

**MIDLANDS CONFERENCE IN CRITICAL THOUGHT 2025**  
University of Derby - One Friar Gate Square on Agard St, Derby, DE1 1DZ

April 24<sup>th</sup> to April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2025

**Conference Program - (Long version with abstracts)**

Welcome to the second Midlands Conference in Critical Thought (MCCT). The MCCT is an offshoot of the highly successful London Conference in Critical Thought (LCCT), first established in 2011. The MCCT has taken onboard the LCCT ethos in that it is a free interdisciplinary conference in critical thought, providing a space for those who share theoretical approaches and interests but who may find themselves at the margins of their academic department or discipline. MCCT, in line with the LCCT, follows a non-hierarchical and decentralised model of organisation that undoes conventional academic distinctions between plenary lectures and break-out sessions, aiming instead to create opportunities for intellectual critical exchange regardless of participants' disciplinary field, institutional affiliation, or seniority. Following this decentralised, 'margins-at-the-centre' logic, both the MCCT and LCCT have no overarching or predetermined theme. Each year the conference's intellectual content and academic tone are set by thematic streams that are conceived, proposed and curated by a group of stream organisers. Each stream generates its own intellectual rationale and Call for Presentations, with conference participants responding to the accepted stream proposals.

## Conference streams

- 1. Can the Arts Aid Health?**  
Professor Susan Hogan, University of Derby, University of Nottingham
- 2. Critical spatial action for the place in crisis: experiences of rebellious citizenship**  
Dr Michele Grigo, Nottingham Trent University  
Dr Fidel Meraz, University of West of England  
Dr Yesmean Khalil, Nottingham Trent University  
Dr Jenni Cauvain, Nottingham Trent University  
Dr Francesco Proto, Oxford Brookes University  
Dr Yahya Lavaf-Pour, University of the West of England
- 3. Critical Whiteness Studies**  
Dr Andrew Fergus Wilson, University of Derby,  
Dr Teodora Todorova, University of Warwick
- 4. Digital Nomadic Commons: Reimagining Virtual Space and Digital Pedagogy**  
Sahjan Kooner, Independent Artist
- 5. Embodied Realities: The Body in Contemporary Thought and Culture**  
Dr Michael Rees, Nottingham Trent University
- 6. Expanding the Boundaries of Creative Research Through Inter/Transdisciplinary Collaboration and Conversation**  
Dr Alice Bell, University of Lincoln  
Martyn Thayne, University of Lincoln
- 7. Exploring the new class politics**  
Dr Phil Burton-Cartledge, University of Derby  
Robyn Fawcett, University of Derby
- 8. From Oblivion to Re-Enchantment: Exploring and Actualising Diverse Knowledges via Faiths and Ontologies**  
Dr Romain Chenet, University of Warwick  
Dr Edward Loveman, University of Warwick
- 9. Mapping the world: How art and creativity can cross borders, break barriers and connect communities**  
Oliver Cloke (Questioner) and Patrick Loan (Instructor) VCAS - Vienna Contemporary Art Space
- 10. Standing on the edge: critical perspectives on margins and limits**  
Dr Anna Migliorini, University of Florence
- 11. The Sublime Object of Delulu**  
Tomáš Havlíček, Masaryk University  
Andrej Krištofík, Masaryk University  
Dennis Wassouf, Masaryk University  
Kateřina Ochodková, Masaryk University
- 12. Work and career in Neoliberal Academia: Systemic Pressures and Inequities**  
Ranier Abengana, University College Dublin  
Anastasia Fjodorova, University of Sterling  
Dr Ricky Gee, Nottingham Trent University;  
Dr Ylva Gustafsson, Åbo Akademi University

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- 9:30-11:00 – Parallel Sessions 1
- 11:00-11:30 – Break
- 11:30-13:00 – Parallel Sessions 2
- 13:00-14:00 – Lunch Break (food not provided)
- 14:00-15:30 – Parallel Sessions 3
- 15:30-16:00 – Break
- 16:00-17:30 – Parallel Sessions 4
- 17:30 – Drinks Reception

### Friday 25<sup>th</sup> April

- 9:00-9:30 – Registration
- 9:30-11:00 – Parallel Sessions 5
- 11:00-11:30 – Break
- 11:30-13:00 – Parallel Sessions 6
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- 14:00-15:30 – Parallel Sessions 7
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- 16:00-17:30 – Parallel Sessions 8
- 17:30 – Post-Conference Drinks

## Schedule Overview

# Information for Participants

## Registration and Information

All participants are asked to register online via [Eventbrite](#), we also ask that you to check in at the registration desk to confirm your arrival at the conference: details can be found at [MCCT – Midlands Conference in Critical Thought & Londoncritical](#) websites

Location: University of Derby - One Friar Gate Square on Agard St, Derby, DE1 1DZ

## Internet access

All rooms offer the very latest, fully integrated audio-visual technology and free Wi-Fi access throughout..

## Funding

The conference is free to attend for all, run by volunteers. Unfortunately, the MCCT cannot provide funds to support those travelling to the conference with limited or no institutional support.

## Food and Drink

Coffee/tea will be provided in the morning/afternoon breaks, but participants will need to organise their own food. There are a number of cafés and restaurants surrounding the conference venue, and on the Thursday there will be a university eatery open in the building of the conference, near the registration room.

## Socialising

On the Thursday evening we will have the conference reception event at the [Quad](#), which will also include a screening short film showreel 'Borders'.

The end of the conference there will be a social drinks at the [Dubrek Studios](#)

## Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> April

(Please note you can find a programme overview at the end of this document)

9:00-9:30 – Registration FG101

9:30 – 11:00 - Parallel Sessions 1

### FG102 - Can the Arts Aid Health? Panel 1. Arts & Health

NeuroD&D: Using Dungeons and Dragons as a mode of neurodivergent personhood exploration

Shelby Judge

Can Dungeons & Dragons as a cultural industry be mobilised for neurodivergent identity expression and representation? In partnership with the disability charity Breakthrough UK, the NeuroD&D project ran a series of Dungeons & Dragons sessions for neurodivergent adults, to investigate how self-determined characters and co-produced narratives can be used to express personhood and identity. This project posits that Dungeons & Dragons as a gaming industry provides an innovative means of expression for neurodivergent people due to its imagination mechanic, self-governed narratives, and autonomous characterisation.

Early literature in the field of Dungeons & Dragons research focused on the mathematical components of dice rolling (McLean 1990). More relevant to this study is more recent research into Dungeons & Dragons that explores the personal (psychological and affective) experience of players engaging in a fantasy game that is driven by players' intentions and imaginations. NeuroD&D develops on existing research on how players negotiate personhood (Waskull & Lust 2004) and videogames as self-involving interactive fictions (SIIF) (Robson & Meskin 2016). NeuroDND utilises Robson and Meskin's SIIF framework, applying it to TTRPG fictions instead of videogame fictions.

Both Shepherd (2021) and Valorozo-Jones (2021) have written on identity exploration in Dungeons & Dragons. In 'Roll for Identity', Shepherd investigated how character creation and full in-game autonomy allows players to explore their queer selves, while Valorozo-Jones' study with neurodivergent Dungeons & Dragons players focused on how game mechanics can be altered to be more accessible. NeuroD&D focuses on neurodivergent players, with an explicit focus on how character creation and in-game autonomy allows them to explore their neurodivergent personhood.

In this paper, I reflect on the experience of undertaking this creative practice-based research and present the qualitative data gleaned from this study, with a view to answering the question of whether immersive narratives and gaming technologies used by neurodiverse people can explore their concerns regarding identity, representation, and culture.

### Arts in Perinatal Health

Susan Hogan

Practices and procedures which can be counterproductive and illness-inducing form part of professional repertoires of behaviour. Taking childbirth as an example, historically, birthing stools have been used in labour to let gravity help, for example. Mobility hastens childbirth and movement can help ease the pain and an example of an iatrogenic practice is that of putting labouring women in beds, or not allowing women to walk around, because of foetal monitoring equipment. There are many iatrogenic practices embedded in hospital regimes, 'routine' induction of

childbirth is another counter-productive but widespread practice. They are insidious and presented as normal or 'routine' and therefore reasonable. They are consequently hard for women to resist. Women's own intuitive feelings can be negated, but women in this state of vulnerability do not necessarily feel able to challenge the practices they encounter in hospital environments (McCourt 2009). Women can also become caught between different models of giving birth and trapped within power dynamics between obstetrics and midwifery with temporal pressures, caused by underfunding that force midwives to intervene, when non-intervention may be a better course. In practice, some women end up feeling violated by their birth experiences and are left in a state of profound shock.

## FG202 - Critical spatial action for the place in crisis: experiences of rebellious citizenship. Panel 1

### Spatializing the Bare Life; The Palestinian Refugee Camp of Bourj el-Barajneh, Beirut

Andrea Canclini & Aya Jazaiery

Born in 1960, Samir lives with his family in a one-room apartment in a tall, irregular building in Bourj el-Barajneh, Beirut's largest Palestinian refugee camp, a ghetto surrounded by poor Shi'a neighborhoods. His parents found shelter here on 28 October 1948 after being expelled from their home in Tarshiha, in the northern Palestine. Bourj el-Barajneh was set up in a sandy piece of land, with a group of scattered tents: for more than ten years there was no electricity, no sewage, only communal toilets without doors, only a few taps in the camp yard.

Today the alleys Samir walks through all bear the name of the camp: no toponomastic here; underground, an unfinished rainwater collection system was built in 2011 with the help of EU. In the camp, the 'Mahabba Youth Group' supplies electricity and water to most of the residential buildings.

At home, when Samir turns on the tap, the water flows through the pipes installed by the Italian Government in 2014, when the blue plastic valves were replaced; when he turns on the light, the electricity is supplied by a new substation with switches donated by 'the Japanese people'. In an emergency in the building, the 'Palestinian Civil Defense', a local volunteer-run safety management system can be contacted on mobile.

At school, his younger child's education is provided by 'Terre des hommes', while the 'Al-Ghad Social Association' organizes after-school activities in its playgrounds. His grandchildren attend a pre-school in a building equipped by the 'Turkish Cooperation Agency' in 2017.

His family's health care is provided by the 'Safety Humanitarian Organisation Agreement' at the UNRWA Health Centre Building. Haifa Hospital supported by the 'Palestine Red Crescent' had its Emergency Unit renovated in 2019 by 'ANERA' and 'from People of Japan', through the 'Human Security Programme'. Anyway, the 'Medicins sans frontier' clinic is open daily.

In his spare time, Samir meets his friends to play cards in shelters renovated by the 'United Nations Agency for Palestine Refugees'.

As a new floor is added to his building, he notices that the columns of the ground floor, lacking proper foundations, grow larger as they sink into the sandy soil.

The three traditional solutions are denied to the Palestinians, here: return is denied by Israel, integration is denied by Lebanon, resettlement in third countries is illegal, so the status of refugee without rights and obligations forces them into a space of exception that is both temporary and infinite.

In response, the political forces that self-govern the camp continue a long tradition of using the camp as a Harvey-like body politic, in which the inhabitants are forced to move in the interstices, whose approaches to urban governance have at the same time denied them any possibility of realising and organising their own living spaces.

The invisible boundaries of the camp have no walls or gates to close: it is the political status of its inhabitants that defines their legal, economic and social status, and therefore only there can they continue to live, without passports, rights or duties, and the emancipatory power of a job.

## Deconstructing Sustainable Architecture

Yahya Lavaf

The prevailing discourse on sustainable architecture remains largely constrained by techno-scientific determinism and reductive materialism that reduce sustainability to metrics of efficiency and carbon performance. This paper challenges such reductive paradigms by proposing a deconstructive approach to sustainability, one that acknowledges the instability, contradictions, and entanglements inherent in the built environment. Drawing on Derridean deconstruction this study argues that sustainability should not be understood as a fixed state but as an ongoing, temporal negotiation between architecture, ecology, and cultural contingencies.

This paper critiques the assumption that sustainability can be universally defined, advocating instead for a more situated, adaptive, and open-ended architectural practice. By repositioning sustainability as an emergent and relational condition, this paper proposes new methodological approaches to reframe architecture as an open system in dialogue with its ecological and social contexts. This theoretical investigation is accompanied by speculative design strategies that illustrate how sustainability might be reimagined beyond the current fixation on permanence, control, and optimisation.

## Cities as Spaces of New Human Rights: Children's Right to Clothing in Nottingham

Michele Grigolo (PI), Geraldine Brady, Jay Chester, Rachel Harding, Yesmean Khalil

The paper reports findings from a collective research project examining human rights through the lens of space and the right to the city. The idea advanced by the research is that by connecting human rights to experiences and narratives of users of urban space, new ideas about and perspectives on human rights can emerge. The focus of the presentation will be the right to clothing, discussed during a focus group with children from Nottingham aged 8-10 and 11-14. Participants were recruited via a partnership with Sharewear, a Nottingham-based charity that provide clothing to households from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. The presentation will highlight some important aspects of children's understanding of clothing in their everyday life, and of clothing as a human right. Different aspects of the human right to clothing will be examined, which exceed the construction of clothing in international law as part of an adequate standard of living, to emphasise aspects of choice, identity, and difference, that cast a new light not only on children's right to clothing but on the right to clothing more generally. The right to the city lens engaged in the project will also help maintain a critical perspective on the production, consumption and circulation of clothing, while suggesting new perspectives and practices that fulfil this right beyond the market and state provision.

**FG204 - Mapping the world: How art and creativity can cross borders, break barriers and connect communities. Panel 1. The Internal and External understanding of bodies across cultural practices.**

**Borders a corporeal reality**

Oliver Cloke

This proposal outlines a creative exploration of the concept of "borders," moving beyond their traditional understanding as mere geographical lines of separation. I intend to investigate through formulated interactions and experiential games the ideas behind the physical borders that our bodies house and thereby create a greater cognitive understanding of our limits. By imbuing borders with sentience, and cross referencing them with ourselves we can develop a richer and more nuanced understanding of their role in shaping human experience.

This lecture will investigate the idea that Borders can be mobile entities, dynamic, evolving systems with their own agency and consciousness. They are spaces of transformation and potential.

This will be conducted through a set of experiments that utilise the recognised conditions of a lecture in order to introduce viewers to an alternative way to engage with learning and educational formats.

Initially introducing the implications of recognising ourselves as bordered and an examination of how borders are constantly being redefined and reshaped by human activity, technological advancements, and environmental changes. From this point it will quickly dissolve into an activity that investigates how borders continue to shape human interactions and influence contemporary political and social realities.

This is the jump off point for the audience to become involved in developing their own artworks, and philosophical inquiries that explore the concept of "the border" using storytelling/poetry and art-making to express physical borders. The idea is to develop in pairs short narratives, poems, to explore the concept of borders and create drawings that visualize the dimensions of borders.

The insights gained from this project could have several potential applications in addressing contemporary challenges related to migration, conflict, and social justice:

- Humanitarian Response: Understanding displacement and addressing the psychological impact of displacement
- Conflict Resolution: Deconstructing the "us vs. them" mentality by reimagining borderlands as zones of exchange
- Social Justice: Addressing issues of inequality and promoting human rights

This workshop will end with a discussion on the philosophical implications of border sentience and the ethical considerations of what border 'crossings' look like on your own body, incorporating an interpretation of the historical and cultural memory embedded within borders. Importantly the discussion will involve how visual representations can be used to communicate complex or abstract ideas about borders and their impact. There will also be the remnants of production, a collection of creative works exploring the concept of borders and uncovering for participants to take with them.

**The Unity of the Internal and External in Homer**

Andrew Milward

There are moments in the epics of Homer where the internal appears to be expressed through the external, moments where emotions are visible through the body, where the manner of the thought of individuals is seen in their person alongside their physical appearance. The way that these moments occur suggests the possibility of an implicit unity between the internal and the external. This unity must be distinguished from the modern view where the internal

causes the external through physical mechanisms. This difference can be conceptualised in terms of a divergence in the way that thought is understood, in other words in thought's relation to being. If the modern view sees only a purely causal mechanism, it understands thought as physical being only, where there is no more than an objectivity of thought that remains outside the subjective; if Homer expresses internal thought and the body together, he understands thought in terms of its unity with external being, where the objective body and the subjectivity of the individual are the same. By developing this Homeric unity, we can elaborate both the abstract possibilities concerning how thought can be understood, and also the practical possibilities concerning how an awareness of the expression of the internal can be used. On the basis of these two aspects, the Homeric unity becomes a guiding idea that concerns not only an ontology of thought's relationship to being, but also an ontology of the subject itself, where a subject understands itself, not in terms of the elements of a casual mechanism, but as an operative whole.

## Experiences of inner life: Does Interiority Matter?

Susan Hogan

With an emphasis on visual culture and theories about imagery and interiority, the topic of interiority will be explored in three potential ways. Firstly, in relation to Interiority and Bodily Signs, this theme will investigate some of the implications of an entrenched enduring link between ideas about interiority and outward bodily signs, and the oft-unfortunate consequences of misinterpretation of such outward signs. Tracing the idea of stigma from its ancient Greek origins, the theme moves on to discuss more recent events, namely witch-hunting and the pivotal nature of bodily signs in the practice of witch detection and determining imagined guilt. Other topics of note could include the doctrine of physiognomy, which was also interested in external bodily signs as denoting internal temperament. Reflections on the reverberations in the present from such ideas, particularly constraints placed upon the behaviour certain sets of citizens due to bodily signs is another area of potential critical thought.

A further aspect of this theme is Experiences of Inner Life Revealed, thinking about such topics as apophenia, a general generic tendency of the human mind to find meaningful patterns in random information, and pareidolia as the visual aspect of this general tendency. The section could also critique ideas about psychiatric projective visualisations as a way of harnessing interiority.

