
issue 4
PLURALITY
NO PLACE LIKE HOME
Reclaiming the Void
SKALA ERESSOS
Books and the Home
There's No Place Like Home

PLURALITY

ISSUE 4:

There’s No Place Like Home

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

December 2025 marked *Plurality's* second anniversary and was celebrated with new and old faces. I first became a part of the team as part of marketing, eager to be involved in a project that celebrates intersectional feminism, brings people together, and provides a space for undergraduate students to get involved with academia. Last spring, I was entrusted with the role of Lead Editor, succeeding Emmi Wilkinson, to continue to offer this space. Working with this journal has been an incredibly rewarding experience, one that has deepened my understanding of intersectional feminism and has allowed me to grow alongside my peers. As *Plurality's* second Lead Editor, my goal is to foster a community grounded in collaboration, curiosity, and critical engagement, where undergraduate students feel supported in exploring complex ideas and contributing meaningfully to feminist scholarship

"There's No Place Like Home" was conceived by our Deputy Lead Editor, Rose Bates. This issue's theme struck a chord for many, including myself, as "what is home?" and "where is home?" can be very complicated questions that facilitate many different answers. 'Home' not only means a place where someone lives but is also a feeling and an experience. Whether the discussion lies at home in the literal sense, in the domestic sphere, or the feeling of being 'at home' in one's own body, or how the experience of home is something deeply political and socially constructed, this issue's theme encouraged authors to explore the concept through an intersectional lens.

Issue 4 opens with our Philosophy and Divinity section, where Almundena Mahou deconstructs the novel *Convenience Store Woman* from the viewpoint of Japanese philosophy, arguing that the novel both evokes and challenges legacies of feminism and existentialism in Japan. In Art and Literature, Violet Blackburn employs a queer reading of the plays *A Taste of Honey* and *Mrs Warren's Profession*, as both feature unconventional forms of gender, family units, and relationships. In another queer analysis, Andrea Cheng looks at two queer Chinese films to show how Western coming-out narratives are not always applicable to Chinese queer trajectories. Rounding up this section, we follow Dorothy down the yellow brick road in Kayla Greer's exploration of domestic ideology in *The Wizard of Oz*. Kicking off our Social Sciences section, Annwen Thurlow examines everyday borders through the case study of two women footballers to demonstrate the intersections of racial governmentality and hegemonic ideals of femininity. Sommer Lugert, a two-time published author for *Plurality*, uses a feminist lens to examine how home and belonging are produced, negotiated, and contested in the lives of autistic mothers. We then turn the page to History and Classics, where Cerys Jones looks at how reading functions as a means of asserting personal autonomy and individuality for interwar and postwar women, and Molly Edby draws attention to the various roles of women in the colonisation and resistance on the American Frontier. In Miscellaneous Musings, Apsara Shah combs through the ideas of androgyny and how gendered appearance can impact how we perceive ourselves and others. Bringing us home is Rita Merle Destremau, who uses an intersectional lens to discuss the power and colonisation perpetuated by homosexual women on the island of Lesbos, and asks if there is a home for lesbians.

This issue would not have been made possible without the contributions of these brilliant authors and the hard work of the *Plurality* team. Thank you to the artists Elise Adams, Rosy Fitch, and Madeleine Brady, who worked across artistic media to create the stunning cover and in-text illustrations, making the idea visually come to life. Thanks to our Head of Production, Khoo Yi Xuan, for collaborating and coordinating across the team to put these beautiful pages together. To section editors Zeynep Kilic and Helena Osie Bishop, for continuing to work with *Plurality* over the past two years, and Asher Rose, Ruby Scott, and Poppy Williams, for joining them in working closely with the authors to help create the pieces that we have today. This issue would not be up to its editorial standard if it were not for our copy editors, Lauren Hood, Juliette Pepin, and Layla Kaban Bowers. And our outreach team, Daniel Wills and Maeve Burrell, for spreading the word of *Plurality* to reach authors and readers alike. Last but not least, thank you so much to my fellow executives, Rose Bates and Neha Ajith; this issue would not have been made possible without your support and leadership.

As this chapter closes, another one begins with our upcoming issue, "The Natural". In a world increasingly shaped by bioessentialism, climate change, and artificial intelligence, I encourage authors to ask themselves: what do we consider to be 'natural'? How has this idea been embedded within our social structures, institutions, dominant ideologies, and even our understanding of time? What can we learn about the natural world and from our evolving relationship to it that might help us reimagine the present and future? 'Natural' logics play into everything from how we understand gender and power, to how we value bodies, organise society, relate to the environment, and even in defining beauty. These concepts do not exist in a vacuum but are rather shaped by history, culture and power. I hope this theme inspires authors to explore 'The Natural' through an intersectional lens and that *Plurality* can continue to offer a space for reflection and reimagining.

In the meantime, I hope you enjoy Issue 4: "There's No Place Like Home".

Emilia Manning-Gaona
Lead Editor

MEET THE TEAM

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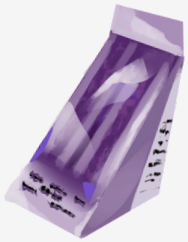
Philosophy & Divinity

Art by Elise Adams

RECLAIMING THE VOID: NIHILISM AND LIBERATION IN CONVENIENCE STORE WOMAN

BY ALMUDENA MAHOU
UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH



'Caminante, no hay camino, se hace camino al andar.
[Traveler, there is no path, the path is made by walking.]' [1]

Antonio Machado (1998, p.152)

In Sayaka Murata's *Convenience store woman* (2019), Keiko Furukura's life seems to present a contradiction: she lives detached from societal norms but is deeply embedded in a mechanised capitalist system that sustains them. Her story invites readers to reflect on nihilism, liberation, and identity in modern Japan. Using Keiji Nishitani's framework (1983, 1990), Keiko's journey can be viewed as an existential crisis caused by her confrontation with the 'nihilism of death' that ultimately results in her moving towards the 'nihilism of life', where she reconstructs herself. Her solution, which involves grounding her identity in the routines of the convenience store, challenges pre-theoretical ideas of liberation. The 20th century Japanese feminist philosophers Yosano Akiko and Hiratsuka Raichō saw women's liberation as achievable through creative expression or motherhood (Heisig et al. 2011, p.1133). However, Keiko departs entirely from these frameworks, becoming a new type of character that challenges the kinds of classifications we live by.

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REVIEWED BY CONNOR ADAMS, ART BY ELISE ADAMS

According to Nishitani (1990, p.1), nihilism is not an intellectual issue — a problem that can be tackled from the outside, as an observer — but an existential crisis that radically transforms the connection between the self and the world. It occurs when the self becomes a problem to itself, and when one's foundation — the social structures and horizons that give the self a meaning — crumbles and a deep sense of groundlessness emerges (Nishitani, 1990, p.1). Nishitani argues that '[i]f nihilism is anything, it is firstly a problem of the self, and it becomes such a problem only when the self becomes a problem, when the ground of the existence called the "self" becomes a problem' (1990, p. 1). This constitutes a form of existential awakening that reveals the self's unfamiliarity to itself, forcing it to confront the void that lies beneath the meanings constructed through the unreflective repetition of social norms. However, simply recognising this void without engaging with it leaves the self separated from it. Detached observation perpetuates the nihilism of death,[2] for as long as the self stands apart from nothingness, it cannot transform its ground of being and move toward the nihilism of life. As Masao Abe explains, Nishitani situates this transition in the movement from nihility to emptiness itself:

In order to stand in a truly free and truly subjective standpoint, one must take a step beyond such a standpoint of nihility and stand in a place that lies even closer to the side of the self than the self's ordinary being does. This is the standpoint of emptiness as distinguished from nihility […] 'What we have called the abyss of nihility can only be constituted in emptiness.[Nishitani, 1983]" (Abe, 1992, p. 61).

I argue that Keiko's confrontation with the void parallels this step beyond despair, towards a proximity to emptiness. For this reason, Nishitani insists that we must 'think with passion' to 'stop observing and start becoming' (1990, p.1).

Nishitani's framework of nihilism is more accurately understood as a two-step process, rather than a structure including two contrasting varieties of nihilism. The first phase is what he terms the 'nihilism of death', signifying an initial recognition of the universal fact of groundlessness (Nishitani, p. 4). This is followed by the 'nihilism of life', where this recognition serves as a basis for constructing a new horizon of meaning — not a replacement of meaning, but a transformation in how it itself appears within the field of emptiness (Abe, 1992, p.66). The nihilism of death reveals itself when an individual realises that the foundational elements of their existence — societal conventions, personal morals and principles, through which their very sense of identity is formed — have disintegrated, leaving an overwhelming void of nothingness (Nishitani, 1983, (p.4). Nishitani describes it as 'that which renders meaningless the meaning of life. When we become a question to ourselves […] nihility has emerged from the ground of our existence' (1983, p. 4). This encounter with the abyss causes despair and existential stagnation, as the self becomes unmoored from all it once relied upon. Nishitani, nevertheless, emphasises that what first appears as profound negativity — the collapse of all fixed meaning, felt as existential disorientation grounded in the negation of the being itself — is not the conclusion of nihilism but the start of a journey of transformation (1983, p.93). To overcome nihilism, one must pass through this stage of self-negation: to deny the false ground of the self given by history, and to let its being become a question mark. Notto R. Thelle (a student of Nishitani's) describes this transformation as one that 'takes place when nihility becomes the very place which opens up for a transcendental reality. […] Abandoning oneself to the abyss, the old ego-centred world crumbles and a new universe comes into being. The flower blooms on the cliff's edge' (1992, p. 133). Keiko's renewal likewise arises within her own descent into the abyss. This voluntary negation is not destruction but the condition of renewal — a movement of becoming rather than being. The nihilism of life begins as soon as one realises this and reframes their perspective towards the abyss, perceiving it as an open cosmos with infinite possibilities rather than a cul-de-sac. In Chapter 5 of The *self-overcoming of nihilism*, Nishitani draws this conclusion from a rereading of Nietzsche, who wrote that we are:

illuminated by a new dawn […] the horizon seems free again, even if it is not bright; at last our ships can set sail again, ready to face every danger; every venture of the knowledge-seeker is permitted again; the sea, our sea, lies open again before us; perhaps there has never been such an 'open sea'. (Nietzsche, 2018, p. 226).

This bittersweet journey of reevaluating one's life and values entails discarding those values that no longer give meaning, and consciously reclaiming those that might.[3]

Overcoming nihilism does not consist of eliminating it but incorporating it as one's grounding — transforming it from within by realising that its void is the very field on which meaning emerges. One must put nihilism 'behind him, [...] beneath him, no longer part of him' (Nietzsche, 2017, p. 7), in order to reach the standpoint of the 'consummate nihilist' — one who has passed entirely through nihilism and has come to see that the nothingness once experienced as negation is also the ground on which life itself may be affirmed anew (Nishitani, 1990, p. 77). This entails accepting the transience and nothingness of existence — the recognition that, as Nishitani explains, nothingness is not opposed to existence but is its very ground, the field in which being and non-being unfold together (1983, p.38). This means accepting that the world of all finite things and transcendent essences is seen to be essentially null — a 'double negation', in which both the finite world and its supposed metaphysical ground are emptied (Nishitani, 1990, p. 174). They are like waves and the ocean: each appears distinct, yet neither exists apart from the other (Nishitani, 1983, p. 103). When their separateness dissolves, the movement of water itself — without fixed form, yet giving rise to all forms — reveals the ground in which finitude and eternity converge. From this standpoint, finitude and eternity no longer oppose one another but are understood as mutually arising within the framework of nothingness, where the transient and the eternal disclose each other as aspects of the same emptiness. As Abe explains, '[i]n contrast to Heidegger,' this standpoint of emptiness 'establishes "Being" as "Being" from its bottomless depths' (1992, p. 54). This allows all things to be known as they are, which restores them to their own ground (Abe, 1992, p. 54). Everything that exists arises and passes away, yet this very movement of arising and passing takes place within a deeper openness that does not itself come or go (Abe, 1992. p.61). This is what Nishitani calls 'nothingness' (1983, pp. 34, 200, 224, 252). It does not erase meaning — instead, it is the background that allows things to appear at all, like the silence that makes sound possible or the blank page that makes writing visible. Seen from this perspective, transience and continuity are two sides of the same reality: impermanence itself becomes the condition of continuity. Nihilism, therefore, is a process of self-redefinition. It does not necessarily require discarding all of one's life structures, but repossessing them and taking them up again from a transformed standpoint.

At the start of *Convenience store woman*, Keiko's existence is characterised by nihilism, where her estrangement from societal values leaves her seeking purpose and stability. Like Dante at the beginning of his journey (1321), Keiko gets lost in the cement forest of Tokyo, experiencing isolation, loneliness and alienation. She is unable to adopt the expectations that surround her, facing the disintegration of all external meanings and becoming forced to seek a foundation within herself. Sartre claimed that 'man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does' (2007, p. 29). He argues that when transcendence and divine order collapse, 'life itself is nothing until it is lived; it is we who give it meaning' (Sartre, 2007, p. 51). Meaning, then, is not deferred to some external source — it is always self-given, arising from one's own choices and actions. Nishitani's position, however, diverges from Sartre's; for Nishitani the problem is not that meaning must be chosen, but that the self that chooses must itself be transformed. In Nishitani's field of emptiness, meaning does not stem from assertion or decision, but from the dissolution of the self into the openness that allows being and nothingness to arise together. Keiko's surrender to the store's order is not a choice but a lived enactment of that dissolution, a way of becoming at home within groundlessness. Nishitani agrees with Sartre that meaning cannot be deferred to an external order; it must arise from within. Yet for Nishitani, the self that gives meaning to it must first undergo transformation (1983, p. 32). Whereas Sartre begins with freedom as the defining feature of the human subject, Nishitani sees the dissolution of that very subject as the precondition for genuine freedom (1983, p.4). Only when the self passes

through the abyss of nihilism and awakens to emptiness can meaning arise.

At the beginning of the novel, Keiko's lifestyle exemplifies a profound nonconformity to societal conventions. She feels no positive connection to society's social norms or moral imperatives — the roles of wife, mother or ambitious professional — yet she also lacks any alternative frameworks that she wishes to engage in through which her existence could be meaningfully grounded. This absence of any framework — the nihility of death — sets in motion Keiko's transformation. Keiko, in a manner reminiscent of Dante, is existentially and physically disoriented; it is this state of confusion that initiates her metamorphosis. At the start of her transformation, Keiko discovers a method to navigate the emptiness she experiences: her work at the convenience store. The store becomes a temporary sanctuary — a place where the rigid rules displace her attention from the existential lack of clarity that she feels. Keiko refers to the store as an 'aquarium' (Murata, 2019, p. 13), a place that provides protection from the chaotic expectations and uncertainty coming from the outside world. Like water muffling noise, the store creates a peaceful and predictable space that allows Keiko to immerse herself in its repetitive rituals. Although considered worthless in society's terms and stigmatised precisely because she finds fulfilment in it — much like service work which is simultaneously looked down upon as insignificant and shameful — these habits enable Keiko to build her identity, acting as currents that guide her life and keep her flowing, transforming what others perceive as mundane into the very process through which her sense of self is created.

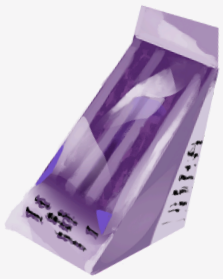
Keiko's connection to the store can be explained by Nishitani's conception of religion as a means to overcome both the nihilism of death and of life, resulting in the cultivation of self-reflectiveness: 'Religion encompasses both the transcendence of nihilism and its deepening toward self-reflectiveness, even though religion has not yet awakened to this. Its nihilism remains, as it were, unconsciously self-reflective' (1990, p. 77). Keiko's devotion to the store mirrors Nishitani's account of religion (1983, 1990): it both transcends and perpetuates nihilism, providing her with order while unconsciously sustaining the void it seeks to overcome. As Abe notes, Nishitani situates the modern crisis of meaning precisely 'at the extreme point of the mechanisation of the human through science', where 'nihility is opened up at the foundation of the human and the world', and where 'humans can be truly autonomous and free only by standing decisively in the abyss of nihility' (1992, p. 61). For Nishitani, 'science' is the modern, non-teleological picture of the world that reduces life to a mechanism; it is the frame that renders nature, society, and even the self as systems to be optimised. When that picture is carried to its limit, it exposes the abyss of nihility. Keiko's barcode beeps, uniform, and scripts stage exactly this threshold: the world as a procedure, and a self that learns to dwell within it. This echoes Nishitani's own demand, as understood by Jan Van Bragt, that the 'religion of the future' must 'dare to think existentially of science' and 'accept the universe with its feature of bottomless death as the place for the abandoning of oneself and the throwing away of one's life' (1992, pp. 34-5). Keiko's disciplined immersion in the mechanised rhythms of the store accepts this condition. The human becomes part of the machine, yet within that very mechanisation she discovers a paradoxical freedom — the ability to dwell consciously within the void it reveals.

For Keiko, the convenience store is a sacred space. It is both the question and the answer — it asks how one might live after the collapse of inherited meaning, and answers through the revelation that stability and purpose can be found in the smallest acts of routine. Within this space, she experiences a paradoxical form of identity — she is alienated from society, yet remains in the store's mechanical harmony, where the self attains coherence within the very structures that rendered it void. In a manner reminiscent of Nishitani's understanding of religion as a double force that both negates and affirms life, Keiko's deep engagement with the store becomes the locus of her confrontation with the abyss, where she transforms nihilism into a mode of being — an affirmation that arises from, rather than resists, the void (understood not only as negation, but

also as the field in which being and nothingness coincide). This affirmation is not an expression of existential authenticity, but rather a response that can only arise through one's own encounter with nihilism — unique, not in its essence, but in the unrepeatable way in which each self comes to face nothingness.

As the weight of societal expectations intensifies, mainly through the figure of Shiraha — who personifies conventional gender roles and societal expectations — Keiko finds herself compelled to grapple with the notion of transforming her existence in pursuit of social validation. Yet, Keiko's ultimate dismissal of Shiraha stands as an act of defiance. It symbolises her determination to resist the imposition of external definitions upon her sense of self, and to ground her existence in the meaning she derives from the store, even in the face of social disapproval — thus committing to overcoming nihilism. Keiko's final act of constructing her identity is expressed in her realisation that 'for the first time, I could think of me in the window as a being with meaning' (Murata, 2019, p. 97). This shift demonstrates that her connection to the store has evolved from refuge — an escape from the anxiety of groundlessness — to a deliberate affirmation of her own way of 'being in the void'. What was once a shelter of avoidance becomes a sanctuary of dwelling and affirmation. It no longer represents the paralysing nihilism of death, but the awareness of emptiness that marks the nihilism of life — shown through how she redefines herself as a 'convenience store worker'.

Keiko's overcoming of nihilism stems from her ability to look into the abyss and accept her own way of being. She finds meaning through dwelling within the store's repetitive order, a mode of being that affirms her identity without succumbing to societal pressures. For Keiko, this overcoming does not require rejecting her old ways, but reclaiming them from a transformed standpoint — repeating the same gestures and rhythms consciously rather than being determined by them. This transformation is what Nishitani describes as moving understood as a movement from what I described as the nihilism of death (where meaning has collapsed, and a void opens within the self) towards what he calls the nihilism of life (where the void becomes an immanent plane of possibilities) and thus overcoming nihilism (1990, p. 174). As she finds personal satisfaction in what most would perceive as mundane or even constraining, Keiko demonstrates that overcoming nihilism does not come from seeking transcendence beyond it by appealing to a higher or external meaning, but rather from transforming her immediate world into the ground of meaning itself. The store becomes not a source of external value, but the very form through which her existence is realised, thus creating purpose in a way that is entirely her own. This uniqueness does not imply a fixed or authentic self; rather, it reflects the singularity of her encounter with nothingness — an unrepeatable way of living meaningfully within emptiness that arises from her specific facticity.



Yet the void Keiko inhabits is not only metaphysical; it is also social and gendered, exposing her to the competing visions of womanhood articulated by figures such as Yosano Akiko and Hiratsuka Raichō. To understand the full significance of her transformation, it is necessary to consider how her way of living unsettles dominant feminist models of liberation. Keiko's way of being gestures towards a different conception of liberation: she challenges conventional gender and societal roles, as well as the paths to liberation that these feminist thinkers defended. Through her rejection of traditional expectations and her adoption of a lifestyle based on the routines of the store, Keiko realises an affirmation of existence grounded not in individual self-expression, but in the acceptance of her existence as it unfolds within nothingness. She echoes the concerns of Akiko and Raichō, but ultimately reaches a radically different conclusion.

