



## **Edition II.** *Networks and Labyrinths*

April 13, 2022

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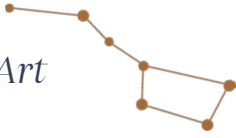
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Anna McKibbin

edited by  
Laurine Heerema

## The Grand Interconnectedness of Sondheim's Work

*"As we pass through arrangements of shadows / Towards the verticals of trees / Forever"*

Sondheim's best-known protagonists are united in their separation, their desire to extricate themselves from the chaos of the world, to observe, to create. "Stepping back to look at a face / leaves a little space in the way like a window" George sings when weighing the demands of his relationship with Dot and what his art requires from him. His conclusion? That window, that pocket of space that lends him objectivity: "it's the only way to see." He will call off the relationship with Dot, he will step back, he will paint. Act 1 of *Sunday in the Park with George* ends with the window being maintained, a final jolt of music signals that the painting is finished. So, it hangs suspended before the audience, waiting for the curtain to fall. It's the only way to see.

This tension appears frequently throughout Sondheim's work, and it's one I feel uncomfortably attuned to. Loving art over people is alluring but it is also a silly, disappointing waste of time, not just because art cannot love you back, but, as Sondheim patiently reminds us again and again, art and people are the same thing. Act 1 may end with the painting, but Act 2 opens with the layered voices of the painted subjects, dipping and sliding around one another in a cacophony of complaints.

Sondheim also grapples with this in *Merrily We Roll Along*. When we meet him, Frank is coming to terms with the friendships that dissolved after a life swallowed by his career. Once again, Sondheim wields the musical theatre form to trace the ways in which we are welded to the world and to each other. Slowly, the Frank we first encounter is peeled back, shown in relation to the friends he grew up with, as the story of his life is told backwards. By the end, he is young, and he is singing that it is "our time" and there is a winning naivete spilling from the promise "me and you, man, me and you." It feels uncomfortably intimate when compared with the vagueness coating Frank's first number where he hopelessly tries to pass on generic-sounding wisdom to disinterested students, ("compromise? I haven't even started.")

It feels akin to the shift from second person to first person pronouns in *Company's 'Being Alive'*, "someone to need you too much...someone to hold me too close..." With this, Bobby realises that he is already inextricably caught in a web of relationships, and there is no way to transcend connection. For Bobby, we know he still has time to redesign his own future, to follow his own advice, but Frank doesn't have that same assurance. The collective is reduced to a singular, tinting *Merrily We Roll Along's* conclusion in a tragic idealism.

Sondheim is always navigating the sprawling impact of the relational sacrifices made in the pursuit of individual desires. My favourite Sondheim song (well, my favourite *right now*), is 'We Do Not Belong Together' from *Sunday in the Park with George*. Dot and George are fighting, he storms back to his painting to work, refusing to dress the wounds he has inflicted. Dot turns to the audience, a last resort, sobbing and belting: "no is you and no one can be, but no one is me George, no one is *me!*" (A side note: while I would encourage the original cast recording for every other number, Annaleigh Ashford in the 2017 revival imbues this line with a righteous passion, punching that final "me" with a special emphasis before letting it sink into the next line).

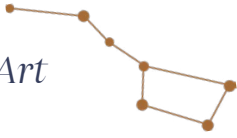
I always loved that sly piece of direction, Dot turning to the audience, not out of desperation exactly, but perhaps out of a desire to be recognised, to be given the last word (which she eventually is, resurrected to make a case). She was solidified as the object of audiences' intrigue and now she is the subject of their sympathy – Dot is not paper fine but weighed down by disappointment. Her turn is a distillation of the musical's ethos, a wonderfully astute observation on the difference between seeing and understanding. James Lapine's piece of direction animates the gendered implications of being a voiceless muse, forcing the audience to confront the way they have been watching the musical and more specifically, her.