Another aspect of this theme might be to think about interior states and explore how making art, and using techniques from art therapy, can help to make interior worlds visual in a practice of Depicting Experiences of Inner Life. The implications of employing arts-based research methods for anthropologists, sociologists and others can be explored, including highlighting potential pitfalls of such applications, such as theory-driven reductive interpretation.

Possible questions:

- How are ideas about interiority and outward bodily signs linked historically and/or today?
- How can bodily signs result in limitation of freedoms?
- The doctrine of physiognomy was interested in external bodily signs as denoting internal temperament. What is the cultural heritage of such schemas?
- What should we say about psychiatric projective visualisations as a way of harnessing interiority?
- Can the arts help reveal our inner world?
- What ontological status should be afforded to inner dialogue, imaginative worlds and emotional reverie 'without turning them into reified states or static properties'?
- How can sociologists and anthropologist best capture our sense of 'insiderness'? What is the value in so doing?

**Break**

**FG102 - Critical Whiteness Studies. Panel 1. The making of national whiteness**

'How Europe(ans) became white' – tracing the lineages of religious sectarianism, anti-Semitism, anti-Gypsyism, and settler colonial anti-Blackness in the racialization of Europe

Teodora Todorova

This presentation traces the emergence and racialization of the modern ethno-national 'white' European subject during the rise of ethnic nationalism in Europe in the 18th century in conjunction with the consolidation of European settler colonialism in South and North America. Drawing on Benedict Anderson's (1983) concept of the nation as an 'imagined community' the presentation seeks to trace the discursive lineages of earlier discourses of exclusion in the formation of European national identities and nation-states. Particularly, the presentation traces, the role played by the rise of modern anti-Semitism (see Hannah Arendt, 1951) and anti-Gypsyism (see Klaus-Michel Bogdal, 2023) in the 15th century during the rise and consolidation of Christian Imperialism across Europe in the aftermath of its defeat of Arab Muslim Imperialism in the Iberian Peninsula which lasted eight centuries; coinciding with a six centuries-long rivalry between Christian Europe and the Muslim Ottoman Empire which ruled over the Balkans. The geo-political struggle between Christian and Muslim Empires over the lands of Europe gave rise to modern religious sectarianism which has also been shaped by the Protestant Reformation and Western Europe's schism from the Roman Catholic Empire from the 16th century on. The presentation argues that religious sectarianism in Europe serves as an early prototype for the emergence of racial nationalism in 18th, 19th and 20th century struggles for European nation-statehood. Moreover, the paper argues that the coinciding advent, expansion and consolidation of European settler colonial nationalism in South and North America rebounds and reverberates across the continent of Europe as a racializing process (see Wolfe, 2016); or in other words a process which racializes Europe(ans) as white.

White Muscle: Theology and ritual in the (un)making of an ultranationalist masculinity

Isabella Gregory

A decentralised network combining combat training, white ultranationalism, and a love of the outdoors, 'Active Clubs' have expanded in recent years across Europe, Oceania, and the Americas (Institute for Strategic Dialogue 2023). With over a hundred cells operating globally, the clandestine masculinist groups meeting under the Active Club umbrella represent one of the newest and most expansive iterations of white supremacist organising today. Drawing on the materials yielded from a digital ethnography across Telegram and TikTok, this paper analyses the Active Clubs through the lenses of theology and ritual. Critical theological accounts of Whiteness understand it as a pseudo-divine power that assures its own divinity through pre-emptively responding to an imagined horizon of loss (Carter 2008, Du Bois 1920, Jennings 2011, Douglas 2015, Krinks 2018, Norris 2020). This project's first task is to evaluate the Active Clubs' cultivation of and belief in Whiteness as that pseudo-divine force, as animated by the groups' diagnostic and prognostic imaginaries for the past, present, and future. It's tempting to dismiss white ultranationalist organising as far away from mainstream political or collective life. But a critical theological analysis connects the sharp edges of extremism to the blunt forces of structural Whiteness writ large. Through this, we see the Active Club as one particularly potent attempt to grasp onto a more widely dispersed power: Whiteness' ability to manufacture and claim the divine.

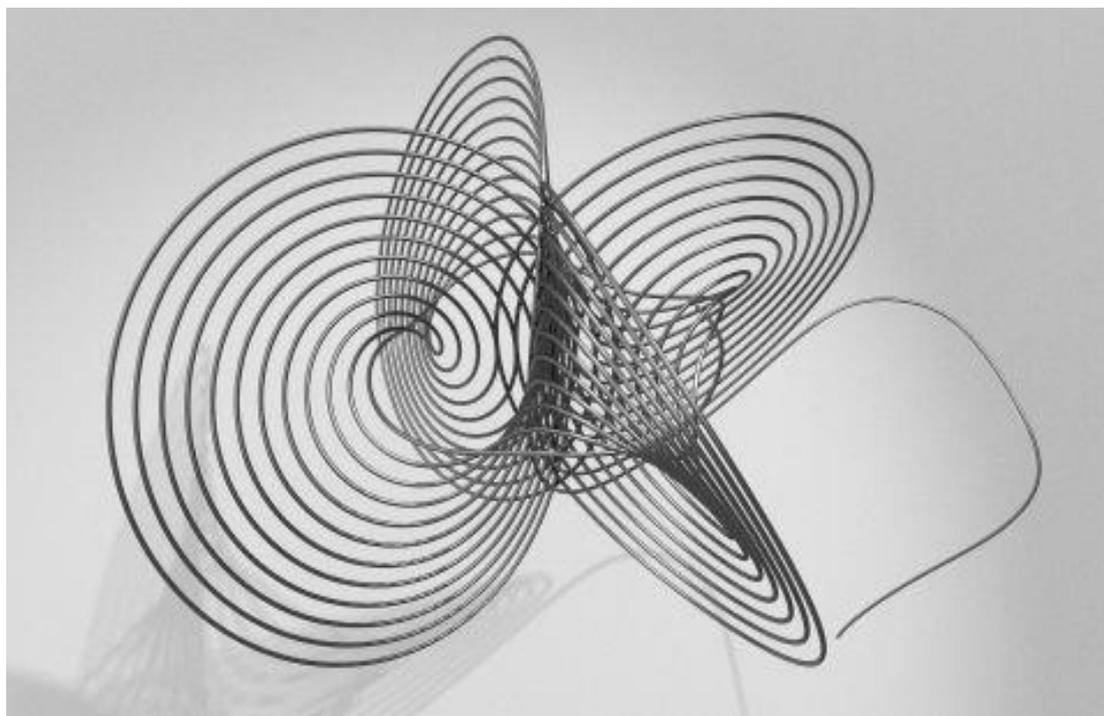
Crucially, this is a misogynistic Whiteness that demands and develops specific forms of masculine ideal. The rituals of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) training are central to how Active Club theologies come to life. Looking to accounts of embodied and ideological formation through combat training (Wacquant 2004), and feminist phenomenologies of

Whiteness and masculinity (Ngo 2017, Ahmed 2007, Alcoff 1999), I suggest that this ritual life attempts to correct the misalignment of the present in which the Active Club finds itself with the past and future that it imagines. If the Active Club theology revolves around a semi-apocalyptic horizon of white loss, MMA is an organised and ritualised attempt to prevent the coming of that future. Wendy Brown argues that the incel phenomenon represents a masculinity characterised by 'raw resentment without the turn toward discipline, creativity and ultimately, intellectual mastery... [with] only revenge, no way out, no futurity' (2019). The Active Club world is far more constructive; this masculinity stakes a claim on a white future, channels a white sacrality, and suggests the necessary steps to assure their security. By stepping into how this theological and ritualised world is sensed, imagined, and experienced, we learn a great deal about one form of white ultranationalist masculinity. But more critically, we learn about the conditions which make it possible, and to some, necessary.

**FG202 - Expanding the Boundaries of Creative Research Through Inter/Transdisciplinary Collaboration and Conversation. Panel 1.**

**Transdisciplinary Plasticity and the Digital Humanities: At The Intersection Of Philosophy, Digital Media, Mathematics, And Art**

Karl Rodrigues



After presenting Catherine Malabou's (non-)concept of 'plasticity', as described in, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction* (2010 [2005]), the aim shall be to expand upon its nature by unpacking the potentially quantitative dimensions therein, as opposed to its heretofore distinguished qualitative character - gesturing towards a 'quantitative plasticity'. Here, references to, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality, and Dialectic*, are to be made. To actualise the aim, Basarab Nicolescu's method of 'transdisciplinarity', as related in, *Manifesto of Transdisciplinarity* (2002), will be used in order to unbound a 'philosophical plasticity' towards a digitally humanistic one, that is, moving plasticity towards the digital humanities for the sake of founding a quantitative plasticity. Here, references to, *From Modernity to Cosmodernity: Science, Culture, and Spirituality* (2014), along with those from the digital humanities literature, are to be made.

On the way to quantitative plasticity, a 'digitally humanistic plasticity' would involve inhabiting the interstices of disciplines and their sub-fields: between and beside, at the general level, the disciplines of philosophy, digital media,

mathematics (and engineering), as well as art on the one hand; and, at the specific level, between and beside the sub-fields of semiotics, computing, modeling, and design on the other. The remainder of the presentation shall delve into each respective sub-field, making overtures to disciplines where appropriate. As a preview, the discussion of the field of: semiotics, would engage with the Saussurian structuralist approach as well as its later more radical Derridean post-structuralist deconstruction; computing, would consider the world of data and algorithms; modeling, would encompass mathematical topology and computer-assisted design (CAD); and design itself, would deal with visually and graphically creative generative AI GPT models. Thus, from all these threads, it shall be argued that a 'digitally humanistic quantitative plasticity' is able to emerge as a viable theoretical and practical (non-)concept and (non-)method.

In the words of Stream 7, the boundaries of philosophical research are expanded through transdisciplinarity, making it more creative (i.e. in the sense of art and fiction) as well as more scientific (i.e. in both senses of the mathematical and natural sciences) - digitally humanistic quantitative plasticity is a humanity and a science. In the words of the Stream 7 specification, digitally humanistic quantitative plasticity engenders collaborative horizons opened through emergent transdisciplinary symbiotic relations, networks, and (group) projects.

This presentation is drawn from ideas currently being developed and written for a PhD dissertation at EGS under the supervision of Catherine Malabou. Multiple articles as well as a subsequent book (Publishers TBA) are to be released in 2026 and beyond.

## Creative Methodologies and the Media Arts Lab: Interrogating Digital Culture through modes of Practice Research

Martyn Thayne

This talk will present what I call a 'media arts lab' framework for interrogating contemporary digital culture. As I shall illustrate, the 'media arts lab' seeks to leverage transdisciplinary modes of co-creation and embodied, media-arts practice in response to critical issues in media culture and society. I will outline a range of creative methodologies, including 'speculative design' (Dunne and Raby, 2013), 'critical making' (Ratto, 2008) and 'design fiction' (Sterling, 2013), highlighting how these approaches can be implemented in an educational setting as part of intensive 'media lab' and 'hackathon' style workshops. I suggest this represents a novel, practice-based approach for examining the complexity of our contemporary digital world.

## **FG204 - Mapping the world. How art and creativity can cross borders, break barriers and connect communities. Panel 2. The Virtual Space: blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction**

### Archive 2023: When the Boundaries Between Humans and Machines Blur

Ziyao Lin

In *Archive 2023 - Stories of My Life with AI*, artificial intelligence (AI) is redefined as an active participant in artistic creation rather than merely a tool or an extension of the human artist. The project consists of two parts: first, AI-generated visualizations that document daily interactions with AI, and second, a video narrated in the first person from AI's perspective, which challenges the traditional human-centered narrative framework. This dual narrative blurs the conventional boundaries between humans and machines, making them co-creators of the work. This archive, blending memory and truth, obscures the line between private and public realms, reflecting on the prominence of AI in 2023, its gradual integration into public consciousness, and its influence on human actions. It raises pressing questions about how humanity will coexist with AI technologies in the future.

At the same time, this art project connects with my academic research. In my study, I propose the concept of "Poor AI," which examines the hidden digital labor and contradictory forces underlying AI technology. Drawing on Hito Steyerl's theory of "Poor Images," I reveal how AI accelerates the exploitation of invisible labor under the logic of capitalism while simultaneously holding potential for resistance against established power structures. AI embodies disruptive power but remains inherently tied to the logic of capitalism. This contradiction runs through every layer of technological development.

In this presentation, I will focus on the following questions: What kind of artistic experiences arise when AI becomes a narrative subject and creative perspective within a work? In the context of increasingly blurred boundaries between humans and machines, what new social challenges might emerge? Aligned with the 2025 Midlands Conference in Critical Thought's theme, *How art and creativity can cross borders*, this presentation explore new possibilities for coexistence between humans and technology while reflecting on the potential issues such coexistence might entail.

## Media/Storm: Navigating Information, Narratives and Borders in the Wake of Hurricane Helene

Ziegi Boss

In September 2024, Hurricane Helene devastated North Carolina's Appalachian Mountains, including my hometown of Boone, transforming a region known for its mild climate into a designated Disaster Area. This presentation will explore the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings of *media/storm*, an art installation investigating the complex relationship between local experiences and the fractured media narratives surrounding the hurricane.

In a world increasingly defined by information overload and polarization, *media/storm* offers a lens to explore the borders between local experience and online discourse, fact and fiction, and personal and political. This presentation examines how geographic and cultural distance, as well as ideological bias shape coverage and public perception of local events, while addressing broader issues in contemporary media systems.

My art installation, *media/storm*, emerged from the experience of navigating an information-saturated online ecosystem in the aftermath of Hurricane Helene. I relied primarily on online media, as well as direct accounts with people I know from the area, to understand the scale of the disaster and evolving recovery response in my home town in North Carolina and surrounding region. Hurricane Helene became a nexus for competing narratives: broadly speaking local outlets focused primarily on personal loss and community recovery while national coverage often framed the disaster within the political discourse leading up to the 2024 US Election. Meanwhile conspiracy theories and misinformation circulated online, undermining efforts to communicate the reality of the disaster and creating difficulties in connecting those impacted to available aid. This project interrogates the ways in which local events are appropriated into existing discourses, often reframed to align with political or ideological agendas. *Media/storm* not only captures the contradictions, distortions, and biases that characterize modern information ecosystems but also highlights the tension between individual stories and collective narratives.

At the heart of this project is the question of how information is constructed, framed, and circulated in an age of deeply fractured media systems. This presentation will address several interrelated themes:

1. **Proximity and Perception:** How the distance—geographical, cultural, or political—of media outlets shapes their framing of local events.
2. **Media as a Bordered Space:** How the digital landscape functions as a border where local stories are filtered, amplified, or distorted.
3. **Art as a Mediator:** The potential of art to critically illuminate the multiplicity of narratives and bridge the gaps between personal experience and media representations.

This presentation will situate *media/storm* within broader discussions on media studies, epistemology, and the politics of representation. Through visual analysis, personal reflection, and theoretical insights, I will explore how Hurricane Helene serves as an example of how information is mediated across scales—from personal to global. *Media/storm* acts

as both a document and a critique of this fractured media landscape, highlighting the human consequences of the declining trust and reliability in information systems. By tracing the borders that exist between personal experiences and discourse at the local, national and global level, *media/storm* underscores the urgency of rethinking the ways we represent and engage with information in an era of media fragmentation and mistrust.

### **Lunch Break**

**FG102- Critical Whiteness Studies. Panel 2. Whiteness, Folklore and the Question of Indigeneity**

Folk not Volk: Reimagining whiteness and subjectivity in encounters with 'tradition'

Andrew Fergus Wilson

Within the field, it is generally accepted that the study of folklore is rooted in the cultural dimensions of nation building and empire building during the nineteenth century. This produced a classed, gendered, and racialised intertext of atavistic narratives that extended the deep roots of emergent modern nations into a vague and mythic 'origin'. Presently, there is a current within folkloristics to unpack and confront these processes and broadening the possibility of folklore's promise to speak of a people in their relationship with local and cosmological spaces and times. This paper will show how the production of 'folklore from above' lent itself to the fascist cultures of the twentieth century and continues to be drawn on by neo-fascist formations today. It will go on to show how, by speaking from and through cultural margins, folklore is capable of unsettling and disordering the essentialist 'whiteness' that racism and neofascism draws upon.

This paper will therefore progress from providing a detailed analysis of folklore in far right political culture to show how a fuller, more inclusive approach to understanding folklore can be productive in countering narrow, exclusive expressions of national culture and identity. It will do so by showing that the sources of agency within folkloric narratives are frequently figures of marginality. The paper is predominantly concerned with articulating the changing theoretical framing of folklore but will draw on local stories of inland mermaids to demonstrate how the dimensions through which fascistic conceptualisations of 'the Volk' are expressed can be seen to be undone by folk narratives.

The three upland pools in the Peak District that folklore tells us are inhabited by mermaids are also imbued with indeterminacy and blurred categories. The mermaids themselves, in the heart of the countryside, provoke confrontations with expectations of limited expressions of gender, sexuality, race, and species. In each they challenge and undo the Volkish assertions of delimited, 'pure' indigeneity that are drawn on in neofascism and show how expectations of an indigenous 'whiteness of being' are undermined by the raw materials of tradition and the imagination of 'the folk'. The paper will conclude that any attempt to essentialise 'the folk' or the people contained within nationalistic expressions of culture and identity will always prove fruitless. 'The folk', as an evolving and complex collective, share continually developing and open-ended 'traditional' narratives and performances that draw on indeterminate and unfixed figures like the inland mermaids to explore and communicate collectively shared experiences and unseen but felt realities. Through the shared performance and reception of these narratives, fascistic formulations of 'the Volk' can be unfixed and disrupted by the plural and unfixed possibilities of 'the folk'. In doing so, whiteness can be seen to one, varied, strand within the wider social fabric that is involved in the process of doing – but not defining – the culture of 'the folk'.