Raichō, in her early essays for the journal *Seitō*, envisioned liberation as a return to what she called an 'authentic self', which she conceived as a primordial, genderless state of being, free from social constraint: 'an authentic person is not a man and not a woman… we

need to come back to our true self' (Kimura, 2019, p. 623). In her later writings, however, Raichō's thinking shifted towards an emphasis on motherhood as the spiritual centre of womanhood and the moral foundation of society. Raichō moves away from a vision of gender transcendence and towards an affirmation of womanhood, with motherhood conceived as the basis of identity (Davis, 2014, p.618). Raichō writes that the year she became a mother was the year she 'began to reclaim [her] selfhood,' realising through motherhood that 'social problems relating to women, mothers, and children could never be solved by individuals alone' (2006, p. 286). Her later philosophy thus re-centred the maternal experience as the site of renewal. Keiko's character reflects certain elements from Raichō's early writings, particularly those emphasising the rejection of gender roles: 'Once we donned our uniforms, we were all equals regardless of gender, age, or nationality — all simply store workers' (Murata, 2019, p. 23). Like Raichō's 'authentic self', Keiko not only rejects the categories of 'wife' and 'mother', but refuses womanhood altogether. Raichō described her concept of an 'authentic self' as 'women's first declaration of their status as human beings,' explaining that the movement 'encompassed the totality of things' and urged women to recover their 'human beingness' (ningensei) by their own efforts (2006, p. 316). Raichō reported that the genesis of this call for liberation came from her own spiritual awakening, claiming that through the years of Zen practice she had 'freed herself of preconceptions and reached the realm where there is no Self' (2006, p. 316). For Raichō, women's liberation is a spiritual transformation inseparable from social awakening. Although Keiko's detachment from conventional femininity is consistent with Raichō's early writing, her devotion to the convenience store recalls Raichō's later ideal of maternal care. Keiko tends to the store like one might care for a living being — feeding it, cleaning it, and protecting its order. Murata thus transforms Raichō's spiritual motherhood into a form of maintenance, in which care and purpose can exist even without love, family or gender. Murata does this by retaining the gestures of care, traditionally associated with maternity — feeding, cleaning, protecting — but emptying them of gender: Keiko performs them not as a woman, but as a convenience store worker. This transformation parallels Raichō's own later thought: 'Given my views on the importance of motherhood and my hopes for an economically autonomous society based on cooperative organisations […] [women] have risen again to build a new self-governing society and create a new civilisation based on maternalism' (Raichō, 2006, p. 308). For Raichō, motherhood becomes the ethical foundation of collective solidarity, not simply a biological role.

Keiko challenges conventional ambitions of 21st century Japan such as marriage, motherhood, or intellectual success. She characterises herself as a 'convenience store worker', finding meaning in the store's rigid, rule-bound structure. This detachment from societal norms challenges Yosano Akiko's philosophy of liberation through creative self-expression and social participation. For Akiko, independence is the necessary condition for women to realise their individuality through art, emotion, and intellectual engagement; freedom is inseparable from creativity. Keiko, in contrast, finds meaning in her repetitive, ritualistic routines. She transforms our understanding of the meaning of being: 'I've been reborn, I thought. That day, I actually became a normal cog in society' (Murata, 2019, p. 12). For Keiko, her individuality is reduced to a function, and her meaning arises not from artistic or intellectual creation, but from disciplined conformity. Whilst for Akiko, being 'just a cog' in society's machinery would be an act of submission, for Keiko it is a form of belonging that provides her with a sense of grounding. In Murata's novel, identity is not compromised by belonging but formed through it — through participation in the ordered rhythms of the store that give Keiko's life coherence and purpose. Although such rigid conformity should suppress identity, Keiko's self is not negated by following the store's rules. Her obedience is autonomously chosen, transforming regulation into the ground of meaning.

Raichō and Akiko's philosophies are reflected not only in Keiko herself, but also in Keiko's sister, named Mami, and Shiraha's sister-in-law. Mami initially supports Keiko in accordance with Raichō's early vision of liberation beyond prescribed gender roles. However, after Mami becomes a mother, she urges Keiko to pursue marriage and social conformity, reflecting Raichō's later belief that motherhood is the foundation of womanhood. Shiraha's sister-in-law embodies Akiko's vision of a

pragmatic, financially independent woman — educated. assertive, and secure in her freedom — but she nevertheless urges Keiko to conform to social expectations of marriage and stability. Keiko ultimately dismisses both frames, instead constructing a life of her own characterised by the repetitive routines of the convenience store — cleaning, restocking, and greeting customers — which provide her with stability and a sense of purpose on her own terms. Ultimately, Keiko's journey brings about a form of self-consciousness — an awareness of what gives her existence meaning. Keiko shares Akiko and Raichō's aspiration for liberation but attempts to obtain it not through creative expression or motherhood, but through acceptance of the void. By rejecting the methods of liberation envisioned by these feminists, Keiko forges her own path and finds her own form of fulfilment. She identifies completely with the store's order: 'the voice of the convenience store won't stop flowing through me. I was born to hear this voice' (Murata, 2019, p. 95). This suggests that Keiko's sense of self is sustained through the fusion of her identity with the structure of the store.

Keiko Furukura's trajectory shows what Nishitani calls the passage through nihilism — a fall into groundlessness that becomes the site of renewal. Her movement from the nihilism of death to the nihilism of life unfolds not through a dramatic rupture but through the smallest rhythms of her daily work, revealing that the transformation Nishitani describes can occur in the very places where meaning first seems to evaporate. By turning away from the liberatory models proposed by Akiko — creativity, self-expression, and maternal identity — without succumbing to despair, Keiko inhabits a form of life shaped neither by resistance nor by conformity, but by an attentiveness to emptiness itself. Her way of being suggests that meaning may re-emerge not through asserting the self, but through allowing it to be reconfigured within the void it encounters. *Convenience store woman* thus invites us to reconsider how a life might take shape when the inherited coordinates of identity fall away, and to ask what other possibilities open when — as Nishitani urges — we learn to begin again from the emptiness at the heart of existence.

Footnotes

1. My translation.

2. The distinction between the *nihilism of death* and the *nihilism of life* is explored below.

3. Here Nishitani disagrees with Nietzsche.

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Art & Literature

Art by Madeline Brady

BEYOND SEXUALITY: A QUEER READING OF THE PLAYS 'A TASTE OF HONEY' AND 'MRS WARREN'S PROFESSION'.

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Although Delaney and Shaw do not explicitly confirm the existence of queer characters within their plays, *A Taste of Honey* and *Mrs Warren's Profession*, this essay will argue they can nevertheless be read as 'queer' plays, using See's assertion that it is possible to read plays as 'queer' regardless of whether they include a definitively queer character, if they 'cleave, fracture, and re-mold conventional identity models' (33). This essay will posit that *A Taste of Honey* and *Mrs Warren's Profession* can therefore be read as 'queer' in their depiction of non-conventional, non-nuclear family units, their non-conventional female protagonists (Jo in *A Taste of Honey* and Vivie Warren in *Mrs Warren's Profession*), and in each woman's non-conventional relationship with her mother.

Both *A Taste of Honey* and *Mrs Warren's Profession* can be read as 'queer' plays in their depiction of non-conventional men and women who are figured as queer even if they are not same-sex attracted. In *A Taste of Honey*, Geoffrey Ingram, Jo's queer-platonic friend who moves in to help her prepare for her baby when she is left pregnant by another man, is figured as homosexual; he is described by Jo's mother Helen and her partner Peter as a 'pansy', a 'lily' and a 'fruitcake', all of which are derogatory terms for homosexual men, and admits to Jo that he has 'never kissed a girl' (Delaney 79, 65, 68, 58). Despite being instantly identified as queer by heterosexual characters such as Jo, Helen and Peter, Geof does not partake in any sexual or romantic relationships with men throughout the play.

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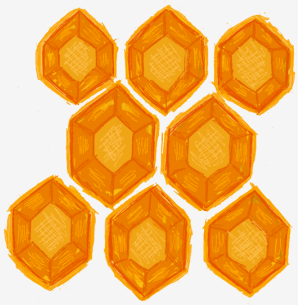
However, although Geof never explicitly 'comes out' as queer, I posit that through the other characters' unequivocal reading of him as a gay man, evidenced by their use of homophobic slurs towards him, Delaney creates as much evidence for his queerness as she can while still adhering to the Licensing Act of 1737. This act, still enforced by law in 1958, restricted all 'explicit expression of homosexual relationships and lifestyles on the British Stage' (O'Connor 14, 20), therefore assumptions made by other characters is the most explicit she can be in line with these legal restrictions. For Clum however, this reinforces the 'shibboleth that the only acceptable homosexual is celibate' (106-7). See counters this, arguing this view of Geof as a 'repressed homosexual' is an act of 'homosexist' exclusion, a term which he uses to denote the 'intentional ignorance' of critics such as Clum in their refusal to acknowledge the 'explicit' and 'real' bisexuality and polyamory that is depicted in *A Taste of Honey*, providing the example of Geof asking Jo to marry him (Delaney 58). Whilst their arguments are in opposition to each other, Clum and See both require an explicit admission of homosexuality from Geof himself to read him as a homosexual man, which I posit both ignores the cultural climate at the time the play was written, and the evidence in the text itself. Moreover, See's argument that Clum figuring Geof as exclusively homosexual is 'homosexist' disregards that Jo only feels comfortable and safe allowing Geof to stay with her because she knows he 'won't start anything', which Geof confirms with his response: 'No, I don't suppose I will' (Delaney 53). Whilst Geof does ask Jo to marry him, I posit this is due to a desire to protect their queer-platonic family through the legal rights granted by marriage, rather than from any genuine attraction to Jo, therefore reinforcing the argument that Delaney intended Geof to be read as a homosexual man.

Jo can also be read as queer in her remolding of conventional identity models, as she rejects womanhood through her emphatic rejection of motherhood. When Geof buys her a doll to practice on, she throws it violently to the floor, and exclaims, 'I'll bash its brains out. I'll kill it. I don't want his baby, Geof. I don't want to be a mother. I don't want to be a woman' (Delaney 75). Jo's resounding aversion to motherhood is reminiscent of Lady Macbeth's speech in Macbeth, in which she states she would kill her baby by 'dash[ing] the brains out' (Shakespeare 1.7.58) rather than go back on her word. Since Jo's phraseology here is so similar to Lady Macbeth's, it is evident that Delaney invoked her speech purposely in this scene, to highlight Jo's emphatic rejection of motherhood. Brooke denotes that traditional stereotypes of femininity, such as that of the 'working-class mother', were particularly valorized in 1950s Britain due to a 'post-war nostalgia' (775), and due to this, infanticide was considered the 'antithesis of womanhood' (Ficke 257). Therefore, it could be argued that, at least by 1950s standards, by rejecting motherhood, Jo rejects womanhood itself, embracing the queer-platonic home she has built with Geof over the home her societal role would have her create.



Mrs Warren's Profession can similarly be read as a queer play, despite its lack of explicitly queer characters. According to Halberstam, as long as masculinity has existed as a recognisable characteristic, butch women have been 'transform[ing] the mechanisms of masculinity', and their mode of living as explicitly outside of patriarchal values of femininity has had to be constantly defended and rationalised to others (276). Vivie Warren, described by Shaw as 'sensible, able, highly educated', who wears 'plain, business-like dress', rides a 'bicycle' and smokes cigars (Act I), is undeniably masculine in both 'outlook and appearance' (Greceo 94), and therefore could be interpreted as a butch woman. She is also evidently figured as the 'New Woman' stereotype of the 1890s, who was criticised by contemporary anti-feminist Eliza Linton as a woman who 'does anything specially unfeminine and ugly', who 'smokes in public' and 'flouts conventional decencies' (qtd. in Ledger 154). Vivie Warren is chastised for these very behaviours by characters such as Praed for 'destroying all that makes womanhood beautiful!' (Shaw I), thereby proving Halberstam's assertions that female masculinity has always caused 'widespread cultural anxiety' (273) due to fears of diversity disrupting the status quo.

Moreover, although Vivie is romantically involved with Frank, near the end of the play she chooses to end their relationship. Whilst Frank believes this is because of Sir George Croft's assertion that him and Vivie may be related, she attests that she knows this is untrue, however she thinks that 'brother and sister would be a very suitable relation' for them, and that it is the 'only relation' she wishes to have with him (Shaw IV). As Engels' 1884 socialist work *The Origins of the Family, Private Property* and *the State* points out, marriage at the time involved the woman being 'placed in the man's absolute power' so that the paternity of the children produced from that marriage could be made certain (qtd. in Allett 30). Therefore, as Allett argues, Vivie's sudden change of heart is due to a realisation that marriage is the 'crystallization of male/female relations, putting into high relief men's pervasive and persistent desire to dominate women' (36), and so she cannot marry Frank, as his status as a 'prosperous Victorian male' means he does not wish to marry a woman with agency, but an 'upholstered angel whom he could set on a pedestal' (Laurence 40). Even a man such as Frank, who has never shown any desire to dominate Vivie, is still a part of the Victorian patriarchal system that oppresses women, a system which, according to Shaw himself, is just as 'venal' as prostitution (qtd. in Allett 81). Therefore, I argue Vivie's choice to live outside of patriarchal society figures her as a butch woman who embodies queer values, even if she is not same-sex attracted.

Both texts can also be read as 'queer' in their depiction of female protagonists who are particularly unconventional for the time period, in contrast to their mothers, who in theory represent unconventionality but do not in practice. The fraught nature of Jo and Helen's relationship is evident in the play's opening scene, in which Jo and Helen exchange passive-aggressive remarks such as, 'She'd drive you out of your mind!' and 'She'd lose her head if it was loose' (Delaney 15, 7). The fact these remarks break the fourth wall, as they are addressed directly to the audience, emphasises the familial nature of the women's relationship, as their grievances are constant, yet they are unwilling to address them directly. Furthermore, when Helen criticises Jo and Geof's living situation for being 'trouble', Jo responds, 'I have been performing a perfectly normal, healthy function. We're wonderful!', a 'deliberately radical' choice of phraseology, as her life by heteronormative, conventional standards is the antithesis of 'normal' (Delaney 81, See 44). Helen is described as a 'semi-whore' in the play's opening stage directions and since, in the 1950s, society 'demanded the idealization of traditional stereotypes" such as 'mother and wife', she she would have been considered the antithesis of a conventional portrayal of a woman (Brooke 777). However, Helen calls Geof insults such as 'Bloody little pansy' and 'arty little freak' due to his effeminate behaviour, and abandons Jo, who is about to go into labour, to console herself with a drink at the end of the play when she finds out Jo's baby will be half black, which thereby reveals Helen's attitudes to be far more conventional than Jo's (Delaney 79, 87). According to Leeming, in popular psychology, disliking milk symbolises rejection of one's mother (xvi-xvii), therefore, the fact that Geof tries to make her drink warm milk perhaps suggests his attempt to become a 'dual substitute mother' who unconventionally prepares for the baby's arrival instead of Jo (Wandor 61). However, even though Geof is seemingly a better mother to Jo than Helen ever was, their non-conventional family is overridden by the 'hegemony' of the nuclear family (Wandor 50) when Helen returns at the end of the play and evicts him, and the play ends on an uncertain note as to what will befall Jo, Geof, and Jo's baby. Thus, the 'PolyFamily's' (See 43) attempt to live as a unit outside of societal norms fails as it cannot ultimately prevail over the nuclear family. Accordingly, despite the radical nature of 'A Taste of Honey' in depicting a queer family unit, I argue Delaney evinces the queer mode of living to be unsustainable in 1950s Britain.

Similarly, in 'Mrs Warren's Profession', although Mrs Warren's occupation as a prostitute ostensibly makes her the least conventional character in the play, her values and actions reveal her to be one of the most. Mrs Warren tells Vivie that she became a prostitute as she had no other financial option, however Sir George Crofts informs her that he and Mrs Warren now own a chain of international brothels, no longer out of necessity, but 'for the sake of 35 per cent', which leads to Vivie's revelation: 'I myself never asked where the money I spent came from. I believe I am just as bad as you' (Shaw III). Here, Shaw speaks directly through Vivie, in order to shift the 'liberal moralizing' (Allett 31) of the previous acts

towards the true moral of the play as an indictment of the capitalist system as a whole. Therefore, resolved to never again be complicit in her mother's money, earned by corruption, Vivie returns to her work at Honoria Fraser's Chambers in Chancery Lane to support herself. The play ends with a visit from her mother, whose acquaintance Vivie rejects forever, with the statement:

'You are a conventional woman at heart. That is why I am bidding you goodbye now' (Shaw IV). As Allett theorizes, Vivie's total renunciation of her mother is due to Mrs Warren's hypocrisy as a woman who, in her youth, had 'railed against the power that men exercised over women', yet now profits from surrendering women 'to men for a price', therefore perpetuating the patriarchal system that will 'disempower' her daughter despite her 'middle-class advantages' (36-7). Indeed, if one reads Vivie as the epitome of socialist values, as Shaw himself appears to present her, it stands to reason that she would cut her mother and her money out of her life, as it is the only way to truly be non-complicit in her mother's exploitative business, which embodies convention through its capitalist practices.

In conclusion, this essay has argued that both *A Taste of Honey* and *Mrs Warren's Profession* can be read as queer through their characters' defiance of conventional gender and social roles, and the mothers in both plays who ostensibly defy convention whilst adopting a conventional mindset, challenged by their daughters. However, both plays feature protagonists whose willingness to embrace and exemplify queerness culminates in them being alone at the end – Jo is forsaken first by her boyfriend, then Geof, then her mother, and Vivie chooses solitude as she is unwilling to benefit from her mother's exploitation of other women. Therefore, whilst both plays capture the non-conventional, both seem to argue that, in Victorian England, and post-war 50s Britain, defying conformity, and adopting a queer mode of living, ultimately leads to isolation.

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HALFWAY HOME: THE FRACTURED FAMILY IN QUEER CHINESE MEDIA

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Queer Western media often depicts the journey of queer actualisation through the linear stages of coming out, typically centred around the individual's self-assertion and establishment of identity. This perception confines the coming out experience to a singular, highly independent process, building on the assumption that it culminates in the queer individual affirming their selfhood in the 'public' realm. What happens, however, when that conceptualisation is applied to traditional Chinese society,[1] where the boundaries between the 'private individual' and 'public collective' are amorphous and virtually negligible? This essay asserts that queer Chinese identity is produced not *independent* of the socio-familial structure, but rather in *direct contention and collaboration* with the familial construct. Two queer Chinese films, *The Wedding Banquet* (1993) and *Saving Face* (2004), are explored through such a lens, investigating how the tension between the queer individual and the familial structure is portrayed and navigated, with emphasis on the employment of non-confrontational tactics such as reticence (含蓄; hanxu) and tolerance (寬容; kuanrong). This essay consolidates the argument on a new imagining of the dynamic restructuring of the traditional Chinese family and redefines the queer Chinese individual as a distinct, intersectional identity.

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Reframing the queer Chinese (individual)

The Chinese conception of selfhood is built on the basis that the individual identity is relational and dependent on the wider collective. In traditional Chinese societies, "nobody is a discrete, isolated being; rather anyone is a full person only in the context of family and social relationships" (Chou, *Homosexuality*, 20). The family is perceived as the most basic and fundamental social institution; any concept of selfhood is inextricable from the familial construct and the responsibilities that bind one to their roles. The family thus forms the central axis of the individual's life, indispensable and primary to the self. Marriage, for example, is primarily seen as a transaction between two households rather than two individuals; by marriage, one joins a family rather than creating their own, and one is expected to take care of not only their own parents but also their in-laws. It is not uncommon for Chinese individuals to continue living with their parents well into adulthood, even after marriage and having children. As a result, queer Chinese individuals engage with their family in far more long-lasting and intrinsic ways than that of their Euro-American counterparts (Engebretsen, 42), a marked difference from the familial concept of the West due to the influence of deep-rooted Confucian values and the strict hierarchy of roles.