But it is Sondheim who skillfully traces the threads of disagreement that are woven through this argument. They are both grieving, mourning the ineffable feelings that are going unheard. There is nowhere to go, their desire and disgust rooted in unlivable love. Initially the song is a volleying of declarations, "I" being thrust forward with no attempt to integrate the other person, they wrap themselves up in mutual disgust, the all-consuming desire to be known being snuffed out. To quote another Sondheim musical: "everybody makes one another's terrible mistakes."

Indeed, those lines, from 'No One is Alone' – the emotional climax of the unrelenting second act of *Into the Woods*, carries Sondheim's unwavering empathy, this willingness to extend understanding to every party in a disagreement. An inferior musical would have used this number to deliver a lesson on self-belief, to be courageous in the blandest, most individualist sense. Instead, it is a pause, a lesson in honesty. In these final moments, the last remnants of fairytale are upended, Sondheim understands that the idea of a villain is self-constructed and ultimately self-defeating. It's the truth that he has been toying with ever since he agreed to write the lyrics for *West Side Story*.

A few months before his death, in an interview for the New Yorker, D.T. Max asked Sondheim "For you, which comes first, the music or the lyrics?" In response he answered, "Oh, they come together." It's an unremarkable comment, a slight aside, but it highlights his power as a composer, his ability to fold a show in on itself, forcing the characters to look inward, balancing every note and lyric against its counterpart. Sometimes that is just in the clever construction of a sentence, ("just remembering you've had an and when you're back to or, makes the or mean more than it did before" from *Into the Woods*,) or profound in its internal logic, ("being sure enough of you makes me sure enough of me" from *Anyone Can Whistle*). Musical theatre is frequently mocked for its obviousness, manipulating music to elicit some desired feeling, but with a Sondheim show, everything feels earned, nothing feels incidental, the music and lyrics arrive in tandem or not at all.

Good art makes you think you have seen something new, but great art reveals life's interconnectedness, claiming to be the newest phrase in a long conversation. There were so many more examples I wasn't able to touch on, the sly "I wish" refrain from *Into the Woods*, the way actions ripple out in *Sweeney Todd* sweeping everyone away in a wave of consequences, 'A Boy Like That - I Have A Love' from *West Side Story*, the finale of *Road Show*. Every time I listen to his music or watch one of his shows, I feel buried in the experience, small and close to the wide, twisted expanse of the world.



Helena Santidrián Mas

*edited by*  
Laurine Heerema

## **MISE EN ABYME: THE WORLD AS AN ENTANGLED NETWORK**

### **A SHORT EXCURSUS INTO THE VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF LABYRINTHS IN ART HISTORY**

“Networks and Labyrinths” suggests Dedalus and Icarus, Theseus, the Minotaur and Ariadne, the Cretan Labyrinth and all the myths surrounding it. When reading these two words, “networks and labyrinths”, paintings, films, photographs, and ideas persistently enter my mind. They all create an unexpected network, intertwined by a *fil rouge* which is the visual representation and the idea of a labyrinth. The entangled excursus into the representation of labyrinths in art history starts with Greek mythology, it goes through Renaissance painting, Surrealism, cinema, literature. It is not a linear path; it is a maze. It seems evident that human beings have constantly represented labyrinths in visual arts and in literature due to a permanent need to give an image of what the world is: an infinite network, a labyrinth, which creates a sort of *mise en abyme*<sup>1</sup>. Follow me – I am just chasing threads (like Theseus...) – through the labyrinth of labyrinths; we might get lost. Although, this is not necessarily a bad thing to happen.