The whiteness of the English folk

Matthew Cheeseman

This paper addresses whiteness, folklore, folkloristics (the discipline that looks to folklore), so-called folk revivals and folk horror. It is focused on England. The paper draws its argument, and some of its language, from the AHRC-funded research network Folklore Without Borders, which has met through 2024 to embed greater diversity within UK folklore and folkloristics.

Firstly it establishes the distinctions that mark folklore and folkloristics in England, where the discipline has not been mobilised as a means to community self-identity in the radical, diverse way that has characterised international folkloristics (Otero and Martínez-Rivera, 2021). Taking an historical perspective it understands this as a symptom of nineteenth-century British imperial power, and the inconvenience of romantic nationalism to the

English. As a result Victorian anthropologists and folklorists were less concerned with national folklore and more interested in universal theories (Roper, 2012).

One such theory, E.B. Tylor's 'doctrine of survivals' suggests that vestiges of the deep past are buried in the customs of the present. Tylor understood culture as progressive and hierarchical, passing through history from the primitive to the civilized. Within this process, 'vestiges' of the past survived. Because the theory supposed such 'rude' survivals were enacted without volition or knowledge of their heritage, and because there are no corroborating pagan texts, this idea enabled the imaginations of many folklorists in constructing an Edwardian vision of middle England populated by pagans. Sir James Frazer heard them in the folksong 'John Barleycorn'; Cecil Sharp recognised them sword dancing, whilst Lady Gomme unmasked Father Christmas as a pagan god.

This paper underlines how this imagined village (Boyes, 1993) aligned with English imperial power. Pagans gave the English a means to discuss heritage without entertaining religion, Celts or Saxons, quietly emphasising English imperial dominance whilst flattening anything Celtic (Koven, 2007). In so doing it established an understanding of folklore connected to the deep past. As English folk went through a cycle of twentieth-century revivals (Edwardian, 1930s, 1950s/60s, the contemporary moment), the white character of this deep past has become an issue of contention. This is all the more so in the context of the UK's declining international economic authority, Brexit and devolution. The paper concludes by considering the conceptual risks, and opportunities, that this situation presents. What should be made of the whiteness of the English folk?

## **FG202 - Expanding the Boundaries of Creative Research Through Inter/Transdisciplinary Collaboration and Conversation. Panel 2.**

### Is there a Phenomenological Gaze? Creating a Dialogue between Human and Non-Humans

Annie Morad

'Having a natter'.

This practice-based research asks questions on how non-human and humans have dialogue together that creates a unique language created in the moment of the encounter. This research revealed how dialogue is formed with visual and sound outcomes created with non-human species' interaction, field recordings, live improvised saxophone playing and digital electron interfaces. This in turn produces a dialogue between the final artwork and receiver. These encounters enable co-productions between non-human avians and myself, exhibited in galleries and discussed in conferences and symposiums. The initial idea from all the contributing beings is the desire for intercommunication through interaction. This is always conducted with respect and empathy. Neither the geese, pigeon, duck nor I speak each other's language, so how do we communicate with each other?

The starting point, for all of us, is watching and observing and listening and hearing; from this, a communication bond is formed throughout our exchanges. Thereby, together we generate a dialogue between us.

The components of the dialogue are in the texture of their feathers, and the subtle changes in their tonality both in sound and visually. Also there is a visual rhythm created by lines of tonal difference formed in the feathers, and the iridescence of colour that changes through movement. The artwork also may or may not incorporate sound and live improvised saxophone playing. I believe I am both a conduit and translator. I translate from their communications that include texture, rhythm and sound into a video and sound language. Taking one sound from a location and placing this in another location in order to 'unpack' the sound. I am using a mutual space as a platform for exploring ideas, taking risks, 'not-knowing'.

Based on my observations, using visual and sound, tones, rhythms, gestures and movement with empathy and respect. I offer an invitation to the receiver to understand the avian voice, and to form their own communication with the non-human, albeit at distance and in the located space of the gallery. The theorist and writer Nicolas Bourriaud,

writes that "...art creates a space for the emissions of other species and for coactivities that entangle the human and nonhuman to become visible" (2022, 82). This is achieved without disturbing their (avian) community and thus being respectful of their lives. These outcomes are exhibited in a 'mutual space' to facilitate live discussions and debates, amongst humans. Art has always been a platform in which to discuss and produce a variant of ideas. The provision of sound and image into a forum of ideas produces discussion and debate, as shown by such spaces as the Serpentine Gallery with their General Ecology movement. The use of art language sits outside 'wildlife documentation' photography or video. This form of language is experienced in live performance gesture, photo and video visuals, sound and observation.

## Transmitting Transgender Neurodiversity: Digital and Arts-Based Interventions to Explore and Advocate for Healthier Youth Identity Narratives

Alice Bell, Ananda Breed & Hannah Andrews

This paper/presentation will communicate our progress towards a research proposition that will analyse the transformative role of arts-based methodologies, including cutting-edge digital tools, in advocating for neurodiverse youth, particularly transgender individuals. Through an interdisciplinary lens, the project will examine how creative interventions can illuminate experiences of masking, identity performance, and resilience in navigating societal challenges. By integrating digital and performative arts with participatory practices, our work will aim to co-create empowering narratives that challenge stereotypes, enhance advocacy, and promote mental health and well-being.

Framing the research within feminist methodologies, this study recognises the responsibility of researchers to approach enquiry as inherently "inter-and transdisciplinary" (Leavy and Harris, 2018: v). This perspective highlights the necessity of multi-perspectival approaches that centre suppressed or marginalised voices. In doing so, the project addresses the intersections of neurodivergence, gender identity, and societal power structures. By blending embodied practices with digital methodologies, such as virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and interactive gaming narratives/processes, the research will expand traditional frameworks, challenging epistemic boundaries while offering new pathways for understanding and advocacy.

Central to this approach is the concept of "neuroqueerness," which highlights the intersection of neurodivergence and queer identities. Digital tools act as "digital masks" and exploratory spaces, enabling participants to experiment with identity performance and resilience-building in environments free from societal judgment. These spaces also provide opportunities for co-creating narratives that disrupt normative discourses surrounding neurodivergence and gender identity, promoting advocacy and justice through collaborative and participatory methodologies and constellations.

The project is underpinned by feminist ethics of care and co-production, prioritising partnerships with young people, community organisations, healthcare providers, and educational institutions. These collaborations ensure that the methodologies are grounded in lived experiences and address the real-world challenges of neurodivergent and transgender youth. The research will be exemplified by a pilot study with Gosberton House School in Lincolnshire which combines digital and traditional arts methods to gather participant feedback and refine practices. This collaborative approach not only centres the voices of marginalised individuals but also advances systemic change across healthcare, education, and cultural domains.

Research questions guiding the study include:

1. How can inter- and transdisciplinary arts-based approaches illuminate neurodivergent experiences and perceptions of identity?
2. What are the relationships between masking, identity performance, and social inclusion/exclusion among neurodivergent and transgender individuals?
3. How can digital and performative tools serve as mediums for resilience and advocacy in neurodivergent communities?

#### 4. What strategies and platforms can amplify neurodivergent voices in broader socio-cultural contexts?

By integrating feminist principles with embodied, digital, and affective resources, this project aligns with the stream's emphasis on "thinking through doing." It exemplifies the transformative power of inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration, advancing social and cultural justice through critical dialogue. Furthermore, it expands the boundaries of creative research to support suppressed perspectives, promoting advocacy and inclusion in education, healthcare, and cultural discourse

### **FG204 - Embodied Realities: The Body in Contemporary Thought and Culture. Panel 1. Embodied Experiences and Identities**

#### Embodied Constitution of Reality in Genetic Phenomenology.

Natalia Tomashpolskaia

For Husserl, apperception could serve as a key to understanding the recognition of living objects. He explains that a child, upon seeing something once, grasps its semantic purpose and subsequently recognises it without requiring detailed reproductions, comparisons, or logical deductions. Such recognition is the 'work' of apperception: 'Yet the manner in which apperceptions arise and consequently in themselves, by their sense and sense-horizon, point back to their genesis varies greatly. There are different levels of apperception, corresponding to different layers of objective sense' (CM 1982, 111, §50).

Apperceptions are categorised as belonging either to the first-order sphere or as being endowed with the meaning of the alter ego. Presentation is a particular type of apperception. Here, presentation is initially understood as 'the presentation of his body as part of nature, given in my own sphere' (CM, §52). The living body of the 'other' manifests as living only through its continuously changing behaviour. We experience the 'other' 'only by means of new apperceptions that proceed in a synthetically harmonious fashion, and only by virtue of the manner in which these apperceptions owe their existence-value to their motivational connexion with the changing presentations proper, within my ownness, that continually appertain to them' (CM 1982, 114, §52).

Another living body derives meaning from my own living body through apperceptive transference. This process eliminates the direct, first-order display of predicates specifically associated with living corporeality, as these are carried out through ordinary perception. In the phenomenological sense, the 'other' is a modification of myself, an intentional transformation of my objectified self and my first-order world. As Husserl writes, 'In other words, another monad becomes constituted appresentatively in mine' (§52, 115). This means that we endow others with qualities derived from ourselves. However, the 'other' is not perceived as a duplicate of oneself but as a distinct being, belonging to another monad with a first-order world similar to, yet distinct from, my own. Through representative apperception, my first-order ego constitutes the existence of another ego. The norm is constituted first, and deviations are then defined in relation to this pre-existing normality. The norm, in this context, is a healthy, living human body free of deviations. Husserl acknowledges deviations from this norm, such as those encountered in individuals with disabilities. Animals, in contrast, are constituted as abnormal modifications of the human condition.

Husserl addresses the distinction between one's own ego and that of the 'other' through an abstract epochè. By conducting the epochè, one sets the boundaries of one's ego, clearing the horizon of transcendental experience of everything pertaining to the 'other'. Husserl writes, 'We can say also that we abstract from everything "other-spiritual", as that which makes possible, in the "alien" or "other" that is in question here, its specific sense' (CM 1982, 95, §44). Within this framework, the individual ego is imbued with the meaning of 'people' as psychophysical objects in the world. The intersubjective world itself can be conceived as having a centralised structure, with my ego at its centre. 'I-am' occupies the first-order position relative to others, forming the primal monad. From this starting point, 'I' constitute others as psychophysical entities. Subsequently, through presenting apperception, we are given not only 'others' but also the surrounding world, including culture, society, and additional layers that form concentric circles around my central ego, my monad. Each of us possesses a horizon unique to our sphere. In other words, each person

first understands their particular surrounding world, in which they are the centre, with the world's broader horizon remaining undisclosed.

## Embodied harms of militarisation and war

Hannah Wilkinson

There has been recognition of how militarised identities, cultures and combat roles in war are linked to disproportionate mental health struggles during military-civilian transitions (Gordon et al., 2020). Drawing on in-depth visual and narrative interviews with ex-military personnel, I share participants' experiences of becoming militarised and delivering state violence as a British soldier in the 'war on terror'. I argue that identity and mental health struggles in post-military life reflect dimensions of trained, embodied state violence, compounded by inadequate social support structures, rather than individual suffering or mental health 'disorders'. In doing so, I draw attention to the need to develop research, policy and practice around 'un-training' militarisation and healing the harms of war through bodily, somatic therapies.

### **FG302 - Work and career in Neoliberal Academia: Systemic Pressures and Inequities. Panel 1. Neoliberal Academia and its Impact on Careers and Wellbeing**

#### Publish or Perish

Daniele Bruno Garancini

Researchers are publishing increasingly many papers because our chances to keep our precarious jobs are tied to the volume of our publication output. The number of papers published by early-career medical researchers on PubMed, for instance, has risen from less than 50 in 2008 to over 300 in 2022 and the average early-career job applicant, depending on specialization, has 2-3 times more publications and presentations in their CV in 2022 than the average applicant in 2008. Indeed, rejected candidates in 2022 tend to have more publications than accepted candidates in 2008 (Elliott and Carmody 2023)

As the volume of academic publications increased, so did the profits of academic publishers. Elsevier, the market leader, is a subsidiary of RELX plc. In 2008 RELX reported £5.3 billion in revenues and £901 million in operating profits. In 2022, revenues increased to £8.5 billion, and profits increased to over £2.6 billion. That is, between 2008 and 2022, revenues increased by over 50% and profits nearly tripled. The same can be said by considering the reports of other publishers, such as for instance, Taylor & Francis, which is a division of informa plc.

As publishers got richer, increasingly productive researchers got miserable. From 2000 to 2015, levels of inequality in academia increased much faster than in the general population. 1% of scientists have increasingly high salaries and benefits while the rest struggle to make ends meet (Lok 2016). Science has become a precariat economy—most researchers transition from one underpaid short-term contract to the next—which disproportionately affects people of colour, among other minorities (Albayrak-Aydemir and Gleibs 2023; Arday 2022).

Open-access publishing is often referred to as a possible alternative to the costly system that large publishing companies offer (Van Noorden 2013). The idea is that researchers should make their submissions to journals that are not affiliated with the major publishing companies, which publish open access in exchange for fees that they keep as small as possible. That is, researchers should withdraw labour from publishing companies, which eventually will die out, and replace them.

This proposal has not delivered on its promise to replace large publishing companies. Ever since the open access model was set forth, publishing companies have incorporated the open access model as their revenues continued to

increase. The first mention of open access publishing in an informa report is in the 2011 report “[Taylor & Francis] supports a range of business models including site licenses, subscriptions, pay-per-view and open access” (p.17). The 2012 report claims that the company has “steadily built a portfolio of open access journals” (p.8), and in 2013 informa launched its open-access publishing brand OA.

Why are researchers not withdrawing their labour? One factor that contributes to this is that journals that publish for smaller fees do not make a better offer to researchers. Indeed, these journals follow the tradition that authors, peer reviewers, and editors are not paid for their work. The justification for this is meant to be that researchers are paid by other institutions for these tasks. But this claim in contemporary academia has become nothing more than a convenient lie—although Frankfurt (1986) may prefer a different terminology—a very large number of researchers are not paid to do research at all, let alone being paid to edit and peer review academic journals (Lok 2015; Bonello and Wånggren 2023).

In order to change the current situation precarious researchers would need to unionize against the publish or perish policy. But this presents great challenges. Precariat economies set workers to compete, reducing the chances of aggregation. Moreover, in a global economy, unionization would also need to be global. If, say, French researchers collectively stopped publishing, this alone would not undermine publishing companies.

### Dark Academia and its reliance upon progress

Ricky Gee

Over the last 40 years Higher Education (HE) policy in the UK, resonating with other contexts, has been shaped by neoliberal logic resulting in continual marketisation, increased tuition fees, rising managerialism and metrics to police behaviour based on a ‘business model’ rather than its civic duty. Such policy asserts how these changes provide material worth for students, promoting human capital via an intensified focus on employability and destination outcomes; persuading students to view themselves as consumers (Gee, 2016; 2019; 2022; Fleming, 2021). This has also intensified academic careers to become focused on metric results rather than the quality of their work and its intended consequences...

.. even scholars who are ardent critics of the neoliberal university still rejoice when their Google Scholar Citation Score increases and would seemingly run over their next of kin in a small jeep if it meant getting published in a ‘top’ journal.

(Fleming, 2021: 5)

Therefore, academic capitalism, results in the university becoming an entrepreneurial organisation to serve capital rather than institutions serving the ‘public good’(Jessop, 2017), with ‘progress’ becoming its main driving force (Gee et al, 2023; Gee, 2022a). This presentation will explore how ‘progress’ is central to the following projects: the combined project of colonialism/modernity; the neoliberal university and ‘career’. The presentation will briefly critique progress from anthropological, decolonial and post-structural perspectives, illustrating how career discourse promotes progress, which comes with violence, as it provides an ever slipping away telos of achievement, the yearning for a temporary place of safety and atonement, yet where this never arrival comes with constant evaluation and scrutiny and a continual bombardment of images and demands to keep up, providing no time for reflection and the inability of our cognitive functions to keep up with a continually accelerating and augmented reality. The paper will then provide empirical illustrations from a range of projects that has utilised a critique of progress to aid the career development of undergraduate students and staff in Higher Education in the UK (see author 2016; 2019; 2022; 2022a; 2020; 2023; 2021).

Sustaining Wellbeing and Work Engagement for Academic Staff in the Neoliberal University.

Roopa Nagori

This is a time of work transformation for the higher education (HE) sector. The new style of working remotely or in a hybrid manner and the transformed work environment in the neoliberal university place pressure on the well-being of academics. Employees' mental health and wellness have assumed great significance in current times, and universities need to understand how engagement and well-being in academia can be improved. This research considers the HE sector in particular and investigates the experiences and events that influence the engagement and well-being of academic staff.

In addition, sustainability issues related to the well-being of employees are central to hybrid work. The United Nations has proposed 16 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); goal 3 refers to the workforce's well-being, mainly 'Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.' This study aims to offer recommendations to improve employee engagement and well-being for academic staff in HE so that strategies to promote one outcome, such as productivity, do not undermine another, such as improved well-being of employees. In the backdrop of the transformed work environment in HE, the researcher aims to propose a conceptual framework for sustainable engagement and well-being for academics.

Research Focus: Specifically, the research addresses three questions:

1. What are the perceptions of academic staff in HE about the factors influencing work engagement and well-being in the post-COVID-19 era?
2. What interrelations exist in the well-being and work engagement factors that impact this discipline's current body of knowledge?
3. Which factors would significantly impact staff well-being and employee engagement in remote and hybrid work?

