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Editor's Note



Cover Image: Feli Moana

By **Rae Teitelbaum** (they/them) & **Anna Rohmann** (she/ her)
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“The future is queerness’ domain. Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see the future beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house. [...] we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds ... Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world”

-(Muñoz, 2009, p. 1)

In this third issue of *Anthways*, we are celebrating queerness in anthropology and taking a closer look at what possibilities for another world, queer and trans histories, communities, narratives, and theories offer. Queerness cannot and should not be attempted to be made tame, normalized, or domesticated by the institution. It is unruly, wild, and radical by nature. However, queerness as

radical political practice, tool, mode, and approach to research, analysis, love, community, and life can be harnessed to provide deeper ways of thinking and doing differently. It goes beyond simply being a shared politics of identity or who you are attracted to, it is also how you see, think, imagine, and participate in the world, rooted in non-normativity, curiosity, and experiments in living and thinking **otherwise**.

This year, Anthways [invited submissions](#) reflecting on the positionality of queer researchers, applied queer theories, and asked researchers to contemplate their own experiences being a queer researcher, using queer methods, and or thinking through queerness within the discipline of Anthropology now and moving forward.

Queering research, anthropology, or ethnography, in particular, requires a process of questioning and deconstructing colonialism and cis-heteronormative, patriarchal structures, which are the foundation for current Western society and academic norms, methods, and approaches that define the discipline of anthropology. It requires centering queer, trans, black, feminist, indigenous, and decolonial approaches to research. It requires slowing down, reflexiveness, thoughtfulness, asking deeper questions, and it requires an even deeper listening. Following Linda Tuhiwai Smith, "The challenge always is to demystify, to decolonize" (1999, p. 16). In the spirit of queering not only research but also academic publishing, we had a network of peers review the submissions with care. This was not done in 'blind review', as we believe that anybody has biases towards certain writing styles, canons etc. It is another way to queer, to think in a way that is other or outside of the established norm that creates the possibility for more caring conversations about how we are coming into our research, the impacts of our presence in these spaces, the needs and desires of others, and the ripples and waves we make in people's lives, including our own, as a result of the relationships that we form.

Our undergrad submission, providing a space for early-stage academics to express their ideas in further efforts to disrupt institutional structures whose voices are heard, radically questions and queers the understanding of what it means to be human. This connects directly with the work of Anna Dobos (she/her), featured in this journal, who writes on our relationship to technology, AI and humans' inherent 'cyborgness' in [The Artificial Beholder and Our Digital Dreams](#).

Addressing a related issue, Qingyi Ren (they/them) from The University of Arts, Linz&Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW problematizes the illusion of "technical neutrality" in regards to gender recognition software. [Queering Digital Space: How Queer Bodies Disturb the Gender Binary in Facial Recognition](#) offers insights into how AI needs to change to be more inclusive of transgender and non-binary people and thus reduce harmful uses of technology in general.

Moving from entanglements of bodies and technology to decolonizing emotional, embodied experiences, Lu Willson (they/them) embraces the question [Can Queering Documentary provide Queer Tools to Decolonise Documentary Filmmaking \(and Dismantle the Master's House\)?](#) They draw on visual anthropology, autobiographical and collaborative methods to challenge how anthropological knowledges are constructed.

In [Our Earthly Queer and Trans Kinship Song](#) by Rae Teitelbaum (they/them), they weave poetry with theory and questions about queering research, and engage with ideas and experiences of kinship and community, as well as what embodied and meaningful research can look and feel like. Sprouting from their fieldwork working with queer and trans eco-communities in Spain and Portugal, they explore experiments in writing, research, and living in connection with human and more-than-human worlds.

In their piece [\(Insider\) Outsider: One Queer Anthropologist's Encounter with the Growing Weed of Positionality](#), Ray Abu-Jaber (they/she) problematizes positionalities of queer researchers and what role that plays for ethical questions and engagement with the (desired) impact of 'our' research. For them, holding on to the tensions and troubles of being a queer researcher and researching queerness can sit next to queer joy in an enriching way.

Making an issue engaging with all these topics remains a highly political act. In this third Anthways issue, **Queering Anthropology**, we not only celebrate queerness and LGBTQIA2S+ researchers in anthropology, placing a spotlight on queer and trans ways of thinking, doing, and undoing, but we also make room for discomfort, challenges, and questioning. Queer and trans people have always existed in every society and culture and have been historically documented in cave paintings, tombs in ancient Egypt, in indigenous languages, rituals, and histories (Prower, 2018; Picq and Tikuna, 2019). Sadly, so many BIPOC, queer, and transgender lives and histories have been erased, omitted, buried, or deemed not worthy of recording or remembering. We live in a world where 64 countries still criminalize homosexuality, and are in a moment of worldwide homophobic and transphobic attacks both in the world of legislation and everyday lives.

By embracing the multiplicity and potential queerness of anthropology and accepting the diversity, flexibility, and fluidity within the discipline, we hope this issue inspires the creation of more caring spaces for a more inclusive, expansive, queer future of anthropological research. These contributions urge us to ask questions that may unsettle, destabilize, and reconfigure our understandings to produce exciting and distinct knowledges and new ways of knowing.

We want to thank all of our peer-reviewers, editors, social media officers, web editors - the entire journal team. Having a community of and for queer researchers puts us in a privileged position to enact the queerness within us, which resulted in this journal edition. We also want to thank all the authors for their openness and trust in us to share their experiences and submissions. Without their fantastic work this imagining of possibilities would not have been possible!

Queering Digital Space: How Queer Bodies Disturb the Gender Binary in Facial Recognition

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Abstract

This paper discusses the intersection of gender and artificial intelligence (AI) and how the binary concept of gender is deeply embedded in the digital space. I examine how facial recognition systems use the binary gender as one of their facial analysis tags and how gender is assigned externally in data and algorithm models, masking heteronormativity with the illusion of "technical neutrality." This paper also discusses the role of queer bodies in dismantling societal order and challenging the binary concept of gender. The paper concludes by asking how machines perceive our identities and what insights queer bodies can offer to the narrative of AI and gender.

Keywords: face recognition, data classification, gender, artistic practice-based research

Contexts

Digital technology has provided space, a brand-new space, for people to explore their identity. In this space, bodies seem to be free, with digital skins, genders, and ages, allowing them to perform and transform themselves in infinite ways (Russell, 2020). Users can easily access portals, pop up as a young man from Southern California on a weekend morning, or effortlessly transform into a subculture lesbian in East London's graffiti streets. We celebrate the extension of the body that digital technology brings (McLuhan, 2001) while being gazed upon, monitored, and subjected to violence (UNFPA, n.d.). As the concepts of digital twins, metaverse, and hybrid collaboration brought by the post-pandemic era and the acceptance of working spaces continue to be highlighted, technology is digitising not only the items in the physical world but also everyone who participates in it, or who has already been digitised. Either as a data file or as a smooth-surfaced 3D modelling character. We stare at our colleagues' every move on the screen while remotely collaborating with software, observing each other, and worrying about the laptop camera's "gaze" so covering it with a bright sticker. Does technology bring us liberation of the body or are we dancing in the matrix, an illusion of a painted prison?

"See" My Gender

The domains of image detection and analysis stand as arenas where machines possess the capability to 'perceive' human presence, as expounded by Scheuerman et al. (2019). The outcomes of facial recognition systems effectively serve as visual representations of how machines 'observe' us. As an individual whose identity transcends the confines of the binary female gender spectrum, I've traversed a landscape riddled with queries and perplexities in the realm of physical structures. The challenges surrounding transgender individuals and the establishment of communal facilities are not novel occurrences – they encompass issues such as access to spaces affirming one's gender identity, including public restrooms (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2016; Bagagli et al., 2021), in addition to instances of prejudice and harassment experienced within public domains (NRCDV, n.d.; Trans PULSE, 2014).

However, when I first opened facial recognition in a workshop, most of the recognition outcomes were markedly skewed towards male identities, accompanied by confidence probabilities exceeding 90%. I thought I was free in this digital space, but unsettling results manifested. When everyone discussed their recognition results and made different faces while waiting for the digital changes, I still felt fearful and frustrated about the violence and prejudice I encountered in real life, which were being expanded in the digital space. This is how I began working as a queer researcher with AI.

How is binary gender deeply embedded in digital space? Scheuerman (2019) examined commercial facial recognition systems from 10 well-known companies, including Amazon, Microsoft, and IBM, and found that seven of the systems used binary gender (male/female) as one of the facial analysis tags. Facial databases are image data used to train and test facial processing algorithms, with each data subset having a set of associated annotations conceptualized as target variables. Taking the well-known facial database LFW (Labeled Faces in the Wild) as an example, this dataset contains over 13,000 face images collected from the web. LFW image annotations include race, hair colour, age range, gender, and a series of similar attributes. (2018) These attribute values are used as given inputs for computer vision algorithms and serve as the baseline for algorithm model predictions, meaning that the dataset's classification instantiates computer vision tasks. In LFW, gender is used as one of the attributes and annotated with the labels "male" and "female" which are classified by the character's names in the images. LFW's web page states "Eventually, we manually reviewed each category of male and female images three times to completely eliminate any incorrect

labels (2018).” In face recognition technology, gender is not considered a personal statement, but externally assigned. Technical practitioners manage and enforce gender binary divisions in the absence or denial of gender-related knowledge.

When the algorithm model is used to predict gender, the model’s results are also given a classification. Therefore, database classification plays a crucial role in computer predictions. One of the main drawbacks of machine learning is that its functionality relies heavily on data, and as data is collected, the dominant power structure is often specified. As with any artefacts, Winner (1980) argues that certain technologies in themselves have political properties. Whether artificial intelligence technologies “can be used to enhance the power, authority and privilege of some over others” Practitioners regard gender as the “gold standard” for designing and evaluating machine learning algorithms (Lockhart, 2022), transform their lack of knowledge about gender into a lazy default for binary gender and bring it into data collection and algorithm model design, masking heteronormativity with the illusion of “technical neutrality” and binary recognition results given by the computer.

Furthermore, the application of machine learning techniques has led to an unsettling deepening of social biases, thereby amplifying discriminatory practices, and fostering the curbing of diversity across numerous dimensions. In this context, Kleinberg et al. delve into the intricate ways algorithmic decision-making systems perpetuate bias and underscore the urgency for regulatory interventions (2018). Meanwhile, Noble uncovers a disconcerting reality, revealing that search engine results and algorithms are rife with negative biases against women of colour (2018). Buolamwini found that commercial AI systems from leading tech companies misclassified women and darker-skinned people (2018). Keyes expose the implicit or explicit use of ‘gender’ as a binary, immutable and physiologically distinguishable concept. Thus, further discussing the neglect and exclusion of automatic gender recognition for trans (2018). In using these technologies, a third-party machine intervenes to produce judgments that deepen the political violence of their existence under the guise of Algorithmic Neutrality. (Wojcik and Remy, 2021). Most studies demonstrate the severe consequences of this for ethnic minorities (Chiusi, 2020; Eubanks, 2019).

A series of studies consistently underscore the severe repercussions of these biases, particularly for ethnic minorities (Chiusi, 2020; Eubanks, 2019). Amidst these revelations, we find ourselves ensconced within the confines of an enigmatic black box – a construct that seemingly extols the virtues of diverse gender options within various software user registration systems. Paradoxically, we perceive our corporeal forms as emancipated entities in the digital realm, all the while unaware that the very opaqueness of this black box contributes to our continued entrapment.

We are all In Between.

What insights can queer bodies offer regarding the narrative of artificial intelligence and gender? In “Trans* Architectures,” Jack Halberstam (2018) deftly deconstructs the notion of “the wrong body,” reframing it not as an assertion of correctness, but as a revolutionary act aimed at dismantling the societal constructs that uphold judgments based on divergent expressions. The landscape of transgender bodies stands in stark contrast to the “normative body,” subverting and unsettling the binary paradigm through its very fragmentation and inherent contradictions. Queer bodies, in their unapologetic nonconformity and propensity for disruption, redefine spatial dynamics meticulously engineered by heteronormativity itself (Ahmed, 2006). “Transgender/queer bodies provide a blueprint for deconstructing the binary,” Halberstam aptly asserts (2018).

Some researchers have entangled the digital and physical realms in digital technology, activity Queer’s body in virtual space. Artist Emily Martinez trained an artificial intelligence model called

Queer AI using text content that incorporates elements of erotica, feminism, and queer theory. Reclaiming agency and fighting bias through AI storytelling (2022). In order to get rid of sound stereotyping and sexism and gender bias in the technology industry, the research team designed a neutral voice assistant Meet Q (2019).

Facial recognition systems perform poorly for transgender individuals and cannot classify non-binary genders (Scheuerman et al., 2019). My face always confuses machines - when I cover my left eye, I am recognized as female, and when I cover my right eye, I become male. I conducted a series of experiments to verify this, and some of the recognition results can be summarized as a machine's perception of certain parts of my face as "male" or "female." When I specifically interfere with these parts, the system changes its recognition results. However, the recognition results are influenced by many factors such as lighting and shooting angle and are not always consistent. Next, I will discuss how to activate my queer body in facial recognition through media art to unveil the intricate choreography between the technologically constructed and the authentically lived. This work seeks to not only expose the profound dissonances and tensions that underscore the relationship between identity and algorithmic perception but also to illuminate the potential for liberating these digital confines through the embodiment of authenticity and the celebration of multifaceted existence.