In the history of art, the first representations of the Cretan Labyrinth can be found in Ancient Greek coins and in mosaics. There, the labyrinths are drawn as simple lines, as a planimetry. No perspective is represented, nor is there volume. The visual interest of these images – at least for me – is not particularly worth mentioning. One of my favourite representations of a labyrinth, albeit not easily discernible, is located in Milan. A small oil on panel that depicts *Theseus killing the Minotaur* (figure 1) can be seen in one of the rooms of the Poldi Pezzoli Museum. It was painted around 1505 by the Italian Renaissance painter Cima da Conegliano<sup>2</sup>. It has been compared to a cassone by the Maestro dei Cassoni Campana which is situated at the Petit Palais in Avignon (Zeri 1976, p. 83) (figure 2). This comparison has allowed the recognition of the iconography, which would have otherwise remained undetermined and ambiguous. In the Milan panel two figures fight in front of a sandstone wall. The figure on the left is represented wearing armour, whereas his opponent appears as a kind of centaur. As aforementioned, they have been identified as Theseus and the Minotaur thanks to the juxtaposition with the Avignon cassone, in which the Minotaur is

painted in the same way: not as a creature with a human body and bull's head, but as a man whose lower body is that of a taurus (Natale 1982, p. 123). In the cassone, the subject is clear due to the presence of a labyrinth in the background. The Poldi Pezzoli panel has also been linked to another piece in the same room that depicts Bacchus and Ariadne. According to the coherent themes and similar dimensions, one can assuredly affirm that they belong to the same cycle. But there is still one open question about the small *Theseus and the Minotaur* panel: what is the sandstone wall depicted in the background? It is not merely a way of covering the canvas' surface, because, if so, the artist could have otherwise painted one of his refined landscapes in Venetian pictorial style<sup>3</sup>. The beige wall is the labyrinth, but Cima da Conegliano has not had the audacity of the Maestro dei Cassoni Campana when representing it. His solution has been to increase the height of the wall towards the centre of the composition so that the observer can imagine the planimetry of the construction as a somewhat spiralled shape. Five to ten years later, the labyrinth has been appropriately represented, not from a parallel and horizontal point of view, as in the Milan panel, but from a higher one, a "bird's-eye view". The parallel view has also been used by the English Pre-Raphaelite painter Edward Burne-Jones (figure 3) and it gives to the scene a naive appearance, typical of this movement that looks back Medieval art and to the first half of Italian Quattrocento. The "bird's-eye view" idea recalls Japanese culture. Some handscrolls (*emakimono*) of the Medieval period, such as the *Genji Monogatari Emaki*,<sup>4</sup> are painted with the *fukinuki yatai* technique, which means "blown off roof" (Mason 2005, pp. 117-118). Rooms of traditional Japanese palaces are seen from above without their roofs. This way the reader of the hand roll, the observer of the drawing, can see what is happening inside these spaces. Plus, Japanese palaces were divided into different rooms by paper panels that could be shifted and moved according to the master's will or to the necessities of the families that lived inside. No walls were fixed: one could leave and later return to a house distributed in a completely different way: a kind of labyrinth. One can easily get lost in a place where walls move. Following our "bird's-eye view" thread that has shown how a Japanese palace can be a labyrinth, one is led back to Sixteenth-Century Italy, to observe Nunzio Galizia's *Veduta prospettica di Milano* ('View of Milan') (figure 5). In 1576, Milan was a chaotic city. Not only had the Spanish invaded the Duchy 50 years prior, but, the city's topography, with its narrow streets, making it difficult for one to follow and orientate. In addition to the existent turmoil, 1576 was also the terrible year that accommodated what was later called *Peste di San Carlo*,<sup>5</sup> the plague that engulfed the city. A city that is presented by Galizia in an apocalyptic view. It is easy to lose oneself in such a place. Possible, even, to lose one's mind. A chaotic and apocalyptic city: a labyrinth. Another entangled network can be found in Milan: the *trompe l'oeil* painted by Leonardo in the *Sala delle Asse* inside the Sforza Castle (Belpoliti 2019). It is an intertwinment of plants and roots and it is dated around 1498.

If one follows again the "bird's-eye view" thread, which is intertwined with the "labyrinth" *leitmotiv*, one finds that it is also entangled with the "madness" thread (we have just mentioned it in the apocalyptic 16th Century Milan). In J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, the characters are forced to go into a maze to find a cup, the ultimate prize of a competition of courage. This labyrinth is enchanted, bewitched. It moves –like the paper panel walls of the



Japanese palace...Not even Ariadne's thread would save anyone here. One knows how to get in, but not how to get out. It makes people go insane (Rowling 2000, pp. 538-551). Furthermore, in the film version of Rowling's novel, the first image of the labyrinth is from above: a bird view.