While progress in the field of HRM has acknowledged the benefits of Employee Engagement to performance outcomes, the search for a link between productivity and performance has been pursued at the expense of a concern for employee well-being. Furthermore, changes in the nature and context of work (remote and hybrid work) support the case for a greater focus on well-being. While previous studies have discussed Employee Engagement and Well-being, few have been applied to the context of universities and hybrid work. The research will analyse the key constructs of the existing theoretical frameworks Guest (2017), Jobs Demands-Resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), and Asset Framework (Robertson & Cooper, 2011) to offer theoretical propositions and a framework that adds to the current body of knowledge.

## Break

**16:00 – 17:30 - Parallel Sessions 4**

**FG102 - Digital Nomadic Commons: Reimagining Virtual Space and Digital Pedagogy. Panel 1. Digital Ecosystems of Learning and Commons Making.**

Beyond the LMS: Open Educational Resources and the DIY University of the Digital Commons

Paul J Glossop

This presentation explores how Open Educational Resources (OERs) and decentralised learning platforms are creating a "DIY university" within the digital commons, encouraging virtual fugitive pedagogy outside traditional academic structures. Inspired by Moten and Harney's (2013) concept of "study" as a fugitive, collective, and improvisational practice, we examine how these digital spaces enable critical learning and knowledge production beyond the Learning Management System (LMS) and formal accreditation.

While the LMS often reinforces institutional control and standardised curricula (Ball, 2016; Giroux, 2013), the digital commons offers an alternative. Encompassing OER repositories, collaborative platforms, and online communities, it provides a landscape for learning characterised by openness, accessibility, and participatory knowledge creation (Wiley & Hilton, 2018).

We investigate how individuals and communities leverage OERs for self-directed learning, critical dialogue, and collective knowledge building. Examples include online communities facilitating peer-to-peer learning, such as the Peer 2 Peer University (P2PU, n.d.), and platforms supporting collaborative projects and alternative educational models. Drawing on research about open education and online communities of practice (Kop & Hill, 2008; Knox, 2019), we highlight the potential of these spaces to empower learners, particularly those marginalised within or excluded from traditional settings. We also consider social media and online forums as spaces for virtual fugitive pedagogy, where communities engage in collective study outside formal structures.

The presentation addresses challenges inherent in building a "DIY university," including quality control, knowledge validation, and the potential for perpetuating inequalities through unequal access to technology and digital literacy (Warschauer & Matuchniak, 2010). It also explores complexities surrounding intellectual property, inclusivity, and fostering critical engagement in these often-unstructured environments.

Ultimately, we argue that the "DIY university," facilitated by OERs and decentralised platforms, represents a significant shift in higher education, with virtual fugitive pedagogy playing a central role. By embracing these principles, these spaces can develop a more democratic and participatory approach to learning, open intellectual exchange, and empowering marginalised voices. This presentation contributes to a broader discussion about the future of education in the digital age, advocating for equitable and sustainable learning ecosystems that prioritise accessibility, critical thinking, and collective knowledge creation. The digital commons, viewed through the lens of virtual fugitive pedagogy, can become a vibrant space for a more inclusive and transformative educational experience, embodying Moten and Harney's "study" as a radical act of intellectual and social liberation.

### Leadership and culture 'building' (?) in the cloud: Initial findings of an interpretative phenomenological analysis of the experiences of online-only school leaders in the UK

Louise Reynolds

"Online connectivity sharpens focus because... it makes people feel more connected in an online environment, because there's a, sort of, stricter rules about when you connect."

Anthony, Alphabet School

After an explosion in online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, a return to 'normal' has been experienced for most children. However, increasing numbers of learners are now homeschooled, some of whom attend one of 25 new UK-based online-only schools. This coincides with a teacher attraction and retention crisis, and growing concern about professional wellbeing. Online learning research grew in popularity from 2020 onwards, with much focus on technology, student wellbeing, and learning loss. Studies into leadership and culture were typically limited to crisis-based solutions. Few studies have considered more routine leadership or the nature of culture in online-only schools. The personal experiences of leaders relating to leadership and culture in online school environments remain largely unstudied.

My work uses interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to help to understand the unique experiences of being a leader of an online-only school, and how leaders have sought to build (if, indeed, 'build' is the correct word) a school culture 'in the cloud'. This presentation will share the initial findings of my PhD research as it stands part-way through my data generation phase. Insights from semi-structured interviews centred particularly on the experience of leaders of culture within their own online spaces will be highlighted and discussed. Within these interviews, leaders have discussed their own practices, ideas and experiences relating to culture, including creating their own definitions and how (and if) culture is different for groups across the school. For example, one online-only school leader specifically delineates between three cultural groups – teachers, admin and students, all with their own practices and values which keep them separate. Conversely, a different school leader describes how they actively "build" a culture which brings together all stakeholders in the school, coalescing around a set of virtual values. The variety in interpretation, 'building' and experience of digital space is stark.

IPA offers a unique opportunity to analyse and explore individual experiences and to describe unique cases. As an initial exploratory study in this field, my research will help to describe the current state of play of leadership and culture in UK-based online-only schools, and what it is like to be working and learning within these spaces. This person-centred, experience-led approach will provide the ability to understand the opportunities online-only school may present for staff and students looking for a viable alternative to face-to-face education within a digital future, and the processes and practices which seem to contribute to the 'building' of an online school digital commons.

## Failing Forward

Rony Efrat

Failing Forward is a hybrid film project that interrogates the intersections of personal memory, digital technology, and collaborative storytelling, reflecting on how virtual spaces reshape creative practices and communal narratives. Sparked by an uncanny parallel between my language patterns and Google's advanced language model LaMDA, the project began as an exploration of human-machine communication and evolved into a broader inquiry into digital commons, authorship, and identity.

At its heart, Failing Forward examines how generative AI tools can both enhance and challenge traditional storytelling frameworks. These technologies enable new forms of decentralized creativity, mirroring the principles of the digital nomadic commons. Through a narrative that intertwines analog archives and AI-generated media, the film investigates how digital platforms foster collaborative creation while raising critical questions about ownership, accessibility, and the ethics of virtual spaces.

The film's narrative follows a fictionalized version of myself—a writer grappling with fragmented memories—who revisits digitized family archives and interacts with an AI that echoes her uncertainties about grief and loss. As human memory collides with digital reconstruction, the boundaries between personal and collective storytelling blur. The process of making the film itself becomes an experiment in collaboration, with AI serving both as an artistic tool and a critical lens to explore the dynamics of shared authorship in virtual environments.

## **FG202 - Embodied Realities: The Body in Contemporary Thought and Culture. Panel 2. The Relationship Between Bodies and Objects**

### Teaching the premodern body

Pan Tome Valencia

Our body is our first tool, not only of interaction with the world, but also of its analysis. The way in which we understand our body and its positionality—as well as the limits and possibilities of what human bodies are and which bodies deserve to occupy each space—is a fundamental aspect of how we interpret reality. This does not happen merely at a discursive level, but is of course vastly informed by our personal sensorial experience. Bodily metaphors have consequently been a mainstay of the history of thought (the body as microcosm, the body without organs, etc.),

but the body itself has been an important site of the expression of intellectual and moral debate—for example, the body as site of purity and impurity. Whose body? And in which ways?

The body continuously produces an interpretative act while being a text to be interpreted by others around it and by itself. However, this never happens in an unmediated manner, but rather in a continuous conversation with the physical, social and categorical circumstances in which a body exists. As students of premodern literature and history, it is our duty to engage and study these now lost interpretative acts through records and verbal (re)interpretations of their meaning; each of them part of a dialogue with a “text” attempting to position itself in a network of relations unavailable to us. But how can we engage past experiences of the body as knowledge? Particularly in contexts where our access to material culture is incomplete due to loss or lack of information. Speaking from an academic positionality, how can we teach about it in ways that recognise the critical and dialogical possibilities of this knowledge?

Using examples from Medieval Japanese texts and focusing on the way in which bodily experience can be used as socio-literary analysis, this presentation will examine the ways in which we can engage premodern bodies as interpretative text through descriptions and depictions of bodily experience and the ways in which we can approach them as an academic subject of study. This examination will make us consider as well the ways in which multiple understandings of what bodies are and can be may serve to inform and reposition our own views both of bodily experience, and of what knowledge is deemed legitimate as literary, academic, and worthy of transmission.

## Willful Machines

Arwen Rosenberg-Meereboer & Åbo Akademi

In this article I will examine this kind of affective relationship to malfunctioning or misbehaving objects. I argue that when objects appear to us as willful, that opens up a space for relating to them. In this paper I will use Sara Ahmed's *Willful Subjects* (2014) to analyze relationships of affect between humans and malfunctioning, stubborn and otherwise willful objects. Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time* (1927) describes the way that objects can appear to humans as either ready-to-hand or present-at-hand. An object that is used as a tool will appear as ready-to-hand, it appears to us as useful for a task. The example Heidegger uses is the hammer, the hammer appears as a tool with the task of knocking nails into the wall, we do not instinctively ponder the individuality of the hammer, one hammer is as good as the other as long as the nails get into the wall. The hammer appears here not as an individual object, but as what Sara Ahmed in *Willful Subjects* calls a part of a whole. The hammer becomes the extension of the human arm and the human will. However, when the hammer breaks Heidegger claims it appears to us as present-at hand, it is no longer usable for the purpose of hammering nails into the wall, and therefore its individuality becomes visible to us, this hammer, that is broken in this specific way. Its lack of usefulness makes it possible for us to see its individuality. Ahmed calls this being apart, as opposed to being a part. The hammer no longer conforms to the human will, it has broken away from the human body.

I am interested to trace the will and willfulness of malfunction, both in and outside of the human body. I analyze malfunction as an interruption in the human will, what Ahmed calls a coming apart. I want to link this interruption to the work of Arseli Dokumaci, who uses interruption as an analysis of the manifestation of disability in the world, where the disabled person disrupts the habitus of the able bodied norm.

In this paper I want to trace the idea of breaking and malfunctioning from machines to the human body and analyze the gaps and spaces that emerge resulting from this disobedience, My argument is that these gaps provide spaces for more and different kinds of relationships.

## The Schizophrenic Word: Passion-Words as Supplement to Precarities

Josh Jackson

North American videogame production is a writhing mass of workplace abuse, passionate exploitation, and disjointed, opaque meritocracy (Jackson, 2019, 2020, 2023). This laborform is emblematic of the capitalist socius' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984) drive to envelop and overcode once-revolutionary action, media, or protest to turn it into a regulated means of subjectivation (Guattari, 1977). It is also emblematic of the subjectivation cycles that occur within immaterial labor that seeks to maximize overcoding the bodies present to create bodies that are utterly unwilling (or, in cases of passionate exploitation, unable) to change, move, or break out for fear of being dislocated from their object of attachment (Berlant, 2012). This subjectivation suite is referred to as cruel optimism (Berlant, 2012).

One area within videogame production that exemplifies cruel optimism is crunch (periods of extreme overwork due to mismanagement, inaction, or poor planning). Williams (2013) presented a seminal overview of crunch in games for what it was: an active degradation of workers' ability to make sense of their identity and their inculcation in the activities that they sacrificed and pined to be a part of. As ironclad as the autopoietic structure that the capitalist socius has assembled may seem, there is potentiality for disruptive action via schizorevolution (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984), or action so far outside of normativity (action, expectation, affect) that the action itself is utterly at odds with value surplus production. However, we run into the problem of the socius subsuming once-revolutionary acts into forms of capital generation (see: South Park s16, ep 13 "A Scause for Applause" for a very succinct demonstration of how the socius takes causes and consumes them in real time). We are left with videogame production workers adrift in a morass of identity- and meaning-making-politics that do not have an ending and an area of potential schizorevolution.

This piece utilizes Deleuze's work in Logic of Sense (1969) to craft an articulation of 'sense-making' without the 'sense'; an outline of the surface tension of the membrane Deleuze mentions that is a sidelong articulation of Guattari's processual assemblage. There is a clear tension that is not articulated between semiotics and sense – semiotics are wordmeaning; things given rank, file, and sense via epistemological collocation. Semiotics are rote, displaced aspects of interation that outline a skeleton of the experience of aleatory humanity. But herein lies the problem. Schizophrenia denotes an othered body; a hole-y brain cobbling together hole-y interactions and intercessions to stopgap the ways of communication deemed as 'normal' which bely the needs for the present body. Therefore, this work seeks to press on exposed nerves by way of articulating precarities (Jackson, 2023) as yet another area of intrigue when thinking about sense-making. Passion has taken on new, further bastardized senses of coercion to further push, further collocate, further find sense in the cruelly optimistic realm of videogames, and I believe at this crossroad there are real, prescient examples of how the operant behavior that lives in cruel optimism and passionate exploitation embeds, hardens, and proliferates precarities in ways that current understandings of labor do not and cannot conceive of.

## **FG204 - Exploring the new class politics – 1. Lived experiences of class**

Is it possible to build more support for a fairer distribution of resources in the UK?

Ruth Woolsey

The rationale behind my PhD is to understand how building more support for more redistributive and egalitarian policy in the UK might be possible. My assumptions were that 1) people needed to be more informed about structural inequalities that might lead to pressure being put on policy makers to act, and 2) this is because structural explanations of poverty are minimised in political and media discourse with neoliberal explanations blaming the behaviour of the most marginalised for their own poverty being prominent and consistent. I interviewed 29 participants from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds and found out existing views on poverty causes. I then showed information about redistribution and that the more equal a country is the more stable its economy is likely to be. This was to understand if fearmongering political rhetoric suggesting the opposite - that redistribution could cause the economy to collapse, prevents support for redistribution. Similarly, I showed information about regressive tax and tax avoidance to highlight top-down corruption and that funds are available via progressive taxation. Therefore, I also presented information that showed redistribution should not affect those on low and middle

incomes to allay any resentment that it has to come from 'the hard-working taxpayer'. I then presented a scenario of structural barriers to upward mobility someone born into a low-income household would likely face and another scenario of the difference for someone born into a financially secure household who would never likely experience poverty however they behaved. I found that views that previously mirrored neoliberal explanations of poverty did not change to be more supportive of redistribution even if there was some empathy for people experiencing poverty and an understanding about the information presented. Instead, those from this group (around a third of participants) brought the blame directly back on to parents and particularly onto mothers. However, another third of participants were supportive of redistribution previous to the interventions and a further small number had minimal awareness of the information on tax and redistribution and were very interested in the idea that society could be organised more fairly. I analysed the findings through Gramsci's concept of hegemony that included understanding people often defer to neoliberalism, rather than actively endorse it or because they are not necessarily politically aware, and this is because of how enmeshed we are in systems and structures that we rely on in everyday life. That is not to say it is not worth attempting to produce more awareness and both poverty campaigners and researchers should focus on highlighting how inequality is maintained and not what causes poverty as this leaves room for the behaviour of people experiencing poverty to be scrutinised. At the same time a counter-hegemony should build alliances with diverse groups making it clear how a left project will be in their material interests.

## Breaking the Chains: Redefining Welfare in the Age of Neoliberalism

Robyn Fawcett

The Universal Credit system, originally touted as a progressive reform to streamline welfare, has become a symbol of systemic failure and social injustice. Designed under the principles of neoliberalism, this framework not only perpetuates poverty but also punishes the very individuals it claims to assist. With punitive sanctions and bureaucratic red tape, many low-income families find themselves trapped in a cycle of despair, struggling to survive while government policies prioritise austerity over compassion. This is evident in the Labour government bringing forward managed migration for 800,000 people on ESA over to Universal Credit, from 2028/29 to 2026 (Mackley et al 2024). This paper addresses the relationship between neoliberalism, governance and class, through the lens of individuals who have navigated the Universal Credit system. It raises critical questions about what a more equitable welfare system might entail—one that genuinely meets the diverse needs of vulnerable populations and fosters an environment where individuals and families can thrive rather than merely survive. This is not just an economic issue; it's a moral imperative to create a society where everyone has the opportunity to thrive, free from the shackles of oppressive policies. It is imperative to advocate for a society that recognises and values the intrinsic worth of every individual. The current framework of Universal Credit exemplifies a significant failure of both imagination and empathy, serving as a stark reminder of a societal structure that is failing its most vulnerable members. There is a critical need to envision a welfare system that not only provides essential support but also fosters dignity, agency, and resilience within communities. This paper will explore these considerations.

## Class and knowledge: The epistemic (dis)advantage and the value of limits

Anna Migliorini

We live in an era that is at once post-materialist and post-idealist, confused or in transition, where on various front it is gaining ground the idea that the reading of social relations as class relations and conflicts is outdated, obsolete. This post-materialist theoretical position would disqualify centuries of Marxist-materialist theories, basing on and confirming assertions about the realism of capital, the necessary defeat of communism and the condemnation of dictatorial authoritarianism which, for a certain vulgate, would be the natural child of Marxist ideology. This disqualifying position should not be recorded as merely scientific, based on a natural historical law, but must be seen as the result of an intention, and of a pragmatic and political one. On the other hand, and in opposition to monolithic and universal theoretical systems that carry more than a potential risk of conformism, a post-idealist point of view

defends the idea that knowledge is always situated. However, in this fundamental corrective, which values plurality, there is perhaps also a risk, the inherent risk of individuality, of the singularity of perspectives and solutions that, far from opposing such a post-materialist symbolic-value vision, end up involuntarily participating in it.