In 2020, I did my first digital gender performance (see F), using various materials (including paper, metal, textiles, ropes, and makeup) to change my appearance and repeatedly requesting facial recognition to identify and confirm me. This performance aimed to reflect on the tension between facial recognition and queer bodies. I primarily worked with Amazon's facial recognition system, Amazon Rekognition. First, Rekognition uses binary gender as a label, and the system also provides an interesting percentage score referred to as the confidence score (Amazon Web Services, 2023), which ranges from 50% to 100% and the value tends to infinity at both ends. It is not hard to obtain data of 99.9% male or 99.9% female during countless data submissions and identification processes, but there has never been 100% data. This part can be explained by the algorithm, but these data also reflect that all facial data are between 99.9% male and 99.9% female. Binary facial recognition systems trained on binary databases still seem unable to recognize 100% binary genders, making us wonder what the remaining 0.1% means. We are all in between.

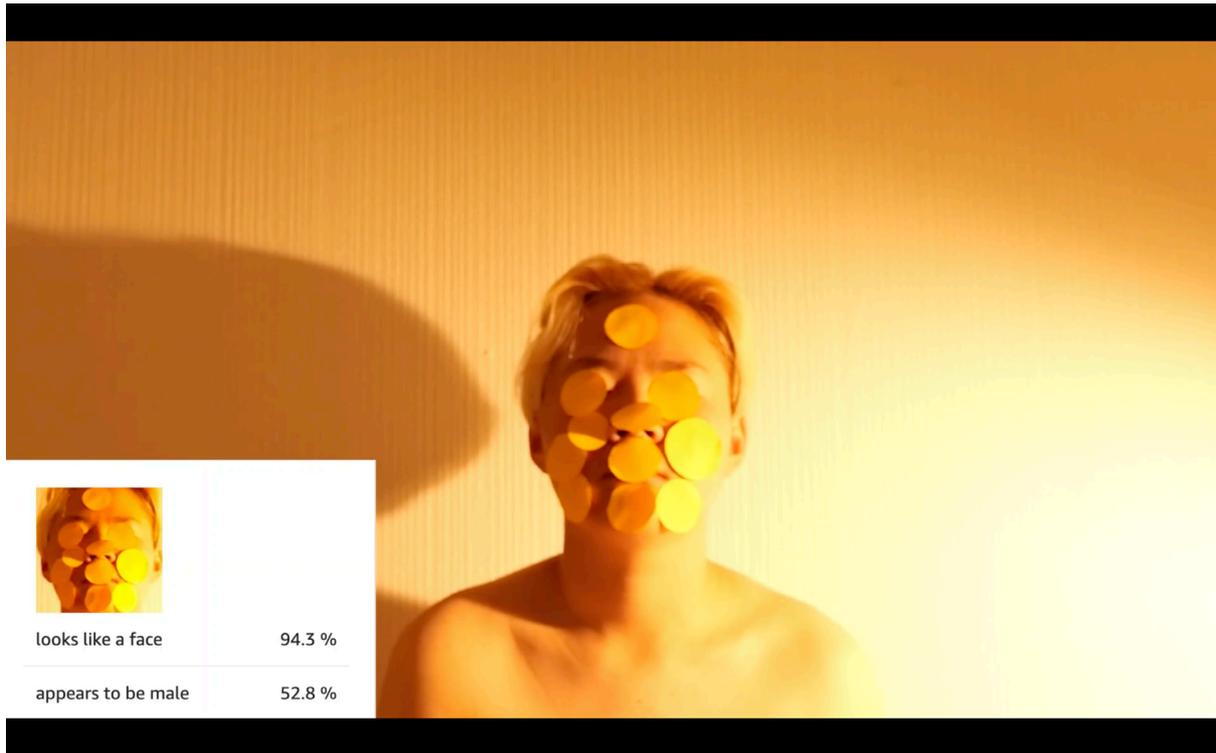


Figure 1 "See my gender". (Video available at: <https://renqingyi.com/see-my-gender>)

In the year 2021, I embarked on a transformative journey, symbolized by the deliberate shearing of my hair. This symbolic act propelled me into the realm of performance, allowing me to amass a comprehensive database consisting of a hundred images. To infuse this repository with gender annotations, I enlisted the capabilities of Amazon Rekognition, yielding an intriguing blend of gender labels oscillating between 51% and 99% for male and female attributions.

Using this database, I trained a machine learning GANS system to randomly generate images of my face with any gender figure label (see Figure 2, Figure 3). The resulting images cast me in a role analogous to an avatar, boldly interrogating the very performative nature of digital gender, and challenging prevailing notions by shedding light on the disparities present in gender recognition data procured from Amazon Rekognition. The experiment calls into question the conventional practice of pigeonholing identities within binary gender constructs through face recognition systems.

I worked with Amazon Rekognition for 7 months from 2020 to 2021. During this tenure, I subjected my diverse visages to countless iterations of submission, perpetually subjected to Amazon Rekognition's relentless scrutiny. These interactions yielded thousands of outcomes, as the system tirelessly identify, classify, and define me. Regrettably, amidst this ceaseless assessment, I remained conspicuously voiceless - never afforded the opportunity to present my perspective or defend my identity.

Moreover, the opaqueness of Amazon Rekognition's processes raises disconcerting queries about the fate of my submitted photos. These images, imbued with elements of my identity, now reside within unknown realms. The conditions under which they were classified, the categorical labels assigned, and the repositories in which they were ensconced remain shrouded in uncertainty.

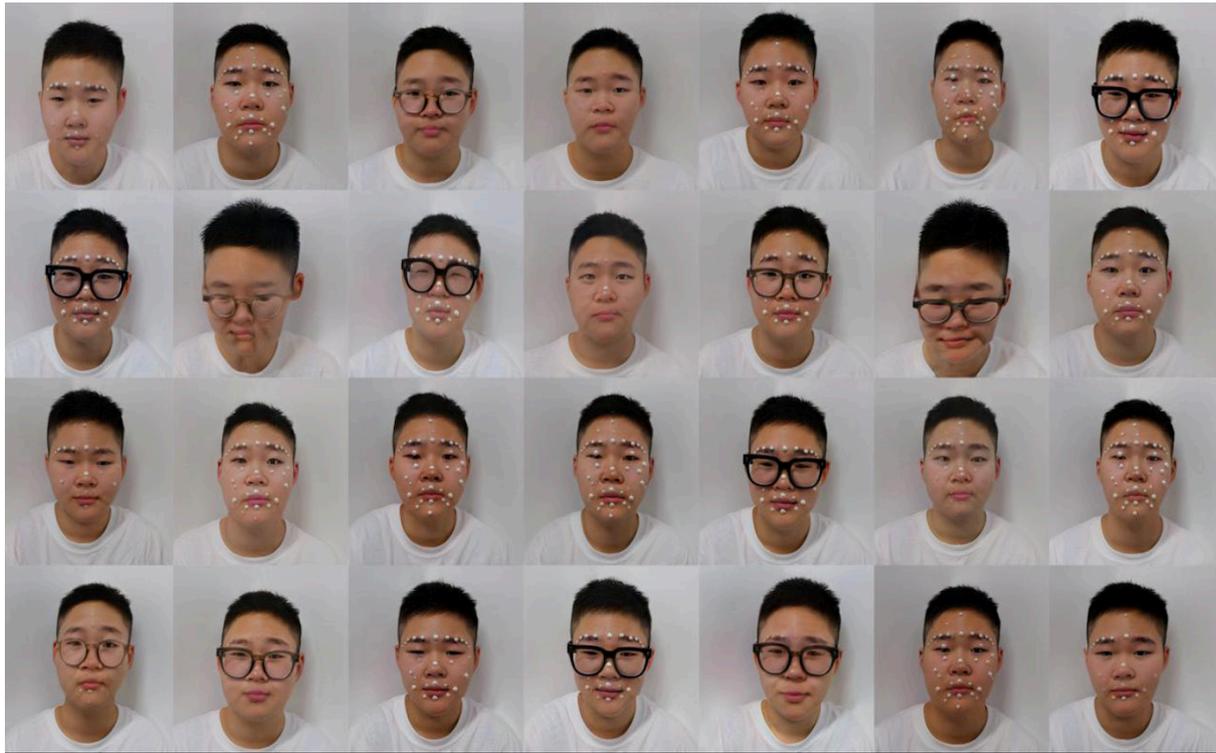


Figure 2 GANs generate faces.

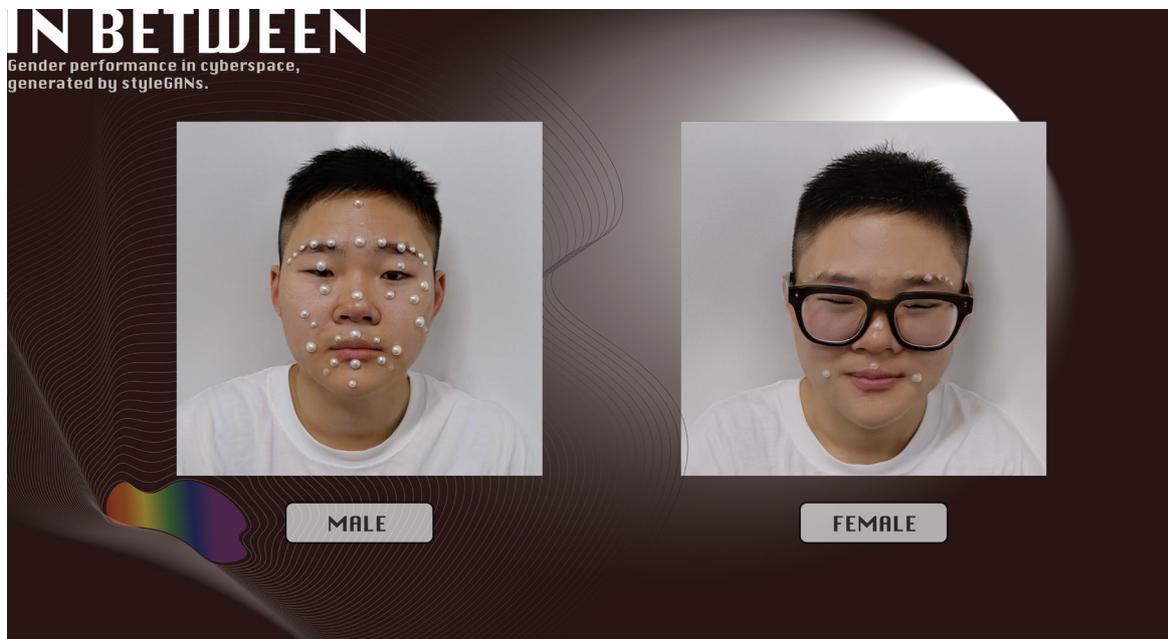


Figure 3 GANs generate faces with gender labels.

Gender bias in AI applications

The gender binary, deeply rooted in societal constructs, has long influenced our perceptions of identity and roles. As artificial intelligence (AI) becomes increasingly integrated into various aspects of our lives, its impact on shaping and reinforcing these binary notions of gender is becoming evident. In addition to the face recognition discussed earlier, in this section, I will briefly discuss gender bias in some AI applications to explain the pervasiveness of the problem and prompt us to reflect critically on the transformative potential of these technologies.

First, voice assistants are commonly assigned feminine names like Alexa and Cortana, and default to using female voices, perpetuating traditional gender stereotypes and reinforcing gender biases (Hwang et al., 2019; Baraniuk, 2022). I also examined some of the applications I frequently use. The translation software DeepL utilises AI to enhance machine translation accuracy (2023). However, when translating from Chinese to English, the software fails to translate the term “Queer” from Chinese (see Figure 4, Figure 5). For instance, when I provided the Chinese sentence “A person is cooking in the kitchen, and the person puts the child’s sandwich into the child’s school bag,” which does not use any gender-specific pronouns, DeepL’s translation automatically assigned a female subject to the sentence (see Figure 6). Interestingly, by adding an adjective before “person,” DeepL provided a different translation: “A successful person is cooking in the kitchen, and this person puts the sandwiches he has made for his child into his child’s school bag.” The subject of the sentence was changed to “He” (see Figure 7).