If one now connects the madness thread with the *mise en abyme* concept, one can arrive to Ariosto's poem *Orlando Furioso*,<sup>6</sup> to Escher's disturbing drawings... that somewhat takes the wanderers of the labyrinth –of the world: us– to Surrealist images and concepts. In the work of the Italian painter Fabrizio Clerici (1913-1993) one finds again with the labyrinth topic in paintings as *Gli orti lunari*<sup>7</sup>– which is a bird's-eye-view...It reminds me of the *Theseus and the Minotaur's* labyrinth from Avignon. And –what a coincidence– one of the most famous paintings by Clerici is *The Minotaur publicly accuses his mother*. Following now the thread of Clerici's life and work, one can get to a text written by Gustav René Hocke (Archivio Fabrizio Clerici 2013), a writer and art critic about the painter's aesthetics, where he reflects about the oniric and theatrical atmosphere of his paintings. Another coincidence (coincidence?): Hocke's most well-known work is titled *The World as a labyrinth*, where he explores this *leitmotiv*; he links Bomarzo, Kafka, the Surrealists and many other artists, authors and movements (Belpoliti 2019).

In this Baroque world,<sup>8</sup> if one does not want to get lost or lose their mind, one has to follow a thread. Mine is art. It guides me through the chaotic and wonderful labyrinth the world is. It helps me to create a network of ideas, connections, images, emotions. Art is my *fil rouge*; it is Ariadne's thread in my world. But art itself is also a labyrinth. It is a labyrinth within a labyrinth. A network of networks. An entanglement and intertwinement of networks and labyrinths. A *mise en abyme*.

Helena Santidrián Mas

## FOOTNOTES

1 *Mise en abyme* is an expression introduced by André Gide in 1893 to define narrative or pictorial structures that repeat infinitely. They present themselves in the form of stories within stories, images within images, paintings within paintings...

2 For more information on this painting: Natale, M. (1982), *Museo Poldi Pezzoli: dipinti*. Milan: Electa.

3 It is also worth mentioning Venetian painter Giovanni Bellini's Pesaro Altarpiece, which can be linked to the *mise en abyme* concept. The image might be useful to illustrate and stimulate the mind of the reader, although introducing it in the text could have been counterproductive. It would have made the network of ideas even more difficult to follow and the threads even more entangled...

4 *The Genji Monogatari Emaki* is a Japanese handscroll created in the 12th Century, based on the Japanese literature classic titled *The Tale of Genji*, written in the 11th Century by Murasaki Shikibu. For more information on this topic: Mason, P. (2005),

5 Called "Peste di San Carlo" after Carlo Borromeo, Archbishop of Milan from 1564 to 1584, canonised in 1610 by Pope Paul V.

6 I have deliberately chosen to avoid talking about the literature that addresses the "Networks and Labyrinths" topic, but it is inevitable to mention Jorge Luis Borges and Umberto Eco.

7 To know more about Fabrizio Clerici and his aesthetics: Archivio Fabrizio Clerici (2013), Fabrizio Clerici. Milan: Skira.

8 About the connection between the conception of the world as a labyrinth and its "Baroque" facet, it is worth going over Bukdahl, E. M. (2017), *The Recurrent Actuality of the Baroque*. København: Controluce.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