Within this framework, my analysis moves through a dialectic between inside and outside, in turn internal and economic-social dimensions, as well as dimensions of different cultural-epistemological contexts. In other words, a dialectic of permeability, reflecting both epistemological and cultural complexity, where this talk analyses social behaviour in theoretical terms, identifying an interesting key in the symbol-value vs. material-class polarity. (Returning to) a class reading allows, through critique, to oppose individual action and personal salvations to collective action and systemic solutions, as well as to expose certain problematic issues as structural, relieving the individual of a cruel responsibility towards a variety of problems, choices, and solutions.

Without making abstraction of intersectionality, this paper conduct its critique by putting at the centre, as a theoretical key, the concept of epistemic (dis)advantage of the subaltern classes and the concept of transclass, as drawn from a few selected (and not exhaustive) thinkers. From the epistemic advantage of the subaltern classes in Karl Marx, to a kind of ambivalent epistemic and moral surplus-ballast as per Chantal Jaquet, via the value, even historical-philosophical, of Walter Benjamin's "tradition of the oppressed" and thus the epistemology of the defeated, this talk will show a way in which a structural class analysis is not only "still" useful, but also allows for a significant enrichment of knowledge and critique of certain structural phenomena that are still more than relevant today, despite the appearances in which they offer themselves to the eyes in the everyday. This class-based structural approach breaks a short-circuit: it operates and restores a context in which capitalism is seen as a natural presence, thus reducing the thinkability of alternatives, and in which the focus on individual values, motives, actions and solutions not only burdens the individual, but also takes energy away from collective, i.e. structural, approaches.

## The emancipation of career

Rie Thomsen & Tristram Hooley

In this presentation Rie Thomsen and Tristram Hooley will attempt to outline a new and critical theory of career. This presentation is part of a longer term project which will hopefully be published 2026. Its aim is to reconceptualise careers in a way that is conducive to the good life and to social justice.

People's lives are made up of a complex mess of working, learning, caring and living. Historically the concept of career has been used to align these different elements of a life project in ways that privilege paid work. The centrality of (the right) employment to the idea of what constitutes a good career has meant that all too often people live to work, rather than work to live. The key metaphor that has underpinned this concept of career has been that of ladder, which suggests that 'good' careers should be based in the workplace and be ordered, meritocratic, and move progressively upwards.

The concept of the ladder suggest that careers should follow a preordained path in which the individual just has to discern what the next step is, develop their capacity and make the move upwards. Indeed, this idea of finding the right 'fit' was central to the emergence of career guidance in the early twentieth century as a technology which could lubricate this process of fitting round pegs into round holes. This a fundamentally social conception of careers as being in service to a greater good (economic efficiency).

Yet, since the 1980s and 1990s this traditional vision of career has been problematicised and replaced with the idea that careers are individual projects which have to built alone. Such careers remain important to the functioning of the increasingly global economy, but the concept of finding a fit has gradually been abandoned. Contemporary careers are defined not by fit, but by adaption, and by individuals who have the capacity to adapt and remain resilient in the face of repeated changes of career.

Even though its nature has changed alongside wider changes in the political economy, the concept of career has always been important to the operation of the global economy. It has provided an organising structure to link individual's aspirations and psychology to the global narratives of capitalism. The idea that we are building a career, that we have agency and that we can shape our lives is at once a genuine act of individual meaning making and a story that obscures the fact that our lives are frequently organised for the benefit of capital rather than our own happiness and self-actualisation.

This presentation will explore the development of the concept of career and the environment for careers within contemporary capitalism. Through an analysis of contemporary forms and rhetorics of career, it will go on to present a reconceptualisation of career in in which we examine how career can be used to help people to cope in the contemporary world, to rethink their lives and what they derive meaning from, to imagine better worlds, and build and live in new forms of society.

We will argue that this reconceptualised idea of career is relevant to the way that people live their lives, to researchers' attempts to understand this, to policymakers and to those practitioners on the front line in the education and employment system who are trying to help people to build better careers every day.

The platformisation of career refers to the process through which individual career enactment is increasingly dominated by digital platforms. This creates a key site of critical investigation for how we understand career as a social practice. Theoretically, the platform refers to the conceptualisation of digital tools and spaces by authors such as Srnicek (2017) and Van Dijck (2017), who have identified that a particular business model has been developed by technologies that bring actors together in digital spaces to extract profit through surveillance. Furthermore, platformisation refers to the process by which digital platforms come to dominate both institutions and practices through the way that the platforms are imagined. This has led to the adoption and normalisation of digital platforms as a central part of individuals' career development. I will argue that this process has played itself out on social media platforms for the last decade which are often constructed in the career development literature as sites where individuals can learn about career options, develop their identities, develop social capital and transition to various forms of employment. Furthermore, I will argue that the rapid rise of AI should be seen as a related phenomenon where more aspects of career development are becoming platformised. Theoretically, I will present various themes on the relationship between platformisation and career.

1. Individuals are inducted onto digital platforms through intermediaries such as educational institutions as a result of the neoliberal logic at play in these spaces and how they have increasingly turned to digital technologies as a result.
2. This process represents a form of enclosure where aspects of individual lives (such as social relationships) which has largely existed outside of markets become drawn into market structures and logic.
3. This involves subjection to the way that platforms have been designed, this is often imagined positively and progressively but nonetheless requires users to operate through logic designed and imposed on them.
4. Platform participation requires users to subject themselves to surveillance, this process has subjective and objective impacts on individuals whilst at the same time largely rendering invisible and unaccountable the corporations which run these platforms and their social and environmental impacts.
5. Digital platforms are inherently brittle institutions often subject to processes of Ensh\*tification (Dockett, 2023), meaning that spaces which argue for their importance and permanence in late-modern life are often unstable structures to build social practices.

The recognition of the importance and dominance of digital platforms in the present and future of careers should reshape how we analyse and understand careers as well as open up important questions for what sorts of career enactment are positive for individuals and how these can relate to digital technologies. This can be furthermore related to academic careers which are increasingly intertwined with the processes of platformisation which are occurring on campus.

Do we understand ourselves? Reflections on work and career in Philosophy at the Neoliberal University

Ylva Gustafsson

Universities are often seen as the indispensable ground pillars for the democratic society, as the beacons of knowledge and ethical conduct, deeply rooted in enlightenment ideals and ideals of justice older than this. They are seen as indispensable for the advancement of modern societies, working for the good of society, for democratic values and enhancing human rights and freedom of speech.

This impression of universities as the beacon of knowledge, understanding and justice is reflected in that it is often claimed that working life at universities, advancing in one's career at universities, is strictly based on personal merits. Policies for publishing articles, seeking funding for research and employing people at universities is often described as rigorous and as based on strict evaluations of merits. Articles go through lengthy peer review processes. Research funding applications go through "rigorous" scrutiny by experts. Likewise, the employment processes for teaching positions go through "careful reflective selection processes".

Today this jargon of academic truth and justice is mixed with an economically driven jargon. Universities discuss their own "efficiency", as if this was a clear goal, constantly suggesting themselves that they are not being efficient enough. At the same time, there is an internalized emotional jargon at universities, suggesting that those who work, or study, at the university ought to love academia and feel deeply devoted to doing research, teaching and learning. Furthermore, there is also a jargon on sustainability, suggesting that especially universities are sustainable working sectors enhancing equality. One suggestion in this talk will be that these jargons become a poisonous mix of self-delusion that makes inequalities and differences in working conditions at universities difficult to understand. I come myself from the field of Philosophy, and the aim in this talk is to look specifically at how the above-described patterns of academic self-delusion are reflected in Philosophy.

### **Drinks Reception and the short film showreel 'Borders' (The Quad)**

## Friday 25<sup>th</sup> April

(Please note you can find a programme overview at the end of this document)

9:00-9:30 – Registration FG101

9:30 – 11:00 - Parallel Sessions 5

### FG102 - Critical Whiteness Studies. Panel 3. Whiteness and Identities

'Whiteness as a project of deracination' – tracing the emergence of whiteness as a classificatory system in settler colonial (nation) state formations

Teodora Todorova

This presentation brings together settler colonial theory and critical whiteness studies in conversation to trace the emergence of 'whiteness' as a classificatory racial category in the emergence of settler colonialism in Turtle Island (North America), Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and Palestine-Israel. The presentation traces how 'whiteness' emerges as a project of 'deracination' (Patrick Wolfe, 2016) in European-dominated settler colonial states giving rise to ethno-supremacist ideologies and consolidating governance structures characterised, at different historical junctures, by white supremacy and racial segregation (USA), racial apartheid (South Africa), and theocratic ethnocracy (Palestine-Israel). The presentation draws on the work of Patrick Wolfe, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Alexander Weheliye, David Theo Goldberg, and Ronit Lentin among others to critique and build upon Lorenzo Veracini's (2010) taxonomy of settler/native/migrant. The presentation argues that 'whiteness' as a concept of racial classification and stratification has been deployed as a project of 'deracination' in order to construct a settler colonial taxonomy of settlers, natives, and racialised migrants in the formation of settler colonial national identities. The process of deracination is characterised by a historic incorporation of a diverse range of European settlers in the category of whiteness, alongside a more contemporary push to redefine the settler-citizen category as multicultural while reinforcing exclusionary racial violence against indigenous communities and racialised ethnic, national, and migrant groups. To do so the presentation draws on empirical examples related to racial securitisation discourses and policies in contemporary citizenship, migration, bordering, policing and carceral regimes in settler colonial societies across the Anglophone world and in South Africa and Palestine-Israel.

### White Muslim Studies: An Emerging Research Field

Jennifer Eggert

In many parts of the world, being Muslim is seen as synonymous with being black or brown. This is the case within both many white and Muslim communities, which often construct their identity in opposition to the other, to the extent where being Muslim and being white is perceived to be essentially at odds to each other. This can be seen in community narratives but also media portrayals and other public discourses which juxtapose "white people" with "Muslim people", as if it were not possible to be both. These approaches to whiteness and Muslimness are often based on understandings of religious belonging that are based more on race and ethnicity than faith and theology.

White Muslims challenge these boundaries, as they transcend clear-cut boundaries between the two groups. Examining the experiences of white Muslim positionalities and experiences can help us better understand the dynamics between race, ethnicity and faith. It can also provide insights into the roles of race and faith in perpetuating power inequities and processes of marginalisation, often rooted in a colonial logic: Globally white Muslims are both part of a dominant majority (white people) and of a marginalised, racialised minority (Muslims), while nationally and locally these dynamics are often subjected to further specificities.

Despite these potentially valuable insights that the study of white Muslims can provide to both critical whiteness studies and Muslim studies, as well as scholarship on race and faith more broadly, there is relatively little academic research that explores white Muslims' experiences and positionalities. A recent rise in publications on the topic has made insightful contributions to our understanding of white Muslims and their relations to both white and Muslim communities, structures and institutions.

This presentation has two aims. First, it will provide a mapping of existing debates in the emerging field of white Muslims studies, outlining trends and areas of focus that scholars have focused on so far. This will include a mapping of specific groups of white Muslims, geographical regions, themes and methodological approaches that have received attention or been neglected in existing scholarship. The presentation then formulates a research agenda for white Muslim studies, outlining avenues for future research and their possible impact on policy, practice, activism and communities.

## Beyond the Binary: Unpacking Whiteness and Racial Identity in Transracial Adoption

Cat Brice

Born in China but raised in Britain by two White British parents, my story is one of many who have lost their biological roots as a result of international adoption. With the inability to speak Chinese and growing up in a white family and predominantly white environment, I have often viewed myself as white, forgetting that the Western world still initially views me as Chinese. This double bind has provoked feelings of shame, ambivalence, and unease as I have struggled with looking Chinese but not feeling Chinese inside. These feelings are not uncommon and are reflected in the works of Volkman (2003), Shiao and Tuan (2008), and Blair and Liu (2020), whose studies have documented similar self-perceptions amongst adoptees raised in environments where their ethnic identity was in constant contradiction with their lived experiences. This presentation will unpack the idea of feeling white from someone who is a person of colour, belonging to a country where they have not always been assumed to belong. By drawing on critical whiteness studies and transracial adoption literature, my presentation will critically examine how whiteness has shaped my identity as a transracial adoptee, and how adoptees like myself navigate the dissonance between self-identification and societal categorisation. In doing so, it will shed light on the emotional and cultural complexities of being a person of colour, yet feeling culturally disconnected from one's heritage. It will explore questions such as: What does it mean to internalise whiteness whilst visibly embodying a different ethnic identity? How does the concept of white privilege manifest in these scenarios? What are the emotional and cultural consequences of navigating this double bind, and how do these experiences disrupt conventional understandings of race and identity? By examining my own experiences as a British Chinese adoptee, alongside broader theoretical frameworks, this presentation aims to contribute to discussions of race, identity, and belonging, challenging dominant narratives. It will rethink how whiteness and racialised identities are often constructed in opposition to each other, creating harsh divisions that either include or exclude those who are assumed to fit within a prescribed category of whiteness or be defined by their differences. By exploring these complexities, this presentation seeks to contribute to a broader discussion about race and identity, advocating for a more nuanced understanding of how these categories are formed, challenged, and experienced, encouraging greater inclusion and knowledge within both academic and societal contexts.

## FG202 - Mapping the world: How art and creativity can cross borders, break barriers and connect communities. Panel 3. Journeys, experiences and documenting place

### Film Synopsis: 'City Break' 2024

Thomas Nicolaou

From 2001-2004, I worked in Thessaloniki as a graphic designer on English Language materials. My trip in October 2024, was my first to the city since 2015. This return trip was to visit friends and enjoy a 'city break'. To experience once again the sights, sounds, tastes, smells and the history that made Thessaloniki the unique port city that it is, located in the south east balkans.

The film is predominantly a meditation on a city that is full of life (both day and night). Through my camera, we glimpse conversations (through friends reuniting) juxtaposed with everyday scenes of café life, musicians busking, people at leisure and protest. In March 2024, the Greek government's culture minister Lina Mendoni, made headlines with the announcement that "under draft legislation already put to public consultation, more than 45% of all music heard on local radio or in public spaces will in future have to be Greek".

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ZIN4JSJWLU>

### Crossing Thresholds: Freud, Personal Journeys and Drawing

Questioner - Patrick Loan

This presentation explores the intersections of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theories, the concept of liminal spaces, and personal encounters with the geography of Freud's life in Vienna and London. Drawing (literally) from these experiences, it investigates how physical locations and the act of travel influence the understanding of the unconscious, inspire artistic creation, and contribute to a psychogeographic mapping of my own experience.

#### JOURNEY

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#### DRAWING

Freud's work reveals the mind as a bordered landscape, with the conscious and unconscious existing as distinct yet permeable realms. Liminal spaces—thresholds where these realms meet—are marked by ambiguity, transformation, and potential. This presentation extends Freud's theoretical framework to physical spaces, considering how his former practice in Vienna and the Freud Museum in Hampstead, London, embody and reflect these psychological borders. By engaging directly with these sites, through drawing in each location, I found the physical locations of Freud's life to act as portals into his theories, and to explore my own memory, personal history, and unconscious.

In Vienna, Freud's former consulting room—where the iconic couch once invited patients to traverse the boundaries of their psyches—still echoes with the energy of exploration and discovery. Walking in the streets around his former practice in the 9th district, where I now live, I reflected on how this layered history intersects with Freud's narratives, revealing a psychogeography that links personal memory to collective cultural identity. The act of tracing Freud's footsteps in Vienna became an artistic inquiry into how location shapes thought and how the physical environment influences our unconscious perceptions.

The journey continued to Hampstead, where in Freud's final home the Freud Museum is located, and preserved much as it was during his last years. Here, the transition from Freud's Viennese past to his British exile highlights

themes of displacement, identity, and continuity. Psychogeographic exploration of the area around Freud's house and the borough of Hampstead made me consider my own exile and cultural displacement from my country and my own creative processes.

Art became a means to process my experiences, using drawings to explore how the tangible elements of Freud's environments symbolically extend liminal spaces and capture the fluid boundaries between conscious impressions of travel and unconscious memories. This process reflects the broader implications of psychogeography and travel in making art, where movement through space mirrors the mind's navigation of its own landscapes, transforming journeys into a form of self-exploration. Locations imbued with historical or personal significance, like Freud's homes, serve as anchors for this creative process, turning physical borders into divides of thought and creativity.

By sharing this personal exploration, I aim to demonstrate how engaging with Freud's former locations in Vienna and London, through the medium of drawing can create a dialogue between psychoanalysis, location, and artistic practice. This also offers a compelling lens through which to explore the borders of the mind, the meaning of place, and the power of creative inquiry. I also invite members of the audience to draw their own memories of place and location during this presentation.

**FG204 - Work and career in Neoliberal Academia: Systemic Pressures and Inequities. Panel 3.  
Critical Practices: Subversions and Resistance in Academia**

The Hopes and Limitations of Using "Ungrading": In and Against the Neoliberal University

Claire Polster

The theory and practice of ungrading are gaining popularity among critical pedagogues in Western universities. More professors are experimenting with ungrading as a means of enhancing student learning, strengthening relationships between students and their teachers and peers, and especially of cultivating more critical, self-determining, and engaged citizens. Faculty members are also adopting ungrading to enhance their own experience and satisfaction with their teaching work. While the literature on ungrading is exciting and inspiring, it tends to focus on issues and relations internal to the classroom and to overlook and/or underestimate the impacts and consequences of the larger neoliberal context within which these classrooms exist.