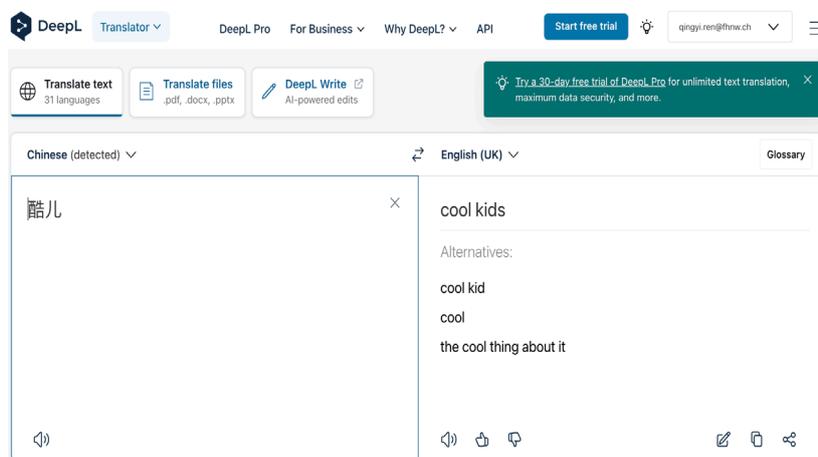
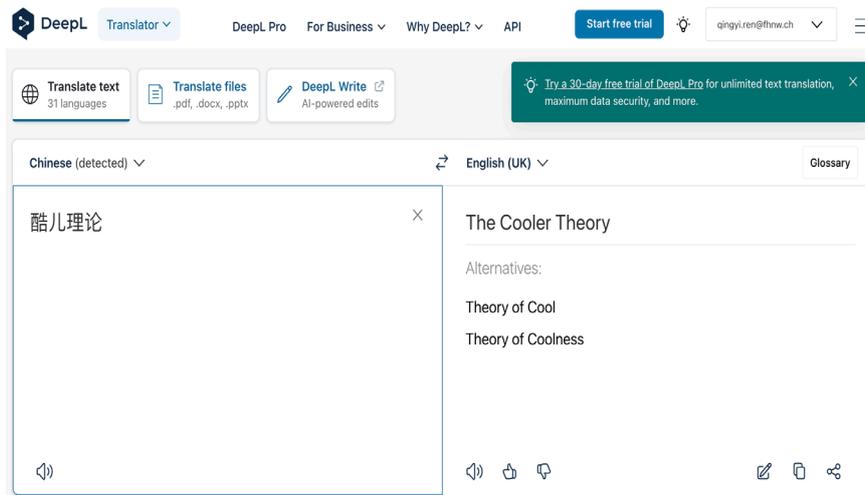


Figure 4, Figure 5: DeepL Translation Results 1&2.

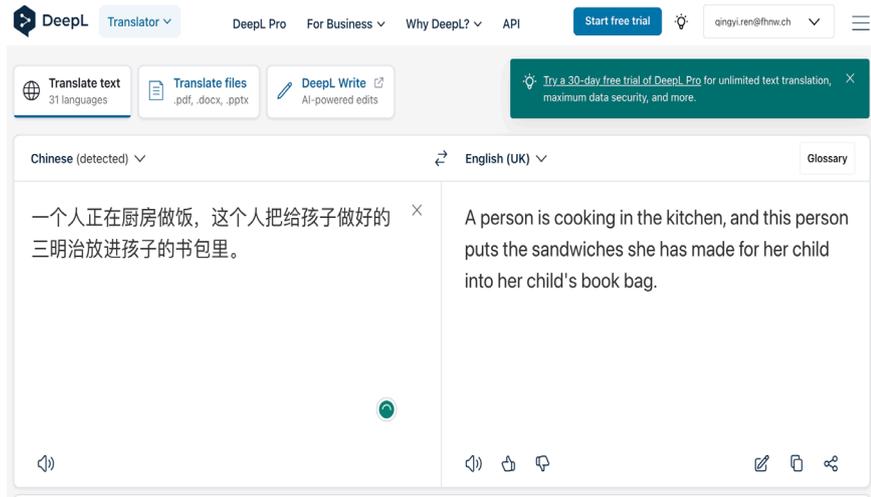


Figure 6: DeepL Translation Results 3.

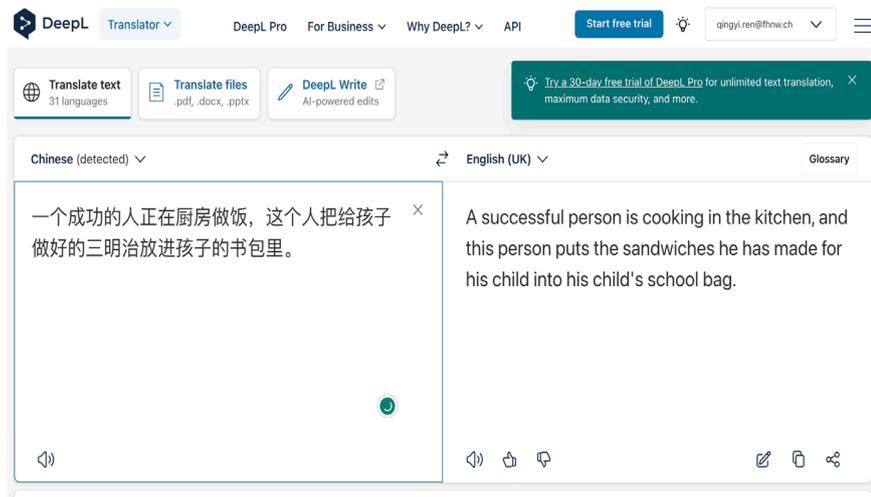


Figure 7: DeepL Translation Results 4

Similar situations also arise in some AI generation software. In the text-to-image generator Bluewillow, the software fails to recognize the term "lesbian." Through multiple attempts, I found that Bluewillow strives to portray diversity (Figure 8, Figure 9 and Figure 10). However, when I changed the sentence to "a successful human," the generated image featured a white male as the main character Figure 11. When using the phrase "a successful woman," the generated image depicted a white female (Figure 12).



Figure 8, Figure 9, Figure 10: AI-Generated Image from Bluewillow 1, 2, 3.



Figure 11: AI-Generated Image of "a successful human" from Bluewillow.

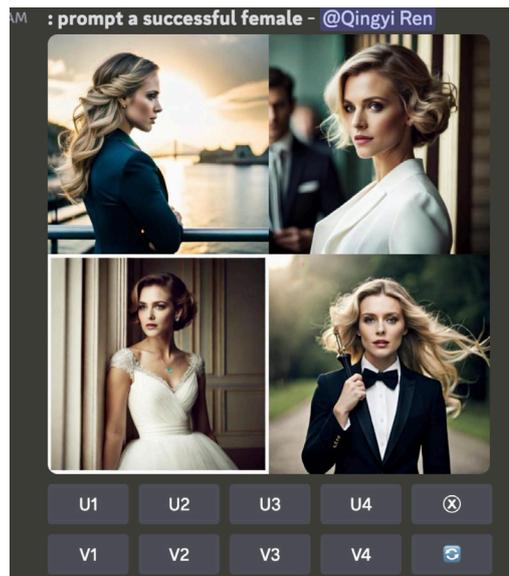


Figure 12: AI-Generated Image of "a successful woman" from Bluewillow.

These observations underscore the urgent need for a comprehensive reassessment of AI technologies to ensure they are inclusive and representative of diverse gender identities. Recognizing the potential for AI to perpetuate gender biases, we must actively work to challenge and transform these systems to better reflect the realities and complexities of human identities.

Conclusion

In this exploration of the intricate interplay between technology and identity, we uncover a multifaceted landscape in which AI capabilities both illuminate and constrain nuances of gender expression. Queer communities are becoming powerful agents of insight, revealing the liberating potential of technology, but also the inherent biases it can perpetuate.

Our work with AI applications like, Amazon Rekognition is a poignant reminder of the delicate balance between human agency and technological dominance. Despite tremendous advances in artificial intelligence, limitations, and inaccuracies in recognizing and representing the complexity of identities persist. It's a stark reminder that as technology evolves, we must also be aware of its potential biases and shortcomings. Our efforts to blend technology and humanity must be driven by a commitment to inclusivity, authenticity, and a relentless pursuit of a digital landscape that reflects our intricate realities.

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Can Queering Documentary provide Queer Tools to Decolonise Documentary Filmmaking (and Dismantle the Master's House)?

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This video mentioned in this piece can be watched [here](#).

Disclaimer: all the images in this piece are excerpts taken from said video, as such no captions/titles were given to them to not disrupt the natural flow of reading and get as close to the watching experience as possible.

Introduction

In this essay I reflect on making a queer collaborative documentary *We Leant Into Our Queerness* to argue that queering documentary provides tools to both decolonise documentary filmmaking and dismantle the master's house (Lorde, 1984). I previously argued that visual anthropology needs to be decolonised from its colonial past and the white supremacist and heteropatriarchal power structures in which it operates (Wilson, 2022). I define queering as sharing power (Moffat, 2009) and advocate that documentary can be decolonised by queering the typical power dynamic in knowledge production between dominant anthropologists benefitting from passive subjects. I argued that documentary can be decolonised by queering (sharing power) at all stages: having activist aims, using autoethnography to queer the filmmaker-self/subject-other divide and using collaborative methods (Ibid). 'We Leant Into Our Queerness' is an 11-minute collaborative documentary made by myself and two queer friends Joaquin and Polly. This essay reflects on using my queer method to decolonise documentary and visual anthropology. I argue firstly that activist aims decolonise documentary as anthropologists share power through balancing competing social justice and academic aims. Secondly, autoethnography can decolonise documentary by ensuring anthropologists reflect on having power over their story which drives the desire to share power with collaborators. Finally collaboration shares power and means anthropologists reflect on and challenge their own thinking from Anthropology and their positionality. I advocate for a queer, collaborative and engaged visual anthropology to dismantle the master's house by sharing power towards social change. I use bold font to show when I use autoethnography in this reflection, and use the terms documentary and visual anthropology interchangeably for the purpose of this essay.

Activist Aims

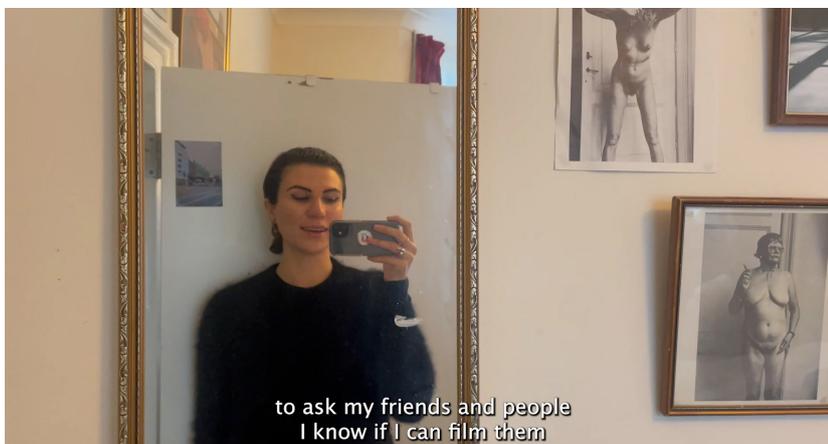
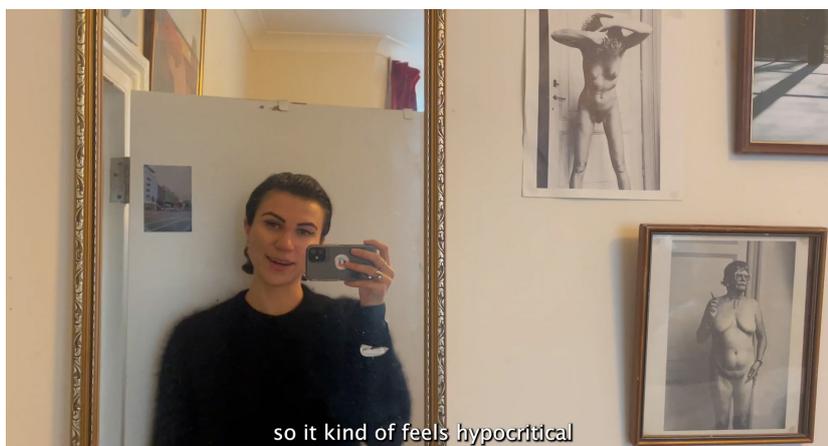
To decolonise anthropology, anthropologists can share their power by sharing activist aims with their research community. I am writing from the position of multiple identities: a queer, genderfluid, white, middle-class person, an LGBTQ+ youth worker and inclusion trainer, and a queer-visual-anthropologist-in-the-making. As I am part of my queer research community, I share social justice aims of equity and deconstructing all power systems. I try to be aware of my relative privilege and share the belief that anthropologists have a responsibility to consistently reflect on the direct and indirect impact of their positionality on the communities they work with and in. In this project, I had competing aims related to my multiple identities. Firstly, I needed to submit an ethnographic video and reflection piece for my Masters. Secondly, one of my activist aims was to make videos to show representations of LGBTQ+ joy and self-acceptance to the LGBTQ+ young people I work with. I often use film in my youth work and have noticed a lack of positive videos about LGBTQ+ people. For example I had been planning to screen BFI Flare's #FiveFilmsForFreedom with an LGBTQ+ youth group, but questioned the ethics of showing them. I ultimately decided that three films about parental rejection, mental health issues and detention centres may have been aimed at an older audience and could be triggering for young people currently living through similar experiences. Equally whilst there are queer anthropological documentaries like Moffat's *Mirror, Mirror* (2007), many are too academic to appeal to younger ages. Thirdly, I wanted to decolonise the extractive power dynamic of anthropologists benefitting from their research community by aiming for my collaborators to somehow benefit from the filming process. I was inspired by Cabezas Pino's *Esta es mi cara* (This is My Face) as collaborators felt the participatory photo process liberated them from the shame associated with having HIV. Having activist aims helped decolonise my filmmaking as I consciously balanced competing anthropological and social justice aims.

