening and tuning-in redirects us towards new potentials. What can grow from these spaces of emptiness when we attend to ourselves and our planet from a place of genuine care, empathy and connection? Slowing down is about cultivating calmness, hope and peace within larger scales of violence. Slowing down is about reconfiguring intentions, and in the case of technology, the work is already being done to pave the way.

This essay stemmed from a concern about the pervasiveness of undemocratic technologies in our everyday, specifically the encoding of racial and gender bias and the addictiveness of our devices. In considering the potential for feminist, queer and anti-racist digital futures, my aim has been to foster a sense of hope regarding these futures and the uses of technology as a tool for positive change and exploration. By threading the concept of self-care as

conceived by Audre Lorde through my essay, I have stressed the vital importance of returning to a non-commercialized understanding of the term as a means of self-preservation against oppressive power structures, and specifically how this relates to the digital sphere. I have utilized Odell's concept of 'not doing' as a method of slowing down and resisting pressures for hyper-productivity and have simultaneously highlighted how the ability to rest is currently not a right for all but a privilege for the few. My aim is to contribute to existing work which highlights how becoming aware of the way in which emerging technologies reinforce discrimination can allow us to critique, resist and imagine otherwise.

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Author biographies

Alessia Arbustini completed an MA in gender studies at SOAS, in London. She holds a BA in anthropology, religion, and oriental civilization from the University of Bologna, Italy. With a background in political activism, her main research focuses are queer and feminist diaspora studies, migration and displacement, gender issues and nationalisms, feminist and queer knowledge production. She is a fellow at the social enterprise Social Science Works in Potsdam, Germany. She is producing an Italian podcast series on gender issues.

Carmel Cardona is an interdisciplinary researcher and practitioner working at the intersections of feminism, medical social science and the arts. In 2020 she completed her MSc in gender at the LSE, and her thesis, 'Cancer and the (re)construction of the Self', explored the impact of a cancer diagnosis through three key themes: temporality, performativity and embodiment. In 2022 she commenced a PhD in global health and social medicine at King's College London, researching sexual selfhood post-cancer, and the potential of creative interventions.

Oxana Eremin graduated in March 2020 with a master's degree in culture and society, majoring in history and gender studies, at the University of Paderborn. She is currently a doctoral student in the Faculty of Cultural Studies and has been a research assistant at the Institute of Educational Science and at the Centre for Gender Studies at the University of Paderborn since September 2020.

nina friedman is a recent graduate of the GEMMA Erasmus Mundus program from Utrecht University and la Universidad de Granada. Their research interests play within the overlapping intersections of black and trans* feminist theories, and abolition and decolonial theories. They are energized by working with and alongside youth and young people in arts-based activism, and are generally motivated by a desire to abolish the hegemonic ways of the world.

Taylor Gardener is a full-time copywriter based in London. Originally from Glasgow, she completed her BA in English literature at the University of Strathclyde. She then completed her MA in gender, media and culture at Goldsmiths University of London, focusing on the psychic life of neoliberalism and the collective disenchantment with 'the turn to happiness' in feminist theory and lived experience. Taylor is passionate about liberation politics and undertook this MA to gain a theoretical understanding on gender, sexuality, race and disability. Her interest in the intersections of technology and feminism stemmed from reading the work of Ruha Benjamin, Cathy O'Neill and Caroline Criado-Perez.

Daniel Heinz is a research assistant at the Fachhochschule Potsdam. As a post-soviet migrant, they are currently preparing a PhD project about the lived experiences of second-generation migrants from the former USSR – the numerically largest group of migrants in Germany. Besides that, Daniel is engaged as an activist in the fields of antisemitism and racism, educating civic society and empowering participants with workshops at the Bildungsstätte Anne Frank and other institutions.

Taey lohe is an artist/researcher, engaged with relational moments in political and linguistic belonging, racialized gender materiality and the possibility of a collective imagination towards decolonising botany. Taey runs a collective solidarity project for Southeast and East Asian migrants, *Becoming Forest* (2021), building a care infrastructure through art workshops and forest walks. She leads Care for Collective Curatorial, delivering a metaverse project, *Ecotone of Collective Lives* (2021–2022).

Ier Vermeulen is a graduate student, who recently finished their research master's in gender studies at Utrecht University. Their main fields of research are critical theory, trans* studies, and Radical Black Feminist scholarship. In the past year, they have predominantly occupied themselves with philosophical onto-epistemological interventions into processes of embodiment and the construction of non-binary subjectivities.

Wenjia Zhou is a doctoral student in sociology at the University of Turku, Finland. She completed her master's degree in gender studies at the University of Oslo, Norway. Her research interests concern gender, the body, knowledge production, and medical technology.

About SVR

The Student Lecture Series Gender Studies (*Studierendenvortragsreihe* aka SVR) is a transdisciplinary platform for students to showcase their gender-related research. Over the past few years, we have run seminars at the Humboldt Universität zu Berlin in the winter semester and have held other events externally. In July 2020 we held our first-ever conference, SVR Breaks the Internet, an international student conference of gender and sexuality studies, hosting fifteen speakers from all over Europe online.

SVR exists to give students at the BA and MA level (as well as graduates) a chance to present, share, and discuss their work in an academic setting and to be recognized for their expertise. We aim to make knowledge production in academia more inclusive and democratic by facilitating peer-to-peer teaching practices and an open minded, supportive feedback culture. It is important to us that researchers have the opportunity to get critical feedback on their work – by exchanging ideas and hearing meaningful critique from other student researchers.

Past projects

Collective Re-Vision, in co-operation with the Margherita von Brentano Centre at the FU Berlin, took place during the summer semester 2021. It was designed in two parts, a workshop and a panel discussion. The former focused on giving peer-to-peer feedback on the projects of eleven new applicants; the latter was formed around the discussion between two previous SVR co-writers, one artist, one publisher, and one academic, and explored collective modes of writing.

Re-Forming Methodologies, in co-operation with the Centre for Transdisciplinary Gender Studies (ZtG) at the HU Berlin, took place in the winter semester 2020–2021. It was designed as a fortnightly online lecture. Twelve different speakers were given a digital space to discuss their work, which explored questions like: How do we develop research that serves to

deconstruct the binary sexuality or normative genders? How do we speak “truth” and make intersecting systems of oppression and social injustice visible? How do we write/research on LGBTQ subjects and social movements within academia’s normative framework?

SVR Breaks the Internet was a conference that took place during the summer semester of 2020. In response to the Covid-19 pandemic it was held online. Successful applicants were grouped into three panels, each moderated by an SVR organizer: Aesthetic Representations of Resistance, State Politics and Gender, Claiming Auto-Ethnography as Queer Method. There was also a solo lecture, ‘A Feminist Discussion of Games: Queer Desires and Digital Utopias’.

7 Worlds Lecture Series, in co-operation with ZtG and Bologna.lab, was held during the winter semester 2019–2020 and featured seven speakers. As it was only SVR’s second event there was no specific thematic focus. Each of the selected speakers was given two weeks to present their research to fellow students.

Ten Fresh Talks, a weekly lecture series, showcased the work of nine student scholars during the summer of 2019. This lecture series was the launch pad of SVR as a whole project.

Organizing team: Tunay Altay, Wen-Min Ji, Hazal Kaygusuz, Adeline Miaayanabi, Korina Pavlidou, Daniela Petrosino, Tatjana Petschl, Bella Ruhl.

<https://cargocollective.com/SVRGenderStudies>