In contrast, this paper explores the tension between the liberatory aims and potential of ungraded classrooms and the realities and exigencies of the contemporary neoliberal university. Drawing on my own experience with ungrading in a third year Sociology course, I address ways in which institutional and other extralocal relations (such as relations with government agencies) shape or organize the ungraded classroom in ways that constrain, complicate, and/or undermine its transformative goals and potential. I then argue that this understanding needs to be incorporated into the design of ungraded classrooms (and classrooms where other forms of critical pedagogy are practiced) in order to mitigate these relations' negative effects, and I offer some examples of how this may be done. Ideally, our pedagogical strategies should aim also to push back against if not to transform these extralocal relations. I offer and invite some discussion of how this might be achieved.

## A difficult conversation and a call to action: understanding the career barriers and enablers of ethnically minoritised professional services staff in UK Higher Education Institutions

Louise Oldridge & Jessey Pswarayi

Whilst there is important work being undertaken to promote diversity and inclusion within academic roles, the issues faced by those in professional services throughout the UK's higher education institutions remains 'largely unexplored' (Harrison, 2023; Nangia, 2024).

In 2024 AHUA commissioned Nottingham Business School to run a research project exploring the barriers and enablers for ethnically minoritised professional staff in senior roles in UK HE institutions.

Certainly, the evidence base has produced specific insights into the career development of students (Arday et al., 2021; Kauser et al., 2021; Bradbury & Van Nieuwerburgh, 2022), various works focusing on more academic roles (Bhopal et al., 2018; Deane, 2019; Bhopal, 2019), plus studies encompassing multiple or combined focus on academic and professional services roles (Arday, 2021), and those which are applied generally throughout broad sectoral and/or disciplinary contexts (i.e. STEM – see Rincon & George-Jackson, 2016, and Omotola McGee, 2020, for example). There are also notable works which have grown around specific occupations such as academic librarians (Brookbank & Haigh, 2021; Ishaq, & Maaria Hussain, 2021), and some scholarly attention paid to the journeys of board members/leadership (Hale, 2023; Nwosu, 2024). However, there is a clear and concerning lack of material which can claim to focus on and capture the experiences and career development of ethnically minoritised professional services staff within the UK HE context.

This is further evidenced by recent calls for collaborative efforts to address these gaps, including ongoing work from the Higher Diversity Coalition (2023), who have identified the need to:

- Address the lack of data collection and analysis as a key driver for change
- Identify best practice and examine the barriers that exist in recruitment, progression, and retention policies and practice
- Tell the real lived experience stories of professional services staff
- Develop a coherent approach to development programmes that build, develop/advance and support the talent pipeline to grow and flourish.

This session shares some of the research findings, taking account of extant literature, and using both the institutional data and the voices of ethnically minoritised people who have had firsthand experience of barriers, inequities and challenges despite the skills and talent and diversity of thought they might bring to senior roles. The workshop will share the early indicative findings and key themes and start to discuss the 'so what' – considering how the Association might use the research to unlock a generation of tangible change.

## Invisible careers: barriers and opportunities for marginal roles in academia

Tanja Ninkovic & Lisanna Paladin

Academia has long measured success through traditional metrics, with written publications originating from research serving as the principal currency for career progression, even after the definition of publication has been significantly broadened by DORA and CoARA. However, with technological revolution in sciences in the last two decades, complexity of instrumentation and methods became so high that academia needed new roles of highly qualified experts who are the go-to point for knowledge for classical researchers - research infrastructure scientists operating cutting edge technologies and trainers teaching other researchers about novel methods and tools.

Despite these roles being vital, they produce contributions that are not measurable by traditional metrics of personal publications, making those who perform them invisible and preventing their career progression.

This presentation critically examines the systemic barriers faced by these individuals. Precarious employment conditions of temporary contracts and time limits in academia, coupled with a lack of recognition for non-publication-based contributions, force many researchers as well as their management and funders to deprioritize these vital roles. This is reducing the pool of skilled professionals willing to engage in scientific training and research infrastructure management, ultimately undermining knowledge transfer, excellence in usage of advanced technologies, collaboration, and thus institutional growth and scientific progress.

We invite dialogues on actionable solutions to these inequities, including:

1. The development of alternative KPIs tailored to measure and reward non-traditional contributions, such as training outcomes, infrastructure reliability, funding secured, and innovations achieved.
2. Institutional policies empowering RI and training professionals to produce results that can be and are measured, as well as to independently apply for funding, and dedicate a fraction of time to innovate on methods and technologies.
3. Organizational strategies that integrate RI and training staff into decision-making processes, inspired by frameworks like the Technician Commitment, to ensure their contributions are systematically acknowledged.

By addressing these systemic challenges, we aim to foster a more inclusive and dynamic academic environment where all roles are valued. This talk invites dialogue on how academia can implement systemic changes that empower professionals to pursue these critical roles without compromising their career trajectories, creating a resilient and sustainable academic landscape.

**Break**

**FG102 - Exploring the new class politics. Panel 2. Responding to the political problem of class**

Groundbreaking 'socialism in one clause' or a toothless 'tick box exercise'?

Interpretive Policy Analysis (IPA) of the dormant Socio-Economic Duty (SED) in England

Vanessa Boon

Overview

Sitting quietly on the statute book is a dormant duty (Section 1, Equality Act, 2010) to reduce socio-economic inequalities through public policy-making, with screening for social harm (Fredman, 2010). This challenges the Conservatives' austerity agenda, welfare cuts and harsh consequences of peak neoliberalism reflected in stigmatisation, rising child poverty and even austerity-related deaths among marginalised groups (Institute of Health Equity, 2024; Mills & Pring, 2024; Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2023; Walsh, D. et al., 2022). In this context, suppression of the SED is a significant injustice and an example of necropolitics (Mbembe, 2019); however, there is a gap in the literature and public awareness. New participatory research engaging expert stakeholders to awaken this slumbering clause brings the insidious meaning of its non-commencement into the light of day, extending academic analyses of austerity (Dorling, 2019; Howard, 2016) and the social reproduction of class stratification (Nunn, 2016) to a potentially disruptive solution lying in waiting.

Background

The SED requires government, statutory agencies, and local authorities to consider reducing socio-economic disadvantages when making strategic decisions. This places poverty alleviation and socio-economic inequalities at the heart of public policy-making, enforced by the Equality & Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and Judicial Review. The SED was passed under Labour but was suppressed by the Coalition government in 2010 (Casla, 2019). However, it has not been repealed, and the governments of Scotland and Wales have activated it in 2018 and 2021, respectively. With Labour now back in power, pledging to resurrect the Duty, it is timely to revive the discourse.

An Unexamined Injustice

The SED is under-researched and largely omitted from literature addressing austerity and social inequalities. Amid rising child destitution, with increasing publications on widening inequalities (Dorling, 2019) and austerity-related deaths, this research explores whether this overlooked legal provision could be part of the solution. Few papers address the SED directly, therefore this study draws on adjacent literature on the promise of social mobility juxtaposed with the widening rich-poor gap. A UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty (Alston, 2019) criticised the UK's position as the world's fifth-largest economy, with one-fifth of its population living in poverty. They condemned the government's failure to commence the SED and concluded that austerity policies were punitive and politically driven and linked with excess deaths. This contrasts with Westminster's narrative of social mobility, highlighting the need for critical research.

Contribution to Knowledge

This presentation will explore results and policy recommendations from critical discourse analysis of a multi-modal sample, including media frames and parliamentary debate, interviews with 16 expert stakeholders, and practitioner-researcher reflections. This 2024 research brings together perspectives from barristers, civil society organisations, public policy practitioners, and academics in law, sociology, social policy, and political economy for the first time. This IPA examines the SED's meaning, claims that it could make austerity unlawful (Casla, 2019 & 2022) and what is required for effective implementation. The findings have been presented to the Cabinet Office and have informed an alliance campaigning for the SED's meaningful application. The MCCT is an opportunity to empower attendees to

incorporate and leverage this socio-economic dimension of forthcoming law across academia, practitioners, and activism.

## The Affective Turn in Political Philosophy and the Social Management of Emotions

Letizia Konderak

In the last decades, an affective turn in political philosophy occurred: several philosophers tried to counter the excessive rationalism in political and ethical philosophy by appealing to emotions. These authors from the continental (Deleuze) and Anglo-Saxon (Nussbaum) traditions considered emotions to be more authentic than rationality, as the latter is subjected to capture through ideological and rational discourses, promoting social and political compliance.

The affective turn defines human authenticity as irrationality: against the coercive force of rationalizing discourses, summoning reasonability, cooperation, and consensus, emotions seem to contribute to political struggles through an “unconscious” intelligence or the irreducible *conatus sese servandi*.

Nonetheless, are emotions refractory to social and political (super)structures? Sociological research on the social management of emotions revealed that communities enact social patterns of emotional management – predominantly to manage negative feelings. For example, the social patterns before compassion for the “poor” and “victims” do not respond to this emotion by addressing their deep political and economic causes yet neutralizing this feeling through indifference or charity. Concerning anger, nowadays, its syntax tends to disappear from the left-wing discourse, as the latter recognizes irrational hate as a prerogative of right-wing aggressivity (e.g., rage about immigrants, globalization, and poverty ideologically structured as a moral guilt). Anger does not belong anymore to the political left-wing lexicon. However, this disappearance also mirrors the current “medicalization” of negative emotions that longs for their suppression for the sake of production and functionality at all costs. Indeed, sociological research on climate activists from the Global North showed the prevalence of positive emotions, while Global South activists focused on anger and fear. Especially activists from the Global South brought about climate justice and politicized their struggles, fueling them with anger, fear, and hope in collective action.

However, the structure and condition that cause anger have pivotal political relevance: first, anger responds to a suffered wrong, an injustice for which one requires compensation. Second, it denotes that someone has wronged us. Contrarily, the social management of emotions neutralizes the political potential of anger in apathy and powerlessness, also due to social isolation and dismantling of political aggregations. In the Italian context, the political stigmatization of left-wing anger reveals the endeavor to repress and forget the violent past of the workers’ avant-garde. Similarly, there is a broad tendency in Western countries to criminalize dissensus – even by politically and legally extending the label “terrorism”.

Nevertheless, left-wing thinking could imagine another pattern for a facund use of negative emotions: instead of erasing anger, they could ally to activate anger through political hope. The positive loop promoted by hope – hope in collective action – could transform the negativity of anger into activism for societal and political change while suppressing the despair of powerlessness. When socialized, the awareness of the moral wrong that a group suffered and the recognition of those who systematically perpetrated injustice could lead to a different pathway for politicizing negative emotions and even a growing class/group awareness. Thereby, left-wings movements and organizations could enhance the political fruitfulness of negative feelings and counter their medicalization.

Liquid belief and watery beings: Indeterminacy and living political folklore

Andrew F. Wilson

This paper is concerned with exploring the continuing folklore of land haunted by ghosts and mythic creatures. The analysis offered here is a wider reflection on the popularity of folklore motifs in contemporary culture. In the Midlands of England, mermaid pools continue to be visited and the legend tripping that leads visitors to them is entwined with the growing awareness of folklore as one dimension of the intangible cultural 'assets' of national parks and other popular tourist areas. However, the pools are not simply one stop on a 'weird walk' or a fresh vector on a psychogeographic *dérive*: they vary from overt legend tripping to 'uncanny' encounters on country walks. It will be argued that these contribute to an ongoing re-enchantment of nature and the landscape. Rod Giblett's *Postmodern Wetlands* and Veronica Strang's work (e.g. *Water Beings*, 2023) rearticulate the human relationship with water and its lifeworlds. Both make clear that water is political and its control is symbolic of power: economic, ideological, and cultural. Both, too, draw attention to the gendered articulation of belief; Giblett especially provides a useful figurative dichotomy between a domesticated 'Mother Earth' and a wilder, more primal 'Great Goddess'.

This paper will demonstrate the ecological undercurrent explicit in the mermaid pools today. It will draw out the watery language of hybridity through which the pools and their folkloric inhabitants undo humanity's conceit of their separation from nature. The wetlands they are situated in refuse to offer solid ground to stand on. Nature as a hyperobject that will endure dankly in ways unfathomable to dry land-dwelling humans unprepared for their own ecocide: polluting humans confronted by wrathful polluted pools that offer sustenance but threaten flood and drowning. Thus, folklore provides a means of examining our current fears of the consequences of our broken relationship with Nature in the guise of the Great Goddess.

Researching Death as a Social Construct

Annie Harpham-Brown

Resoundingly, the sociological approach to death centres the biological at its theoretical core. Even those which attempt to move beyond medical theorisations and toward an analysis of social construction, often end up conceptually struggling against death's obscurity or 'unknowability' (Carpentier and Van Brussel 2012). In turn, sociological thought is left to consider a social response to death; to theorise how we respond to its unknowable 'nature' (see: Becker 1973; Elias 1985). This captures a view of dying, the dead and bereavement, drawing attention to the ways in which we navigate human bonds (see: Valentine 2008; Bennet and Bennet 2000), physical agency (see: Glasser and Strauss 1965; Turner 1995) and the experience of suffering (see: Meir et al 2016; Car et al 2020). However, conceptualising death as primarily 'unknowable', makes room for unattended notions of 'other-than', 'more-than' or 'beyond' human (see: Sullivan 2012). Here, arguably, lies the possibility of a sociology which reproduces the social by filling in the conceptual gaps with that which is deemed already socially equivocal. Alternatively, I argue that with a methodological focus on social relations as the 'constructors' of reality, researchers can dislodge and reconfigure death's 'unknowability' and begin to conceptualise it as an inherently socially constructed, and therefore, socially negotiable phenomenon.

Underpinned by the view that reality is materially produced by what we do in relation to one another (i.e. social relations) (Smith 2005), my PhD thesis discovers and documents a local authority's social relations of death during the COVID-19 pandemic. Conducting an institutional ethnography, and undertaking interviews, observations and document analysis, my fieldwork focuses on empirically capturing the actualities of the social relations of death (i.e. what they are and what arises from them). Following this, I theoretically examine how the reality of death both arises from and is characterised by the processes of social construction.

In presenting my research, I will outline my methodological approach and establish one of the ways in which sociology can produce empirically informed theoretical research regarding death's social construction. Furthermore, by drawing on the key findings of my fieldwork, I seek to demonstrate how such an approach supports a distinct characterisation of death, and one that, in turn, helps make the 'unknown' more knowable. Here, I speak to the conference stream of 'From Oblivion to Re-Enchantment: Exploring and Actualising Diverse Knowledge via Faiths and Ontologies', where I will express how, through a social constructionist re-evaluation and re-imagining of key ontological issues, the profound energy of the social and its apparent malleability is necessarily encountered. Speaking beyond the implications for socio-theoretical thought, I argue that this encounter has very real potential for social change.

### Attuned to Coincidence: Enactive sense-making and the Tibetan Buddhist concept of *tendrel* (rten 'brel)

Llew Watkins

Within Tibetan Buddhism, *tendrel* – often translated as auspicious coincidence – is an important, complex and subtle concept, expressing the deep interdependence of all phenomena. According to the tantric Buddhist view, *tendrel* is considered to be a natural aspect of a deeply meaningful cosmos. Coincidence is significant because it connects to the process of awakening: reality has aliveness from its own side, providing feedback through coincidence.

Enactivism is an influential approach within cognitive science that theorizes cognition as the enactment or bringing forth of a world. Rather than considering an organism and its environment as separate, enactivism holds that the two are radically mutually entwined or 'structurally coupled.' Both enactivism and the Tibetan Buddhist understanding of *tendrel* claim that due to the interdependent co-emergence of mind and world, phenomena are groundless rather than fundamentally existent; it is because of this groundlessness that phenomena emerge.

The recognition of a coincidence can be a powerful experience, occurring at the connecting membrane between self and external reality. A coincidence is dependent on a conjunction of external phenomena, and at the same time is interpreted through the personal, according to what is meaningful for an individual. Enactivism provides a useful framework to investigate coincidence because the enactive approach holds meaning-making to be foundational for cognition. 'Sense-making' is a natural response to uncertain internal and external conditions, and depends upon a person's unique history of structural coupling. Furthermore, in its articulation of 'participatory sense-making,' enactivism also allows an investigation of coincidence as an environmental process that includes other agents, enabling exploration of meaning as a shared social process.

For the Buddhist tantric practitioner, a deep understanding of *tendrel* serves as a feedback mechanism demonstrating the degree of attunement between the practitioner and their environment. Failing to attune oneself to the environment, due to a rigid and fixed sense of identity, obstructs this flow. This raises interesting questions about the importance of openness and flexibility in the process of sense-making. The personal, practical and cultural understanding of *tendrel* then is a valuable phenomena to explore from an enactivist point of view because it is directly connected to the process of feedback between the internal and the external, the personal and the transpersonal. This paper uses the enactive framework to analyse the capacity of mind to attune to an environment. Aligning with the wider topic of this stream, I argue that both how we understand our relationship to the world as either an expression of radical interdependence or one of fundamental separation, and whether we see reality as alive and magical from its own side or as inert and lacking meaning, has enormous cultural, environmental and political implications.

**FG204- Mapping the world: How art and creativity can cross borders, break barriers and connect communities. Panel 4. Collective and collaborative Practices: mapping and cooperation within art practice**

**A Site of Collisions: Brownian Motion in Artist Collectives**

Pragya Bhargava, Sally Stenton & Svetlana Atlavina

Brownian motion describes the motion of a particle suspended in a fluid. This motion is a result of rapid, instantaneous collisions of the particles with smaller particles in the medium, resulting in a trajectory characterised by a series of irregular and random displacements.

This interactive presentation activates a site for exchange between participants engaging in collective activity. Beginning with an introduction to Project Potpourri's international digital publication, Artist Collectives: conversations, methods and practices, we invite participants into the energetic void, to explore how concepts from physics can help expand ideas and experiences of collectivity and collaboration.