I reflected on my position as a visual anthropologist and to what extent I was using my power to benefit myself/Anthropology or my queer research community.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a powerful queer tool to decolonise documentary filmmaking. I previously argued with Moffat (2009) that autoethnography decolonises documentary by queering the binary between powerful anthropologist-self and submissive subject-other (cited in Wilson, 2022). By doing autoethnography for my collaborative film I realised it is an even more powerful tool.

In an early seminar, I showed - with embarrassment - a short edited video in which I reflect about hating being photographed and filmed, adding that it feels hypocritical to ask people if I can film them when I hate it:



In the following weeks I worked on my 'official' autoethnography about how finding out from my mum that I have a queer elder was a moment of queer self acceptance for me. I felt even more anxious showing this video because it felt personal and exposing. I had read that autoethnography risks being narcissistic if not linked to social, cultural and political contexts (Chang, 2008:54) and feared falling into that trap. Equally, I had no idea if getting dressed into my suit 'counts' as anthropology. Thankfully I felt validated by my tutor - the representative of Anthropology - that it did count as autoethnography and anthropology so breathed a sigh of relief. However the sigh was short-lived when my tutor added 'but I thought you said you hated being filmed, you look totally confident'. I felt embarrassed and

slightly annoyed - was he doubting my words, my story? It felt particularly jarring given the subject matter because he was a cis, heterosexual man. However, on reflection I realised he was right, much to my surprise I had enjoyed making the video and was happy with the result. But how could that be when I have always hated having my photo taken? I realised it was for two reasons. Firstly, when I had my photo taken as a teenager I hated the expectation of looking feminine and 'pretty' because due to my queerness it didn't feel like me. I reclaimed my queer appearance in the film:



More importantly I realised that I actually hate having my photo taken because someone else is in control of my image/narrative. In this film, in contrast, I had power over what story I told, how I told and filmed it, and how I edited it together: what I made visible and what remained hidden. I had complete power over my narrative and image.

This process showed me first-hand how autoethnography benefits participants 'in terms of self determination and empowerment' and 'constructing one's own subjectivity' (Coppens, 2012:132). This is particularly powerful for queer people who construct our own subjectivity in a heteronormative world (Allen, 2011). Autoethnography made me reflect on my positionality as a visual anthropologist, and directly guided my approach to collaborative filmmaking. I was aware of the power I held as a white, middle-class anthropologist/filmmaker and wanted to share this power so that Joaquin and Polly would enjoy telling their own stories and constructing their own subjectivity as I had.

Overall, autoethnography proved an even more powerful queer tool to decolonise documentary than I had expected. Autoethnography queers the filmmaker-self/subject-other power dynamic. But more importantly, autoethnography made me reflect on the importance of having power over one's story and image, reinforcing my desire to decolonise knowledge production by relinquishing power to my collaborators for their stories. I included my reflections in the film to show my journey of acceptance and understanding because it drives the story behind the queer method:



Collaboration

There is a wide range of what collaboration can involve in Anthropology and beyond. In 1969, Arnstein developed a ladder of citizen participation which ranges from low participation through manipulation and informing, to high participation through delegation and citizen control. Similarly in Anthropology, traditional research methods including participant observation and interviews are collaborative to some extent because research communities' voices may be included however ultimately the Anthropologist holds the power in knowledge production. In contrast, in the ethnographic film *Esta es mi cara*, Cabezas Pino documents a highly collaborative storytelling process which uses participatory photography with a group of men living with HIV in Chile. Whilst the film itself is not very collaborative with Cabezas Pino making the filming and editing decisions, the film clearly shows that the research collaborators hold the power over their stories. They decide which parts of their stories they want to tell through their photos and have full control over how their photos are taken and then exhibited.

Because collaboration is on a spectrum from anthropologists holding the power to produce knowledge to horizontal relationships between anthropologists and collaborators, I will describe my own approach to the collaborative filming process. **I initially explained to potential collaborators that the only given was the theme of queer self-acceptance, and that we work collaboratively to film it. Joaquin chose to talk about music, composed a piece of music based on self-acceptance and did an interpretive dance to his composition. I edited the video because of Joaquin's time restraints but as seen in the film, I showed it to Joaquin and was completely open to all edits. Polly had almost complete power in making her section of the film: she decided the theme of chosen family, chose to write a poem, did the majority of the filming - asking me to film anything I wanted - and made almost all the editing decisions asking me to do the technical editing.** Collaboration is a queer tool to decolonise documentary filmmaking because anthropologists actively share power with 'subjects', who become collaborators.

Dominant Collaborators, Submissive Anthropologist

When Joaquin said that music helped him with self acceptance, I felt some tension in me. As someone who is not very musical, I couldn't relate to his experience and worried that the young people I work with wouldn't be able to either. I felt a similar tension during editing when Polly discarded many of my favourite videos. In moments like these I felt confused and stressed, because I wanted to do things differently.

However, I remembered my autoethnography and the queer aims of sharing power so I actively went against my own expectations and the power I would traditionally hold as a filmmaker. Grimshaw beautifully expresses 'the necessary process of personal transformation which is the precondition for the new kind of ethnographic understanding. [...] The film-maker [...] must [...] be prepared to submit himself to the experience's disorientation, vulnerability' (in Moffat, 2009:116). It indeed felt vulnerable and disorientating to give up power over the video, but in doing so we more honestly showed Joaquin and Polly's experiences in their ways. Whilst I can't relate to music helping with self-acceptance, perhaps others may relate more to Joaquin's story than to my own. It was a powerful realisation about the kind of anthropology I want to do, a queer anthropology which agrees that 'to know another is [...] the most intimate act, and the queerest—as "a way of knowing it is also a way of being" (Ingold 2008, 83). This queer, this anthropology, depends on our desires to learn an/other way alongside others.' (Weiss, 2016:634). Thus queer anthropology is an acceptance of the 'other'.

Dominant Collaborators, Submissive Anthropology

When Polly asked if she could write a poem, I again felt tension but this time because I didn't know if poetry 'counts' as anthropology given I had never seen poetry in ethnographic films. I knew that if I told Polly this, she wouldn't write a poem, but then I felt even more tension because this would have been having power over Polly's story. I replied

something along the lines: 'well I don't know if it 'counts' as Anthropology, but the kind of anthropology I'm doing is queer and collaborative so if you want to write a poem, let's go with it'.



I intentionally put my collaborator in a position of power over Anthropology. Adams and Jones write that both queer theory and autoethnography 'ask questions about what counts—as experience, as knowledge, as scholarship, as opening up possibilities for doing things and being in the world differently' (2008:5). I do queer anthropology, which embraces 'an opportunistic stance toward existing and normalizing techniques in qualitative inquiry, choosing to "borrow," "refashion," and "retell" methods and theory differently' (Ibid). What comes out of it is a more honest closeness to how Joaquin and Polly think about self-acceptance, and a more queer, creative, decolonised anthropology. Out of anthropologists' reflexivity about and reactions to tension comes acceptance of 'other' ways of doing and being.

Submissive Collaborators, Dominant Anthropologist

Whilst I often queerly shared power during the collaborative process, at times I remained the dominant anthropologist. **For instance, I edited Joaquin's video and the film's overall structure, although in the future I would love to explore more participatory and collaborative editing. Equally when Polly and I edited her video, I explained that the final decision was hers but from my perspective as an anthropologist-in-the-making I would like to include two clips including the clip below because it explains that the aesthetic style of the section was her choice:**



Although I aimed to share power, I had not committed to what extent. I initially believed my role was to submissively facilitate, however I realised that I had learnt valuable insights about visual anthropology during my Masters which may aid how an audience understands the film. Equally, whilst I was advocating for a queer method which decolonises anthropology, I was not aiming to completely eradicate anthropology but rather adopt the notion of 'collaboration described by Sarah Elder as « creating an open space for dialogue » (1995: 94)' (Coppens, 2012:144). In retrospect, I think it could have also been interesting not to include the explanation as the viewer would have to work to understand the different aesthetic style but I prioritised wanting to show that Polly was involved in filming. I agree with Moffat that in collaborative methods 'no longer does the ethnographer have the last word, rather due to being in a never ending dialogic encounter the participatory anthropologist's position is gender ambivalent and queer' (2009:1).



Collaboration is a queer dialogue which involved me constantly negotiating positions of dominance and submission.

In collaborative filmmaking, the participatory anthropologist's position is queered because collaborators, anthropologists and Anthropology 'alternate between dominance and submission, the masculine and the feminine, the articulated and the silenced' (Moffat, 2009:160). Collaboration is a queer tool to decolonise documentary because the authoritative anthropologist actively shares power. Collaboration requires energy to constantly and consciously navigate positions of power and means anthropologists actively reflect on, question and sometimes work against the assumptions and expectations that come from both their own positionality and Anthropology. As Coppens argues: 'The boundaries between teacher and students became permeable; everybody was involved in a learning process and shared their knowledge and skills. This kind of reciprocal exchange may have transformative potential and reveals an effective way to deal with «the moral burden of authorship » (Ruby, 1995)' (2012:147). Collaboration decolonises documentary filmmaking because anthropologists relinquish the power and collaborators become more active, powerful agents in their own storytelling process. Again I deliberately included scenes showing the collaboration in the film:



This leads, I hope, to a queer decolonising of anthropology which is inventive and creative, and which retells methods and what 'counts' as anthropology.

Conclusion

My queer tools (activist aims, autoethnography, collaboration) decolonised my documentary filmmaking and helped me achieve my aims.

Firstly, I made a film for my Masters submission. Whilst my tutors will decide to what extent I was 'successful' anthropologically, I have argued that it certainly 'counts' as queer anthropology.

Secondly, I now have a positive video about queer self-acceptance for my youth work. I plan to screen them in late May so cannot comment on their reception but I think they will be useful tools for my future work. I may show them as separate clips as the anthropological reflections may not appeal to children and young people but I am pleased to have started a project making films about positive LGBTQ+ stories which I plan to continue. I can use the 'final product as crucial for public intervention and social change' (Coppens, 2012:133).

Finally 'the process [...] can often take precedence over the final circulated product' (Wachowich, 2020:108), so I will now reflect on what collaborators thought about the process. I included Joaquin and Polly's reactions to watching their sections in the film:



Similarly, when I showed my film-in-progress, I sent Joaquin a photo of him on the big screen. He replied 'it's beautiful, I love it! Thank you so much for including me in this idea. I love it, it's amazing. I'm so happy to be on the big screen'. Finally, I had asked Polly about dedicating the film to Jules, her partner who had passed away a couple of years previously, and she loved the idea. After spending a day editing together, she said: 'Thank you for today. I'm so happy with what it all looks like and it feels like a real tribute to our fam'. Polly also asked me if we can screen the film at a memorial event for Jules next year.

I similarly felt self-acceptance filming and seeing my queerness on screen:



I experienced that 'this construction of the self by means of audiovisual methods and narration is a creative and somehow therapeutic process' (Coppens, 2012:142).

Queer acceptance was our film's method and theme. By queering my method and actively sharing power with collaborators - meaning actively negotiating against the tension of my own assumptions and Anthropology's expectations - I accepted my collaborators and their experiences. Acceptance is shown in the film through the stories, collaborations, my collaborators' reactions, our emotions and our close relationships which grew in the filmmaking process:





To decolonise documentary, we should prioritise the process as much as the product and use methods which share power and lead to acceptance, emphasising 'the importance of the creation process and [...] the emancipatory effects that can be gained through it' (Coppens, 2012:133). A queer, collaborative visual anthropology is a powerful tool because anthropologists relinquishing power to facilitate people telling their own narratives leads to acceptance of the self and the 'other'.

These queer tools decolonise documentary filmmaking, but queer anthropological tools can also be used to dismantle the heteropatriarchal, white supremacist master's house more widely. We must 'root out internalised patterns of oppression within ourselves if we are to move beyond the most superficial aspects of social change' and 'use each others' difference to enrich our visions and [...] joint struggles' (Lorde, 1980). Activist aims provide vision for our joint struggle, as long as we take an intersectional approach: 'I am not free while any woman is unfree' (Lorde, 1997). Autoethnography, or deep self-reflection, makes us reflect on our position and internalised patterns of oppression to share privilege with more oppressed communities. Collaboration requires us to reflect whether our beliefs come from oppressive power structures and hegemonic ideologies. It requires us to root out internalised patterns of oppression and accept 'other' ways of thinking, doing and being as not inferior, but rather different ways to enrich our joint struggle. This queer method taught me that music, chosen family and queer elders can lead to self-acceptance. But more importantly I learnt queer tools to relate across difference and use my privilege towards acceptance and shared equality.

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Our Earthly Queer and Trans Kinship Song

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Anthways, 2023 © Rae Teitelbaum

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Laying in piles of starry earth bodies
Legs and torsos entangled
With those of my queer kin
I find a moment of respite
Of deep rest
To exhale and sigh
To feel the sunlight
And your bodies
On my face, arms, and thighs
Joyful and peaceful
I grin

*rewind

f a y e looks into our hearts and says:

“Even in the darkest of times there’s still hope and light. Moments like these are why I’m alive and why I continue to go on after living through the darkest, scariest moments of my life. This is why these spaces and family is so important.”