With the individual being so deeply imbedded in the family-kinship system, the inherent notion behind coming out (i.e. the affirmation of selfhood) is antithetical to the very basis of how Chinese society operates, as placing one's identity-based homosexuality at the forefront displaces collective values (Chou, *Tongzhi,* 138). The queer Chinese individual additionally has to navigate their sexuality through a world view shaped by ingrained traditional Confucian values such as filial piety (孝; xiao) and social harmony (和諧; hexie), whilst upholding their role of offspring and the responsibilities inherent to such roles. The tension therefore exists within the conflict between the individualised sexuality and the collective responsibility, and the desire to reconcile the two.

The dynamic of the queer individual within the familial structure however must not be understood simply as an intrinsically antagonistic relationship; rather, the goal is to acknowledge how the tension and conflicts inherent in the dynamic comes to contextualise and define the queer Chinese identity. While Euro-American queer discourse places queerness in the public domain and leaves behind the familial site, in Chinese queer subjects "the family is necessarily a negotiation partner [...] to engage with rather than move away from" (Huang and Brouwer 111). Any further exploration of the queer Chinese identity has to be in tandem with the familial structure due to its fundamental nature; simultaneously, any transformative restructuring of the traditional Chinese family cannot be understood without the politics of queering.

Reticent politics and the penumbric existence

Under the structure of the Chinese family, the coming out process for queer Chinese individuals is complicated by tactics of reticent politics. Traditional Chinese values

insist on the importance of harmony and maintaining equilibrium, with particular focus on how one should attend to socio-familial and personal-political relations (Tsai, *Poetics,* 4). To be the 'proper self' is to maintain the normative order and one's role in this order, carried out through strategies of self-preservation and self-discipline. This is rooted in the disciplinary forces of reticence and tolerance, specific tangible rhetorics that can be traced back to classical Confucian thought and Chinese poetics (Tsai, *Language,* 54). These values are employed through repression and discipline, in favour of maintaining communal harmony. Scholars Liu Jen-Peng and Ding Naifei propose that the politics of reticence is instrumental in the tactics of confronting and abating queerness in the Chinese family (35). Rather than outright confrontation, silent tolerance and reticence is employed, often through forcing the queer Chinese individual to similarly engage in such denial and repression of the self in order to maintain the normative order.

The theory of reticent politics and how they come to affect and define the queer Chinese identity will be explored through the analysis of two films: *The Wedding Banquet* (1993) and *Saving Face* (2004). These two films exhibit the model of the queer Chinese individual, its inseparability with the family, and how the politics of reticence and tolerance come into play. Crucially, both films further exhibit the possibilities in the queer Chinese identity, and how it can come to subvert and evolve the traditional Chinese family.

Repression and the familial struggle in *The Wedding Banquet* (1993)

Wei-Tung is a gay Taiwanese immigrant living in Manhattan with his white boyfriend. Under pressure from his parents to marry and start a family, he seeks to marry one of his tenants, Mainland Chinese immigrant Wei-Wei, who is in need of a green card. However, his plan backfires when his parents arrive in New York to celebrate his marriage. The fraught desire to retain the cohesiveness of a traditional Chinese household competes with his individual identity.

The fulcrum of the film lies in the tension between Wei-Tung's 'authentic' queer self and the 'fabricated' straight son. Wei-Tung actively represses his queerness when his parents come to visit: hiding away all his 'gay' decor and putting up traditional Chinese decorations in its place, and pretending that his white boyfriend is his landlord. In doing so, Wei-Tung engages in the repression that relegates his sexual identity into the "realm of ghosts and shades" (Liu and Ding, 3). By trying to "keep his place" within the familial construct, he simultaneously displaces himself, as part of his identity is kept in the liminal order and made invisible.

Wei-Tung's elaborate scheme of a sham marriage should be understood not only as simply out of appeasement of his parents, but also out of his desire to maintain his role in the socio-familial construct, and the realm of balanced harmony. This is shown through multiple exchanges in the film that showcase how Wei-Tung's layered socio-cultural obligations conflict with his sexuality.

In a scene after Wei-Tung and Wei-Wei's hasty city hall wedding, they encounter his father's old army subordinate Old Chen in a restaurant, who, upon learning that Wei-Tung did not host a wedding banquet, tries to urge him otherwise:

Commander [Gao Baba] really loves 'keeping face'[2], how can you be so careless? [...] Now after so much trouble he finally got his son married, so if you refuse [a wedding banquet], then you are being unfilial! (Lee, my own translation)

There is a clear contrast in this scene: while Gao Baba chuckles heartily at Old Chen's words, Wei-Tung's face is turned away, contorted in discomfort and shame. The positioning of the scene adds to the nuance of the dialogue: Old Chen stands in between where Gao Baba and Wei-Tung are sitting, and Wei-Tung is turned away so that his expression is only visible to the camera and not the two men, concealing his inner conflict. The mentions of 'keeping face' and filial piety put excessive emphasis on the familial responsibilities and social reputation that Wei-Tung is expected to uphold; indeed, after this exchange, Wei-Tung finally concedes to hosting a proper wedding banquet. It is clear that Wei-Tung feels the acute pressure of having to fulfill his role as son and as part of the wider social community centred around his family. The tension between his inner sexuality and the external role gradually becomes far too

much for him to bear as after his father suffers from a mild stroke, Wei-Tung, under increasing pressure, finally comes out to his mother:

It's been almost 20 years that I've been living a big lie. There has been so much pain and joy in my life that I've wanted to share with you, but I couldn't. Sometimes I can't stand it and want to be completely honest with you... but I couldn't bear putting all the burden that I've had to carry on your shoulders. (Lee, my own translation)

Gao Mama's response displays the perception that Wei-Tung's homosexuality is not in accordance with the socio-familial role that he has to uphold:

Did Simon lead you astray? How could you be so feckless! (Lee, my own translation)

Furthermore, employs tactics of reticence in order to keep Wei-Tung's sexuality in the penumbric space:

Don't tell your father... it will kill him. (Lee, my own translation)

Gao Mama's intention is for the queer identity be "made to cooperate in their own invisibility and quiescence' in order to maintain the harmonious space, made liminal in existence at the risk of disturbing the natural social order (Liu and Ding 32). The clash between assumed harmony is part of director Ang Lee's central approach for the film, as he expressed that he "loved stirring things up rather than sticking to the Chinese ideal, which is to appeal for calm" (Pacheco).

Wei-Tung's sexuality is linked to his role as a son: fulfilling the filial responsibility of bearing children and continuing the family line. As "one's sexual deviance is not determined primarily by the sex of one's sexual partner(s) but by the (lack of) adherence to the ascribed filial duty of bearing children" (Huang and Brouwer 104), it is the fact that his sexuality prohibits him from granting heirs that forms the larger part of the conflict. Wei-Tung, however, is able to fulfill the filial duty of bearing children to some degree. This will be expanded on and analysed later in the essay as a possibility in the dynamic changes of the traditional Chinese family.

Reticence and shame in *Saving Face* (2004)

Wil is a second generation Chinese-American living in New York City, working as a successful surgeon. A closeted lesbian, she meets Vivian–a daughter of a family friend–and is drawn to her immediately. Meanwhile, Wil's mother Hwei-Lan is ostracised after she is discovered to be pregnant out of wedlock, and begins living with Wil. The tension between Hwei-Lan's demands for Wil to formulate a family and Wil's repressed sexuality is bolstered by the use of reticent tactics in order to keep surface-level image of harmony, at the risk of 'losing face' (失臉; shilian).

The tension of the queer identity and the traditional family in this film is linked to the preconceived notions of what a normative, acceptable relationship in the context of the Chinese socio-cultural realm is. Both Wil and her mother transgress not only social rules of the collective but also the values in the familial construct; Wil because of her lesbian identity and Hwei-Lan because of her pregnancy out of wedlock. Hwei-Lan's arc forms a model for what Wil would face in the wider social community, and the exchanges between Hwei-Lan and her father parallel the dynamic between Wil and Hwei-Lan. Upon finding out the Hwei-Lan is pregnant, her father erupts in rage:

No family's daughter is more shameful[3] than you! [...] Didn't you think about how other people would see me, laugh at me? [...] Give up on your 'face', fine, but I still want to keep mine! (Wu, my own translation)

Subsequently, Hwei-Lan is disowned, and effectively banished from the respectable realm of the family; a parallel of the threat that many queer individuals face. On the other hand, Wil and Hwei-Lan's relationship is strained similarly due to the banishment of the inappropriate to the liminal and invisible space. Wil reveals to her friend Jay that Hwei-Lan is aware of her homosexuality:

Wil: She knows.
Jay: She does?
Wil: She dropped by my apartment a couple years ago unannounced.
Jay: She caught you. So, what'd she say?
Wil: Nothing. She dropped some dumplings on the table and left. We haven't talked about it since.
Jay: She kept setting you up with guys?
Wil: That's when it started.
(Wu, my own translation)

The deployment of reticence here–the denial and lack of acknowledgement–all ties in the relegating of the forbidden and transgressive into penumbric existence. Reticence "judges and holds responsible [...] with actions and not words" (Liu and Deng, 42), not as an outright confrontation but rather utilised with the tactics of shame, which shadows and outlines the realm of reticence. Wil's comment that her mother's efforts to set her up with men started after her discovery of her lesbian identity further shows how reticence extends and expands from the belief to "make things proper" and attempt to relegate dissident individuality back into the normative order of things (Chou, *Tongzhi,* 253).

The theme of shame, present in both Hwei-Lan and Wil's arc, is additionally rooted not just in individual shame but in the shaming of the collective identity (i.e. the family). As the Chinese individual is inextricably rooted in the family construct, personal transgressions are accounted for in the context of the entire family. This is exhibited in the previous extract regarding Hwei-Lan's pregnancy, and further shown in Wil's coming out scene:

Wil: I love you. And I'm gay.
Hwei-Lan: How can you say these two things in one single breath? You say you love me, then you break my heart like that. I am not a bad mother. My daughter cannot be gay. (Wu, my own translation)

Wil's deviant sexuality is seen as a transgression not just done by herself, but also seen as her mother's fault. The construction of Wil's identity is rooted in her relationship with her mother, and the deviance from the appropriate and propriety that is dictated by socio-familial forces is also considered as a failing of the parent. Wil, by 'coming out' to her mother, forces her to confront what has been pushed into the liminal realm, making the invisible visible – and in doing so, exposing the shame within.

Reconciliation and rebuilding of the Chinese family

Both films confront how the queer Chinese identity struggles to navigate the traditional Chinese familial realm, with its reticence-heavy atmosphere and the burden of upkeep the filial harmony. But, in the crux of both films resides the possibilities of reconciliation and rebuilding, and further pushes the boundaries of the traditional family. Both films similarly embrace the previously invisible things that were kept in the liminal space, and portray the subversion of the traditional home. This section articulates that coming out does not foreclose the possibility of coming home, and outlines the different forms of acceptance and integration between the queer individual and the family.

In *The Wedding Banquet*, Wei-Wei becomes pregnant and decides to raise the child together with Wei-Tung and Simon. This unconventional structure of family, with two queer fathers and one heterosexual mother, actively subverts and queers the very basis of the familial construct. At the same time, the decision to keep the child and formulate a family aligns with the normative household structure – meaning that despite his deviant sexuality, Wei-Tung still fulfills his filial responsibility. It is also revealed that Wei-Tung's father had known that Wei-Tung is gay and in a relationship with Simon, who he acknowledges as his son-in-law in the form of gifting him a red packet. The marital and familial connotations behind the red packet signals a form of acceptance, and brings into light other possibilities that allow for the reconciliation between the family and the individual, possibilities that do not require the relegation of the queer self into liminality.

In *Saving Face*, Hwei-Lan recognises the happiness that Wil derives from her relationship with Vivian whilst acknowledging her own happiness in her 'taboo' love affair with a younger man. Both shame-tinged affairs are finally confronted and accepted by both mother and daughter, and unconventional relationships fit into the family dynamic. Director Alice Wu stated in an interview that the relationship between mother and daughter, based on her own experience, had "everything to do with her willingness to make changes in her own life to be happy" (Bolonik). The closing shot before the credits shows Wil and Vivian swaying and kissing, surrounded by the other members of the Chinese social club, while the mid-credits scene depicts the characters at a family gathering. This signals how the queer Chinese self is embedded in the familial realm, and that integration between the two is not only possible but necessary.

Through analysing these films, we dispense with the idea that coming out is invariably aligned with the Western model of a linear process that neglects the

familial site in exchange for the public, external community. Instead, the queer Chinese individual undergoes a unique, continuously varying path in the assertion of their identity, one that is inextricably twined with the filial structure and treasures the reunion between family and individual.

There are still unanswered questions about whether genuine reconciliation can be achieved; Gao Baba in *The Wedding Banquet* subtly accepts Simon, but that is contingent on him having a grandchild, whilst whether Wil's relationship with Vivian will clash with filial responsibilities is not properly addressed. The goal, however, is acknowledging that there is no 'end point' for queer acceptance in the Chinese family; what is and should be prioritised is the frequent interrogation of the family structure, and opening up spaces for transformation.

Footnotes

1. Among the most popular being Cass and D'Augelli's models, which focus on the queer individual's integration into the wider society, with fleeting mentions of the familial structure's influence on the individual's queer acceptance process.

2. 'Keeping face' (面子; mianzi) as in the Chinese cultural concept of outward-facing reputation, honour and respectability.

3. The exact phrase used is '丢脸' (diulian), literally meaning 'losing face'.

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THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME: DOROTHY'S JOURNEY AND DOMESTIC IDEOLOGY IN THE WIZARD OF OZ

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"There's no place like home." With these words, Dorothy Gale clicks her heels three times and vanishes from the colorful, magical land of Oz, returning to the gray Kansas prairie where she began. This iconic moment from L. Frank Baum's 1900 novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* has resonated through generations as a comforting affirmation of home's irreplaceable value. Yet beneath this sentimental surface lies a more troubling narrative: Dorothy's circular journey represents not a heroine's triumphant adventure, but a story of feminine containment that ultimately reinforces early 20th-century domestic ideology. While Oz offers Dorothy agency, power, and significance, Baum's text systematically devalues these experiences, positioning the impoverished Kansas farm as the proper "home" for a young girl. This narrative structure reveals profound anxieties about female autonomy and exposes the mechanisms by which what historian Barbara Welter terms the "cult of true womanhood" was maintained at the turn of the century, even as women increasingly challenged their confinement to the private sphere.

Baum's opening description of Kansas establishes home as a place of profound deprivation. The prairie is gray, the grass is gray, the house is gray, and even Uncle Henry and Aunt Em have been drained of color and joy by years of harsh labor. Aunt Em, we are told, was once young and pretty, but "the sun and wind had changed her, too. They had taken the sparkle from her eyes and left them a sober gray; they had taken the red from her cheeks and lips, and they were gray also. She was thin and gaunt, and never smiled now" (Baum 11). This is the "home" to which Dorothy must long to return—a place where life itself seems to have been bleached away, where work brings no pleasure and existence offers no vibrancy.

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This portrayal reflects the harsh material realities of prairie farm life, where women's domestic labor was both essential to family survival and physically devastating. Yet the text insists this barren domesticity is where Dorothy belongs. The ideology Welter identifies as the "cult of true womanhood" positioned the home as woman's "natural" domain through four cardinal virtues: "piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" (152). By the 1820s, Welter argues, these virtues had become so deeply entrenched that "without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement or wealth, all was ashes. With them she was promised happiness and power" (152). Baum's narrative echoes this ideology nearly a century later, insisting that Dorothy's proper sphere is the domestic realm regardless of that realm's actual conditions. Dorothy, an orphan with no agency over her circumstances, is being socialized into Aunt Em's fate—a future as a farm wife whose existence offers neither vibrancy nor prospects beyond domestic service.

The contrast when Dorothy arrives in Oz could not be more stark. The cyclone tears her from the domestic sphere and deposits her in a world of vivid color, magic, and possibility. Everything Kansas lacks, Oz provides: beauty, wonder, friendship, and most significantly, a role for Dorothy that extends far beyond the domestic. She immediately matters in Oz in ways she never did in Kansas. Her house's landing kills the Wicked Witch of the East, and Dorothy is instantly hailed as a powerful sorceress and liberator. The Munchkins celebrate her, the Good Witch of the North kisses her forehead as protection, and she is given the silver shoes—objects of genuine magical power.

What follows inverts traditional gender expectations in remarkable ways. Dorothy embarks on a quest, that most masculine of narrative structures, and gathers a company of male companions who defer to her leadership. The Scarecrow, Tin Woodman, and Cowardly Lion all look to Dorothy for guidance and moral clarity. She makes the decisions, charts the course, and demonstrates consistent courage and resourcefulness. When the Wizard proves incapable of helping them, it is Dorothy who kills the Wicked Witch of the West, proving herself a witch-slayer twice over. This is not a passive princess awaiting rescue but an active hero whose competence exceeds that of her male companions and the patriarchal authority figure of the Wizard himself.

Jack Zipes, examining the subversive potential of fairy tales, argues that such narratives can challenge dominant ideologies by presenting alternative social arrangements. Dorothy's adventure in Oz does precisely this, offering a vision of female capability that directly contradicts the cult of domesticity's insistence on women's natural limitations. She operates successfully in the public sphere of adventure and quest—the realm coded as masculine—and proves herself more capable than the men around her. Significantly, in Oz she is not performing domestic labor. She is the protagonist of her own story, not its support system. As Zipes observes of subversive fairy tales, they "seek to illuminate the truth of social conditions" (125). Dorothy's journey illuminates the arbitrariness of gendered spheres by demonstrating her competence outside them.

The revelation of the Wizard's true nature is crucial to understanding the text's gender politics. The Wizard—the ultimate patriarchal authority figure whom everyone fears and obeys—is exposed as a fraud, a "common man" from Kansas who has used theatrical tricks to maintain power. He cannot actually help Dorothy or her companions; his power is entirely performative, built on deception rather than genuine ability. Yet the text's treatment of this revelation is remarkably gentle. The Wizard is revealed as a "good man" who simply isn't magical. The narrative reveals that the Scarecrow, Tin Woodman, and Lion never actually lacked brains, heart, or courage—they possessed these qualities all along and merely needed to recognize them.

This same pattern applies to Dorothy, but with a crucial difference. She, too, possessed the power to return home all along—the silver shoes could have transported her at any moment. Glinda knows this but doesn't tell Dorothy at the beginning of her journey, explaining later that Dorothy wouldn't have believed her and needed to learn the lesson for herself. But what lesson? That adventure is less valuable than domesticity? That her power and agency should be used only to return to powerlessness? The revelation that Dorothy could have gone home immediately doesn't empower her—it undermines the value of everything she experienced and accomplished in Oz.

Throughout her adventure, Dorothy repeatedly expresses her desire to return to Kansas. After defeating witches, navigating dangerous territories, and proving her courage time and again, she remains fixated on going home to Aunt Em. The text frames this desire as natural, even admirable—evidence of Dorothy's good heart and proper values. Yet this narrative choice systematically devalues her adventure, positioning Oz's wonders as problems to solve rather than experiences to embrace.

The mechanism of Dorothy's return is particularly revealing. The silver shoes' power is activated not by any external force but by Dorothy's own desire for home. She must click her heels three times while thinking of Kansas. The magic works only because she genuinely desires to leave Oz and return to the gray prairie. This appears to grant Dorothy agency: she is not forced back but chooses to return. Yet this represents what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in their analysis of nineteenth-century women's literature, identify as constrained choice within patriarchal narrative structures. Though Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* examines Victorian texts, their concept of how "women have been denied the economic, social, and psychological status ordinarily essential to creativity" illuminates how Baum's 1900 text extends nineteenth-century patterns of feminine containment into the Progressive Era (49). Dorothy has been so thoroughly socialized into believing that home —gray, joyless, limiting home—is where she belongs that she actively chooses her own containment.