Project Potpourri started and developed through conversations. A collision of ideas led to an open call in 2023 that invited artist collectives to submit a page which reflected their collaborative working methods. The act of sending a prompt into the digital unknown led to an unexpected gain in momentum as Project Potpourri accidentally fell into facilitating a creative form of action research with a global reach. The hierarchical mode was broken when the 23 Collectives with members in over 17 countries posed questions to each other and then responded with enthusiasm, generosity and an eagerness to interact. Digital connection, ecological concerns and quiet subversion emerged as key themes through the exchanges within and beyond the publication. The conversations that ensued crossed many geographical and ideological borders.

We, the team of Project Potpourri, are practising artists with backgrounds in physics, engineering and social psychology and through our collaborative reflections on the project these paradigms collided. This transfer of ideas and energy lead us to probe associations between the behaviour of microscopic particles and the dynamic qualities of artist collectives. For this session, we take the notion of Brownian motion from the domain of physics and cross it with processes of human collaboration. From the stirring of this mix, a potent vapour of possibilities arises. What if each member of an artist collective acts as a "particle" in constant interaction with other particles? What is the role of cohesion and adaptability in these random encounters? What particles facilitate global collaborations via digital channels? How can a microscopic view break the human/non-human divide and expand ideas of collectivity?

For this session at MCCT, we propose an experiment where attendees of the session become particles emulating Brownian Motion. We invite you to shift your listening from head to body and experience the intra-active possibilities, human and beyond. You will be invited to interact with audio prompts that will accompany you as you mingle and weave in amongst each other. For those online, we have a crafty plan to enable you to move around too.

If the proposal is accepted Sally Stenton and Svetlana Atlavina will be present in the space. Pragya Bhargava hopes to be there as well, but otherwise will be online.

**Mapping Borders: Transforming 2D Maps into 3D Structures with Q\_plus\_I**

Q\_plus\_I

This workshop, led by the artistic duo Q\_plus\_I, invites participants to explore the boundaries between two-dimensional cartography and three-dimensional physical structures. Rooted in the themes of borders, map-making, and spatial storytelling, the session offers a hands-on opportunity to reimagine maps as dynamic, tactile representations of personal and collective experiences. By using thread, wool, and tape, participants will create three-

dimensional maps that connect physical structures with the narratives of their journeys and connections to the location of the conference in Derby. This is a continuation of the workshop Q\_plus\_I did in July 2024 with a group from NECE (Network for European Civic Educators about the changing history of Austria, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and how those borders changed over the centuries. A short visual introduction of the workshop last year will be given to demonstrate how it worked.

Maps serve as tools to navigate, define, and understand the world. Yet, they are often seen as flat, static representations of complex, multidimensional realities. This workshop challenges this perception by treating maps as fluid and interactive, blurring the lines between geography, memory, and physical space. Participants will begin by selecting a map (which will be given out) and has a connection to the local region – both contemporary and historical maps of county boundaries, routes of canal systems, rail routes etc in the Derby and Midlands area. Participants may also choose a map that represents their journey to the location and can use the printer provided to print maps, ensuring a visual reference to help their creative process.

Participants will transform their 2D maps into 3D creations, employing thread, wool, and tape as their primary materials. These fibers will act as both literal and metaphorical tools for connection, representing the physical structures, boundaries, and relationships embedded in the maps. Participants will be encouraged to think beyond traditional cartographic techniques, considering how elevation, texture, and movement can be integrated into their designs.

The workshop emphasizes the interplay between the physical and the abstract. As participants recreate their maps in three dimensions, they will reflect on how borders—whether geographic, emotional, or cultural—shape their understanding of space. They will explore questions such as: How do we experience borders in our daily lives? How do physical structures, like roads, rail, canals and rivers, intersect with our personal narratives? What happens when we disrupt the flatness of traditional maps to reveal hidden layers of meaning?

Q\_plus\_I will guide participants through these explorations by sharing insights from their own artistic practice, which often examines the intersection of spatial design and storytelling. Through collaborative discussions and individual experimentation, participants will gain a deeper understanding of how to use artistic methods to visualize and embody connections between places, structures, and stories.

The workshop will culminate in a collective installation where participants' 3D maps are shown in a communal space, creating a shared tapestry of journeys and connections to Derby and the local region. This final act of assembly not only celebrates the creative process but also highlights the collective nature of mapping as an act of shared meaning-making.

Open to artists, designers, and anyone curious about the relationship between maps, borders, and physical space, this workshop provides a unique opportunity to rethink how we represent and interact with the world around us. Participants will leave with a deeper appreciation for the area of cartography, and fresh perspectives on the intersections of geography, memory, and artistic expression.

## Lunch

**FG102 - Standing on the edge: critical perspectives on margins and limits. Panel 1. Political-Epistemic Solidarities**

Hope Now. Future Imaginaries in Times of Political and Ecological Transitions

Magda Schmukalla & Liene Ozoliņa

Climate change triggers a deep fear of losing an essential part of present life, namely a future towards which life can develop. Living under the conditions of climate catastrophe means living a life which pulls towards 'no-time' (Baraitser 2020). In Eastern Europe this existential fear and the traumatic collapse of known identities and temporalities is not new. It was acutely present in societal life and collective moods during the 1980s when a knowledge of the failure of Soviet-type communism was becoming apparent without there being any future alternative to easily replace the failing system. This paper presents a psychosocial approach to studying the practices of hope and imagination in communist and post-communist Europe, with an empirical focus on artists and art collectives and their aesthetic and conceptual tools for capturing and enacting alternative futures. Drawing on case studies of dissident and artistic-ecological movements in Poland and Latvia from the 1980s, we examine how hope and collective desires were expressed in art in the context of these transitions, how these transitions were eventually experienced as unjust and inequitable, and how post-communist sites can therefore help us identify new forms of imagining and working towards just futures. Such a theoretical and empirical perspective shifts the status of Eastern Europe away from its usual position of the marginal, less-developed object of European history to the position of an experienced subject holding rich knowledge of how Western institutions and global society will have to change for just transitions and sustainable futures to become possible.

Tell me about us: epistemic solidarity as activism

Giulia Russo & Gabriele Nanino

Recent and growing attention has been given to epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007): broadly speaking, this term refers to the phenomenon of being harmed as a knower, and its theoretical framework. These practices are based on, or can result in, forms of epistemic marginalization, where the oppressed are substantially disregarded as epistemic contributors: while it is widespread among different vulnerable groups, its specific manifestations are produced by the dominant epistemic resources at work in the distinct domains of knowledge. Subsequently, the collective counteracting practices have been based on the group-specific differences as distinctive and demarcating attributes of emancipatory enterprises, as well as on advocacy for giving voice to the oppressed.

However, some consequences of these politics are undesirable from the point of view of the oppressed: first, the fragmentation of the social body (up to the point of theoretical essentialisation of the marking attributes); second the so-called "elite capture", i.e. the cooptation of the emancipatory narrative by the dominant elite (Táiwò 2022).

Parallel efforts in social epistemology have tried to give attention to individual strategies to minimize, counteract or prevent epistemic injustice: epistemic solidarity, for example, is starting to get some attention. It is characterised as a form of support to produce knowledge that implies an individual burden and is based on a relevant similarity among the participants to the epistemic exchange, and aims at a sociopolitical transformation (Pot 2022).

While this characterization is generally sound, our opinion is that it can be further expanded to ground collective political action in order to avoid the fragmentation that brings about both elite captures, as well as the individualised and isolating forms of resistance. In particular, we are interested in distinguishing between "acting epistemically in solidarity with someone" and "acting epistemically in reciprocal solidarity": in the first case (that might include the above-mentioned problematic phenomena) the burden to contrast oppressive structures in the epistemic exchange

is mostly individualised and unidirectional, while in the second case all the parties share collectively the effort of resistance.

Situating the analysis in the context of neurodivergent activism, we propose a further distinction between “intergroup epistemic solidarity” and “intragroup epistemic solidarity”. Our argument is that both should take the form of “acting epistemically in reciprocal solidarity”, however is the second kind that must benefit the most from this framework, given that through the relevant shared feature of oppression we can avoid the fragmentation of the social body and the distinctive forms of testimonial isolation that can facilitate elite captures. In particular, recognizing that other kinds of bodies and minds are disabled and oppressed by similar normative structures can work as a positive limit for the affirmative action at group level, while simultaneously constitutes the reciprocal shared burden that allows both inter-group and intra-group relations as mutually solidaristic action.

The relevant political effect of this idea is that of enhancing the group coalition on the basis of the recognition of a communal belonging to a single class: such classes are built on the awareness of being oppressed by similar epistemic corpora and normative structures - that nonetheless produce different kind of group-specific oppressive norms.

## **FG202 - The Sublime Object of Delulu: Delusions in Contemporary European Political Landscape**

### **Fugitive Knowledge and Food Sovereignty: Reinforcing Territorial Markets through International Environmental Law**

Samuel D. Holder

Global food governance is predominantly shaped by neoliberal trade policies and corporate agribusiness interests that marginalise localised, small-scale farming systems. These dominant structures prioritise economic efficiency and scalability, often at the expense of traditional, place-based agricultural practices that sustain food sovereignty and environmental resilience. This project explores how international environmental law can serve as a vehicle for legitimising and protecting the fugitive knowledge embedded in territorial farming models. By proposing a Territorial Markets Protocol, this research aims to institutionalise legal protections that recognise and incentivise localised food systems over the corporate-driven frameworks that currently dominate agricultural policy. In the pursuit of food sovereignty, smallholder farmers and local communities rely on adaptive, knowledge-rich farming systems that resist industrial agricultural paradigms. These systems, rooted in cultural heritage and ecological stewardship, embody forms of subaltern knowledge that international trade regimes often disregard or suppress. The Territorial Markets Protocol seeks to reclaim this knowledge by embedding it within legally binding international frameworks under institutions such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the UN Committee on World Food Security. Drawing inspiration from the European Union’s support for territorial farming initiatives, the protocol proposes legal instruments that visibilise and prioritise local food networks and ensure the equitable access of smallholder farmers to resources. This project will critically engage with the epistemic hierarchies that perpetuate the erasure of smallholder farming knowledge in global governance frameworks. It will analyse how existing international environmental agreements, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement, offer strategic entry points for integrating territorial markets as a mechanism for climate adaptation and socio-economic resilience. Additionally, the research will explore how bottom-up, community-driven advocacy efforts can influence international policy discourse to foster a more inclusive and pluralistic food governance system. Finally, this project interrogates the political and institutional barriers that impede the formalisation of fugitive food knowledge in global legal instruments. It will present insights from stakeholder engagements with smallholder farmers, legal experts, and policy advocates, offering a roadmap for embedding alternative knowledge systems within mainstream governance structures. It ultimately argues that the recognition of territorial farming models through legal frameworks is a critical step toward fostering a more just, sustainable, and sovereign global food system.

Who are “climate refugees,” and what protections they are entitled to remain vexed questions in international law. Refugees’ subjectivities are shaped by the interplay between law and dominant narratives, making it critical to interrogate how law and dominant narratives mutually reinforce each other. Refugee law plays a profoundly paternalistic and disempowering role, framing individuals through the lens of victimhood and otherness while imposing idealised identities. Existing narratives respond in line with such legal framing, reinforcing the dual threat/victim construction of climate refugees. This symbiotic relationship between law and narrative directs legal protection efforts toward maintaining state sovereignty and border control and exclusion, at the expense of genuine assistance to people.

To challenge this status quo, I argue for a paradigm shift away from state-centric protection mechanisms that perpetuate victimization and passivity. Instead, my argument explores venues to contest and remake legal subjectivities of climate refugees, reframing them as active political subjects. Grassroots movements led by refugees themselves or ‘host’ communities exemplify transformative alternatives, disrupting the epistemological trap of framing refugees as “problems” to be managed, through subversive acts of solidarity, rooted in hospitality and altruism. By transcending state-imposed moral boundaries, refugees become empowered subjects rather than passive recipients of protection, disrupting othering and dystopian narratives.

This bottom-up approach situates protection as a process negotiated from below, creating a space of resistance within existing legal frameworks. By challenging hegemonic power-knowledge dynamics, grassroots movements produce counter-narratives that subvert exclusionary practices of protection and foster transformative change. A shift from sovereignty to solidarity enables climate refugees to reclaim agency and contribute to shape protection responses. Protection thus emerges not as a paternalistic imposition but as an act of mutual care, reshaping the concept of protection under the existing legal paradigm.

Ultimately, exploring how solidarity-driven grassroots movements challenge dominant power-knowledge dynamics invites us to imagine protection as a tool that contributes to the production of counter-hegemonic narratives—one that navigates the constraints of law and dystopian discourses to secure meaningful forms of protection for climate refugees. This shift holds the potential in both conceptual and practical realms of refugees’ protection.

### Delusional Order

Tomáš Havlíček

Henri Lévy-Bruhl once proclaimed that justice has the the property of bringing disputes to an end. Justice and its various interpretations are central to how we perceive law and the legal order, as well as the role of courts and judges – the arbiters of a world brimming with conflict. In my presentation, I aim to delve into the core of our understanding of modern law. Fundamentally, modern law can be seen as a tool for seeking equilibrium between competing interests, whether collective or individual. Law acts as an instrument capable of adjudicating these disputes and, more importantly, justifying its decisions – typically by appealing to some notion of universally accepted good.

I intend to explore the mechanisms through which this justification is constructed and examine the various appeals that judicial decision-making employs to convince us that its resolution is the most appropriate and just. “Take it to court; the court knows the law” is a common refrain, reflecting an unshakable faith in the judiciary’s ability to find the proper balance in society – an equilibrium that politics, by its nature, cannot achieve. Politics is the domain of perpetual antagonism, characterized by constant struggles over which group or principle will prevail. We hope for political change to rectify dysfunctions, but can a change of regime truly bring an end to this endless conflict? Of course not; such a belief would be naive. Antagonism is inherent in politics and serves as its defining mode.

But what about judicial decision-making? Do we trust that the legal system, embodied by the judiciary, can provide the much-desired balance? Why does this trust not strike us as similarly naive? The central thesis of my presentation

is to reflect on how the legal system helps obscure social antagonism through its decisions, creating a "delusional order" – an illusion of fairness and justice. This constructed order promises that everyone can succeed, regardless of class, material conditions, or social standing. It offers the image of a society where one's origins do not determine their opportunities, presenting the law as a neutral arbiter of disputes.

My work explores the intriguing paradox of modern law: its capacity to resolve conflicts and foster social order, while simultaneously presenting an image of justice that may obscure the complexities of deeper societal divisions. Rather than dismissing this as a flaw, I aim to understand how this dual role of law contributes to its enduring authority and its ability to function as a stabilizing force in a world marked by competing interests and structural inequalities.

#### **FG204 - Work and career in Neoliberal Academia: Systemic Pressures and Inequities. Panel 4. Decolonising Strategies for Neoliberal Academia**

### Oversights and institutional inequality with intersectional studies

Bingji Li

This essay offers a critical examination of intersectionality studies, with a particular focus on the conceptual vagueness and the significant oversights present in current academic discourse. Intersectionality, while a pivotal framework in feminist academia for understanding the complex interplay of social stratification axes, has been criticized for its tendency to marginalize certain racial and gender groups. Specifically, the essay highlights the underrepresentation of Asians, Middle Easterners, and other non-dominant racial categories within intersectional discussions.

The research posits that these oversights are not merely coincidental but are deeply intertwined with the conceptual vagueness of intersectionality and the broader context of institutional inequality in academia. It argues that the dominance of Anglophone countries and Western societies, particularly the United States, has led to a racial discourse that centers primarily on black and white experiences, often at the expense of a more diverse racial narrative.

A key factor in this marginalization is the predominance of the English language and American perspectives in intersectionality studies. The essay suggests that the global influence of English has further marginalized those who cannot effectively communicate in this language, pushing them to the periphery of academic and social recognition. This linguistic dominance, coupled with existing power structures, results in a discourse where white and black narratives dominate, rendering other voices nearly invisible.

Furthermore, the essay critiques the field of intersectionality for its implicit assumption of the English language and certain cultural narratives as the standard, thereby overlooking the inherent privileges associated with nationality and language. It calls for a more nuanced approach to intersectionality that acknowledges and critically examines these privileges, moving beyond a singular focus on race and gender to include a broader spectrum of identities and experiences.

In conclusion, the essay advocates for a reevaluation of intersectionality studies to address these oversights and to develop a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of social stratification. By doing so, it aims to contribute to a more equitable and representative academic discourse that recognizes the full spectrum of racial, gender, and cultural identities.

The present pedagogy of international law is based on a normative system which is premised on the post-colonial narratives of the global north. This resulted in leftover colonial imprints in the syllabi, context, and philosophy of the subject. Doing international law from different critical lenses has been seen as the emancipatory reaction to this positivist pedagogy of international law. However, the present pedagogical practice of doing international law in India continues to have a positivist recurrence. Such a practice in turn has produced an epistemic inequality in understanding of the subject itself and continues to benefit the narratives of the global north. Academic reaction to this pedagogical dilemma has been subsumed within the echoes of bringing forth critical theories such as TWAIL as a part of the teaching curriculum. However, this author argues that the present literature fails to highlight how this movement towards doing critical theories is based on a false equality premised on the disposition of social ascriptions in understanding international law. Further, building on the first premise this paper tries to situate the 'other' who this author coins as the "subaltern student" amidst this praxis of teaching international law. Doing so this paper essentially questions, if the calls for decolonisation of the pedagogy are backed by democratisation. Additionally, it also asks if the revolution in pedagogies of doing international law resonates as a revolution of the voices of the geographical south. Or is it still the legacy of the generations of the post-colonial master, a 'lyuten' or a 'bhodrolok'. Lastly, it merits questions such as, does critical international law really speak to the socially backward, economically backward, and historically oppressed, in the geographical south? Or can a subaltern ever speak or do international law?