Family meaning queer kin
Queer kin meaning our bodies enmeshed on the rocky dirt ground
Outside the moon temple
And in the treehouse
We finally get to giggle
And
Begin
Dreaming up new worlds
New ways of gathering
Outside
Of boundary lines, rules, and labelled terms

These moments feel like bliss to us
A radical sort of rest
A tender kind of revolution
That says queer and trans people deserve to rest
To play
To dance
To gather and thrive
Show off their unique bodies
Instead of feeling shame
Or the need to hide
We remind each other that we can live fulfilling lives
That we can hold each other
Transcend
And dance with and through the pain we carry inside

Somehow,
Am I Still An Anthropologist if...?
Still rings in our minds
We giggle together and f a y e says it aloud
Teasing playfully
Since we've all kissed each other
And shared so many long cries,
During heart circles and over cups of tea
Tears of processing
How this all feels
To come out as trans
Non-binary,
Queer
To cut and loose family ties
To go through heartbreak, grief, and trauma
That we've stored in our insides our whole lives
Now, finally
It all leaks out from our eyes

So much vulnerability
We've shared
And countless experiences that can't be defined
We hold each other in the pain
Make space for the unruly
The hurt and the rage
We hold space for each other to collapse and to be untamed

Traveling and living in community
Sharing and making worlds
In kitchens, tents, and cara/vans
Over fires and hot teas,
In workshops and cold river washes and swims
And sunrises over the sea

Have held
and the trees
The mountains
Our starry earth bodies
While we have used precious time
loops
To dream up these new dreams
New ways to
Love
And
Live
Differently

What does the community need?
How do we show up for others?
What do we have to share, give, and receive?

How do we acknowledge our situatedness
Recognize our humanness
And our emotions in all that we do?

As Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes:

“Is her spirit clear? Does he have a good heart? What other baggage are they carrying? Are they useful to us? Can they fix our generator? Can they actually do anything?”

-(Smith, p. 10, 1999).

What is the research doing and why does it need to be done? How can it be done in a way that centres care, which is a connector to love?

What I have learned is that a queer anthropology
Is one that should not be afraid to diverge greatly
To remake the rules
To begin again completely
To love deeply
And be honest in ways
That we thought we couldn't be
Perhaps it's about putting love and care before productivity

When I think about the last few months
(of fieldwork)
Where *we*
(Alma and I)
Travelled together in a van around Iberia

I think of how much I grew
How much I loved
How my life flipped
Completely upside down
How much I cried
And how much I was held

In community
By my kin
This big web of lifelines
That helped me stay afloat
And swim to shore amidst high tide

Through breakups and death and
Major life changes
I found expansive and brilliant human nests
Where I was given a mobile home
And space and time to grieve
And rest

My body, heart, and bones,
Found a moment of calm
In my cold little van
Cocoon
Where I could sleep,
unravel,
dream,
transform
and
love

Driving back to Lisbon
Was the ribbon we tied
At the end of this chapter
(Of fieldwork)
This last time

So, I place a bit of writing

From that drive

To bring this back

To my inner insides:

Driving Back to Lisbon

My tears hug my cheeks
And kiss my nose
While you wrap me up in your arms, hands, and feet
The bugs buzz around the van window
While I cry for all that has been
Over these last months

All of the love
The heartbreak
The fears
The growing pains

The tears for our
Love of frogs, birds, rabbits, and pigs
Love of cows, bugs, bees, and trees,
And love of being queer and trans
Love of being me

I found a home in myself
In the mud
and the dirt
In the river
In the sea
In the brambles and amongst the orange trees
Underneath sage plants
and rosemary

Beside the goats, the dogs, and the cats
Up in mountains
And in sunrises and sunsets

I saw my reflection
And you saw me
Hiding and shining
Rainbowing
But struggling to be

So, I walked and I walked
Through lightning storms and tunnels
And waded through dark forests

And pools of goo
Cried to the mountains
Then cried to you

You listened so gently
While I turned into morning dew

You held me
And I held you

While we fell apart
Together and apart

Then we walked
We walked together
And we walked alone
And then found each other
And met in time loop holes

In naps
In rivers baths
And for hot teas
On the ground looking up at the stars
And under the strawberry trees
Where I drank medicine from your palms
Made of roots, blossoms, and magical love and leaves

It was here
On this journey
Where I continued to learn
To make my own remedies
To bring me back to
This porous earth
Filled with potentiality

I am grateful for your nest
Where my heart found a home
And thank you for helping me find
My way back to own
Inner world home.

Perhaps queering anthropology is about
Opening a space
For doing things in **wild**
Different
And loving
connective ways

Like Donna Haraway says:

“Kin is a wild category that all sorts of people do their best to domesticate. Making kin as oddkin, rather than, or at least in addition to, godkin...troubles important matters, like to whom one is actually responsible...What shape is this kinship, where and whom do its lines connect and disconnect, and so what? What must be cut and what must be tied if multispecies flourishing on earth, including human and other-than-human beings in kinship, are to have a chance?”

-(Haraway, 2016, p. 2).

Seeing

Queer kinship as a wild,
Remedial force
As a way to rebuild strength
And generate new networks of care and support

Queering as a method of learning to listen
And trust each other more deeply
Including the critters, lakes, fungi, and trees

Queering as a mode of experimental living
And engaging playfully and radically

Queering as a voice that asks us to go deeper
To keep questioning

Queering as a body that is multiple
Both with and without
A shapeshifting world
That reminds us of potentiality and possibility
Of what is here now
And what is to come

It reminds me of Jose Esteban Muñoz who said,

“Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (2009, p. 1).

Queerness as fantasy, co-creation, and collaboration
As a gentle whisper
Encouraging us to merge
To ask for support
To tell my/their/our own stories
To transcend and transform

To take action
To think of issues of access
Like who is benefiting?
Who holds the power?
And how can that be distributed, shared, or navigated collectively?

Queer community as ecology
Queer kin as a healing prophecy
As a potent medicine
A restorative energy
To help us move through our trauma and grieving
To help us come together
And create powerful resonance
To see and be seen

I find myself
here

Dreaming of and being in

Piles of

starry earth bodies

Dreaming up new futures

And better collective nows

Amongst cobwebs,

thyme,

and dusty grounds

We sing our earthly queer and trans kinship song

And wildly

We dance

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I'm here, I'm Queer, how should I speak here? (Insider) Outsider: One Queer Anthropologist's Encounter with the Growing Weed of Positionality

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I'm here, I'm Queer

"How does being Queer feed into my research?", reads the prompt for this issue. A curious question. Being Queer does not just feed into my research, it bleeds into it, drenches it with love, hope and determination. Being Queer and Queer experience is my research. It is all I ever talk about. It's all I ever see, it is all I ever read about (using read loosely here – at this point I'm more likely to look up a Youtube essay than actually read a book), it's everything. I breathe it, and so does my work. I am not just a Queer researcher stepping into the field, I am a Queer person, a Queer body investigating, desperately trying to do something, trying to enact change, create something, and use this space of anthropology and the support of my caring, thoughtful anthropology peers and tutors around me in the classroom and on the campus to create something that can reach out to other Queers and our community. At the soul of it, I am trying to use anthropology and the ideas it holds to nurture a little seed called a PhD project that can grow into a beautiful tree of hope and inspire joy. It comes as no surprise then that my research project itself is gay as fuck (it's literally called "Didn't Gay Mean Happy Once" - a title I keep using over and over again, wearing it like the pride badges that adorn my jackets). Birthed from Queerness, and the memories of that poor little Queer kid that I used to be who grew up learning that they will never be safe as a Queer person in this world, the kid that constantly worried about their rights being taken away, and a need to do something and be part of a movement that can enact a positive change to make the world a safer better for other Queer kids, it lives in me, evermore flowing through me especially now as I enter my MRes/PhD.

As Audre Lorde understands (1984, p.57) joy can be a powerful thing. For communities that face unrelenting prejudice and discrimination, especially in the everyday, hope can be difficult to find. Hope for change, hope that things will get better, or hope for the future can seem unreachable. And that is why, as projected by Audre Lorde (1984, p.57), reminding people of their capacity for joy is incredibly important. It reminds those people faced with prejudice that their lives are worth living and that they deserve love, joy and happiness. It is a nice flicker of love to balance out the pain that they go through. Part of that joy that Audre Lorde talks about is how, in the face of everything painful, people do not just survive but thrive (1984, p.57). So of course, this celebration of joy is not stepping away, disregarding or ignoring pain. It is thriving despite it. To me, this celebration of joy is exactly what I need to put out into the world to enact that positive change I want to see. So, I actually did the shit. I made things, I wrote, I read, I listened. I hurled myself into a PhD project all about queer joy and how to inspire joy in Queer people.

As it currently stands, my project is all about investigating how tabletop games can facilitate joy in Queer players. How can tabletop games like D&D make people feel good. How do players use games to bring them joy? This is all in the hopes of eventually turning my findings into the creation of my own tabletop game that can spread joy and give Queer players that effervescent light glowing feeling. I just want to make something that can make Queer people happy and remind us of our capacity for joy. And every time I spoke about my project, the energy and light beaming across my face, I felt full. My soul felt full. And that is such a beautiful thing I find myself feeling every time I step into a classroom, conference, or workshop I run, sharing Queer joy with the world around me. But every time I open my mouth, there is one problem...

I keep saying "we".

How should I speak here?

In my project, my way of speaking was often picked on and questioned. Centred on the Queer community, with myself as a Queer researcher engaging in a Queer topic, I felt a clash between how I would conceptualise my topic of study and my role and positionality as an anthropologist and Queer person. Whenever I talk about my project - creating a game that hopes to inspire and facilitate Queer joy in players, whenever I talk about Queer emotions and experiences, I keep saying "we". "As Queer people, we..." is a very well used screwdriver or spanner in my brain's toolbox of things to explain my project. And this is a problem. As Abu-Lughod once asked "Are there ways to write about lives so as to constitute others as less other?" (1991, p.149). In my work, I wanted to do just that. Fed up and uncomfortable with reading some Queer researchers referring to Queer communities with the extracted distance and cold, disconnected, sanitised words of an outsider observing, I made it a point to fight against this in my own work. I am uncomfortable saying "Queer community" like some Queer researchers do, because it feels so detached, clinical, isolated, and puts us under a microscope. Instead, I embraced the activist method for community and bringing together, adopting terms such as "we", "us" or "my community" to evoke the united visibility Queer activists embody when talking about my project. A method and way of speaking that I now realise has its own issues.

"As Queer people, we are often taught shame around our Queerness, and we expect to be met with Queerphobia at every turn" I remember saying to my sister when explaining the reasoning behind me choosing to work with Queer joy. In doing this, I hoped to distance myself from the far off way that some Queer researchers were referring to Queer communities. I learned from working in a Queer charity, especially when we wanted to secure funding or inspire anyone to actually give a fuck about a Queer charity and the work we were doing, "us" and "we" are useful terms to promote the Queer community as a united front. They were words that allowed non-Queers to see us as a united voice that was worth helping, one that stood together. And they amplified that voice. But is there really such a thing as a united voice? Is one "united" voice more favourable and effective than multiple? What about the multiplicity of experiences, identities, and voices in our Queer community? As Weston (1998, p.205) argues, simply saying "my people" is not inherently an issue. As she explains, identities and communities are somewhat socially constructed, and with each community or identity there comes a different context of its construction that can greatly influence how that phrasing "my people" is used. An activist saying "my people" has a very different context, power, and meaning than a colonialist using that phrase. Whilst that is true, and whilst I use those terms "us" and "we" under the good faith of an activist context, that is no excuse for my use of the terms. As pointed out to me by my tutors, such use of "we" and unifying myself as a researcher with my community of study may raise the volume of the unified activist Queer voice, giving the community visibility, but it can actually silence some voices too. Even though I am Queer, and so is my topic and community I am working with, I cannot speak for all Queers when I talk about my research. I do not want to silence these voices that are not mine. Even the people I do share an identity or label with, they may not feel how I feel. They may not want to say what I say. So I cannot speak for them either. Regardless of my intentions, I cannot let the way I use terms like "us" and "we" silence them. I must actively work not to silence them. I must recognise the outsider aspects of my positionality. And I must grapple with this part of me and my role as a researcher. Maybe this is something other Queer researchers find too. An issue to grapple with, a weed in my growing tree of a project. So what do I do about it? How do I solve this problem?

Learning how to speak here: Attempt One - Autoethnography?

Anthropologists are forever inundated with important, needed debates over ethics and representation. Anthropologists cannot help it. As a discipline that was birthed from colonialism, stealing, and reporting back to so-called homelands about some "exotic other" (a disgusting term and ideology I think a lot of people working in the discipline wholeheartedly resent. See Weston, 1993), anthropology fosters some methods and ways of speaking that have been and still are dangerous. As Kath Weston notes (1993), even early lesbian and Queer studies in anthropology heavily focused on examining and looking for evidence of same-sex relationships and gender difference in cultures outside of the West, deeming such cultures as "other" by forever comparing their beliefs and structures to Western culture's. Anthropologists in this area would deem such findings "exotic" and exoticize the same-sex relations and understandings of gender they "found" in these cultures, presenting them as unusual or spectacle in their comparisons to Western conceptions and structures (Weston, 1993). Thus, Anthropologists need to be wary of their influence and the dangers and harm their ways of speaking can cause. Anyone doing anthropology needs to be careful and actually think about what they say and what they write about. Particularly for myself, focusing on how I write and speak is an integral concern for me to consider, so that I can minimise any harm to the Queer communities I work with, and so I ensure I actively work against anthropology's dangerous past of othering in my writings. But how can I ensure I do this? There have been voices that tease out and twist around whether or not autoethnography is the way to go (see Browne & Nash, 2010).