One might argue that Dorothy's desire to return reflects genuine emotional bonds rather than ideological conditioning—that her love for Aunt Em represents something authentic that transcends questions of agency. Indeed, Dorothy's concern for her aunt demonstrates real affection. Yet this very emotional attachment reveals another dimension of gendered socialization. Dorothy has been trained not only to accept domestic limitation but to provide emotional labor, to prioritize others' needs above her own development. Even in Oz, she continues this caretaking role, comforting the Scarecrow and encouraging the Lion. Her love for Aunt Em is genuine, but that love has been cultivated within a system that teaches girls that self-sacrifice is their highest virtue. The fact that emotional bonds coexist with social constraint does not negate the constraint; rather, it shows how effectively ideology operates when it secures not just compliance but willing, even loving, participation.

What has Dorothy actually learned? The text insists she has learned that "there's no place like home," that Aunt Em's love matters more than adventure, power, or self-actualization. But the lesson beneath the lesson is more insidious: that female power and agency are less important than returning to one's proper domestic sphere. Dorothy's growth, her demonstrated competence, her genuine power—all of it is erased the moment she clicks her heels. She returns to the same gray Kansas, unchanged, with the same limited prospects. Her adventure leaves no tangible trace.

The narrative insists this is a happy ending, yet Baum's own descriptions undermine this claim. Dorothy returns to a place explicitly depicted as colorless and joyless, to

an aunt destroyed by domestic labor, to a future promising only more of the same. The text asks us to believe that this is superior to a magical land where Dorothy was powerful, respected, and genuinely needed. The very impossibility of this claim reveals the ideological work the narrative must perform: domesticity must be enforced through story because it is not naturally desirable to capable, adventurous young women.

The Wonderful Wizard of Oz was published in 1900, at a moment of profound tension around gender roles in American society. The women's suffrage movement was gaining momentum, with women increasingly demanding access to education, professional work, and political participation. The "New Woman" of the 1890s and early 1900s challenged the cult of domesticity by seeking lives beyond the home. Baum's text can be read as a cultural negotiation of these anxieties. It allows Dorothy temporary power and agency—acknowledging the reality of female capability—but ultimately insists she must relinquish this power and return to domesticity. The fantasy genre provides a safe space to explore the threat of female autonomy and then neutralize it. Dorothy can be powerful in Oz because Oz is not real; her return to Kansas represents the restoration of proper social order. As Gretchen Ritter observes, *The Wizard of Oz* "is a story about journeying away from home and then returning home, transformed but also restored" (172). Yet this "restoration" carries different meanings for Dorothy than for her male companions, who return to Oz to rule. Dorothy alone must be restored to domestic limitation.

The cyclone itself becomes a metaphor for the social upheaval of changing gender roles. It violently disrupts Dorothy's domestic life, carrying her into unknown territory where traditional rules don't apply. The text allows this disruption but insists it must be temporary. Adventure is positioned as disorder, something to be survived and overcome rather than embraced. The goal is always restoration—getting back to Kansas, getting back to a world where girls know their place. This ideology connects to broader mythologies of American identity. Kansas represents the heartland, traditional values, the "real America" of farms and family. Dorothy's return is framed as recognition of what truly matters, but it also represents a rejection of alternatives, an insistence that there is no legitimate life for women beyond domestic service.

The genius and the tragedy of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* lies in its creation of a genuinely powerful female protagonist whom it then cannot allow to keep her power. Baum gives Dorothy real agency, real competence, and real importance—and then insists she must give it all up. The text reveals the mechanisms of feminine socialization with unusual clarity: Dorothy must not only return home but must actively desire that return. She must believe that Kansas is superior to Oz, that Aunt Em's gray existence is more valuable than her own colorful adventure. The ideology succeeds not when it forces compliance but when it secures willing participation.

Yet the text unconsciously reveals the fragility of this ideology through its own descriptions. The very grayness of Kansas, the joylessness of farm life, the obvious superiority of Oz in every material and experiential way—all of this undermines the lesson the narrative attempts to teach. If home were truly so wonderful, would the text need to work so hard to convince us? If domesticity were naturally fulfilling for women, would Dorothy need magical shoes to make her choose it?

Dorothy clicks her heels three times and vanishes from Oz, but perhaps the real magic trick is the one Baum performs on his readers: convincing generations that the gray Kansas farm is truly worth more than Oz, that limitation is superior to possibility, that a young girl's proper place is always and inevitably the domestic sphere from which she started. This magic trick—the ideological sleight of hand that makes containment look like homecoming—reveals more about early 20th-century anxieties around female power than it does about the true nature of home. There may be no place like home, but for Dorothy Gale and the countless women whose lives she represents, that is not necessarily the comfort the story pretends it to be.

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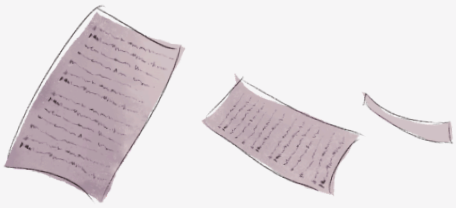

"SHE SHOULDN'T BE ON THE FIELD ANYWAY" RACIAL BORDERS AND POLICING OF IDENTITIES IN EVERYDAY SPACES

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Knowing borders as 'racial' refers to the manner in which language of difference, conceived in the creation of the ideology of race, is now applied through the tightening and restricting of migrants and migration across national boundaries. This piece will explore how everyday bordering (Yuval-Davis et al., 2018) works to disrupt the making of 'home' for migrants, not only at border crossings but in spaces such as employment, leisure, and sport, and can even work to disrupt the ability to feel at *home* in one's body. By applying an intersectional lens to the displacement of home caused by racial, everyday borders, it will be argued that processes of othering in society are fundamentally linked to the logic of racial hierarchies embedded in everyday bordering. First, this will be examined by tracing how the policing of borders weaponises concepts originating out of white supremacy. This will then be used to explain how borders today continue to differentiate treatment on the basis of a racial hierarchy. A case study will then be introduced, looking at the undertones of whiteness in UK-based discourses on award of the BBC Women's Footballer of the Year 2024 to Zambian footballer Barbra Banda. This will demonstrate the intersections between racial governmentality of migrants and racial constructions in hegemonic ideals of masculinity and femininity. This will contextualise the vitality of using an intersectional analysis to deconstruct racial borders, through an examination of how racial bordering works in everyday spaces of community.

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The History of 'Race' and Borders

Understanding history through the lens of European colonialism makes evident how migration and borders have been?, and continue to be, a central tool in creating unequal and racial colonial orders. Mass migration from colonial metropoles to the peripheries was an exercise of free movement, which allowed the creation of settler colonies (Gutierrez Rodriquez, 2018). After the creation of settler colonies such as Australia, conditionality on movement was imposed to restrict the movement of racialised peoples, showing that borders function along and replicate racial lines. This process of border flexing was instigated alongside the development and creation of the modern liberal and sovereign western nation state, and the conditionality of borders stems from the necessity of selective movement which built the modern nation states (Johnston & Lawson, 2005). This demonstrates that the policing and presence of borders is malleable — able to be flexed and changed in order to actualise the existence of a superior race, and to manifest racial and racist hierarchies (Achiume, 2022, p. 454). Mezzadra and Neilson (2012) term this as differential inclusion, showing that a person's status as a migrant is subject to fluctuating legal definitions as well as cultural and economic demands placed on legal and illegalised migrants. By centralising the critical race theory understanding that 'race' has been shown to be an unstable category (Balibar, 2011, p. 27), we can understand that, similarly, the fleeting and trivial markers that fluctuate to make a person's immigration status are unstable and subject to frequent change. Achiume's definition of borders as racial explicitly traces the impact of this history to now, showing that national borders still have disparate impacts along the lines of 'race'. One way this is actualised is through visa schemes imposed by the UK which systematically deny applications from countries where the majority of people are non-white, such as the African continent, much more frequently than applications from North America, a white majority country (ibid., p. 471). Because UK border institutions are able to obscure their racist intentions by splitting guidance and visa requirements by countries rather by race, the effects of their bordering can appear non-racially explicit— not targeted at black and other racialised people, but at 'Africans' (white and non-white alike). However, the real embodied outcomes of this racial functioning of borders, instituted at territorial sites of historical coloniality, uphold white supremacy and mark non-white bodies as less free.

Looking at the patterns that result from the practical application of border restrictions is central to understanding borders as racial. However, more important for the ontological investigation of the racial functioning of borders is examining the way in which the space of borders work as sites that permit strict yet conflicting definitions of citizenship. This works to segment and stratify types of non-citizen in a deliberately hierarchical order (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2012). While seemingly not based on racial identities, the application of different definitions of a citizen borrows from, and replicates, the social construction of race in subjecting people to differential inclusion. This moulds non-citizens' identities at the borders into those that are superior, and therefore freer and more unrestricted, and the antithesis of freedom for those marked as inferior. These categories of identity can be based on a complex calculation which takes into account country of origin, changing labour demands and method of entry (Shachar, 2009).

Intersectionality is a lens which focuses on the need to consider that the lives of black women exist at the intersection of overlapping and complex forms of control (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality can highlight how different socially constructed identities intersect with socially constructed ideals of migration to govern differential inclusion (Lafleur & Romero, 2018). For example, hegemonic masculinity and femininity contribute to the notion of citizenship as applied differently; the frequent demonisation of black and brown migrant men as sexually violent shapes the extent to which borders restrict and frame their lives, with female migrants portrayed as contingent passive victims of distant conflict (Kroon & van der Meer, 2021). This therefore translates to different impacts in the freedom with which refugee men can successfully resettle (Griffiths, 2015), and the ability of female refugees to break the bounds of this portrayals without backlash – or indeed have a reunited family (Threadgold, 2006). The creation of different narratives about identities present within migration can then also be extended to other

groups of migrants in times of 'crisis' or heightened media attention, seen in the European 'refugee crisis' in 2015 which centred on Middle Eastern migrants (Bonjour & Bracke, 2020). Similarly, Eastern European migrants are shown to be able to 'pass as white' only when they are deemed sufficiently middle class – a further example of the complex social processes of belonging and othering (Blachnicka-Ciacek & Budginaite-Mackine, 2022) showing the importance of examining intersections of marginality in migration journeys to expose the workings of the systems of power at play. Racial borders are spaces in which superiority and inferiority is stratified by changing, moving and unstable categories that blend ideas about labour, cultural identity, deservingness and race, and are ultimately naturalised through the allegedly non-racial labels of citizen/non-citizen. The examination of splintering of identities within the immigration system and citizenship is another example of the power which comes from the creation and monitoring of micro-identities, governed by social forces.

Everyday Bordering: Disruption of Home

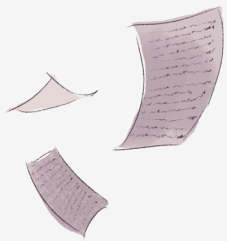
The analysis of everyday bordering identifies the workings of racial borders in spaces far and beyond physical border crossing points and employees of the UK home office border force, complimentary to the intersectional analysis of the splintering of identities. Mezzadra & Neilson (2012) identify that all political processes are intensified at a border (p. 60) and Balibar (2004) identifies that border control has moved to the "middle of political space" (p. 109), due to the role that everyday institutions play in enforcing immigration policy. Consequently, we can understand how intensely the identities of citizen and non-citizen are played out in spaces of community such as employment, healthcare, education, neighbourhoods, and cities. The evolution of language weaponised in the creation of racial difference, can be seen clearly to now be deployed in the sphere of migration to reproduce and create hierarchies that results in some migrants being racialised as inferior (Pereira Trindade & Yilmaz, 2025). These understandings provide and set vital context for Yuval-Davis's (2018) discussion of everyday bordering in the UK. The movement of borders into the everyday transforms not only employers, and similarly teachers, doctors, and housing staff, into proxy extensions of home office enforcers, but indeed transforms those racialised and stratified people too into policers of their own precarious status (Yuval-Davis, et al., 2018, p. 233). It quickly becomes evident how if a person is constructed as a non-citizen at the border, because racial borders are not spatially fixed and permeate the everyday, that a person's non-citizen status can follow them around, preventing the putting down of roots and the establishment of home or belonging in a community (Webber, 2021). What the understanding of borders as 'racial' can do in combination with an intersectional feminist view of migration, is illuminate how systems of binary oppressions interact to create an embedded and pervasively hostile environment for migrants (Yuval-Davis, 2008). Hegemonic identities work to create binary categories, such as those of 'man', 'woman', 'black', 'white' (Schipppers, 2007). An intersectional view understands that binary identities are socially constructed, and that when complex and socially constructed identities outside of the cultural norm interact with systems which derive their power from hierarchical positioning of identity, the fundamental contradictions within them are exposed (Crenshaw, 1989).

Boundaries in Women's Sport

The realm of sport is a particularly ripe area in which to look at the intersection of the policing of bodies by the above outlined implicitly racial borders, and hegemonic and dominant ideas of masculinity and femininity, because of the central role the body plays in cultural understandings of sport (Wilks, 2020). Barbra Banda is a women's footballer who currently plays for Orlando Pride, a team in the top division of the National Women's Soccer League in the USA (BBC, 2024). She has also represented Zambia, her national team, at major tournaments – though in 2022 Banda was prevented

from playing for Zambia in the Women's Africa Cup of Nations (Karoney, 2022). According to the Football Association of Zambia, this was because of her failing a "gender verification test" due to abnormal testosterone levels, although the Confederation of African Football (who are responsible for gender verification testing) dispute this, saying she was withdrawn by her national association and no tests were undertaken or failed (Knight & Worden, 2022). Despite overcoming these hardships in even being able to play, at only 25 years of age, Barbra Banda is considered one of the best women's footballers in the world —scoring 57 goals in 63 matches for Zambia, breaking countless scoring records domestic leagues and international football, and being renowned for her goalscoring, confidence and technical skill. Because of this in 2024, Banda won (via public vote) the BBC Women's Footballer of the Year award (BBC, 2024). This victory for Banda sparked significant backlash within the UK print media and on social media, with comments immediately jumping to question Banda's sex and gender identity, accusing her of being a man and inferring she should not be eligible to compete in the game (Wrack, 2025). Despite being assigned female at birth and living as a cisgender woman, Banda was subject to an outpouring of racist and transphobic abuse for existing outside the norm of a white female body (Grover, 2020). The spillover of this discourse was not limited to the online sphere, as since the high-profile conversation around Banda's sex, she was subject to abuse from the crowd at multiple football matches (PA Media, 2025). At the time of writing, almost exactly a year on from that initial racist transphobia directed towards Banda, she has again been the target of media attacks in response to being named in the FIFPRO World Best XI (Vertelney, 2025). The questioning of Banda's gender exposes the commonalities between misogynoir and transphobia— both originate as retaliations against divergent forms of gender expression that threaten the norm of the gender binary (Snorton, 2017).

Understood through an intersectional lens, the vitriol and abuse directed at Banda exposes the ongoing conflation of hegemonic femininity with whiteness. The outrage stems not from concerns about hormonal advantages in women's sports, but from ideas about how the female body should look, which are fundamentally embedded in a westernised, white-centred world view (Adjepong & Carrington, 2014). In a space where white womanhood and white female bodily features are the norm, the black female athletic body is constantly treated with suspicion and accusations on non-belongings. The racism that is enacted towards Banda, can therefore be understood as a consequence of her invading a historically white, masculine space— which arose to be so out of colonial and exclusionary histories (Puwar, 2004). By comparison, cisgender men who have hormonal advantages in men's sports, such as swimmer Michael Phelps, are celebrated as phenomenal athletes— their biology is not used to question their gender identity (Fischer & McClearen, 2020). Across women's sports instead of this same celebration, black female superiority is routinely questioned on the basis that it diverts from

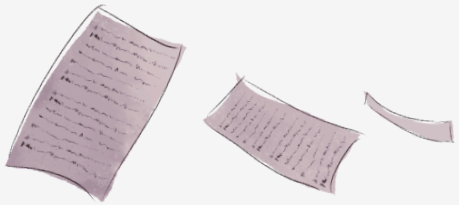


the white norm, seen in athletics with Caster Semenya, boxing with Imane Khelif, and tennis with Serena Williams (Engh, 2025). The way in which arguments about sex difference centre on non-white (yet cisgender) women exposes how women's sports spaces are caught up in, and further perpetuate, the same foundations of white supremacy which positions whiteness as the assumed, natural and objective norm (Fischer, 2023). The case of Banda, in combination with a wider understanding of the historical construction of the black female body as unfeminine, demonstrates how the actualisation of hegemonic identities can work to police the bodies, expression of identity and behaviour of black women. These forms of control over gender and racial identities can in turn be applied to any group which threatens the racial hierarchy of power in some way. Therefore, this intersectional exploration of Banda's experiences allows for an understanding of how the perpetual negation of black womanhood prevents black female athletes, such as Banda, to feel comfortable and at home in her own body without being constructed as

an invader, a predator in women's sports, and tying back into enforcing that divergent forms of femininity do not belong in sports, and consequently, wider society.

Borders in Sports and Beyond

But how does this relate to everyday racial borders? Barbra Banda is an immigrant and visa holder in the US, awarded this status based on her exceptional sporting ability. Borders are institutions which, as has been shown above, are not static and immutable, but active in creating and mediating identities. This is also achieved by selective intervention in global flows of people and labour (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2012). The productive institutions of borders not only affect migrants, but the underlying racial logic too creates the ideas of citizens who do not belong (Castles & Davison, 2000). Everyday borders can be understood then, to govern the lives of anyone perceived as non-belonging— particularly people of colour. The othering of non-white looking individuals links to the othering of migrants and they both draw from the same constructions of white supremacy in order to justify the existence of border regimes and exclusion of black women from western societies (Nunnally, 2010).



Therefore, the understandings of power and the way identities are splintered in order to uphold white supremacy can be drawn from both the concept of stratified racial borders which permeate the everyday, and the case study of Barbra Banda and the controversy of her mere existence in women's football in America. It can be seen that hegemonic white femininity draws the borders around what physique, attributes, bodily ideals and behaviours are acceptable, and conformity with these ideals is encouraged and rewarded (Upadhyay, 2021). These borders are actualised and brought into the everyday by instances such as the publicly visible abuse directed towards Banda and other female athletes, which teaches women of colour throughout society that their expression of femininity is not acceptable and contributes to the regimentation the lives of black, brown and non-white women in the Global North (Wilks, 2020).

The intersectional lens exposes the interplays in oppressive structures which govern the experience of women and racialised bodies, and importantly, how these structures of power enter everyday spaces. Similarly, the stratification of identity at borders works to uphold white hegemonic identities as privileged and powerful, and works within these same power structures to extend racial borders to the everyday.

Additionally, we return to the life of Banda to draw another intersectional example of the impact of racial border. In 2025, Banda and several of her Zambian teammates were unable to play for Zambia in games due to concerns that upon their return to the US, they would not be permitted entry and have their visas revoked (Guardian Sport, 2025). Here, the interplay of misogynoir (which refers to the intersection between racism and sexism that can be uniquely targeted at black women) and borders can be seen to, again, control the movement and freedom of racialised individuals who are caught at this intersection of multiple structures of oppression— that are amplified at the border (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2012, p. 60). In times of salient political discourse and policy concerning migrants, those affected are those who experience the intersections of multiple power systems— in this case, a black, African woman from the Global South. This prevented Banda and her teammates from not only representing her home nation, but travelling and visiting her home country. Caught in limbo, unable to be at home in her body, in her profession, or in her country of birth, the everyday implications of racial hierarchies at the border and in gender identities are visible to see. In many ways, both the backlash against Banda and her inability to travel outside the US typify the actual functioning of racial borders and how they are able to permeate beyond the physical border into representing control over the lives of people who transcend borders into countries where they are othered and made an outlier and minority. This reinforces the racial hierarchies created at borders that place white bodies as more free from criticism and scrutiny, and more free to move through the world. Compoundingly, the Senegalese women's basketball team have been named as the first victims of the recent United States travel ban, which targets in the majority African nations and imposes a blanket ban on visas

granted to those nationalities to enter the US (Ewing, 2025). This again shows that the disempowering nature of the social categories of race and gender disadvantage female athletes in prominent and unique ways, and that these processes are mediated by, and begin at, borders.