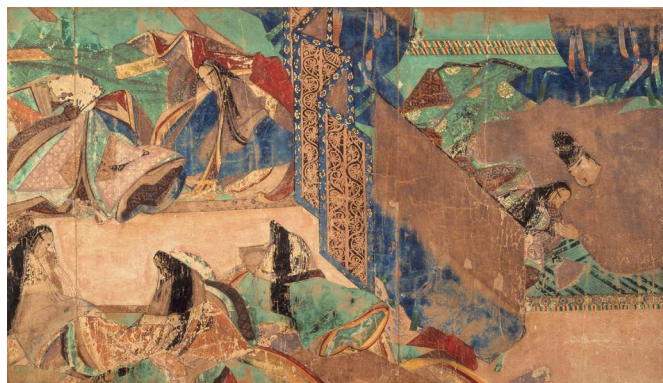


Figure 4

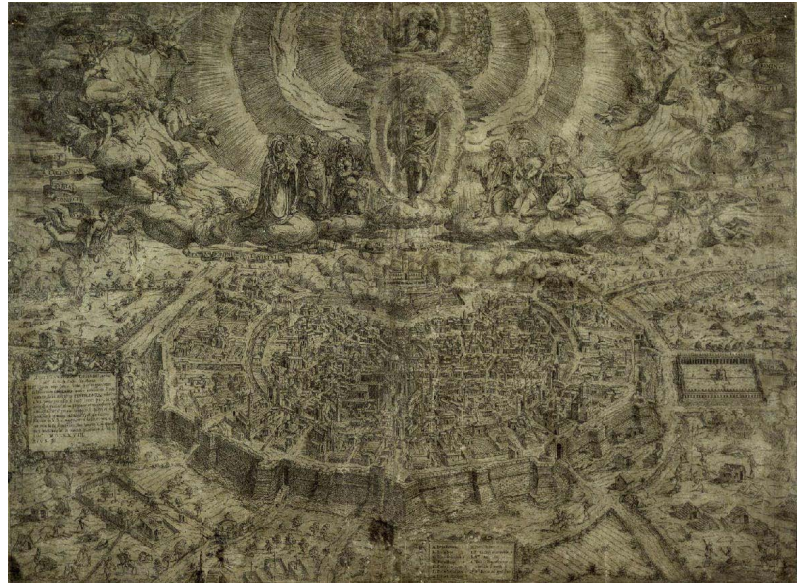


Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

## FIGURES

**Figure 1** *Theseus Killing the Minotaur*, Cima da Conegliano, 1505, oil on wood panel, Museo Poldi Pezzoli, Milan. Public domain, image courtesy of Museo Poldi Pezzoli, Milan and Google Arts & Culture.

**Figure 2** *Theseus and the Minotaur* (detail), Maestro dei Cassoni Campana, 1510-15 circa, oil on cassone panel, Petit Palais, Avignon. Public domain, image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

**Figure 3** *Theseus and the Minotaur in the Labyrinth*, Edward Burne-Jones, 1861, pencil, brown wash, pen and ink on paper, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. Public domain, image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

**Figure 4** *Genji Monogatari Emaki*, scene from the yadorigi gi chapter, illustrated handscroll, Tokugawa Museum, Nagoya. Public domain, image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

**Figure 5** *Veduta prospettica di Milano*, Nunzio Galizia, 1576, Civica raccolta delle Stampe "Achille Bertarelli", Castello Sforzesco, Milan

**Figure 6** A frame from the *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* film, 2005.

**Figure 7** *Gli orti lunari*, Fabrizio Clerici, 1967, oil on canvas, private collection, Milan. Image courtesy of Tommaso Calabro Galleria d'Arte.

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## To Be Interdisciplinary

Have you ever wondered why academia is split into highly specialized fields and whether this is always a good thing? In search of an answer to these questions, this article is going to explore the networks, or, rather the disconnected networks that exist between the sciences and the humanities, and what it means for one to be interdisciplinary. A concrete delineation of academic fields is outmoded and even puts one at a disadvantage. Thus, one should strive to be connected to both science and the humanities in some way, however minor that association is.