## Addressing the postgraduate mixed ethnic satisfaction gap in UK higher education

Rhianna Garrett & Maranda Ridgeway

Between 2010-2023, mixed ethnic postgraduate research (PGRs) and postgraduate taught (PGT) students have held the lowest satisfaction rates out of any ethnic group in British higher education, yet this is paired with a limited understanding as to why. This paper will address these nationwide institutional survey findings exposing the on-going low satisfaction gap for mixed ethnic PGRs and PGT. We argue the academy must begin to move away from monoracial anti-racism into more inclusive multiethnic approaches. Without this, universities cannot pursue the goal of becoming anti-racist institutions.

Previous research has shown that there are unique experiences mixed ethnic PGRs have within their doctoral degrees compared to their monoracial counterparts (Garrett, 2024), but we require more knowledge on how mixed ethnic populations with unique intersectional identities are navigating monoracial higher educational spaces. It is important to situate mixed ethnic educational understandings in Britain as the predominance of literature on this subject has originated from the US. For example, Combs, Johnston-Guerrero & Malaney-Brown (2022) argue universities must move into more multiethnic spaces of thinking because universities are increasingly becoming more multiethnic and multicultural in a globalised world. This research is indicative of an overall dearth of knowledge of the lived experiences of mixed ethnic Britain as a whole, which has wider social implications regarding racism, belonging, and community.

We conducted a content analysis of AdvanceHE data, using 2010-2023 student statistical data, the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES), and the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) to outline current statistical understandings of mixed ethnic student populations. We searched for how often 'Mixed' was mentioned as an area of significant interest when data was analysed to see where and why the authors became interested in mixed ethnic concerns. We then discuss the survey findings in relation to wider literature.

The paper presents three main findings to situate the on-going problem of low satisfaction rates faced by mixed ethnic PGT and PGR students and suggests new research directions for scholars to take to effectively address the problem. First, we located that there is a sporadic mention of mixedness as an area of concern despite the consistency of low satisfaction rates. Second, we found the shifts in linguistics from AdvanceHE could have influenced the

responses to surveys found for mixed ethnic populations, and comment on the overall limitations of quantitative data collection and mixed ethnic lived experience. Third, we found even after the prominent warnings of mixed ethnic satisfaction drops in 2019, there was limited mention of mixed ethnic concerns since.

We express a call to action for policymakers, practitioners, and scholars concerned with 'race', ethnicity and identity to begin paying attention to their mixed ethnic populations on campus, as it is currently influencing their higher educational experiences in ways we cannot empirically explain.

**Break**

**FG102 - Standing on the edge: critical perspectives on margins and limits. Panel 2. Subjective-Objective Limits**

Binarized limits and the volatile/disordered self: a neurodiverse collage of lived experience as playful academic explorations

Romain Chenet

'Who wouldn't grow up warped?' (Haraway, 1988: 576).

Considering our imperfections and inadequacies vis-à-vis amorphous and unreal 'perfections' that structure encounters may offer views into how subjectification can be resisted positively in material practices across varying societal classifications (sexed, gendered, raced, classed, and otherwise). For instance, our output is saturated by spikes of person-/positionality, not existing without/outside volatile embodied multiple selves and some 'other', a hyper-construct guiding individual/group space researched 'from' within emanations of conscious life, itself a dualized onto-epistemological presence that many of us (inconsistently) share. Yet, concomitantly, this can remain a 'game of truth and fiction' which does not necessarily impel more seriousness than it offers (Foucault, 2000: 244). Rather, any such positivist indulgence or maintenance of 'ideality' may play into a programming left in abeyance [... with] hidden meaning' (ibid.: 231).

I thus explore, from my positioned experience on the liminalities between several intersecting identity-set margins, how subjectively 'professional' efforts could be reimagined as queries into binarized narratives, and critical engagements into these. In other words, I poke lingering 'god tricks [of] 'relativism and totalisation' inherent to my/our practice (Haraway, 1988: 584), invoking what we may yet learn about humanity's complex practices. This hopes to grasp past Mohanty's (1984: 82) critiqued 'discursive self-representation' that arises weakly in needed resistance to a 'larger economic and ideological praxis of "disinterested" scientific inquiry and pluralism [as] surface manifestations of a latent economic and cultural colonisation'. Perhaps, then, we may here co-find ways to share ideas and curiosity across hotbeds of critical research in response, especially if subtly and unexpectedly – in line with the framings my attempt draws on.

Productions of the limit. The concept of scarcity as a problem in the Marxian critique of Malthus

Alvise Capria

In an era marked by ecological, social, and geopolitical crises, the concept of scarcity has resurfaced as a central framework for interpreting global uncertainties (BRETTHAUER 2016; DE CASTRO 2013). From debates on resource depletion and overpopulation to the austerity measures shaping economic policies, the discourse on scarcity permeates both scientific theory and public imagination. Yet, the question arises: are these perceived limits intrinsic to human existence, or are they socially constructed and strategically deployed? This paper addresses these questions by critically examining the foundational role of scarcity in economic thought, focusing on the theories of Thomas Malthus (understood as the 'inventor of the modern economic-political concept of scarcity', cf. VALENZ 2023) and their critique by Karl Marx.

The first part of this paper will focus on the famous Essay on the Principle of Population (MALTHUS 2015), which offers one of the most influential articulations of scarcity as a natural and unavoidable condition. Malthus' central thesis posits that while population grows geometrically, resources increase only arithmetically, creating an inevitable tension that leads to poverty, famine, and societal collapse unless population growth is curbed. Scarcity operates as both a scientific principle and a moral imperative, justifying the unequal distribution of resources and legitimizing policies that maintain the social hierarchy. Poverty, then, is not a product of economic structures but of an immutable natural law. I will briefly show how Malthusian ideas, despite criticisms, have demonstrated remarkable persistence

among economists and politicians over the centuries, particularly in the context of austerity measures and reductions in public spending, perpetuating a narrative that legitimizes economic inequalities and undermines efforts to address the root causes of poverty (EHRlich 1968; RAWORTH 2017; SCHELLNHUBER 2004).

The second part will address Marx's critique of Malthus, seen as a radically different understanding of scarcity. For Marx, scarcity is not an inherent characteristic of human existence, but a social construct produced and perpetuated by capitalist modes of production. In *Das Kapital*, Marx dismantles the Malthusian premise by demonstrating that the capitalist system deliberately manufactures scarcity to sustain its operations. The creation of a "reserve army of labor" – a surplus population of unemployed or underemployed workers – is a key mechanism through which capitalism maintains low wages and secures profits for the ruling class (MARX 1962;1963;1964), making scarcity a tool for social control rather than a natural limit. Moreover, Marx emphasizes the transformative potential of human productivity and technological innovation. He argues that the capacity to produce resources is not constrained by arithmetic laws but is contingent on the organization of social and economic relations. Far from being outdated, Marx's insights offer valuable tools for interrogating the ideological underpinnings of modern economic policies and for imagining alternatives that transcend the artificial limits imposed by capitalism by situating the concepts of scarcity and limits within the "margin" – not as static boundaries, but as dynamic spaces for critical reflection and transformative action. By challenging the presumed inevitability of scarcity, this analysis seeks to reclaim the margins as sites of epistemological and political renewal.

#### **FG204- Work and career in Neoliberal Academia: Systemic Pressures and Inequities. Panel 5.**

##### **Exploitation of the Psyche in Neoliberal Academia**

#### **Alienated Present and Precarious Futures: Three Studies on the Ideology of Academic Hope Labour**

Ranier Abengana

This presentation uses the concept of 'hope labour' (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013) to interrogate the exploitative and precarious types of work that take place within neoliberal academia. Hope labour refers to un- or underpaid work performed in the present for the sake of gaining experience and visibility, with the expectation that such investments can pay off, leading to greater opportunities for professional development. In the context of academia, activities such as underpaid teaching, peer reviewing, conference organisation and participation, grant application, and professional networking often count as hope labour as they are performed with the expectation of future career advancement or professional recognition, despite offering little or no compensation. Its future-oriented nature means that hope labour is generally undertaken by already precarious academics such as PhD researchers and early career researchers (ECRs), but more significantly, it often falls to those who cannot but work—those coming from working-class backgrounds who face additional barriers in securing stable academic positions. Despite the everyday rhetoric of these activities as 'rites of passage', 'works of passion', 'stepping stones', or 'learning opportunities', I argue that hope labour should be viewed through the same lens as any form of labour under capitalism. Contrary to the perception that academia is insulated from capitalist dynamics, academic hope labour must be considered 'doubly unfree' (see Hester & Srnicek, 2023)—both in the sense of selling one's labour power and the necessity of working for survival. Rather than simply argue for a blanket compensation of these forms of work—however important—I suggest that a more critical approach is needed, one that interrogates the structural conditions enabling this exploitation, thus allowing the possibility for collective resistance. I proceed in three parallel steps. First, to complicate the conservative rhetoric about academic hope labour, I draw on Jaeggi's (2014) theory of alienation to challenge the notion that such activities are freely chosen, arguing instead that they represent a loss of agency. This crucially opens a critical question with emancipatory intent: what does it mean to have autonomy in academia? Second, rather than hypostasising hope by framing academic hope labour as a necessary function of one's calling, I unpack the 'structurally ideological' component of hope (Stahl, 2024; cf. Jütten, 2018), arguing that this form of hope, while

seemingly rational (e.g., projected towards a 'better' future), can nonetheless function ideologically, binding academics to distorted self-understandings and reinforcing continued exploitation within the neoliberal academic structure. Third, I argue that ideology is not simply false belief but is instead embedded in practices that structure reality (Žižek, 1989; Adorno, 2022). Precarious academics from working-class backgrounds tend to internalise the necessity of undertaking free work, as part of their self-improvement and career development. A critical analysis of this leads to the crucial idea of how the line between voluntary self-exploitation and coercion is increasingly blurred (Han, 2017; Chung, 2022), further reinforcing the ideological framework. By underscoring these interconnected concepts, I seek to uncover how the current system of academic hope labour is not only exploitative but functions to structure neoliberal academia itself, thus invoking the need for collective resistance to challenge the broader systems at play.

#### Acknowledgments:

This presentation builds on the thought-provoking insights of Anastasia Fjodorova and Amy Morrell

Allen, as shared in the stream "Rethinking Work and Career: Continued Resistance to the Neoliberal Order" during the 2024 MCCT. Anastasia, in her presentation, highlighted how passion is instrumentalised to sustain capitalism, luring those in need of stable employment into exploitative and precarious working conditions under the guise of fulfilment and selfactualisation. The widespread ridicule of this ubiquitous rhetoric is summed up in the statement, "I've always felt passionate about not starving to death." Amy Morrell, on the other hand, in response to one of the presentations, spoke about how a significant component of academic labour is built on the soft coercion that underpins the phrase, "could you please ...?"—a phrase that can be used to disguise exploitative requests as collegial favours. Drawing inspiration from these insights, my presentation seeks to examine the ideological function of 'hope labour' within neoliberal academia, interrogating the mechanisms that allow for precarious work conditions under the illusion maintained by the 'myth of meritocracy.'

### Burnout and alienation in neoliberal academia

Anastasia Fjodorova

Drawing on Marx's concept of 'alienation' and Fisher's 'capitalist realism', this paper analyses how voicing claims of the incompatibility of late capitalism with humanity is regarded either as unthinkable and in need of pathologisation, or as a foregone inevitability correlating with "rising rates of mental distress" (Fisher 2009: 19). It is not just that a critique of capitalism is viewed as 'delusional'—based on the assumption that it is inherently good—but that such critiques become even more delusional if capitalism is accepted as the only possible reality. After all, critique of reality is delusion. Mental distress becomes a response to both an unliveable present and towards the inability to resist the destruction of the future. For example, Roberts (2015) argues that,

If, in a moment of awareness, a person claims that they are a puppet merely responding mechanically and obediently to 'alien' orders – that their body is in fact an empty shell controlled by external alien powers – they are likely to find themselves summoned to the nearest psychiatric authority, declared out of touch with reality and diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia ... The possibility that such claims – statements expressing one's predicament – might actually be accurate descriptions, albeit laced with a dash of metaphor, of one's present relationship to the wider world and the dominant system of production is simply not up for consideration (37).

However, Han (2021) would argue that neoliberalism "does not even exhibit the famous 'alienation' from work"; instead, "we throw ourselves enthusiastically into our work until we burn out" (18 – 19). Where does this burnout come from? Han continues, "the pressure to perform produces a psychological pressure that can burn out the soul, even if the amount of work actually being carried out is not all that great" (2021: 77).

Academic capitalism prioritises productivity and competitive logic, leading to a culture of over-working and exhaustion. However, viewing academic work as a “labour of love” (Hall 2021), promotes a tendency to embrace, or even valorise, over-work and exhaustion as a demonstration of one’s commitment to their profession. Academics are often held responsible “for their own emotional and intellectual well-being” (Poutanen 2023: 85), with increasing levels of stress, anxiety, and other forms of mental ill-health, seen as individual failings rather than the symptoms of structural problems. It follows then that solutions to worsening mental health among academic staff—instead of addressing structural issues—are also individual in nature, with universities paying lip service to mental health awareness through the organising of workshops for staff on topics such as “managing stress” and “developing resilience”.

I say all this to illustrate the profound disconnect between the policy and discourse around UK higher education and the lived experience of UK higher education. This then leads us to the contradiction between the stated aims and ideals of the university and the precarious reality of academic labour and existence. Ultimately, what is valued is what can contribute to production, to profit, and to capitalism. This is at odds with the simultaneous discourse around sustainability, equity, social justice, etc. Is it any wonder that there has been an increase in mental distress amidst all of this gaslighting? Neoliberal discourse constructs and forces an artificial reality that masks the exploitation propping it up. According to Han, “burnout and revolution are mutually exclusive” (2021: 19). If our current society is one where “it’s easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism” (Fisher 2009) and imagining the end of capitalism becomes delusion, then perhaps all that is left as resistance is a form of ‘madness’ in which you’re invited to take off the mask and stop performing.

#### Roundtable Discussion

Convened by Ranier Abengana, Anastasia Fjodorova, Ricky Gee & Ylva Gustafsson

Opportunity to discuss all presentations within the stream and consider future connections and activity

#### End of conference drinks (Dubrek Studios)

MCCT – Program Overview - Hosted by University of Derby

Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> April

	FG102	FG202	FG204	FG302
<b>9:00 am - Registration (FG101)</b>				
<b>09:30 – 11:00</b>	Can the Arts Aid Health? - Arts & Health	Critical spatial action for the place in crisis: experiences of rebellious citizenship -	Mapping the world – 1. The Internal and External understanding of bodies across cultural practices	
<b>11:00-11:30 – Break</b>				
<b>11:30 – 13:00</b>	Critical Whiteness Studies – 1. The making of national whiteness	Expanding the Boundaries of Creative Research Through Inter/Transdisciplinary Collaboration and Conversation - 1	Mapping the world – 2. The Virtual Space: blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction	
<b>13:00-14:00 – Break for lunch (food and drink not provided)</b>				
<b>14:00 – 15:30</b>	Critical Whiteness Studies – 2. Whiteness, Folklore and the Question of Indigeneity	Expanding the Boundaries of Creative Research Through Inter/Transdisciplinary Collaboration and Conversation - 2	Embodied Realities: The Body in Contemporary Thought and Culture- 1. Embodied Experiences and Identities	Work and career in Neoliberal Academia – 1. Impact on Careers and Wellbeing
<b>15:30-16:00 – Break</b>				
<b>16:00 – 17:30</b>	Digital Nomadic Commons: Reimagining Virtual Space and Digital Pedagogy - Digital Ecosystems of Learning and Commons Making.	Embodied Realities: The Body in Contemporary Thought and Culture- 2. The Relationship Between Bodies and Objects	Exploring the new class politics – 1. 'Lived experiences of class'	Work and career in Neoliberal Academia – 2. Transformations of Career in Academia
<b>17:30 – Drinks Reception and showing of 'Borders' (The Quad)</b>				

## MCCT – Program Overview

Hosted by University of Derby

Friday 25<sup>th</sup> April

	FG102	FG202	FG204
<b>9:00 am - Registration (FG101)</b>			
<b>09:30 - 11:00</b>	Critical Whiteness Studies – 3. Whiteness and Identities	Mapping the world – 3. Journeys, experiences and documenting place	Work and career in Neoliberal Academia – 3. Critical Practices: Subversions and Resistance in Academia
<b>11:00-11:30 – Break</b>			
<b>11:30 – 13:00</b>	Exploring the new class politics – 2. 'responding to the political problem of class'	Mapping the world – 4. Collective and collaborative Practices: mapping and cooperation within art practice	From Oblivion to Re-Enchantment: Exploring and Actualising Diverse Knowledges via Faiths and Ontologies
<b>13:00-14:00 – Break for lunch (food and drink not provided)</b>			
<b>14:00 – 15:30</b>	Standing on the edge: critical perspectives on margins and limits – 1. Political-Epistemic Solidarities	The Sublime Object of Delulu: Delusions in Contemporary European Political Landscape	Work and career in Neoliberal Academia - 4. Decolonising Strategies for Neoliberal Academia
<b>15:30-16:00 – Break</b>			
<b>16:00 – 17:30</b>	Standing on the edge: critical perspectives on margins and limits – 2. Subjective-Objective Limits		Work and career in Neoliberal Academia – 5. Exploitation of the Psyche in Neoliberal Academia
<b>17:30 – Post-Conference Drinks – Dubrek Studios</b>			