To summarise, racial borders emerged from a colonial and Euro-Centric construction of history and weaponise the politics of difference in order to disrupt the process of homemaking for immigrants. This piece intends to add to the literature on the hostile environment to elaborate on some of the day-to-day forces that govern the life of migrants, and how these forces draw on long created concepts of racial hierarchy. This was shown to be actualised through the infiltrating of borders into everyday spaces of community far beyond physical border crossings, and the impacts this has on different migrant identities. Hegemonic ideas of masculinity and femininity born from a white, western world further extend and shape the embodiment of racial borders for black female athletes such as Barbra Banda. Intersectionality is therefore a critical lens with which to look at the everyday impacts of borders, and how they are embodied by intersecting and overlapping structural inequalities of power. This has significant implications for the way we understand the relationship between everyday spaces of work and leisure, and the centrality of migratory discourses to those spaces and the way both citizens and non-citizens navigate them.

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BELONGING OTHERWISE: AUTISTIC MOTHERS AND THE BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL FEMINIST POLITICS OF THE HOME

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Autistic mothers frequently experience both belonging and exclusion in normative motherhood as their ways of caring are unfairly judged against cultural ideals of maternal selflessness, a constant state of being attuned, and emotional labour, which fail to validate unique autistic mothering practices (Pohl et al. 2020; Dugdale et al. 2021; Kanfiszer et al. 2017). This essay does not imply that autistic mothers are inherently less attuned, less selfless, or less emotionally capable than neurotypical mothers. Instead, it argues that differences in sensory processing, communication, and executive function often lead to different expressions of being attuned and care that are poorly captured by dominant metrics; those mismatches produce misrecognition, not inevitable inferiority.

Framed biopsychosocially and informed by feminist critique, the paper treats autistic motherhood as constituted through reciprocal relations among embodied neurodivergence, cognitive–emotional experience, and sociocultural structures (Engel 1977; Wendell 1996; Fraser 2013). Drawing on five participant-centred studies, I demonstrate how the "difficulties" attributed to autistic mothers are often the predictable outcomes of an infrastructural and normative mismatch, rather than solely individual deficits (Pohl et al., 2020; Dugdale et al., 2021; Kafer, 2013).

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Methodology

This paper is a qualitative synthesis of five studies selected for centering autistic women's voices, employing qualitative or participatory methods, and offering complementary designs that enable cross-method comparison: a thematic interview study of childbirth and postnatal care, a large community-participatory survey, an interpretative phenomenological analysis, and two narrative analyses of identity and life trajectories (Hampton et al. 2021; Pohl et al. 2020; Kanfiszer et al. 2017; Webster & Garvis 2016; Dugdale et al. 2021). Analytically, the paper follows three epistemic commitments. Firstly, it privileges lived experience and gives particular weight to autistic-led or co-produced knowledge. It treats autistic traits as relational resources, that is, as capacities that gain meaning and value through interactions with environments, relationships, and caregiving contexts rather than as fixed individual attributes (Milton 2012; Kafer 2013; Walker 2021; Pohl et al. 2020). Secondly, it employs cross-method triangulation to identify recurrent themes as higher-confidence findings inductively (Pohl et al., 2020; Dugdale et al., 2021). Thirdly, a feminist, intersectional lens situates participants' accounts within gendered, ableist, and socio-economic power structures (Crenshaw 1991; Fraser 2013; Kafer 2013). Where studies omit demographic data (e.g., race, migration, communication diversity, etc), those absences are treated as analytically meaningful limitations that constrain generalisation (Pohl et al. 2020; Dugdale et al. 2021; Gore et al. 2024; Kanfiszer et al. 2017).

Domestic Sphere

The domestic sphere is the primary site where autistic mothers in the corpus both produce intense forms of belonging and experience concentrated, gendered burdens (Dugdale et al., 2021; Pohl et al., 2020). Reading these studies through a biopsychosocial frame clarifies how the "difficulties" described are rarely reducible to biology alone (Engel, 1977; Shakespeare, 2013). Across the qualitative interviews and the large participatory survey, embodied neurodivergent features shape day-to-day caregiving in specific ways (Hampton et al., 2021; Pohl et al., 2020). Sensory sensitivities, executive-function differences, and affective experiences are shaped by the environmental accessibility autistic mothers have, as well as perceptions of their unique abilities (Webster & Garvis, 2016; Walker, 2021). For example, Pohl et al.'s large survey echoes this in the longer term: autistic mothers report greater difficulty with multitasking, domestic organisation, and the unpredictability of infant routines (2020).

Psychologically, the studies show pervasive exhaustion, anxiety, and masking or strategic presentation (Hull et al., 2017; Dugdale et al., 2021). Kanfiszer et al. (2017) and Webster and Garvis (2016) illuminate identity work following diagnosis — women reframe past experiences and sometimes repurpose traits like persistence and focused interests as strengths — while Hampton et al. (2021) and Pohl et al. (2020) document perinatal anxiety and high rates of prenatal/postnatal depression. This biopsychosocial lens helps us see these states not merely as internal pathologies but as predictable psychological responses to sustained sensory overload, social surveillance, and the moral pressure to "get motherhood right" (Kafer, 2013; Fricker, 2007; Fraser, 2013).

The "social" dimension — where feminist theory is most insightful— explains why these embodied and psychological features translate into deficits rather than simply different styles of parenting (Hays, 1996; Hochschild, 1983). Feminist work on the social organisation of reproductive labour shows how unpaid caregiving is normalised and moralised (Federici, 2004; Bhattacharya, 2017). Normative, idealised pressures of self-sacrificing motherhood make sensory and executive demands morally fraught (Rich, 1976; Ruddick, 1989). For example, breastfeeding becomes not only a tactile challenge but also a site where failing to conform can be taken as failing as a mother (Pohl et al., 2020; Hampton et al., 2021). The result is a double burden where mothers must manage sensory discomfort while also navigating moral judgment (Fraser, 2013; Federici, 2004). Furthermore, the corpus makes clear that autistic

mothers disproportionately bear this invisible labour because social institutions neither redistribute care nor adequately recognise non-normative care practices that are less strenuous for their unique brains (Fraser, 1995; Federici, 2004; Dugdale et al., 2021). Pohl et al. find that autistic mothers are more likely to feel judged, isolated, and unable to seek support (2020). Fraser's distinction between redistribution and recognition is helpful here: autistic mothers suffer from both a lack of redistribution (e.g., insufficient respite, workplace flexibility, affordable childcare, practical accommodations) and a lack of recognition (e.g., misreadings of competence, pathologising of adaptive strategies) (1995; 2013).

However, the corpus also highlights how the domestic production of belonging can be an active site of identity and agency (Dugdale et al., 2021; Webster & Garvis, 2016). Several qualitative accounts describe intense being attuned to infants and a capacity to "read" sensory cues, abilities some mothers interpret as a parenting strength (Webster & Garvis, 2016; Hampton et al., 2021). Biopsychosocially, these are unique biopsychological advantages to mothering with an autistic mind (Engel, 1977; Kafer, 2013). Yet these strengths often go unrecognised or are re-interpreted through deficit frames by professionals or allistic peers (Pohl et al., 2020; Dugdale et al., 2021). The same systems that reward normative maternal performance do not value alternative forms of care (Hays, 1996; Hochschild, 1983). This pattern reproduces stigma where autistic mothers must juggle extra labour to perform normative mothering while their distinctive competencies remain undervalued (Fricker, 2007; Milton, 2012).

Finally, an intersectional caveat is essential and empirically grounded. The studies' samples skew toward Western, partnered, verbally able participants who can access diagnostic services or online networks (Pohl et al., 2020; Dugdale et al., 2021). Kanfiszer et al. deliberately included women with intellectual disability and found qualitatively distinct trajectories of marginalisation, such as institutionalisation and more extreme social exclusion (2017). Class, race, migration status, and single parenthood likely shape access to accommodations, exposure to surveillance, and the capacity to translate caregiving knowledge into recognised expertise (Crenshaw, 1991; Erevelles, 2011). However, due to sampling constraints within existing research, these axes are under-researched as existing knowledge privileges the experiences of more privileged autistic women who can participate in studies and the spheres where research is advertised (Pohl et al., 2020; Dugdale et al., 2021).

Peer Networks

Peer networks emerge across the corpus as central infrastructures of belonging and practical care for autistic mothers (Pohl et al., 2020; Dugdale et al., 2021; Hampton et al., 2021). Whereas formal institutions such as maternity services, social services, and clinics were often experienced as surveillant, poorly informed, or unpredictable, autistic-led peer spaces were repeatedly described by participants as places where parenting styles were legible, strategies were validated, and embodied experience was treated as expertise (Milton, 2012; Pohl et al., 2020). Biologically, social environments that anticipate sensory needs reduce arousal and sympathetic activation, decreasing the physiological cost of participation (Walker, 2021; Devon Price, 2022). Psychologically, asynchronous online formats and autism-specific groups reduce masking demands and performance anxiety, freeing cognitive bandwidth otherwise spent on impression management and enabling more focused problem-solving (Hull et al., 2017; Milton, 2012). Socially and politically, autistic peer networks provide recognition: they legitimise non-normative caregiving styles, offer shared vocabulary for explaining one's embodied experience to non-autistic professionals, and incubate mutual advocacy tactics through co-production (Fraser, 1992; Warner, 2002; Linton, 1998; Spade, 2020).

Milton's dual-empathy formulation critically reframes why these spaces are necessary. The dual empathy problem is defined as the reciprocal mismatch in understanding between autistic and non-autistic people, where social difficulties arise not solely from autistic traits but from a two-way gap in communication, perspective-taking, and expectation (Milton, 2012). It frames social exclusion and misunderstanding as relational rather than purely intrinsic to autistic

mothers. Rather than viewing communication breakdowns between autistic mothers and professionals as unidirectional deficits, the dual-empathy approach locates the problem in mutual incomprehension rooted in different communicative and sensory styles (Milton, 2012). Peer networks collapse that asymmetry. Interlocutors share sufficiently overlapping norms to make exchange legible and affirmatory. This explains why mothers report feeling "understood" and why practical advice circulating in these communities is often finely attuned to sensory contingencies and executive-function realities, advice that mainstream parenting manuals and clinician training commonly omit (Pohl et al., 2020; Dugdale et al., 2021).

This paper expands this definition spatially, arguing that this mismatch is not only reproduced socially but also through allistic-constructed spaces. Spatially, the pattern is robust. In-depth interviews in the childbirth/postnatal study show that autistic mothers often preferred one-to-one or autistic-specific breastfeeding and parenting supports because such settings could be tailored to sensory and communicative needs (Hampton et al., 2021). The large participatory survey shows similar tendencies on a larger scale. In it, autistic mothers report finding mainstream parent groups exclusionary and often turn to online communities, autism-specific forums, or local autistic mothers' groups for practical advice, emotional reassurance, and policy advocacy (Pohl et al., 2020; Gore et al., 2024). In this way, autistic peer support groups validate the spatiality of autistic homes (Warner, 2002; Fraser, 1992).

When the mutual understanding explained by the dual-empathy problem is compounded, autistic peer networks function as subaltern counterpublics in which marginalised mothers articulate alternative meanings of competence and good care, and where collective claims for recognition and redistribution are formulated (Fraser, 1992; Warner, 2002). They have a dual function: immediate, practical provisioning (tips, mentoring, emotional support) and longer-term political influence (co-produced training materials, coordinated advocacy, and submissions to consultations) (Pohl et al., 2020; Baldwin & Costley, 2016). This is a vital corrective to institutional epistemic injustices (Fricker, 2007), but it is also politically fragile.

Yet, the affordances of peer networks can be ambivalent and stratified. Digital platforms extend reach and lower logistical barriers, making them especially valuable for mothers managing exhaustion, geographic isolation, or sensory intolerance for in-person groups (Pohl et al., 2020). However, the same digital infrastructures carry risks that reproduce social inequality. Access depends on technological connectivity, digital literacy, and safe private space for participation (Pohl et al., 2020). Additionally, moderation quality and community norms determine whether forums remain supportive or fragment into gatekeeping contests over diagnostic legitimacy, a tension Pohl et al. identify as salient for many women (2020). In addition, public posts can be weaponised in adversarial institutional contexts such as custody disputes and social services inquiries, so disclosure online carries safety costs (Pohl et al., 2020).

This fragility is twofold. Firstly, peer networks often rely on unpaid, gendered emotional labour. Moderators, mentors, and content curators who are frequently women perform intensive labour such as conflict mediation, signposting to resources, and crisis support without remuneration or formal recognition (Hochschild, 1983; Luxton, 2006; Bhattacharya, 2017). The corpus hints at burnout risks: those who shoulder moderation work do so in addition to domestic care, exacerbating the same exploitative distribution of labour a feminist analysis calls into question (Fraser, 2013; Federici, 2004). Second, intersectional dynamics shape both who benefits from peer networks and who does the labour (Crenshaw, 2017; Erevelles, 2011; Bailey, 2021).

Mothers with financial means, higher education, or stable partnerships are more likely to hold leadership

roles and have the capital to convert peer know-how into consultancy, training roles, or research partnerships. Conversely, marginalised mothers such as those who are racialised, low-income, single, and non-verbal may remain underheard in community decision-making or lack digital access entirely (Crenshaw, 2017; Erevelles, 2011).

There are also internal political tensions over epistemic authority. Debates about the value of self-diagnosis versus clinical diagnosis, authenticity, and gatekeeping can fracture communities and exclude those who cannot or choose not to pursue formal diagnoses (Pohl et al., 2020). In peer spaces, diagnostic debates can thus have material consequences for inclusion and advocacy leverage. This compounds the moral paradox. Peer networks can empower and protect, but they can also replicate the very hierarchies they aim to dissolve unless actively governed by inclusive practices (Fricker, 2007; Fraser, 2013).

Recommendations

Access to meaningful support for autistic mothers is uneven: socioeconomic status, race, geography, diagnostic status, and prior institutional experiences shape who can obtain accommodations, who can access peer networks, and who must shoulder unsupported labour (Crenshaw, 2017; Erevelles, 2011; Bailey, 2021; Gore et al., 2024). It is important to note that recommendations are constrained by the representation of need in the available literature. Those who are not represented– those who are more marginalised, excluded, and surveillanced– may have different needs and priorities (Kanfiszer et al., 2017; Hampton et al., 2021). As research becomes more inclusive, recommendations should be updated to best represent the spectrum of autistic mothers' experiences.

At a biological, sensory level, support should prioritise regulation and predictability rather than attempts at normative correction (Walker, 2021; Devon Price, 2022). Funded access to occupational therapy focused specifically on sensory regulation in parent-infant interactions would help translate clinical knowledge into everyday caregiving (Pohl et al., 2020). Scheduled, predictable in-home nursing or doula visits conducted in low-stimulus settings can provide hands-on help when parents need it most (Hampton et al., 2021). Practical home adaptations such as affordable soundproofing, blackout blinds, dimmable lighting, as well as provisioning of sensory toolkits should be standard elements of perinatal packages to reduce cumulative physiological load and make domestic routines more habitable (Walker, 2021; Devon Price, 2022).

Psychological and cognitive supports should be autism-competent, flexible, and scaffold executive function (Hul et al., 2017; Milton, 2012). Perinatal mental-health services must include therapists trained in autism and trauma-informed approaches adapted to autistic communication styles (Hampton et al., 2021; Gore et al., 2024). For example, offering asynchronous modalities reduces the sensory and real-time pressures of standard therapy (Hull et al., 2017). Executive-function coaching for concrete parenting tasks like planning, time-blocking, and sequence mapping–paired with cognitive aids such as visual schedules, step-by-step guides, and checklists–converts overwhelming tasks into manageable modules (Devon Price, 2022). Small group interventions should be delivered in autism-friendly formats (limited size, clear agendas, scheduled sensory breaks), and every care plan should include a personalised crisis protocol that names triggers and explicit de-escalation steps (Hampton et al., 2021).

Social and domestic supports close the loop between recognition and redistribution (Fraser, 2013; Federici, 2004; Hochschild, 1983; Ruddick, 1989). Partner and family education sessions involving an autistic mother should foreground autistic parenting strengths and practical accommodations, so care is redistributed within households rather than invisibly absorbed by mothers (Hays, 1996; Rich, 1976). Peer-led local and

online autistic mothers' groups must be funded and professionally supported, with paid moderation to prevent burnout and accessible governance structures to ensure inclusion (Bhattacharya, 2017; Fraser, 1992). Community offerings—sensory-friendly baby groups with limited numbers and predictable formats, and home-visiting programs staffed by autism-trained practitioners—create low-barrier sites for belonging that mainstream groups often fail to provide (Pohl et al., 2020; Gore et al., 2024).

At the policy level, investments are needed to make these measures sustainable: create accredited training and certification for autism-competent perinatal practitioners; establish inclusion grants and quotas to ensure racialised, low-income, non-verbal, and otherwise under-represented mothers shape research and service design; and launch public-health campaigns that normalise neurodivergent mothering (Crenshaw, 2017; Fraser, 2013; Erevelles, 2011). These biopsychosocial measures work together to reduce physiological strain, scaffold cognitive labour, and redistribute both material supports and recognition, thereby increasing comfort and genuine belonging for autistic mothers (Shakespeare, 2013; Kafer, 2013; Wendell, 1996).

Conclusion

Autistic motherhood illuminates how belonging and exclusion are co-produced across biological, psychological, and social dimensions (Shakespeare, 2013; Kafer, 2013; Wendell, 1996). In domestic spaces, the interplay of sensory sensitivities, executive-function differences, and normative expectations of mothering generates both distinctive caregiving strengths and significant burdens (Pohl et al., 2020; Hampton et al., 2021; Dugdale et al., 2021). Peer networks, in contrast, reveal the transformative potential of relational environments structured around mutual understanding and shared neurodivergent norms (Fraser, 1992; Warner, 2002; Linton, 1998; Spade, 2020). They validate alternative caregiving practices, reduce the cognitive and emotional load imposed by masking (Hull et al., 2017; Walker, 2021; Price, 2022), and provide platforms for both practical support and political advocacy (Pohl et al., 2020; Gore et al., 2024). Yet these spaces are not immune to stratification, labor inequities, and epistemic tensions, underscoring that inclusion and recognition require ongoing attention to intersectional power dynamics (Crenshaw, 2017; Erevelles, 2011; Roberts, 1997; Bailey, 2021). Taken together, the corpus demonstrates that supporting autistic mothers effectively demands interventions that are relational, biopsychosocially informed, and attentive to both structural conditions and the cultivation of affirming communities (Shakespeare, 2013; Kafer, 2013; Wendell, 1996). Belonging, in this context, is not simply the absence of exclusion but the active creation of spaces—domestic, social, and institutional—where autistic ways of mothering are understood, valued, and sustained (Fraser, 1992; Warner, 2002; Linton, 1998).

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History & Classics
Art by Elise Adams

ROMANCE READERS AND THE POLITICS OF LITERARY TASTE IN TWENTIETH CENTURY BRITAIN

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The Mass Observation (MO) archive, a collection of intimate, first-person narratives, offers unique insights into the different ways in which books and reading habits allow interwar and postwar women to negotiate and express identity in the safety of the domestic sphere, a traditionally feminine realm. By situating women's reading practices within broader historical developments in literacy, publishing, and gender roles, the essay examines how reading functioned as means of asserting individuality and personal autonomy. First, this paper will provide a concise summary of shifts in publishing, literacy, and literary taste, followed by a case study of Mills & Boon readers in the late 1980s and early 1990s, focusing on the social negotiations involved when women read for pleasure. While the activity of reading is not always confined to the home, the strong material and emotional attachments women express towards their books highlight that these objects often provide a unique source of comfort. The book itself therefore functioned as a portable 'home away from home,' which reinforced the twentieth-century reader's sense of self wherever she may be.

This paper will engage with responses to the MO 1988 Autumn Directive Part 1 and the 1993 Spring Directive Part 2, which ask respondents about their favourite pastimes and reading habits. The idiosyncratic nature of the MO material underscores the importance of avoiding any singular or universal notion of the female experience. Women's engagements with books and reading were shaped by class, age, and race; and although the MO archive offers limited background information for each respondent, it nonetheless provides valuable insight into the diverse ways women asserted personal autonomy through their literary choices.

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Data and Methods.