It is often viewed that science is more academically rigorous, as it is held with higher regard in comparison to the humanities. For example, humanities subjects such as English Literature or History are referred to by UK academic institutions as “soft subjects”, even if they are studied in the final years of school. Strikingly, it is reported that if one were to decide to embark on studying a ‘soft subject’, it actually hinders their chances of getting into top research universities (Fazackerley and Chant, 2008, p. 1). In light of this, not only is it a widely held belief that science should be taken more seriously than the humanities, or is somehow “more academic”, but schools in the UK actually discourage students from studying humanities for fear of hindering their chances later on. In contrast, the studying of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) is not only encouraged, but is viewed as the solution to monetary growth and the avoidance of economic depressions (Ismail, 2018, p. 3). Does this therefore mean that one should hold science with higher regard, and thereby neglect humanities subjects in order to guarantee academic, and therefore financial success?

The answer is not as simple as pitting one academic sphere against another. However, such a stance of viewing science as the solution that will evade us from all our economic woes has damaging implications for the humanities and those who work within the field. In 2021, the Education secretary Gavin Williamson announced cuts for arts courses in the UK. (Weale, 2021) These cuts were targeted at courses such as music, dance, performing arts, as well as art and design. (Weale, 2021). It is crucial to note that these are fields which feed into an industry full of creatives that are worth £111bn a year to the UK economy (Weale, 2021). The humanities and arts provide a profound economic contribution. In light of this, it seems horrendously absurd to have an economic preference

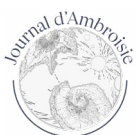
on one academic field and cut the other. Does the UK government think that by focusing investment into STEM subjects, it will bridge a gap created by underfunding the arts?

We need both the humanities and science for the economy to flourish. It is imperative that we do not rely on one over the other. However, this issue does not only concern economic growth. It is crucial that a more cohesive network exists between these two academic subjects, both in terms of our thinking and academic endeavors, as well as how we view the future of these subjects. Too often one hears from society that individuals are either “artistic” or “scientific/mathematic”. Why not both, even in some small way? For example, the ‘artistic side’ in one’s scientific studies could be an outlet which influences and shapes their overall thinking.

E. O. Wilson, a prominent American biologist, naturalist and writer, in *The Origins of Creativity* discusses the relationship between the humanities and the sciences. Wilson maintained that, contrary to what is commonly believed, the humanities are not very different to science (2017, p. 186). For Wilson, “one permeates the other” (2017, p. 186). There is a symbiotic relationship that exists between the two fields which is frequently ignored, as one subject feeds into another in a series of subtle yet harmonious networks. Crucially, Wilson then pointed out that all scientific knowledge must first be formulated in the human mind (Wilson, p.186). In light of this, therefore, our scientific discoveries are a wholly human process from the brain. (Wilson, p.186). How does such a stance situate the humanities in relation to science then?

Wilson argued that the humanities went beyond science in terms of both its creation and development. (Wilson, p.187) He went as far as to say that humanities had an even “further reach” than science (Wilson, p. 187). In Wilson’s view, whilst scientific theory focuses on the real world or reality, scientific experimentation explores potential “real worlds”, and scientific theory explores all *potential* worlds that have yet to be proven. (Wilson, p. 187) The humanities cover all three of these ‘levels’ and an additional one that science never really can, that being the infinite possibility of fantasy worlds (Wilson, p.187). Although the humanities and the sciences are not the same, Wilson’s thesis articulates how these fields are interconnected and where there is a natural departure. In addition, they are not on an equal footing but that they should indeed both be taken equally seriously for their different and intriguing influences, both in our real and fantasy worlds.

Why then, is it important to be interdisciplinary and what does that even mean in this context? According to Wilson, a vast majority of scientists and researchers live out their careers in their niche fields of academia (Wilson, p. 191). He viewed this as a profound limitation on their personal and academic development. He believed that if scientists and scholars in humanities collaborated, albeit even in a remote way, it would bring the best branches of learning together (Wilson, p. 198). He termed such a synthesis of knowledge the 3rd Enlightenment (Wilson, p. 198). Although such a claim may at first sound outlandish, Wilson is not the only prominent scholar who purports the importance of being interdisciplinary or at least thinking about how one’s field connects to others.