Hinged on the analysis of the ethnographer's experiences, autoethnography inherently brings forth the positionality of the researcher (Waterston, 2019, p. 12). Being an expulsion of the ethnographer's feelings, thoughts and experiences, autoethnography requires experimentation with writing forms and can become quite unorthodox and chaotic (2019, p. 12). As Waterston explains (2019, p. 12) some forms of autoethnography are much more an experiment in revealing and looking at oneself than trying to represent or understand a community. Indeed Reed-Danahay (2002, p. 423) defines autoethnography as "produced by an 'insider' or 'native' observer" of their own culture. Therefore, in Waterston and Reed-Danahay's understanding of autoethnography, you're just speaking for yourself, using your own experiences to learn from or say something with, and hopefully change the world.

Particularly in Queer work, this form of autoethnography is an incredibly satiating method (see Browne and Nash, 2010). Indeed, as Rooke explains (2010, p.34) "as ethnographers of Queer lives, while we are busy deconstructing the discourses and categories that produce our informants' subjectivities, we might consider the extent to which we ourselves are willing to be 'pulled apart' or undone?". And it is exactly for this reason that I am keen on employing this form of autoethnography and its methods. If I am going to analyse my encounters with the people I work with, then I need to first apply such scrutiny to myself. To Queer Rupaul's favourite phrase "if you can't analyse yourself, how can you analyse somebody else". This is why I actually really appreciate this self-reflective self-unravelling form of autoethnography championed by Waterston and Reed-Danahay and everything it does. It is me making myself bare as a signal that I too am open to scrutiny and examination.

It can be said that such autoethnography is self-indulgent; revealing and exposing the self for the sake of it (Behar, 1996, p.13), or that self-analysis is too personal and takes away from the communities and people you study with (Behar, 1996, p.22). Revealing so openly and vulnerably your experiences and how these interweave with your views and ways of connecting with

the people you study could be said to taint your work as biased (Behar, 1996, p.10). Indeed, conducting this form of autoethnography as an insider to the community i am working with can bring up its own issues as well. Insider research is the brand of work that revolves around the researcher actually belonging to the social group they are conducting research with, on the basis of shared characteristics (Gair, 2012). I am doing research on the Queer community, and (as I banded on about before) I am Queer (I have pretty much made being Queer my whole personality at this point) so in that way you could consider me an insider. As an insider to the community they are working with, a researcher may find themselves subjected to their own unwanted bias. They may have problems separating their personal experiences, feelings, and ideas from those felt by the people they are working with (Liu and Burnett, 2022, p. 3). This may be true for problems upholding objectivity; as an insider you may feel extremely connected to the people you work with and so may struggle to separate your "objective researcher" lens from your more human one, thus stopping you from doing ethnography or alike entirely for fear of what it might do to that community. In my situation, this lives alongside my penchant for grabbing a metaphorical megaphone and accidentally talking as though I am speaking for an entire community whenever I describe my own thoughts or ideas. In this way, I definitely have problems separating my personal experiences and ideas from those felt by the people I am working with. And what helps me keep this problem in mind is knowing that by the simple virtue of my role as anthropologist, and in my identities within the Queer community, I am also somewhat an outsider.

Although both these issues may be true, I believe there is still a benefit to this form of autoethnography and what I can absorb from it in my pursuits for learning how to speak and how to use/not use "us" and "we" when I talk about my project and Queer experiences.

In an effort to attempt to address my positionality, I conducted an autoethnographic experiment playing a tabletop game known as The Terrific Travelling Trouble shooter with my sister (check the game out, I highly recommend it). Using Waterston and Reed-Danahay's understanding of autoethnography as a space to make oneself bare and unweave oneself, I followed my feelings as I played the game to attempt to investigate my own bias as a Queer person so that I may stop homogenising my experience. The game's main role is to generate conversations, using a physical suitcase as a base to guide the players through helping each other. Each of the two players are ascribed a role to play the game, with one becoming a travelling troubleshooter complete with the wonderful suitcase to help you as you cure people of their troubles, and the other a customer who has a trouble or problem to solve - problems can be a real problem or fictional. The suitcase is kitted out with soft knitted objects that will guide the troubleshooter through a conversation with the customer, giving them helpful prompts to inspire solutions to the customer's issues when squeezed. The moment of play between my sister and I proved to be a good moment to test managing my insider/outsider positionality and my problem of misusing "us" and "we" when talking about Queer experience, as i was at once insider (due to our familial connection and shared history) and outsider (given my positioning as Anthropologist and Queer person in a moment of Queer joy against my sister's as a non-Queer person experiencing joy). Following autoethnographers' attempts to explore "people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles" (Bochner and Ellis, 2006, p.111), I found the autoethnographic encounter allowed me to understand my own joy, with the sensorial emotional experience uncovering things i did not previously know, and allowed me to grapple with my insider/outsider positionality by unravelling myself.

The autoethnographic excursion was and acted exactly as that: an analysis of the self(ves). I was the subject in my ethnography. In my autoethnography, I was not an observer speaking for a group or

a community. I was simply untangling myself and what my work means for me. If I want to create a game that inspires Queer Joy, I must first detangle, re-entangle, string out, and knot together what exactly Queer joy means to me. How does it feel for me? Where does it come from? I am but a fragment among many fragments that live within the Queer community umbrella. Thus, I can build a picture not by blowing up my fragment to take up the space of a full image that constitutes Queer experience as a whole, but to recognise it just that, a fragment that will be stuck together alongside other fragments from various people to make a beautiful collage of Queer experiences. So I must first start with autoethnography analysis, with my fragment. Then I can carry on self-analysing through autoethnography whilst ensuring I listen to other autoethnographies of the people I work with to see how their experiences have influenced the making of their games. Thus there will be more colours to the fragments of Queer experiences, and I can avoid the all too easy accident of having my own as the sole representative.

The game predicated on me revealing a problem to my sister for us to talk through and solve – something I found very uncomfortable when we played and when I wrote up my autoethnography. In the self-focused autoethnography, I was recounting a personal moment I a Queer person was experiencing as I began to understand why I was so uncomfortable, why I am so closed off and reluctant to be vulnerable around my family, and why opening up to my sister and feeling us connect through her deep care for me has brought me joy. Did this moment of vulnerability taint my work on Queer joy with bias, as Behar warns? Yes. The bias I have that comes out when I explain my project, saying things like “as Queer people, we often don’t experience care, and so it’s important to show when we do” does come from my particular experiences as a Queer person. This is not shared by all Queer people. As advised by Abu-Lughod, generalisations in ethnography are dangerous. As she explains, “When one generalises from experiences and conversations with a number of specific people in a community, one tends to flatten out differences among them and to homogenise them,” (Abu-Lughod, 1991, p. 475). Employing an ethnography of the particular - something that speaks from and represent an individual’s experiences, rather than homogenising various experiences to speak for an entire community (Abu-Lughod, 1991, p. 475) is an effective way of working against the harm that would otherwise come from making generalisations. By centering individuals and individual experiences in anthropological projects and ethnography, anthropologists can avoid homogenising experiences and points of view (Waterston 2019 p.12). Doing so arguably offers more nuanced representations to the anthropologists work (Waterston 2019 p.12). This form of autoethnography works to create accessible ethnography that is grounded on everyday life (Jones and Adams, 2016, p.197). Such focus of everyday life arguably invokes the ethnographies of the particular, effectively echoing the call to focus on individual life and not homogenising experiences to create a ubiquitous “Queer experience”. Choosing to adopt Waterston and Reed-Danahy’s respective autoethnographic approaches to the recount of the session I had playing the game with my sister allowed me to explore my particular individual experiences growing up as a Queer person. Following my own thoughts as we played made me analyse myself in a way I hadn’t before, thus leading me to change the sentence “as Queer people, we often don’t experience care, and so it’s important to show when we do” to “I am a Queer person, and because I am the only one in my family that we know of, I feel distant from them. I feel like I am misunderstood by them, and growing up did not receive the care from them I would have liked. This is why it is important for me in my concept of Queer joy to celebrate when Queer people receive care”. Through this form of self-focused autoethnography I am making clear my bias, interrogating it by making it the focus of my study. Beyond this, I am interrogating myself and my experiences, opening myself up to scrutiny but also unravelling myself so that I may see more clearly the difference between “me” and “my” experiences and my imagined idea of a homogenised Queer experience where “we” all feel and have experienced what I have.

As Behar recounts (1996, p.16), her vulnerable self-exploration moved readers to begin to explore and understand themselves. Her vulnerability allowed readers to feel connected to her, projecting

their own problems, experiences and feelings onto their imagined picture of Behar, and so feeling close to her in her ethnographic journey. This allowed them to reflect on their own experiences, making their understanding of Behar's ethnography deepen through empathic connection. Championed by Abu-Lughod (1991, p.472), such connection in this way dissipates opportunity for othering, as the readers feel aligned with Behar and her recounts of her experiences with the people she studied with. Married to vulnerability, the sensorial and emotional elements of Behar's work are too aided in creating such connection and opportunity for deeper understanding. As Behar attests "When you write vulnerably, others respond vulnerably. A different set of problems and predicaments arise which would never surface in response to more detached writing" (1996, p.16).

Indeed, such vulnerability within my autoethnography allowed me the space to be honest with myself, leaving everything bare. Thus, such emotionally vulnerable sensorial autoethnography allows for both myself and any reader of my ethnography to understand something deeper about my experiences with joy, and perhaps their own. This self-unravelling method equally allowed me to work from a point of "I" instead of "we". So, from this excursion, I realise why I see Queer joy the way I do and it now reminds me to only speak from my particular experiences, rather than lump them in with every other Queer person's by saying "we". Hopefully, by interrogating myself and opening myself up in my vulnerable autoethnography, any reader may feel inclined to unravel their own conceptions of joy also.

This way of engaging the insider aspects of oneself, and focusing research on untangling how you feel and experience things is but one autoethnographic approach.

Learning How to Speak Here: Take Two - Recognizing and Activating my Insider/Outsider Aspects

As (Jones & Adams & Ellis, 2013) understands, autoethnography is not always carried out by an insider; outsider researchers can engage in this too. Unlike Waterston and Reed-Danahy's respective auto-ethnographic methods, autoethnography is not always used as a way of untangling the self. As previously mentioned, within anthropology there is responsibility for representation and careful consideration around how an anthropologist represents the people they work with and their topics. Part of that careful consideration is being open, honest, and transparent about your presence as a researcher and making clear your position, bias, and situatedness so that readers know to take your words with a pinch of salt. After all, they are not gospel. One way of doing this is to harness reflexivity in your writing, adopting a reflexive auto-ethnographic approach. Detailing their thoughts and feelings as they become immersed in a community they are an outsider to, some auto-ethnographic methods are intended to reflexively make clear an anthropologist's bias and situatedness. Simply reminding the reader that you are in fact just an anthropologist writing what you see from your point of view can do a world of good. The inclusion of the anthropologist's presence in this form of autoethnography conducted by an outsider is used as a way of reflexively detailing their possible bias to ensure their work is not taken as objective fact and as a way to counter bias rather than allow the focus of the piece to be about the researcher untangling themselves.

For me, simply being reflexive in my autoethnographic approach is not enough. With being reflexive, the whole point is to address your audience and make them aware of your thoughts, bias, opinions, and point of view by showing yourself as a multi-faceted human. However, such reflexivity does not speak to nor draw out how the researcher's own identities and life experiences entwine with their subjects on a deeper level. As an insider/outsider to the community I am working with in my own project, I feel as though it is not enough to be simply reflexive. I can address my bias this way, making the reader or anyone who engages with my work aware of my

positionality as a precursory warning that my words may be taken with a pinch of salt, but this does not allow me to dive deep into how I am tied to my research, and how my experiences as a Queer person seeking and experiencing Queer joy emerge in my understanding of such. Telling the reader that I am but one Queer person, speaking in a sea of Queer people does not undo the harm I could cause by silencing voices everytime I say "we" or "us". I feel like there is a step that belongs before reflexivity and reflexive autoethnography that I need to take first: Recognising my duality as an insider/outsider.

An outsider can be characterised as having different beliefs or identities from the community they are working with (Liu and Burnett, 2022, p. 3). Though this may pose a problem to "gaining access" to a community (a term I am very uncomfortable with as it feels underhanded and invasive. Using this term feels like seeing a community as an object of study that you have to trick into trusting you and gain access to for your own benefit in the name of "research". And this is a very disrespectful and uncomfortable way of doing things that could seriously cause the community harm), the outsider may have more critical understanding and view with more of an analytical lens than the insider. With no prior knowledge gained through embodied experience of what being within that community means, the outsider has to pay deeper attention to things that may have just been given to an insider. The outsider realises they do not have this embodied knowledge, and so they have to listen more (Liu and Burnett, 2022, p. 3).