MO contains a wealth of intimate, detailed narratives across a range of themes related to everyday life. One of the most debated aspects of MO is its self-selectivity – respondents are in full control of what directives they respond to and the level of detail and truth in their responses, which some social scientists argue compromises the archive's representativeness.[1] Due to the self-selectivity of the material, the archive is inherently shaped by personal bias, limiting its use for those seeking statistical uniformity.[2] Though many scholars contend that these very characteristics can be seen as limitations – the archive's subjectivity, inconsistency, and lack of generalisability – are what make MO uniquely valuable. Rachel Hurdley conveys this idea under the description of MO material not as a reflection of wider social trends, but as "a particular case of the possible".[3] Joe Moran argues that this "first-person vividness" provides a subjective facet to research which is at times more valuable that the "dry empiricism of statistics".[4] Pollen further defends the archive's incoherent and heterogeneous nature, asserting that its "mixed and disruptive methods" grant access to the real inconsistencies of history that are often obscured by traditional research methodologies.[5] The voluntary engagement of MO respondents without prior knowledge of directive themes also highlights that participation in MO grows out of a general interest in sharing. For instance, respondent T1277 expresses that: "I enjoy the time brooding on topics for Mass Observation", suggesting that for this respondent, the considerable timeframe afforded to Mass Observation contributors, and the surprise element of the directive topics, make the process of writing for MO particularly pleasurable.[6]

By engaging with responses to the 1988 Autumn Directive Part 1, which asks respondents to explain their favourite regular pastimes, and the 1993 Spring Directive Part 2, which asks respondents specifically about their reading habits and organisation of books within their own homes, this essay examines how twentieth-century female respondents conceptualised their own reading practices and the social meanings attached to them. Common among many of the responses is an underlying awareness of literary taste as a marker of cultural identity, shaped by the broader social developments and late 20th-century attitudes toward reading. The ways in which this literary taste is discussed, however, differed starkly from person to person.

Literary Hierarchies and the Rise of the 'Ordinary' Reader.

The 'ordinary' reader emerged during the late 19th and early 20th centuries as reading became an activity increasingly accessible to the general population. This accessibility depended on three requisites: literacy, leisure time, and disposable income – conditions that became widespread only by the late 19th century.[7] As Feather argues, "[e]ducation was the driver of change".[8] Accordingly, it was the Victorian education legislation, such as the 1870 Education Act, which prioritised the education of the poor, that enabled Britain to reach a rate of almost 100% literacy by the turn of the century.[9] These changes were not felt uniformly by both men and women – while both experienced significant increases in leisure time and disposable income, men benefitted far more than women from these developments. For instance, in her social study of Middlesbrough's working class, Lady Bell concluded that the men read more than their wives due to both a greater likelihood "to be stimulated by intercourse with his fellows" and because "he has more definite times of leisure in which he feels he is amply justified in 'sitting down with a book'".[10] Despite this, social changes throughout the century encouraged the emergence of the female reader, and by 1997, 71% of women compared to 58% of men read books.[11]

This reading boom continued to accelerate throughout the early 20th century, and the prominence of lending libraries in this period mirrored this growing interest in reading as a leisure activity. The First World War indirectly prompted an expansion in female readership. During the war, employment opportunities gave many women greater economic independence and increased their spending power.[12] The following interwar years ushered in a re-establishment of domesticated gender roles in which women were expected to return to "home and duty".[13] The domestic expectations of the interwar years were challenged by the emergent Modernist movement, where figures like Virginia Woolf defied traditional societal norms, instead advocating a

"conscious break from the past".[14] However, such avant-garde defiance largely belonged to women from wealthier, well-educated backgrounds, for whom reading had long been an accessible pastime.

Therefore, due to prevailing narratives of domesticity among working- and middle-class British women, greater numbers turned to home-based leisure activities which could be engaged in while maintaining a performance of conformity to these domestic gender roles. This included reading which, due to increased female spending power, women were increasingly able to self-fund. This, combined with a "post-war surplus of single women," created a new market of financially independent female readers whose literary choices were less constrained by a husband's control.[15]

While these changes were more apparent for middle- and upper-class white women, developments in library systems in the interwar period began the process of broadening accessibility to other demographic groups, predominantly working-class women. The public library service was available to 96.3% of the population by 1926, and library service points across Britain grew from 5,730 in 1920 to 23,000 in 1949.[16] Furthermore, by 1949, it is estimated that nearly a quarter of the population were registered as borrowers.[17] 'Tuppenny' libraries also emerged in the 1930s, and accommodated a growth in reading activity, particularly among the lower classes.[18] They rented out popular fiction for twopence a week, getting their name from the cost.[19] As such, lending libraries, particularly 'Tuppenny' libraries, increased the accessibility and affordability of reading for women across the country.

The response of the publishing industry to these developments was to capitalise on these new markets and commercialise the book trade, incorporating commodity-style techniques and prioritising the packaging and advertising of their books.[20] Certain publishing houses successfully targeted certain audiences, such as Mills & Boon, who marketed their books specifically to the types of women who frequented 'tuppenny' libraries.[21] Women had always read romantic novels, but the success of publishing houses like Mills & Boon solidified their popularity, and by 1982, romance novels accounted for at least 25% of all paperback sales.[22] This effort to cater to women's literary tastes, which had been otherwise neglected by publishing companies prior to the interwar period, encouraged the growth in the reading public, despite the two outbreaks of war. However, the commercialisation of the publishing industry and their newfound focus on working-class and female readers, who were generally excluded from literary engagement in prior decades, also invited debates over the effects of this greater accessibility.

As such, this growth in readership in the late 19th and early 20th centuries prompted what James describes as a "negative climate surrounding the growing popularity of book reading," a sentiment which fuelled the development of a literary hierarchy intended to safeguard 'high culture'.[23] In this period, Britain's social elites treated most popular leisure activities with scorn, likening them to a drug habit.[24] In regard to mass reading, they expressed a particular distaste for the mass use of regular and 'tuppenny' libraries, arguing that the latter in particular encouraged "the reading of fiction for entertainment only".[25] A product of this consternation was the conception of the literary hierarchy, organised into 'lowbrow', 'middlebrow', and 'highbrow' works of literature. While Virginia Woolf championed a defiance of traditional domestic roles through her fiction, she otherwise shared this condescending attitude towards the newly empowered reading public. She exemplified this disdain in a 1927 letter, arguing that middlebrow literature was "in pursuit of no single object, neither Art itself no life itself but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige," thereby articulating the anxious response of literary elites to a newly empowered reading demographic.

The persistence of this disdain for what the 'socially inferior' were reading through the mid-to-late twentieth century was a direct result of intensifying self-consciousness about status. The main factor in this shift

was the decline of traditional symbols of elite status. The decline of the British aristocracy began in the late 19th century and was solidified by postwar legislation such as the Life Peerages Act of 1958, which diminished the dominance of hereditary peers.[26] Therefore, as upper-class influence and relative living standards declined, individuals were compelled to defend their social status more aggressively and through novel means.[27] Cultural taste, including literary preference, was elevated to a primary indicator of status. As McCracken argues, "the reputation of a text seems to diminish as its readership grows".[28] Consequently, as the 1950s paperback revolution brought "books into far more homes than had ever had them before," the reputation of popular, mainstream fiction was associated with 'lowbrow' tastes, while preferences for established 'highbrow' works were associated with higher social status. The decision over what was and was not intellectually stimulating enough to be classed as 'highbrow' was decided entirely by the upper classes who, threatened by the popularisation of reading, were looking for new ways to diminish others to assert their own superiority. As such, it was the deterioration of traditional class definitions in the mid-to-late twentieth century that consolidated books as increasingly indicative of intellectual and social sophistication.[29] Therefore, as an analysis of the MO material will highlight, the distinction between 'highbrow', 'middlebrow' and 'lowbrow' literary tastes, which emerged in the interwar period, was able to survive well into the latter half of the century and still permeates discussions of reading habits today.[30]

Literary Favourites: the Case of Mills & Boon.

As literary tastes are seen as indications of social status and personal identity, it is unsurprising that readers are reluctant to associate themselves with genres and authors associated with 'lowbrow' and unintellectual tastes. Reading tastes are presented in the tangible display of bookshelves, and so constitute a semi-public display of identity and invitation for judgement, as acting as a microcosm of class status. This is reflected in a response from M1201, who explicitly uses the bookshelf as a tool of social navigation: "A study of a recently met person's bookshelves will tell me if we have anything significant in common".[31] This hints at the capacity of books to cultivate female friendships, exemplified by the proliferation of book clubs which has persisted well into the 21st century, and boast large female membership.

This tension between private enjoyment and public judgement is evident in the case of Mills & Boon, a publisher whose popularity among women has made it a primary target for the policing of 'lowbrow' literary taste. By 1998, Mills & Boon had sold over 200 million paperbacks in 100 markets, claiming 54% of the UK romantic fiction market, a dominance that stems from a loyal, and predominantly female, working-class readership.[32] As such, Mills & Boon has long been dismissed as formulaic and lowbrow, despite, and partly because of, its enormous popularity. As McAleer notes, the publisher has "always been the butt of jokes", and its rigid adherence to a successful formula, requiring authors to follow "a strict list of specifications", has drawn significant criticism.[33] The publisher has also long been a site of feminist contestation, especially during the period of second-wave feminism. This period focused on achieving substantive equality, and thus exposed and criticised traditional patriarchal structures across a wider array of issues than its predecessor, such as reproductive rights and domestic violence, and did so through more radical means. This also coincided with a historiographical 'cultural turn,' which prioritised cultural over the dominant political and economic modes of historiography, and incorporated theoretical frameworks from a range of disciplines, such as literary criticism and cultural studies.[34] The influences of second-wave feminism and the historiographical 'cultural turn' prompted an increase in the study of women's popular reading and invited much debate over the significance of romance novels in perpetuating or challenging patriarchal hierarchies.

Initially, critics argued that the books were regressive due to the reinforcement of traditional gender norms and emphasis on marriage and heterosexual romance, depicting the female protagonists as needy and weak.[35] More recently, scholars have argued that these novels provide space for female agency and escapism, representing a phenomenon that was uncommon for much of the 20th century: novels written by women specifically for women.[36] This new research is encouraging, but it is important that the study of these

novels is not approached with preconceived notions of their strengths or flaws; to effectively examine the genre's social significance, we must prioritise an analysis of the reader's experience over judgements of literary merit. Furthermore, while romance novels can risk perpetuating traditional gender roles, so does literature more popular amongst men – for example crime novels and military fiction, which often feature strong, stoic male protagonists. Yet there is comparatively little research into the shortcomings of these genres. The debate over reading habits would be enriched by the transition from a sole focus on the merits of a literary work to a prioritisation on the experience of the reader.

The most seminal work into the study of female romance readers was Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. Interview responses from 42 romance readers challenge popular assumptions that romance novels are anti-feminist by nature, encouraging in their readers an acceptance of patriarchal traditions.[37] Accordingly, the MO directive responses from 1988 and 1993 that are the focus of this essay were written during a period of transition within academic literature on female popular reading. However, while the late 20th century saw a shift to a less critical perspective on romance novels such as those published by Mills & Boon, this was not immediately mirrored in popular perception.

The tension between the popularity of Mills & Boon novels and their existence as indications of anti-feminist, anti-intellectual values is evident in the following MO response:

The bedside tables in my parents' bedroom have become temporary bookshelves, although mum doesn't seem to get the time to read so much anymore. Before she started teaching again, the house was littered with 'Mills & Boon' books. You would find them everywhere – often stuffed down the side of chairs, where they were hidden if she was disturbed reading them! Once a week she would meet up with our next-door neighbour and swap copies.[38]

Her description of books 'stuffed down the side of chairs' evokes an intimate domestic setting where the pleasures of reading coexist with the constant interruptions of home life. Earlier in the response, A2685 explains that her mother studied literature at college before becoming a teacher.[39] Despite her mother's literary knowledge, her impulse to hide the books demonstrates a defence of her own literary taste and a tacit recognition of their low cultural status. Her weekly 'swap' with a neighbour, however, also represents a small, semi-clandestine act of female community despite her shame surrounding the genre. Female community was a large aspect of the lives of female readers from the start of the century. For example, during the Second World War, "female factory workers were to be found debating the merits of... *Gone with the Wind*" (Z-B, 260). Therefore, despite widespread disapproval, female readers have sought supportive communities in which they can discuss their reading habits at will, often in spaces that encouraged female autonomy over patriarchal dominance, such as the wartime workplace or within the home.

However, other respondents articulate explicit disdain for Mills & Boon and similar forms of popular romance, representing an internalisation of the patriarchal literary hierarchy, where women seek to express an intellectual identity by policing their own or others' leisure reading. Subsequently, T1277 describes Mills & Boon as follows:

Young Asian wives could buy the Mills and Boon romances, to which they are addicted, at the supermarkets with their groceries and dispose of them to the library when they were read. In this way the husbands could not complain of their extravagance, since the 70p would be hidden in the food bill.[40]

Here, the respondent's racialised framing exposes how the cultural policing of 'lowbrow' taste intersects with race and gender, positioning immigrant women as othered – both as racial outsiders and as 'addicted' readers of unintellectual fiction. These sorts of racial prejudices were normalised in late 20th century British society. The 1968 'Rivers of Blood' speech by Enoch

Powell, which garnered mass public support, introduced a racist rhetoric which persisted well into the final decades of the century, encouraged by organisations like the National Front and British National Party. By 'othering' the readership to a specific, racialised group of 'young Asian wives', she attempts to defend her own intellectual identity as an Englishwoman and disavow the genre's low cultural status. Later in her response, she expresses that although she reads widely, these books are "seldom romances – never Barbara Cartland or any Mills & Boon," which further distances her from the genre and implies a belief that, due to the repetitive nature of the novels, she has no use for 'any' of them.[41]

Escapist literature peaked during wartime, as readers sought a refuge from the difficult realities of everyday life, but romance novels continued to serve this purpose for many women in the post-war period. In Radway's study,[42] she identifies the greatest motives for female readers of romance were "for simple relaxation", "because reading is just for me; it is my time", and "to learn about faraway places and times", highlighting the priority of both comfort and separation from the realities of a patriarchal society. This reliance on books for comfort was a[43] phenomenon evident among some MO responses. Reading provides a quotidian presence or companionship, offering a 'home away from home'. M1201 later states that "Sometimes, particularly when I'm tired, I like to read something that doesn't require energy, so I read an old familiar friend.", with "old familiar friend" suggesting that the routine reading provides a unique source of comfort.[44]

However, reading for the purpose of escapism is also critiqued in certain MO responses, just as it was by social elites in the first half of the century, who disapproved of literature that was not intellectually stimulating. L2039 states that "I cringe visibly at Louis L'Amour and Mills & Boon," aligning these genres with other forms of fiction deemed inferior, such as horror and westerns.[45] This rejection is tied to a broader critique of escapist literature, as evidenced by her defence of children's classics as "a 'better' form of escapism".[46] Accordingly, this respondent is actively seeking a defensible position *within* the realm of leisure reading, symbolising the impulse felt by many women to defend their reading choices after a history of dismissal. Such distinctions suggest that even among readers who consume fiction from outside the literary canon, there may exist an internalised hierarchy that differentiates between acceptable and unacceptable forms of leisure reading. For example, R1580 states that "[f]or my 'light' reading I choose 'bodice rippers'. They are those romantic novels (NOT Mills and Boon) about Pirates and Maidens".[47] Her preference for 'bodice rippers' over Mills & Boon romances suggests that even within the specific realm of popular women's romance, readers delineate between subgenres based on perceived literary quality and narrative complexity. This shows an active, self-aware attempt by the female reader to delineate a personal, defensible space of 'light reading' even within a stigmatised genre. The case of Mills & Boon underscores the gendered implications of literary taste, revealing how female readers navigate the hierarchy of 'legitimacy' in popular fiction during the late-twentieth century. The MO material reveals that these female readers are acutely aware of these hierarchies, and their responses reflect the diverse effects these judgments have on their private reading habits.

Conclusion.

The personal, often contradictory responses to MO directives reveal how women navigated the relationship between reading, identity, and social expectations, particularly in their engagement with genre fiction such as Mills & Boon. The enduring legacy of this phenomenon is most clearly demonstrated by the capacity of books to cultivate female friendships, evidenced by the persistence of book clubs into the 21st century, and their predominantly female membership. Furthermore, the continuous success of modern popular women's fiction, i.e. 'chick lit', suggests that this category of literature, providing narratives that speak directly to women's experiences and anxieties, still fulfils many of the same functions as the Mills & Boon novels. Thus, with additional time, it may be illuminating to extend a similar methodology into

a study on reading habits in the twenty-first century, but such a study would also require a consideration of the influence of social media on the position of romance and 'chick lit' novels within the literary hierarchy. Ultimately, this paper demonstrates that by substantiating historical trends and scholarly debate with MO material, which preserves the idiosyncrasies of personal experience, we may begin to comprehend the different ways in which women asserted personal autonomy through their choice of literature at the end of the twentieth century.

Footnotes

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10. Lady Bell, *At the Works: A Study of a Manufacturing Town* (Edward Arnold, 1907), 145.
11. Martin Francis, "Leisure and Popular Culture," in *Women in Twentieth-Century Britain: Social, Cultural and Political Change*, ed. Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2001), 258.
12. Ibid, 54.
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16. McAleer, *Popular Reading*, 49.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid, 70; Robert James "'Literature Acknowledges No Boundaries': Book Reading and Social Class in Britain, c.1930-c.1945," *Journal of Social History* 51, no.1 (2017): 83.
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22. Edwin McDowell, "The Paperback Evolution," *New York Times*, January 10, 1982.
23. James, "No Boundaries," 83.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid, 92.
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36. Ibid.
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38. A2685, Mass Observation Archive (University of Sussex): response to the Spring 1993 directive.
39. Ibid.
40. T1277, Mass Observation Archive.
41. Ibid.
42. Francis, "Leisure and Popular Culture," 259.
43. Radway, *Reading the Romance*, 72.
44. M1201, Mass Observation Archive.
45. L2039, Mass Observation Archive (University of Sussex): response to the Autumn 1988 directive.
46. Ibid.
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THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME: HOW WOMEN TOOK PART IN THE COLONISATION AND SETTLEMENT OF THE AMERICAN FRONTIER

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The "Wild West" is perhaps one of the most popularised eras of history, recalling a glorified image of freedom and lawlessness all embodied through male caricatures: cowboys, outlaws and pioneers. It was men who were seen as founders of the frontier and responsible for the Native American Resistance. Early frontier historian Fredrick Jackson Turner writes the American West was a "meeting point between savagery and civilization", summarising the view contemporary Americans had when approaching this new land.[1] This "open" land offered European American settlers the opportunity to create a new life and a new home. However, this opportunity relied on the land being stolen from the native population. Their lifestyles were reduced to being "uncivilised" to allow white Americans the moral right to "tame" the area and build a society modelled around their ideals.[2] This period in history saw not only an attempt to create a homeland which promised wealth and freedom to European Americans but continuous resistance from Indigenous people to protect their land and their lifestyles. Women and particularly Native American women's role in this key stage of history is not forgotten but undermined, particularly by certain scholars, for example, Turner. Their existence is attached to the existence of a man, and their impact is overlooked. As the first historian to record frontier history, Turner's word was often viewed as undoubtedly true; yet this does not exclude the fact that his narrative excluded Pioneer women and Native American women, thus helping to form the continuous view women were absent from this history.[3] This essay will aim to correct such stereotypes, bringing attention to the various roles women played from resisting invasion to creating frontier homesteads and towns.

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When the trope of a masculine West is continued, it is implied that women's existence did not contribute the formation of the frontier.[4] This fact remains untrue as both married and unmarried women heavily contributed to the formation of the frontier. Unmarried women proved particularly significant after the 1862 Homestead Act allowed them to take up homesteading.[5] Unmarried women began to make claims on Western land, though it should be noted this was often claimed within a family context. Homesteading required a community so while these women were creating new lives without a husband, they were not doing so without support from their biological family.[6] This does not disprove their significance, rather it shows that they were still dominant in the creation of permanent homesteads which would turn the West into a settlement. Unmarried women, including divorcees and widows, were also able to thrive through starting businesses. A particular case of this is Mary McNair Mathews, who, after being widowed early, moved to Virginia City with her son and established a successful business; first taking on domestic tasks such as laundry and sewing, before running a school and finally opening a boarding house.[7] Business opportunities were rife along the frontier, and unmarried women had the chance to establish successful businesses, thus contributing to the local economy, and, creating roots of a wider self-equipped town. The domestic sphere also proved an irreplaceable element to creating a stable economy. Married women cared for livestock, often making a profit from selling eggs and butter which would be used to pay for farm equipment or vital infrastructure, like windmills. Thus, married women's labour within the home formed the backbone that allowed a running homestead to be maintained.[8] Therefore the work of both married and unmarried women can undoubtedly be seen as a key element of the formation of an economically thriving frontier town.