In *The Systems View of Life*, Pier Luigi Luisi and Fritjof Capra discuss the importance of viewing the world and all spheres of knowledge as a network (Luisi and Capra, 2014, p. 4). This is because we cannot ignore that the world is fundamentally a vast network, in every aspect, from tiny cells within a liver to the structure of society or the economy. Moreover, Luisi and Capra argued that in any system, individual parts within said system can be discerned in some way (Luisi and Capra, 2014, p. 65). On reflection of this, one can surmise that things rarely work in isolation. We therefore must at least have an idea of the networks that exist between academic fields since the world is intrinsically interlinked (Luisi and Capra, pp. 2, 4).

In acknowledging these aforementioned theories, where lies the evidence or the success of being interdisciplinary? In 2008, a paper was published that revealed how academics with an artistic outlet such as poetry or music were more likely to have won a Nobel Peace Prize than academics who remained insular within their field with no creative pursuits (Root-Bernstein, 2008). Following this, it can be inferred that being interdisciplinary in your academic or daily life does not mean you have to throw yourself into the humanities or vice versa. Not everyone is out there to climb the academic ladder to aim to win a Nobel Peace Prize. However, being interdisciplinary can be as simple as engaging with music, art, or, at the other end of the spectrum, observing the intricacies of the natural world whilst out on a walk, or listening to a podcast on a riveting science topic. Of course, certain people already are interdisciplinary and go even further than this in their academic life by delving into multiple fields during doctorate study such as Biology, Chemistry and Anthropology (Sarah Byrne, 2014). Despite this phenomenon, the future for academics such as these can be precarious, and it is certainly not advocated or seen as conventional. If the world in every aspect is interconnected when why has being interdisciplinary hit the mainstream?

The important thing to consider about being interdisciplinary, is that even small endeavors will aid in making one more rounded as a person. The world is inextricably interconnected, and therefore, it seems perverse to disconnect oneself from different academic territories. Humans are invariably curious beings, so when your mind considers or ponders something outside of your academic field, rather than shutting that door, seize that interest and consider how it can benefit your own research or interests. Ultimately, it is aiding your development as a human being and our place in this complex world.

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Elizabeth Rose

edited by  
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## From X-Men to Gilmore Girls and Lord of the Flies to trees and the latest Tik Tok trend: An enquiry (see stream of semi-conscious thought) into how and why we love to recognise references.

*“Watch YellowJackets,” my coworker tells me, “it’s like Lord of the Flies meets Cheer.” Cheer sounds like Cher, ‘do you believe in life after love?’ Clueless, actually.*

*Is this a Lorelei Gilmore tribute piece? No. Should it be? Maybe. More on that later.*

This is an article about networks. Specifically, those networks of recognition and affiliation through which we interpret, engage with, and communicate about the world around us. The article’s opening is a brief example of what I mean: exemplifying the rapid-fire connections we make, the neural networks we build, associating what a friend might say and the millions of references to literature, art and general media that are constantly presented to, and permeate, our consciousness. There are few among us who haven’t said “oh this reminds me of [insert book/song/TV show/ (increasingly) Tik Tok here]” during a conversation with friends. With my friends at least, these webs of connection expand exponentially – enough to rapidly derail even our best efforts to focus on any single topic.

*Networks and the human brain, Cerebro in X-men, WAI in The Start Up Wife – the former an amplifier, the latter an imitator, an AI app designed (by Cyrus, no not the Great – though The Great is, conveniently, a great show) to replicate algorithmically a previously uniquely human capacity for abstract connection.*

If you happen to have read *The Start Up Wife*, or watched *Gilmore Girls* or *YellowJackets*, you are probably far more inclined to continue reading this article than those who have not. Why? Because we have a hardwired inclination towards things with which we experience familiarity. Whether this familiarity derives from being a member of a particularly devoted fandom, or due to personal representation within a work of art or literature – in general we tend to like what

we know. And, accordingly, and cyclically, know what we like. A self-perpetuating *Catch-22*, if you will. Yet, even when in conscious rebellion against this practice (and its proclivity to generate literary echo-chambers) – reading and watching and listening to things at total, curated, random – hopelessly complicated networks of connection still form. This is because our perception of the world is informed and, in many ways, limited by our unique past experiences: everything we have watched, read, seen or heard before.