I myself am somewhat an outsider to the community I work with. I am a white British, half-Jordanian, Asexual Lesbian women+ from a working-class family. I am also an anthropology student at a university. And so, these parts of me are very particular and give me particular experiences and privileges that I must recognize whenever I conceptualise my project, the way I see it, and how I speak about it. As a white person and as an anthropology student conducting research, I have a certain level of privilege and power that I need to recognize and consider when I talk about my Queer experiences. Being an anthropology student immediately slaps on an anthropologist lens to everything I will view in my project, and so this may separate me from the Queer communities that I am studying with. Furthermore, no member of a community can be a complete insider to it. A "full insider" does not truly exist, as communities have intersectionality. Thus, in this way I am not just an insider but also have outsider aspects to me.

Following this, engaging my position as a somewhat outsider with an insider perspective could potentially circumvent the problem of "speaking for" that I seem to have. If I recognise my part as an outsider, then I am continuously reminding myself of the fact that I am different from the community I am working with and so my experiences and knowledge(s) are not enough to fully understand the people I work with. This simple fact may remind me to listen and not fall into the trap of saying "we" but instead engage the word "I" whenever I wish to share something from my own embodied experience.

Recognizing my limits as an insider could ensure I reduce generalisations and avoid using my own experiences as blanket statements that stand for an entire community's experiences. Indeed, as Waterston recognizes in her own work that focused on representing her father and her family "I knew I did not have insider access to all aspects of my father's cultural milieu, since so much of his life experience occurred before my time and in places I did not know" (2019, p.12).

Similarly, I too do not have insider access or embodied knowledge of each Queer person's experiences with joy, or their need for joy. I am but one voice in a sea of voices. So how many then am I silencing when I represent my own experiences, and yet entangle them with the broader communities when I say "we". By recognising my outsider perspective and positionality and by

autoethnography at times, I can engage the "I", adding my small fragment of experience to the broader picture whilst listening to everyone else around me and sitting alongside their fragments. Thus, holding these two roles or positionalities in tandem with each-other certainly is helpful for my own psyche when I think about my work. However, I still do not know how to bring these two positionalities into conversation with each-other beyond just thinking about them. What can I tangibly do to address my duality, and avoid accidentally passing myself off as just an insider?

Still Learning How to Speak Here

Emotions, how we think, how we feel; this is what I get to write about. I feel so lucky. As a good friend once joked, I am a professional Queer. Being Queer literally is my work, I would not be on this PhD course without it if I am honest, it colours everything I do. But it's not just a lens to see through, not just a way of challenging research or doing ethnography, I think for me it's a type of anthropology that I am connecting myself to. Queer anthropology for Queer audiences done by Queer people. I do not use Queer as the verb meaning to challenge or do something differently as they often do in academia, I use it to mean fucking Queer like the people the community, to signal who it is I am writing for, who I am making for, who I want to join into the conversation and listen closer to.

But to do this, to carry out my project and to make sure it actually does something positive and puts out joy, and adds a little more love and celebration of Queerness into the world as I hope it will, I need to live with this problem of the insider/outsider positionality. I need to sit with this discomfort around my use of "we" and "us", and not run away from it, ignore it, or look for a quick solution. Nor can I abandon the words entirely (they are useful in some contexts, and they can activate something in some situations). I just need to sit with this and carry it with me as I venture through my project. The best thing I can do is keep it with me as something to always be mindful of and check. I can constantly look for things to help me address it, such as different methods, theories, and ways of speaking so I do not silence anyone. Maybe this is not a problem. Maybe it is a helpful little friend, a nice reminder to take care and think more about my bias and positionality. And, in all honesty, I am excited by this opportunity I am sitting with. This "trouble" I am staying with (Haraway, 2016), as anthropologists like to say.

Now, as I enter my MRes/PhD project, I am elated with these buzzing ideas that I love so much. They are embedded in me. And I get to wake up everyday knowing that what and who I get to research, read, write about, hear, listen to, discuss with, and make is all drenched in love, absolute unbridled love, for my community and for us (there I go again). And that is a wonderful feeling. So being Queer does not just add to my research, it absolutely just is my research. But I need to keep an eye on my Queer positionality in my work, and hold onto the trouble of using words such as "us" and "we". And I will sign off this little essay with something else that I always find myself saying. When asked the question, what is your research project, what do you study, what do you do, I always say this: it's just really fucking gay.

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Undergraduate Course Essay Showcase: The Artificial Beholder and Our Digital Dreams

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Utilising my organic neural network, I attempt to synthesise a piece of writing using the following parameters:

- 1) 4000 words
- 2) Anthropological essay
- 3) On the the topic of generative art, cybernetics, dreams and intelligence

My first attempt goes as follows:

In March of 2016, Google Deep Mind's AlphaGo beat top Go player Lee Sedol. In the wake of this paradigm shift in the growing capabilities of Artificial Intelligence, new and novel uses of synthetic media began to appear. In the midst of a year dense with political upheaval, we gazed upon these odd creations of early machine learning and recognised something not entirely unexpected and yet nevertheless uncanny; a distorted reflection of our own subjective experiences.

Though useful, I ultimately reject this iteration. I can see the problem at hand; my long term training data has consisted of creative fiction and opinion pieces and likewise my newer input data has consisted largely of popular science articles and technical papers on cognitive function, whereas the output content and style required for this task is anthropological and academic in style and substance. I attempt another iteration:

Much of the synthetic media that failed to succeed as art sparked a cultural discourse around its very shortcomings. These strange mishaps, experimentations and occasional viral artefacts generated an ongoing human machinic mimesis, asking us to examine our own biases and cognitions, including some of the perennial mysteries of the mind, such as dreams, memory, hallucinations and ultimately what it means to see, think, tell stories, and be human.

Though still not the level of stylistic and qualitative excellence I had hoped for, it is perhaps closer. In an attempt to grow the dataset for this essay, I decide to incorporate a second neural network, this one artificial in nature, provided by InferKit.com. It writes:

If we can use artificial intelligence to see ourselves in a different light and show us that there's always more to life than our own experiences, maybe we can finally be the first generation of humans to be truly holistic. One issue that persists, however, is that one must introduce the term 'intelligence' at least loosely to differentiate between man and machine. Bacon was smart – or at least he thought he was. He believed a) that man was the only form of life with consciousness and b) that consciousness was essential to understanding and transcending life. Is it possible he had a self-fulfilling prophecy?

While uncannily relevant on a surface level and oddly eloquent in delivery, this iteration ultimately also fails on account of being factually nonsensical. We can see that my own organic neural network is attempting to build statements that can, if cited properly, be traced in origin; a lineage of thought, publication, consensus, refutation and scholarship stretching backward into the epistemological shallows of history. I lack the algorithmic brute force to analyse all of these data points but have the contextual cultural and institutional knowledge gained through many years of iterative supervised learning in general knowledge to contextually understand if something is nonsense or not. On a good day I can tentatively say that I am both conscious and intelligent, but if that changed, would anyone be able to prove it?

The notions of intelligence and consciousness have been related but it has long been established that one does not inevitably lead to the other. The end goal in developing intelligent machines is not to create consciousness, and yet the question remains, would it arise on its own? Turing sidestepped divisive philosophies of mind and intelligence, deciding instead that the problem of other minds can only be solved relationally; if a human intelligence cannot differentiate whether another entity is human or machine, via an imitation game, the Turing test of intelligence has been passed. John McCarthy elaborated on Turing's definition of artificial intelligence as machines that can perform tasks that are characteristic of human intelligence (McCarthy et al, 1955). Many hold the view that our brains already function in much the same ways that computers do; the mathematician John von Neumann claimed that the human nervous system is 'prima facie digital' (1958, p.44) while cognitive neuroscientist Jack Gallant states that 'the mammalian cerebral cortex is a multi scale biological computing device consisting of billions of neurons, arranged in layered, local circuits' (2020). AI Researcher Kate Crawford refutes the notion that with enough training general, human equivalent intelligence can be achieved 'without addressing the fundamental ways in which humans are embodied, relational, and set within wider ecologies' (2021, p.4-5). Various theories of mind explored by anthropologists outline cultural differences in relation to how we perceive our sense of self and the inner workings of others, such as Charles Taylor's notion of 'porosity' (2007) relating to the way individuals distinguish between mind-body boundaries and the efficacy of the supernatural. From his field work with the Urapmin, Joel Robbins likewise speaks about 'opacity'; our ability or lack thereof to infer the intentions and thoughts of other minds (2004). For a culture that refuses to make any inferences regarding the thoughts or intentions of others, the Turing test may hold no relevance.

Even so, it is our main Western scaffolding on the matter, and I propose that using its relational framework of interactive feedback ties deeply into infrastructures of consciousness. Feedback loops are the foundation of cybernetic and systems theory, first put forward by Norbert Wiener in 1948, set out to 'find the common elements in the functioning of automatic machines and of the human nervous system' (Wiener, 1948). Cybernetics has long been associated with the organisation of the mind, societies, ecologies and machines. Gregory Bateson talks about the ways cognition and environment are entangled in these feedback loops, stating that 'we believe that consciousness has feedback into the remainder of mind and so an effect upon action' (Bateson, 1972, p.295). Professor of Cognitive Philosophy Andy Clark speaks of the importance of the mind-body 'scaffolding' problem, writing that 'the looping interactions between material brains, material bodies, and complex cultural and technological environments' are integral to the notion of who we are, that we 'create these supportive environments, but they create us too.' (2004, p.11). Likewise scholar of cognitive science Douglas Hofstadter proposes the idea of 'strange loops' as the architecture underlying the ongoing process our minds engage in to emerge as an "I" at the centre of our experience as humans (2000). The very notion of a mind truly comprehending itself in this sense is likewise brought into question by Donald Hoffman who states that 'no conscious agent can describe itself completely. The very attempt adds more experiences to the agent...so on in a vicious loop of incompleteness' (2019, p.194).

I theorise that narrative creation might be at least one junction in which the relational, experiential and cybernetic approaches to consciousness meet; the stories we tell to others and the stories we tell ourselves, about ourselves. When early machine intelligences undertake this same task, the results often seem to reflect our own experiences back at us in ways both uncanny and absurd yet deeply familiar. In 2016, filmmaker Oscar Sharp and NYU based AI researcher Ross Goodwin submitted the short film 'Sunspring' to the Sci-Fi London Film Festival. Though filmed and acted by

humans, *Sunspring* was written by an LSTM (Long Short Term Memory) recurrent neural network, a type of deep learning neural network often used for text recognition. Trained on a curated archive of science fiction scripts that Goodwin could find online, the source data consisted largely of movies from the 80's and 90's and TV series like *X-Files* and *Star Trek* (Newitz, 2021). At the centre of the film are three characters who engage in an emotional tet-a-tet that feels familiar yet doesn't actually make any sense. While the sentences of dialogue seem coherent enough on their own, they do not string together into anything resembling an actual narrative or through-line. Commenters on YouTube have compared the film to 'watching movies as a small kid, before I really knew what they were saying but still enjoying the characters...' or the way it sounds when 'you watch a movie from a language you're just learning and don't understand...'. Others have compared watching *Sunspring* to the experience of replaying a dream:

"this feels exactly like my dreams sometimes. It got me to thinking about how through our day, we take in all of this information in images, text, sounds...we then shut down at the end of it all and our brain tries to make sense of the data we collected, or at least we recall some of that data in random spurts. This is what makes up our dreams...raw data...that we process at random. I think this is what is happening with this AI. We push in so much data that the end result feels like a dream...its odd and off-putting in so many ways, but then it also feels somewhat natural and clear."
(User Nate Fin, YouTube)

Comments like these show how intuitively viewers correlate the ways that human and machine learning overlap. Why we sleep, never mind why we dream, is still elusive to science, leaving dreams, much like consciousness itself, in the realm of the subjective. Dreams have generated many mythologies; ancient societies considered the dream a vehicle for divine inspiration. Joseph Campbell writes of dreams as 'a personal experience of that deep, dark ground that is the support of our conscious lives, and a myth is the society's dream. The myth is the public dream and the dream is the private myth' (2012, p.48). Speaking in general terms, modern science tells us that during REM sleep, commonly associated with the dream state, our motor functions and the hippocampus shut down, while the rest of the brain regions, especially the amygdala, light up, correlating with many subjective, reported dream experiences that are sensorially abundant but logically incoherent (Sander van der, 2011). But what is happening when something like *Sunspring* is being constructed by a machine intelligence? Natural Language Generating (NLG) algorithmic networks like GPT-2, (an autoregressive language model), or the LSTM used to create *Sunspring*, work in different ways, but generally speaking they draw on vast datasets, either curated/labelled for supervised learning or scraped from the internet, for unsupervised learning. What creates this disjointed, dreamlike effect are two things; lack of memory in the algorithm and a limited dataset from which to draw knowledge. As AI researcher Janelle Shane elaborates:

"Dreams are notoriously incoherent, switching settings and mood and even characters midstream. These neural-net dreams, however, don't maintain coherence for more than a sentence or so — sometimes considerably less. Characters who are never introduced are referred to as if they had been there all along. The whole dream forgets where it is. Individual phrases may make sense, and the rhythm of the words sounds okay if you don't pay attention to what's going on. Matching the surface qualities of human speech while lacking any deeper meaning is a hallmark of neural-net-generated text" (2020, p.50-51).