Establishing a European American hegemony in the West required more than just the establishment of an economy and basic infrastructure, it required both physical and "social reproduction".[9] "Social reproduction" refers to ensuring that society is recreated through education.[10] This included raising children within societal boundaries and creating a united community. Pioneer families consisted of multiple generations so it should be noted generational differences did arise when deciding what traditional values should be continued. Diaries and letters of pioneer women are an excellent source of evidence when exploring this change, but again, it is important to treat each account as an individual experience rather than a common one. That said, comparing multiple diaries and letters allow common themes to rise. It can be understood that older women were embedded in values belonging to the Eastern coast and Victorian England. The diary of Adrietta Hixon reveals that her mother was quick to guarantee that her and her sister remained "lady-like";ensuring they protect their complexions with bonnets and lotions and always riding aside.[11] Similarly, Mollie Dorsey Sandford recalls dressing in her father's clothes to make retrieving a runaway cow easier and the way her mother feared she was losing her "dignity" due to this act.[12] These accounts reveal older generations were still attempting to enforce values deriving from Eastern society and despite younger women like Mollie breaking these norms and adopting to the lifestyle at hand, ultimately these generational ideas would still have a heavy impact on continuing traditional lifestyles. These traditional values allowed the family unit to successfully continue with daughters entering marriage or caring for their parental families. "Social reproduction" is often unconsidered by early historians such Turner or popular media which prefers to focus on famous and exciting characters such as Jesse James or Wyatt Earp. However, this female dominant task ensured that frontier towns became a community through sharing values and continuing to build a stable domestic sphere.[13]

Women also contributed to the formation of society by ensuring the community was equipped to continue reproduction. Through undertaking teaching posts, women created a self- functioning community and stability which would allow future generations to securely raise children; again, this created not just an economy but a community.[14] Similarly, this continuation of a community can be seen when looking at the role of women as midwives who created a self-reliant community and the ability for future generations to be born, thus guaranteeing the continued population of the West. It is described, how on the trail, women assisted each other in giving birth, with wagons used as

birthing chambers.[15] When medical systems had not yet been fully established, midwives continued to ensure safe births and, therefore, the future of the frontier. Midwives provided the healthcare needed to create a self-sustaining society and create formative towns which would not end after the death of one generation but be continued.

The journey Westwards and the following attempt to build a new lifestyle was both physically and mentally straining. Support systems were needed to be able to continue to live such a lifestyle and establish frontier towns. Women often provided this support system for each other, including small acts of kindness and unity that took place on the trail, such as women standing in a circle with their skirts held out, to give each other privacy when they wished to relieve themselves.[16] However, it also included large acts of kindness following disaster. For example after the death of Noami Sager's husband and her own illness on the trail, the women of the party cared for her and her children.[17] While Naomi did succumb to her illness on the trail, this account reveals the support shared between women which allowed them or their families to continue the journey and populate the frontier.

The colonisation of the American West was reliant on the displacement and cultural death of the Indigenous groups who already had established lives on the land. Assimilation was a key tool used by European Americans to allow the European way of life to gain hegemony in the West. Many organisations looking to enforce assimilation hired female missionaries and teachers, who, due to the rise of the idea of the "New Woman" (women who were working towards developing female liberation), were beginning to take part in further education.[18] Female missionaries were agents of government assimilation projects with a particular famous case being the first white woman to migrate to the West; Narcissa Whitman. Whitman joined her husband working for the "American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions" to travel to Oregon Country to convert the Cayuse.[19] While the Cayuse tribe first welcomed the missionaries, it became clear that Whitman's aim was not just to convert but to destroy culture. She records a disdainful attitude towards the Cayuse, viewing them as dirty and ruining her home.[20] Tensions increased as the Cayuse became dissatisfied with the Whitmans' consistent discussion of damnation, they requested for the Whitmans to pay for the mission land or leave. Finally, tensions reached an ultimate high and ended in the Whitman massacre with the family being assassinated by members of the Cayuse tribe.[21] Whilst this example ends in their death, it is telling of the methods and aims of unnamed missionaries who avoided the pages of history due to their success in enforcing Christianity and their dismantling of other cultures. Women's roles in assimilation allowed Christianity and European culture to gain hegemony in the West while Native practices became restricted. This ultimately developed the united culture rooted in wide-spread Christianity and Christian values known to history.

This attempt to conquer native land was met with fierce resistance. Each tribe has its own history of battle, massacre and colonisation but throughout these individual histories, key figures can be seen to advocate for their lifestyles and home. Accounts directly from Native American sources are rare; Indigenous culture and history has often been destroyed and replaced by a European narrative. Even the accounts that do exist must be treated with care as many were written by Europeans and so are dependent on a good translator and an unbiased writer to be completely accurate.[22] These accounts are mainly focused on male resistance leaders such as Sitting Bull or Red Cloud. However, indigenous women do still play a major role in the fight to protect their culture, they are just often unnamed. Therefore, to understand how women resisted, an exploration into group resistance and domestic roles must be undertaken. Resistance took place through physical altercations with the US army as well as through outspoken advocacy and conservation of

culture.[23] A key conservation of this culture is the continuation of dance; an act of resistance carried out by many indigenous men and women.[24] As part of an attempt to force assimilation, US figureheads attempted to restrict dances, particularly if they believed the rituals would interfere with farming - a tool used to limit tribes to one area and end a mobile lifestyle. An example of this restriction is noted by Stephen Ferara in his study of Sioux religious beliefs, when he states dances of all types were banned by the government to "stamp out" indigenous practices.[25] The Sun Dance was banned in 1883 but was continued in secret, with the practice being preserved until the ban was lifted in 1950, allowing modern-day Sioux people to continue the practice.[26] The existence of this dance shows an act of community resistance which undoubtedly involved generations of women defying their oppressors to preserve their culture.
Female authors who recorded their tribes' traditions and histories can also be seen as resisting European rule. Their refusal to allow their culture or their tribe's fate to be forgotten or generalised by white historians ensures

the world could not push their lives aside. Susan Bordeaux (a mixed-race women) described her own experience in the changing Western world. This included describing the dances held at Fort Laramie and the outfits of mixed-race Native American girls such as "their moccasined feet".[27] This simple act of recording the outfits worn allows an aspect of lifestyle to be remembered. Bordeaux also recorded darker elements of Native history, including attacks from the US Army. These attacks being recalled by an Indigenous person ensures the narrative is not twisted by white historians to justify the actions, but rather the true horrors are presented. Bordeaux's account of the Battle of Blue Water uses accounts told directly by those who experienced it such as Cokawin. Cokawin, who managed to conceal herself, describes the horror to Bordeaux as "Men, women and children were shot right down".[28] This account guarantees the horror experienced can never be twisted or justified and serves as an act of resistance in the face of the Americans who wished to forget the blood spilt in the name of settlement.

Native American women also held positions of power within their communities, meaning that all acts of physical rebellion credited to men were supported by women. Plains Native American women were of major significance in economic and ceremonial matters.[29] The writing of Josephine Waggoner, a mixed-race woman who recorded her changing world, reveals the responsibilities of women by recording the work of her mother: Ithatewin.[30] Waggoner records the work of her mother in Powder River Country as she tanned hides for trade with US Army Officers.[31] While this recording takes place after Red Cloud's war it can be assumed that this work is generational and thus performed by Plain women before Waggoner's time. When war broke out between the US Army and the United Plains troops led by Red Cloud over the ownership of Powder River country, it can be assumed that tribal women were supporting the armies through helping to create the economy needed to sustain a war. These unnamed women provided the home support which allowed acts of resistance to be made against the US army. Red Cloud's war was won after two years; with the US ordering their soldiers to abandon Powder River Country.[32] This war was sustained by the efforts of women and ultimately shows their resistance to oppression. Native American women can occasionally be noted to take part in physical battles. A famous example is Buffalo Calf Road Woman, who saved her brother after his horse was shot out from under him at the Battle of the Rosebud or what the Cheyennes call the Battle Where the Girl Saved Her Brother.[33] This example of bravery shows that women again supported the army in their acts of resistance and were passionate about protecting their homelands.

In conclusion, when exploring the history of the American West we see much more than the romanticised image created by popular imagination but rather a simultaneous attempt to create and preserve a home. European American women fought to create a

permanent frontier and the promise this new homeland embodied while Native American women fought to preserve their land and culture against foreign oppressors. The West is not just a history of men, but a complex history of the women often left unnamed and their role in the creation of a European West and the gradual breakdown of Indigenous lifestyle.

Footnotes

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MISCELLANEOUS MUSINGS

HOME IS WHERE THE HAIR IS: AN EXPLORATION OF ANDROGYNY, SELF-IDENTITY AND GENDER DISPLAY

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By eschewing the gender binary, does androgyny affect how 'at-home' (i.e. how comfortable and confident) people feel in their gender presentation? Appearance and dress feed into the 'gender display' which we create (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p.127), so a myriad of social ambiguities are attached to visual androgyny. This became especially conspicuous to me when I, a woman, had a friend shave my foot-long hair in my first term of university. West and Zimmerman (1987, p. 133) note that hair style is one of the key characteristics through which we visually assess 'sex category'; suddenly changing this aspect of my appearance made me less at-home in my presentation as a woman. Whether or not I intend it as such, visual androgyny affects how others perceive my identity, an issue which is more salient as a woman of colour in the context of Westernised beauty standards. As well as this, forgoing traditional femininity is interpreted as a political statement; as a facet of a broader split in feminist thought around the relevance of women's life choices to their political opinions, the politicisation of women's style choices has long been a subject of debate (Srinivasan, 2021; Hillman, 2013). This essay will explore the nature and problematisation of androgyny, and the impact of gendered appearance on how we perceive ourselves and others.

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'Androgyny' is a highly contested and questionable term, though one which I believe is still useful. Derived from the Greek 'andro' and 'gyne' ('male' and 'female'), androgyny entails an ambiguous or poly-faceted gender presentation which incorporates elements of both, or neither, masculinity or femininity (Wood, 2022). This concept has been questioned in many ways: the categorisation of certain presentations and identities as 'androgynous' implicitly reinforces the idea that there are solidly defined 'masculine' and 'feminine' categories on either side, whilst the scrutiny of androgyny from a purely visual standpoint arguably neglects the traditional or untraditional gender identities behind people's appearances (McCormac, 1983; Wood, 2022). A further difficulty with the concept of androgyny is how it is applied, given that a prevalent Western bias shapes how femininity, in particular, appears. As the feminist abolitionist Sojourner Truth pointed out in her 'Ain't I a Woman?' speech (1851), non-white and working-class

manifestations of womanhood have long been othered and invalidated due to their deviance from a white middle class norm (a norm which Truth was fighting to overturn). This can also be applied to queer and trans women, especially in the modern-day context of online transvestigation culture, wherein people try to reveal the suspected trans history of celebrities or public figures whose features fall outside of a stereotypical gendered norm. In terms of appearance, 'feminine' beauty standards are often implicitly linked to a more white mode of appearance, with a bias towards features such as a slim nose, straight hair and fair skin; as Amia Srinivasan points out, women's value is often tied to their Westernised conventional attractiveness (Srinivasan, 2021). Similarly, Natacha Kennedy (2018) describes the phenomenon of 'cisgenderism', a wide, implicit societal preference for features and behaviours which easily fit into binary gendered norms. The racial and transmisogynist aspects of feminine attractiveness are further muddied by the disdainful hypersexualisation of non-white and trans people in various contexts; the social value of gendered presentation is not just pro-cis/white but actively hostile to those who deviate from a Western, gender-binary norm. We should perhaps therefore hesitate to categorise people's appearances as 'androgynous', since doing so seems to paradoxically reinforce harmful binary norms around gendered appearance. However, to view the use of 'androgyny' as discriminatory is to view deviance from binary gendered norms as negative; many queer and trans people find visual androgyny to be empowering rather than limiting.

Equally, the space between and outside of traditional masculinity and femininity, and the marginalisation of non-white modes of femininity, cannot be effectively questioned without understanding the language and concepts through which these negative views are enacted; I believe that the concept of androgyny is still a helpful analytical tool when considering gendered presentation in our current era of enduring gendered aesthetic norms.

Why is visual androgyny relevant to how at-home we feel in our gender? The vast majority of modern gender theorists repudiate traditional biological essentialist views of gender in favour of theories which emphasise the societal and performative aspects of gender – West and Zimmerman (1987), for example, frame gender as a mode of doing rather than being. This means that even in private, our appearance can strongly affect how at-home we feel in our body and gender. In the Midwestern second-wave feminist journal Ain't I A Woman?, a woman describes her experience of cutting her hair short as radically changing the way she views herself: she feels stronger and more self-confident (Anon, 1971). Her 'refusal to act an established role,' she asserts, has allowed her to escape the importance of gender to her identity; her reflection in the mirror 'doesn't look like a girl [...or] a boy. She looks like ME' (Anon, 1971, p.2). Given that Judith Butler (1988) describes gender as purely 'performative' (created by our perpetual enactment of it), even a simple act such as cutting one's hair can undermine the boundaries of gender that dictate somebody's identity. The writer in Ain't I A

Woman? finds the androgynous nature of her new appearance unequivocally liberating, enjoying 'non-involvement' in gendered expectations. For her, feminine gendered presentation was obfuscating her identity. West and Zimmerman (1987) note that girls relate their gender identities to their appearance much earlier than boys do; in my experience and that of those around me, this cruciality of appearance to gender self-identification persists into adulthood. Many girls I know, myself included, feel 'unwomanly' without shaving their legs and armpits, even when the only person seeing them is themselves. For me, shaving my head strongly impacted on my relationship to my own gender, though not in such a straightforwardly positive way as for the Ain't I a Woman? contributor. The writer in Ain't I A Woman? notices that cutting her hair initially leads her to 'objectify' her own appearance more, focusing on the aesthetic nature of her features (eyelashes, lips, biceps) rather than on their functions. I similarly find myself analysing the amount of femininity in my newly exposed facial features. Whilst gender is by no means solely tied to external appearances, the introspection that follows visual disruptions to our typical gendered performances highlights how inextricable visual performance is from our own gender identities. This means that 'androgyny' is still useful as a concept, because it helps us to understand our relationship with our appearance in the context of our own social preconditioning.

Gender, however, is never purely a personal affair. Robert Leach (2008) points out that theatre audiences not only 'read' the meanings with which somebody imbues a performance, but also 'manufacture' additional meanings, contributing as much as the performer does to the significance of a performance. Butler (1988; 2006) argues that the performative aspect of gender identity means that this, too, is shaped as much by outside perception as by introspection; the individuality of gendered performance is strongly shaped by the contexts in which it is learned and received. How I choose to visually present myself to others is therefore of great importance to how at-home I am my gender identity, as problematic as this can become. When somebody on the bus addresses me as 'Sir' from behind, then apologises when I turn around and they see my face, their 'gender attribution' to me is shifting based on the information which my appearance gives them (Kennedy, 2018, p.7); others' perception of my gender presentation can in turn affect how I see my own gender. Leach (2008) describes the 'conundrum' of multidirectional causation in the relationship between perception, intention and meaning; if, as Butler (1988) asserts, the 'pretence' of gendered performance is the source of gender, is my own gender identity unreal if it is partially illegible to others? This is clearly not the case, given that racial and trans issues play into the meanings which our cisgenderist society derives from androgyny. One evident example of the problematic implications of societal cisgenderism is J. K. Rowling's inflammatory assertion during the Paris 2024 Olympics that boxer Imane Khelif was 'a male', seemingly based solely on Khelif's square facial features and muscular physique (Rowling on X, 2024). Rowling's

reduction of Khelif's perceived gender down to being 'a male' exemplifies harmfully biological-essentialist language, as well as showing the negative reaction of cisgenderist perspectives to visual androgyny; from Rowling's perspective, trans-ness is framed as an insult based on Khelif's visual androgyny. Khelif is in fact an Arab cisgender woman; Rowling's biased and incorrect assumption of her gender should not have any impact on the truth of her gender identity. Nevertheless, how at-home we feel in our gender, however false people's assumptions about our presentation are, can unfortunately be affected by them. It bothers me irrationally when people assume that I do not identify as a woman based purely on my appearance (an assumption I had never faced before cutting my hair), because I feel unsure whether the validity of my gender presentation is based on its interpretation by others; the imperfect world that we live in imposes external binary perceptions onto everybody, which particularly affects

those who fall outside of a white cisgender norm. Here, again, the concept of visual androgyny helps us to understand how gender is perceived by others.

One friend's reaction to my haircut was to joke that it was 'so gender studies of [me]' to make this change – inescapably (and arguably more so for men), subversion of gendered fashion norms is seen by many as a political choice. As Hillman (2013) describes, the extent to which women's fashion choices are political has been a hotly debated topic since second-wave feminists split over the politicisation of women's private life choices. Within the feminist movement, many saw fashion choices as an important, even necessary part of feminist practice. Blanchard and Reville (1974, p.58) describe androgynous self-presentation as a 'visionary' step towards a 'sex-role less society', viewing all women's choices about their appearance as either reinforcing or undermining the gender order. Much as political lesbianism in this time period was undertaken as a way to undermine the unequal sexed relationship between men and women appearance as either reinforcing or undermining the gender order. Much as political lesbianism in this time period was undertaken as a way to undermine the unequal sexed relationship between men and women, many second-wave feminists saw androgynous fashion as a tool by which to escape oppressive gender roles which saw femininity as 'weak, gentle… and above all, sexual' (Freeman, 1968, quoted in Hillman, 2013 p.161). One could argue that this view of androgyny's significance is overly dramatic in a modern day setting: modern-day social progress may have rendered fashion and appearance choices much more politically neutral than they were in the 1970s and 1980s when the Ain't I A Woman contributor and West & Zimmerman were writing. Rather than radically unsettling the gender order at the cost of being derided as 'ugly' and 'gender deviant' (Hillman, 2013, p.164), androgynous fashion, like many other aspects of queer culture in the modern-day West, is increasingly mainstream and acceptable or even aspirational (as exemplified by the popularity of shows such as RuPaul's Drag Race or Heartstopper, which feature and celebrate gender nonconformity).

There are many other problems with viewing stylistic androgyny as a progressive political stance. For one, as discussed above, it may not be effective: the relational, interpretation-dependent nature of gender presentation means that even my androgyny arguably reinforces the dominant masculine-feminine binary (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Woodhill & Samuels, 2022). Most people measure me up compared to their ideas of what a 'man' or a 'woman' is, rather than perceiving me as neither. As well as this, politicising the decision to crop your hair projects ideological perspectives onto a choice which, for some, is based solely on 'convenience and practicality' (Hillman, 2013, p.162) – for me, the prospect of a 2-minute hair wash was undoubtedly a major factor in my haircut(!) The view of visual androgyny and an eventual genderless society as conducive to gender equality also arguably devalues the importance of femininity to my, and other women's, identities: even in the 1970s, many argued that a feminism which did not prioritise women's choice to enjoy feminine dress if they pleased was no kind of feminism at all (Srinivasan, 2021). The view that traditional femininity is empowering hold true for some trans women, too:

Andrea Long-Chu (2018) describes how she transitioned for 'mascara and lipstick' and other visual trappings of womanhood. In this vein, the modern-day feminist activist Florence Given (2020, p.168) advocates for prioritising 'your own visual satisfaction' simply as a personal act of joy; gendered presentation is largely about 'feeling electric' rather than about attempting to systematically undermine patriarchal gender roles. The femininity, or lack thereof, of my own outfit choices is based solely on what I think looks good – arguably, though, I only have this luxury because of the normalisation of varying degrees of femininity through the deliberately political fashion choices of those who came before me. I am lucky enough to be able to view myself as a beneficiary of, rather than a member of, movements to change norms around women's dress; I can safely choose how to manipulate my appearance to feel the most 'at-home' in my gender, though many trans people are not so fortunate.

Overall, how 'at-home' we feel in our gender is inextricably linked to our level of visual androgyny. Personal gender identity can and should be decided by ourselves alone, and is arguably an inner state rather

than appearance-based. However, the imperfect sociopolitical climate in which we exist means that our appearance is regularly assessed, evaluated, and compared to traditional masculinity, femininity and therefore androgyny; the term' androgyny therefore remains a useful one for understanding societal perceptions of gendered presentation. Only in a truly gender-equal world (or arguably even a genderless one), without 'androgyny' or any other gendered language of appearance affecting our lives, would we ever be able to feel truly at home in our gender entirely on our own terms.

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NEO-COLONIALISM IN SKALA ERESSOS: IS THERE A HOME SOMEWHERE FOR LESBIANS?

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Last year, Tzeli Hadjidimitriou's documentary Lesvia premiered in theatres internationally, showcasing archival footage of women and gender minorities gathering in the small beach town of Skala Essseros on the island of Lesbos (2024). Every summer, these self-identified lesbians met in remembrance of ancient poet Sappho (Boyd, 2013), who lived on Lesbos more than 2,500 years ago and who gives her name to lesbians and sapphics/sapphists. In the film —spanning from the 1970s to the early 2000s— the community depicted is idyllic, welcoming, and brightly coloured. Its open mindedness is enlightening, and any young queer person who watches it feels the same longing for togetherness: a reviewer on *Letterboxd* wrote "Not only an important part of queer history in Greece but also a sad reminder that I'll never be a lesbian woman in Eressos during the 80's.." (Pavlos, 2024); another review reads "i love documentaries i love history i love archives i love greek islands i love queer people i love summer i love the sea i love going out with friends....<33" (Anastasia, 2024). However, the film touches on an issue discussed less frequently: this search for a home common among communities who face discrimination. Because of the appropriation of Lesbos by homosexual women, the Island —and especially Eressos— has become a tourist hub where native residents are softly expropriated and excluded from their spaces.

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In this essay, I will use an intersectional analysis to discuss the patterns of power and colonisation perpetuated by sapphics on Skala Eressos, in relation to concepts of "home" and "homelessness". I will begin by describing both the power imbalance between locals and pilgrims, and the disparities in lesbian representation among tourists, then I will move on to the meaning of migration especially in regard to Lesbos' own context, examining the many political implications of a home.

The queer joy that was found in Eressos by the lesbian community is undeniable. The beach became a place of acceptance and freedom previously unheard of and for once, lesbian history was made without bloodshed, without the aggressions and battles, the dismissal and the forced outings (Cant and Hemmings, 2010). Lesbians from Western Europe assembled in this beautiful place to express their love and flee from an oppressive heterosexual society (Nestler, 2009), as an obvious response to the common sentiment of queer homelessness.

Queer homelessness is a recurring theme in queer communities, and that is probably why the creation of queer spaces is such a common phenomenon (Anne, 1992). An exclusion from both the parental home and the social system has led queer people to gather and create their own spaces in which they can be safe from discrimination. They are not the only segregated community which have endeavoured to create this new social order within their groups, but this queer rehousing has certainly been a topic of conversation in later years (Frost and Selwyn, 2018; Motta and Lahiry 2025; Ponce, 2015). Creating for oneself a space as a solution to solve one's marginalisation and a new, blank land on which to start again free from stereotypes and heteronormativity was a dream, albeit a white colonialist dream (Çapan and dos Reis, 2024; Stoltz, 2019). Lesbians specifically have struggled to find their place in society, excluded from the gay narrative because they are considered women, and at the same time excluded from womanhood because they are queer (Wittig, 1980).

To salvage a feeling of home and find communities, groups such as lesbians have resorted to "entre-soi" (Tissot, 2014). The French concept of "entre-soi" describes this tendency to gather within one's own kin —often in terms of socioeconomic class but also among more specific groups, and very often within marginalised communities (Que-veut dire ?, 2023). The practice can be voluntary (women-only spaces, events "by and for", chosen diversity, etc.) or involuntary (inner-cities, private schools, etc.) (Tissot, 2014) — but in any case, it both questions the established class-hierarchy and furthers the categorisation of identities by creating exclusionary spaces in the name of inclusivity. It implies "the exclusion, either active and deliberate or not, of others" (my translation, Tissot, 2014). Whilst "entre-soi" can feel safe and enable a break away from the system, it is usually much more of an example of selective inclusion, in which boxes and pre-defined categories of identity define the limitations of togetherness (Walker, 1996). The relation of cause and effect that sprouts from exclusion leads to a specific inclusion which itself leads then to a deeper exclusion, and this wish for more boxes and limited spaces is imbedded in the very roots of Western queerness (Puar, 2013). Skala Eressos' "entre-soi" sprouts too from exclusion and discrimination, from Western European homophobic societies and from the islanders themselves.

It is essential to note that there has been historic discontent from the Lesbians towards lesbians. In a 2008 court case, three inhabitants of Lesbos argued for a ban on homosexual women calling themselves "lesbians", saying that it was disgraceful for them to be identified with homosexuality (Flynn, 2008). There have also been many instances of gender-based discrimination towards the pilgrims, for instance

men salaciously eyeing the women who were tanning and bathing, often naked (Hadjidimitriou, 2024). The partially recovered 2001 documentary film, Lesbians go mad on Lesbos shows armies of reporters interested in filming the bodies and the manners of the pilgrims. There is a testimony of a woman being beaten up and called a "dyke" by a Greek teenager (Stewart, 1999). All of this attention is in no doubt directly caused by a worldwide queerphobia (Mason, 2002), and misogyny which, even on Lesbos, does not quieten down.

The lesbophobia and misogyny shown are unacceptable and are not to be understated. However, these are not excuses for the blatant disrespect that lesbians have shown Lesbians over time, are they reasons to create a discriminatory and classist "entre-soi". Indeed, in the background of every sapphic paradise scene hides a form of neocolonialism. The women were slowly, insidiously settling in this space that they did not see as real, and instead aimed to create a new vision of Eressos which did not account for the reality of the village. Lesvia shows disgruntled locals who complain about the noise, the taking over of local shops, restaurants and hotels (Hadjidimitriou,2024). Originally, lesbians came and camped on the beach throughout summer, but as time went on, women-only hotels opened and some couples even bought property near the beach to live there year-long (Hadjidimitriou, 2024). This shows a clear absence of awareness among the newcomers. Their longing for a home completely disregards the homes already established, and furthers the power imbalance between them and the locals (Hall and Tucker, 2004).

The wealthy Western European lesbians, most coming from Denmark, Switzerland, England, Germany and Italy (Nestler, 2009), arrived on Lesbos and monopolised the beach. They drove up the prices by buying the shops and restaurants from locals —for whom it is the main source of income— and this only lead to the local population being displaced and forced to find a home where the cost of life is cheaper (Hall and Tucker, 2004, pp. 200-202) . This economic transaction —the commodification of the meaning of "home"— is a physical experience of the dehumanising "trading in" that neo-liberalism and ultra capitalism imply for the disadvantaged (Hall and Tucker, 2004). The Greek islanders would not be inclined to say no to the transaction, as the women are ready to pay good money (which is worth less to them). The Greek economy relies heavily on tourism, so the option to refuse this economy is almost non-existent. Greek islanders therefore fall victim to the capitalist economy that lesbians —although supposedly anti-system— are now shamelessly furthering. The tale that is told among lesbian communities is greatly different from the reality of the process of expropriation that is taking place. Often, the relationship between Lesbians and lesbians is described as a "conflict of values" or a "cultural dilemma" (my translation, Nestler, 2009). They describe a clash of cultures: one is rural, traditional, queerphobic, and close-minded, whilst the other is international and community-oriented. This is unfair representation which dehumanises Lesbians, shaping them as old-fashioned ruffians who are stupid and bigoted, and who ought to be kept at a distance for the wider benefit of the population. The way it works in Skala Eressos is "cultural distance and close company" (my translation, Nestler, 2009).

This then leads to the segregation of, and distancing from, Lesbians by visiting lesbians, and also breeds apathy and disrespect towards the local culture and lifestyles. In Lesvia, a restaurant owner complains about lesbians getting their hair cut on his terrace and leaving the hair on the floor for the staff to clean up (Hadjidimitriou, 2024). Similarly, in a 1999 essay by S. Stewart, one can read (and this is taking place in a restaurant):
"The game was truth or dare. At first the dares were mild, like 'make out with so and so' but as

the women got more and more drunk, they began to rub their crotches against the chairs, whip off their shirts and shove their bare breasts into one another's mouths." (p. 37)

The local standards and culture are disregarded. The only "valid" culture in Skala Eressos was the Western European queer one, understood as "more" valid than[2] the locals' for the simple reason that it advocated self-expression and "freedom".[3]

The trip to Lesbos was erected as an emblem of lesbianism. The phenomenon that took place in Skala Eressos was propelled to the forefront of lesbian symbolism, described from the early 1970s as "a place with a tradition of same-sex practices and where it was possible to have a separatist community where women might live independently in an atmosphere of love and freedom" (my translation, Nestler, 2009: 71). The pilgrimage to Lesbos represented everything that lesbians aimed for: a place without men, where they could stay together and fight against normativity one day at a time. The community yearned for a blank page, somewhere to be oneself entirely because of the absence of rules and pre-determined ideas: "a place like this, [...] is something that 15-year-old me has always needed." (Hunt, 2025).

But this dreamed vacation did not account for the families, men, and children living on this beach or around it, whose reality was completely transfigured (Stewart, 1997). This also ignores the fact that this so-called "welcoming" space was only discussed among specific, exclusionary queer communities, often from affluent socio-economic positions with class privilege. In Nestler's 2009 dissertation, she discusses the results of her interviews with multiple vacationers on Lesbos who all confirm they heard about Skala Eressos from friends in gay bars, and all of the people interviewed are familiar with lesbian circles and come from Western Europe (p. 70-81). Indeed, the lesbian kinship created every summer was not only perpetuating settler colonialists habits and methods, such as buying off people's livelihood and disregarding local culture, but also fundamentally breeding an exclusionary "entre-soi".

As with any utopia, the reality of Skala Eressos was very different from the fantasy: it was a secluded place for "white, middle-class European and American women in their twenties and thirties" to stay together, just as they stayed together in their own countries (Kantsa, 2002). Although in the original lesbian pilgrimages in the 1970s they formed a much more open circle and discussed politics and feminism, the movements grew into a communitarian one where "Greeks are with Greeks, English with English, Germans with Germans" (Kantsa, 2002).

Choosing a "safe" space that is inaccessible and exclusionary is a privileged and discriminatory way of maintaining a standard of lesbianism that goes beyond simply 'being a lesbian'. The shared community goal that was common in the late 90s and early 2000s, :"every lesbian needs to go to Eressos", was truly "every rich white lesbian needs to go to Eressos". It did not help that a lot of them came to celebrate poetry and art, and in the name of morality and literature, would feel it was adequate for women to settle on the island simply because of some pseudo-intellectual argument (Stewart, 1997, pp. 24-26). The disagreements between Lesbians and lesbians were in fact, often caused by Sappho herself whose mysterious life was debated and strongly disagreed upon. In a 2002 essay, Venetia Kantsa discusses this selective memory from both locals and tourists, and argues that neither the choice to see Sappho as equal to a modern lesbian icon nor the one to see her as an important lyricist and devoted mother only are entirely objective (p. 36). She explains that social memories are always selective, especially when it comes to personalities such as Sappho whose life story has been told and retold in many different ways over the centuries (Kantsa, 2002, pp. 37-40).What is certain however, is that lesbians do not have a moral high ground over

Sappho, and that this intellectual pilgrimage that started in the beginning of the century with poets and authors such as Renée Vivien or H.D. (Kantsa, 2002, p. 40) does not justify in any way the attitude towards the locals, and their treatment as inferior. It also restricts the access to Lesbos to a knowing, educated lesbian sphere, who believe themselves to have the correct information, as most testimonies from the sapphic holiday show (Kantsa, 2002, p. 40; Nestler, 2009, p. 75-81; Stewart, 1997, pp. 22-27).

Skala Eressos was never open to non-European lesbians, or to lesbians not from Western Europe (Stewart, 1997, pp. 22). Skala Eressos was never open to poor lesbians, rural lesbians, or to lesbians who didn't have lesbian knowledge, education, or literacy (Bravmann, 1994, pp. 156-159).

The issue that this fundamental lack of awareness within the lesbian community raises needs to be addressed and discussed within all circles. The strong dichotomy between lesbians who believe Skala Eressos is their own and the ones who have never heard of Sappho is not inconsequential to the lesbian history that is being written every day. The Western vision of Skala Eressos is omnipresent and has always lacked an intersectional reading (Bravman, 1994, p. 163). As times evolve, it is essential to look at this pilgrimage from another side — one where the locals may have more agency as to what their own birthplace looks and feels like, and where this part of lesbian history is not placed on such a high pedestal.

The two main phenomena that took place in Skala Eressos —the "soft-power" colonialism and the white-supremacist "entre-soi"— are shown rather distinctively in the archive footage from these summers, namely in Lesvia and in Lesbians go mad on Lesbos.

Lesvia's director, Tzeli Hadjidimitriou, is both a lesbian and a Lesbian, and she celebrates the refuge that women found in Eressos while pondering about the locals' discontentment. However, although Hadjimitriou's experience is valid and extremely important, she was one of the only Lesbians who took part in the summer pilgrimages, (Stewart, 1999, p. 22). The definition of "home" is questioned by Hadjimitriou throughout the film, as well as the meaning of a sanctuary, and her own relationship to her birthplace. It is important to note that as a local herself, she is not entirely critical of the newfound colonisation, but only asks for a conversation to be opened with locals (Isa, 2025). This seems unattainable seeing as even lesbians who have lived in Eressos for years continue to speak primarily in English, even with their Greek friends. The predominance of English as the village's language is another instance of neocolonialism, where local culture and habits are erased to ease "understanding" and "integration", but in reality participate in the globalisation of a passive British empire (Kehinde, 2025). Although the pilgrims used their position as "victims" to justify their migration of lesbophobia, the power imbalance shifted in their favour on the island. Their privileges were blatant and often insensitive towards locals. They were in control of the economy of the village for at least three months every year, perpetuating the dependency of tourists on the locals (Hall and Tucker, 2004, pp. 24-28). Tours were organised by tourism agencies in England, Austria, Germany and Switzerland (Nestler, 2009), and in collaboration with a British lesbian-owned tourism agency in Eressos (Kent, 2001), leaving no profit for the locals. In Lesbians Go Mad On Lesbos, one such tourism agency organises a week-long trip for British lesbians, which was met with disapproval from other lesbians vacationing at the time (Kent, 2001). Obnoxiously taking up public space may be described as stereotypical 'Brits abroad' behaviour (Mills, 2025). The couple responsible for the organisation admits they had hoped for a little bit more of sightseeing and discovering of Greek culture (Kent, 2001).

The gentrification that has been taking place in Eressos for more than 50 years is unacceptable, and it enters into the Western tradition of taking over people's spaces in the name of a moral cause, which in this case is open-mindedness and free love.

By analysing the underlying colonialism and classism in both of these films, it is clear that the over 30 years of sapphic heaven created in Eressos have not been as blissful for everyone as lesbian history tends to advertise. The pilgrimage to Skala Eressos has oppressed local

residents and created exclusionary queer spaces. Although its original intention was to create a home for marginalised people, it has stripped Lesbians of power over theirs and the newfound sanctuary is far from being open to all lesbians. This reorganisation has set the foundations for the present day Eressos.

Eressos remains a cultural centre for free love. It is historically a place for former hippies, happy families, and lesbians (Skala Eressos, no date). The International Eressos Women's Festival gathers thousands of queer people every year who come for the films as much as for the community. However, the movement towards Eressos is still very different from what it was, both in form and content.

In the past 20 years, Lesbos' tourism has grown, since it is a cheaper alternative to places like Athens or Mykonos. The coast line has become a regular all-inclusive resort, with bird-watching, yoga, water-skying and other fun, family friendly activities. Eressos, whilst still exhibiting values of open-mindedness, has become another tourist attraction. Tourism forms around 13% of Greece's GDP (Bellos, 2025), proving the importance of the opportunities the area offers for some locals. These benefits exist in spite of the fear of a globalised island which, like Mykonos, brings never-ending construction works and loud and obnoxious populations (Hall and Tucker, 2004, pp. 197-200; Stott, 1985). Tourism is a game which famously benefits locals at first, before pulling the rug from under their feet and leaving them stranded with no power in their own hometown (Brown and Hall, 2008, pp. 842-844). In Eressos, this can be seen for instance with a case described in Nestler's dissertation, in which a permanent resident to Eressos runs a shop called "Casa Concept", which "rents and sells properties on the island to international female buyers", putting the profits of the business entirely out of the locals' hands (2009, p. 38). This reorganisation of the village's economy by wealthier outsiders, in their favour, is common in situations of exploitative tourism (Brown and Hall, 2008 pp. 840-841).

The tourism business is also useful to dissimulate the ongoing migrant crisis that boomed in Lesbos in 2015. Refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq have been coming to Lesbos for years, trying to find passage to mainland Europe (Diaz, 2019, p. 6). The human toll is atrocious, with stories of bodies being hauled on the beach by locals, and tens of thousands of people sleeping on the streets (Diaz, 2019, pp. 7-8-9). Lesbians have been exemplary in their solidarity with the newcomers, offering food and shelter and advocating for their rights (Diaz, 2019, p. 28). The capitalist and colonialist imperialism that forces people to leave their home because of power-driven wars and oppression is the same as what can be observed in Skala Eressos, hiding behind the name "tourism" (Hall and Tucker, 2004). As explained by Kantsa in her essay: "everyone involved in or affected by the expansion of lesbian tourism should contextualize it as a process by which lesbian women appropriate the place and gradually become its hosts" (2002, pp. 49-50). This is also the basic process of colonisation: appropriating for oneself the land by becoming the host and thus controlling the economy and changing the culture.

The migratory crisis and the impact it has on the economy and the daily life of Lesbians is rarely discussed when reminiscing about the lesbian haven of Eressos. The blindness exhibited by communities of lesbians over the world towards locals and refugees is astounding (Jansen, 2025, pp. 29-30). It once again asks the question of the difference between an immigrant and an expat. How can Eressos still represent a shelter for lesbian and queer communities, while its inhabitants are struggling to make ends meet, bodies are being washed up on its shore, and most lesbians cannot even access it by lack of awareness or funds? The essential radical and political

aspects of lesbianism have been completely erased from these pilgrimages, and this ancient idea of community and homeliness which was always utopian is now solely fantasised.

The lesbians who came to Eressos symbolise a particular neocolonialist movement, and their homosexuality has rendered them "excusable" to the broader world. However, they are not to be detached from the Western European desire for cultural hegemony, and the questioning and alteration of both original pilgrimages to Lesbos and modern tourism, may be discussed through a decolonising lens.

Discussions and awareness about these important humanitarian and intersectional issues must take place because the community can only suffer from the obliviousness and enforced supremacy that has been so destructive to these individuals over the course of history. As a marginalised community, there is almost a duty towards other marginalised communities to understand their subjectivities in this situation, and not try to make one superior over the others.

This is not a critique of the understandable desire to find a home —somewhere safe and warm, with like-minded people. But when this attempt at a physical or spiritual closed fence community has been oppressive and, in the end, unsafe, the question has to be asked : is it the right battle to be fighting?

Footnotes

1. For the purpose of clarity, I will write "lesbian" when talking about the accepted and 1 most common self-definition of a woman or non-binary person attracted to women and non-binary people (Hord, 2020), and "Lesbian" when talking about the inhabitants of Lesbos.

2. The culture is "valid" because it is considered more moral by the newcomers. Without even touching on the discourse between the subjectivity of morality, i is also blatantly ignorant towards the locals to put one's own conception of culture above someone else's.

3. "Freedom" defined as centring the desires and expressions of a certain group of 3 lesbians. It is not simply the freedom to love, but the freedom to infringe on other people's spaces and lives, similarly to every settler colonialist mind frame (Grant and Snelgrove, 2023).

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WE HOPE YOU ENJOYED PLURALITY ISSUE 4: THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

ARTWORK BY ELISE ADAMS, ROSY FITCH AND MADELINE BRADY
ARTWORK BY ELISE ADAMS, ROSY FITCH AND MADELINE BRADY

AND FINALLY.

THANK YOU TO EVERYONE WHO WAS AT THE ISSUE 3 & 4 LAUNCH PARTY!