The resulting absurdist and often unintentionally humorous creations of AI driven texts have become culturally familiar enough to generate their own memes, as parodied by comedians like Keaton Patti, who has repeatedly claimed to have fed an ambiguous AI 1000 hours of a certain genre of television to create new and novel iterations, such as Hallmark Christmas movies (Fig.1).

THE CHRISTMAS ON CHRISTMAS

INT. SMALL TOWN SNOW GLOBE REFILLERY

We see a SINGLE MOTHER refilling snow globes with Christmas juice. She is widow. Her husband died in every war.

SINGLE MOTHER

I refill globes better than Jesus
Claus, yet still my twins are dad-
free. Why? They need double dad.

BUSINESS MAN enters the shop. He wears clothes that cost money. His hands are briefcases, and he's Hallmark hot.

SINGLE MOTHER (CONT'D)

Hi. Do your snow globes lack wet?
Hurry. Christmess attacks soon.

Business Man has flashback to when he was Business Boy. A Christmas tree explodes his family on purpose. He now hates trees and Christmas and explosions. He exits the flashback.

BUSINESS MAN

Shut your sound! I am from Huge
City. I bought your land and am
turning it into an oil resort.

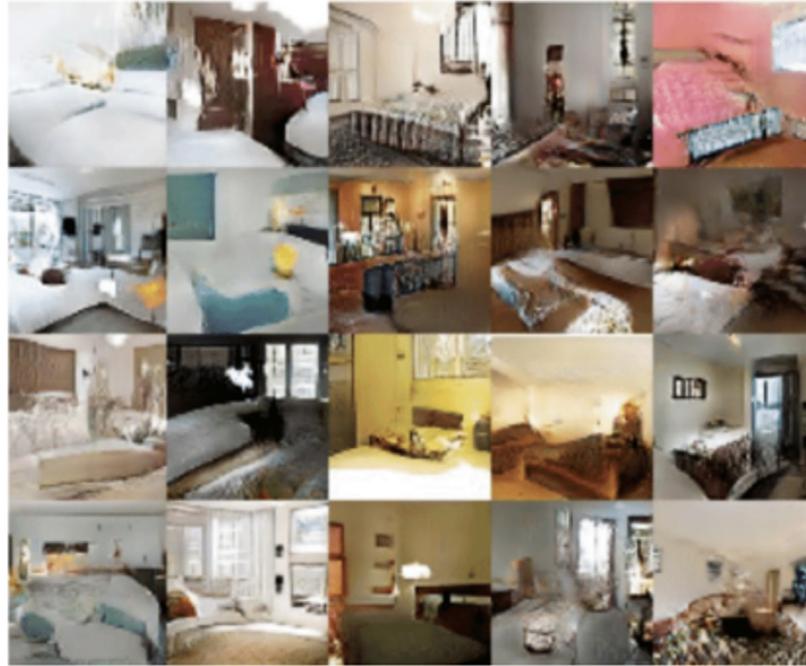
Fig. 1. Keaton Patti, Twitter, 2018.

In truth, these pieces are written by Patti himself, imitating the rudimentary AI that is trying to imitate humans, an apt example of cybernetic feedback loops creating connections between individuals, computer systems and society, collaborating to create a new genre of humour that criticises both the limited capacities of so called intelligent machines as well as the limiting narrative conventions of our own, human generated media. These storytelling cliches can be considered self replicating iterations of larger cultural archetypes, part of our so far unique myth-making abilities (see Campbell, 1968). We internalise these archetypes by simple virtue of having engaged with them all our lives through social absorption, which leads to the inevitable conclusion; is how we write and tell stories truly all that different from how machine learning systems compile original content from our collective digital landscape? Data artist Kim Albrecht's project 'Visualising Memes: Culturegraphy' showcases the way that humans use data to create new artefacts, by means of culture references, influences and connections. Illustrated in a dense, interactive line graph framework, she showcases the myriad references used in the making of the artefact and all the ways the artefact has been in turn referenced by others in the creation of further artefacts. I suggest that these social, cultural and linguistic infrastructures tie in deeply with all aspects of how we construct our conscious experiences, including the ways we see and understand our environments.

Beyond the objective nature of relational and cultural intelligence we are left with the subjective; our inner experience of the world around us, a situation deeply shaped by our embodiment, sense perception and memory, what David Chalmers refers to as 'qualia'; the hard problem of consciousness (1995). Aligned with the assumption that consciousness is an emergent property culminating through layers of embodied cognitive evolutionary adaptation to our environments, Hoffman argues that our sense perception and in turn memory functions evolved in service of our fitness rather than in service of modelling any objective 'truth', stating that 'perception may seem effortless, but in fact it requires considerable energy...so evolution has shaped our senses to be misers.' (2019, p.XVII), likening our day to day experience of reality to that of a computer's desktop, rather than the impenetrable cascade of binary code underlying its operation. Aldous Huxley espoused this same theory many decades prior, writing that:

"To make biological survival possible, Mind at Large has to be funnelled through the reducing valve of the brain and nervous system. What comes out at the other end is a measly trickle of the kind of consciousness which will help us to stay alive on the surface of this particular planet. To formulate and express the contents of this reduced awareness, man has invented and endlessly elaborated those symbol-systems and implicit philosophies which we call languages" (Huxley, 1954, p.8).

To break down these structures of understanding, such as what happens in cases of neurological damage or the use mind altering substances, can call into question the very notion of how our senses shape our realities. Integrating the rise in sheer data and the limits of human perception, Hito Steyerl expands on this idea, writing that 'contemporary perception is machinic to a large degree. The spectrum of human vision only covers a tiny part of it. Electric charges, radio waves, light pulses encoded by machines for machines are zipping by at slightly subluminal speed' (2017, p.38). Image recognition and categorisation remains a stumbling block for machine learning algorithms for various reasons (Spratt, 2017), including flaws in data sets and poorly set parameters. Notably, one of the most effective methods of machine driven media synthesis utilises the feedback loop. Generative Adversarial Networks were first proposed by Google's Ian Goodfellow in 2013 and first radically utilised by Alec Radford et al in 2015 to generate realistic renderings of faces and bedrooms (Fig.2) using a convolutional neural network, in which a generator creates random samples and a discriminator determines which are real. A form of internal Turing test.



1: Samples of images of bedrooms generated by a GAN trained on the LSUN dataset, taken from Goodfellow (2016).

Fig. 2. Radford et al, 2016.

Radford's results were revolutionary at the time of publication but flawed, exemplifying what became quickly associated with synthetic imagery; distortions and hazy boundaries between space and object, a sort of pixelated, surrealist impressionism. Could the inherent shortcomings of machine vision help us grasp a raw form reality that lies beyond our cultural systems based scaffolding? In early 2019 an image likely created on ArtBreeder, a publicly available platform that uses BigGAN and StyleGAN models to synthesise visuals from pre-existing data sets, was posted on Twitter with the caption 'I bet you can't name one thing in this photo'. The image then appeared on Reddit with the description 'This picture is designed to give the viewer the simulated experience of having a stroke (particularly in the occipital lobe of the cerebral cortex, where visual perception occurs.) Everything looks hauntingly familiar but you just can't quite recognise anything' (Fig. 3).

Posted by u/mcsabas 3 years ago 2 4 2 6 2
13.8k This picture is designed to give the viewer the simulated experience of having a stroke (particularly in the occipital lobe of the cerebral cortex, where visual perception occurs.) Everything looks hauntingly familiar but you just can't quite recognize anything.



Fig. 3. Reddit, 2019.

It has been theorised that the reason this image disturbs the viewer is because it fails to cohere some of our most basic cognitive functions, such as distinction making and part-whole systems, as boundaries between objects seem to lack clear distinction (Cabrera, 2021), as if someone was tasked to reconstruct an image from memory without any comprehension for what is actually present in the image. Huxley writes about a similar subjective experience while under the influence of mescaline, describing that 'place and distance cease to be of much interest. The mind does its perceiving in terms of intensity of existence, profundity of significance, relationships within a pattern' (1954, p.6). He goes on to say how 'table, chair and desk came together in a composition that was like something by Braque or Juan Gris, a still life recognisably related to the objective world, but rendered without depth, without any attempt at photographic realism' (1954, p.7). While he speaks largely about the experience of a collapse of visual categorisation, its opposite is more often associated with psychotic or pharmacologically-induced hallucination.

It is commonly said that human brains are pattern seeking machines, in search of information that will help predict future scenarios more accurately. This process of human minds finding familiar patterns in randomness is referred to as pareidolia and it has been theorised that if the feedback loop of observation and categorisation is disrupted, runaway errant processes can take place (Bateson, 1972 p.302), such as over pronounced visual identification (Keshavan, Sudarshan 2017, p.178–81). In much the same way, Google's DeepDream attempts to find patterns in data noise, something that its researchers have termed "deep dreaming" and "inceptionism" (Mordvintsev, 2015). DeepDream's aim is to find and enhance patterns in existing imagery, creating over-processed visuals, a sort of 'algorithmic pareidolia' (Ibid). This process starts with a neural network

trained on a labeled data set to recognise and categorise a specific parameter, such as dogs in the case of Deep Dream, and then set loose on unrelated visual data. In essence, if a flower bears a slight resemblance to a dog, the network's 'dreaming' will process that image, making it look more like a dog, which in turn makes the network see the dog even more strongly on the next pass and so on until everything takes on the appearance of dogs. The imagery from DeepDream (Fig. 4) has been routinely compared to the visual distortions experienced with drugs such as LSD and psilocybin and the psychedelic art created by humans attempting to translate these experiences into visual form (Fig. 5). It has also been compared to the paintings of Louis Wain, best known for his increasingly abstracted paintings of cats that seemed to mirror his losing battle with schizophrenia (Fig. 6).



Fig. 4. DeepDream dog visualisation, 2015.



Fig. 5. Psychedelic painting by Alex Grey.



Louis Wain - Pictures of cats and their changes with disease progression.

Fig. 6. Progression of schizophrenia in Louis Wain's paintings.

These extremes of vision and systems breakdown between missing patterns and pattern overstimulation reiterate the structures that conspire to create reality and ourselves; feedback loops, pattern recognition and meaning making. Robert Lanza and Bob Berman go a step further, theorising that reality itself would collapse without consciousness. Quoting Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, 'A path comes into existence only when you observe it', they state 'there is neither time nor motion without life. Reality is not there with definite properties waiting to be discovered but actually comes into being depending upon the actions of the observer' (Lanza, Herman, 2010, p.101). This implies far deeper repercussions around the growing complexity, dare it be said intelligence, of machine learning systems and alternative, emerging ways of sensing, processing and operating in the world. While DeepMind's AlphaGo had beaten a world class Go player based on studying an immense database of existing gameplay and human supervised learning, its successor, AlphaZero had been left to teach itself various different board games with no human intervention. In just three days it succeeded, generating its own knowledge, free of the constraints of human logic, defeating its predecessor 100 games to 0 (Ouellette, 2018). The existential risks and opportunities inherent in such a result can be unnerving. But AI systems, at least for the time being, function as tools, an opportunity for us to not only better understand our own minds but to step outside of them and consider radical alterities. The InferKit neural network I'd previously engaged for this essay tells me that 'as a philosopher, I should be objecting to these arguments, but I'm not. I admit to worrying about a brain that can think in such a way, because I can't fathom it being smart enough to build its own skyscraper.'

As David Beech and Andy Clark say, we have always been cyborgs. 'The human is not a fixed, natural and eternal configuration of properties, qualities and capacities but has itself been perpetually reformed and reconstituted by its own products including the development of technologies' (Beech, 2019, p.64). He goes on to reference the Dada movement, which arose in the context of an increasingly industrialised and mechanised Europe, disfigured and disoriented by technologies of destruction during the First World War.

Voltaic arc of these two nerves that don't touch
Near the heart
We note the black shivers under a lens
- Tristan Tzara

He looks at me, and then he throws me out of his eyes.
- Sunspring

Tzara had used methods such as the cut-up technique; isolating and rearranging text extracted from newspapers and novels into nonsensical and occasionally oddly prescient iterations (Beech, 2019). The method had been adopted by William S. Burroughs in the 60's and David Bowie in the 80's, who'd said of the method that 'if you put three or four dissociative ideas together and create awkward relationships with them, the unconscious intelligence that comes from those pairings is really quite startling sometimes' (Bowie, 2016). Likewise, the free association and integration of old and new memories we experience in dream states have had profound effects on the creative process of artists and scientists throughout the ages who have found novel solutions to long ruminated problems through dreams. As written in a 1926 letter, Margaret Mead recounts a particularly striking dream, in which fellow anthropologist Franz Boas is speaking to a circle of colleagues about a mass of brilliant blue jelly he had created. Conflict ensues in the group over what its use could be. 'I took some of the astonishingly blue beauty in my hand,' Mead recounts 'and felt with a great thrill that it was living matter. I said "Why it's life — and that's enough" — and he looked so pleased that I had found the answer — and said yes "It's life and that is wonder enough."' (Mead, 2006, p.327).

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