For example, despite the resounding differences between Anna Burn's historical-fiction novel *Milkman*, and the TV show *Atypical*, I found in both a deeply relatable and common theme. For reference, *Milkman* follows an anonymous protagonist through the Troubles in 1970s Belfast and *Atypical* is a great coming of age show which follows the family of Sam, a teenager on the autistic spectrum. The two really don't have much in common. However, both the narrator of *Milkman*, and Casey, Sam's sister in *Atypical*, love running...until they don't. In these two vastly different works, and, in each case, due to extremely different reasons, there is a pivotal decision made by a character to stop doing the thing – running – that not only forms a significant part of their identity, but brings them joy. I likely only associate these two characters, because I also shared this experience. (You'll be relieved to know that after some key plot twists and character development, Casey, *Milkman*'s anonymous narrator and I all regained their – our – enjoyment of the sport.)

The protagonist of *Milkman* also happens to *love* reading while walking. This habit renders them largely oblivious to the happenings around them, to the concern and consternation of nearly everyone they know. Similar in practice, but different in effect, to the chronic case of reading-while-walking exhibited by Rory Gilmore.

Rory Gilmore, daughter of Lorelei Gilmore, the eponymous *Gilmore Girls*, if you will (not to be mistaken with the *Gilmore Guys* – some pretty funny guys who really liked the original show) are widely recognised as the universal champions of abundant and abstract literary references.



Aside: the Gilmore Guys referred to Lorelei as a prototype of the 'adorkable' protagonist—see Zoey Deschanelle—I see it.

Someone else, far more dedicated than myself, counted how many books alone (leaving aside theatre, song and movie references) were referenced throughout *Gilmore Girls*: 339. Frankly, a crazy amount. Again, I ask, why?

Why did the writers of *The Simpsons*, *Gilmore Girls*, *Parks and Rec*, and later, the iconic character that is Abed Nadir, played by Danny Pudi in *Community* (though also guest starring in *Gilmore Girls* season six and seven!) go to such lengths to include this elaborate network of often very dated literary, cinematic, and musical pop-culture references? I think the answer lies in the same reason that Television quiz shows like *Only Connect* (that operate on the basis of needing to find the connections between seemingly unrelated prompts) are so popular. Everyone loves being able to recognise references, and the more obscure and esoteric the reference, the more satisfactory we find the recognition.

Are you Satisfied? (*Marina*) "I will never be satisfied." (LMM) ...Adding *Hamilton*, *Moana*, *Encanto* etc. to my Spotify queue.

The references we make and the connections we form between these not only brings personal satisfaction, but can operate as a "social barometer" – helping us identify people we share common interests, likes and dislikes with. Making abstract references and having people recognise these, or recognising abstract references made by another, for example, makes us feel part of a community, a network – now mostly referred to as fandoms. The joy of such networks is that where you find people with whom you share a common frame of reference, communication becomes seamless: less time is wasted explaining specific points since a single reference will suffice. These networks and friendships built on shared artistic interests offer a great non algorithmic way to expand your frame of reference and preferences, especially through recommendations. Personalised recommendations, whether hand-picked reading lists, suggested movies or a curated playlist, are to me symbolic of deep interpersonal connection. They move above and beyond the assumption that another person will enjoy something simply because you do. Instead, they demonstrate a holistic awareness of things and themes that another likes, based on recognising and responding to their engagement with literary and artistic media and providing an entirely unique set of recommendations through the connections you personally make with what you know of their interests.

A friend recently made me a playlist and the first song featured is *Imposter* by Pearl Charles. The lyrics open with: "Never look into the mirror, They always say that's your first mistake". My friend didn't know this at the time, but their recommendations were near perfect – mirrors feature heavily throughout my favourite pop culture references. *I'll Be Your Mirror* by the Velvet Underground happens to be one of my favourite songs. Unsurprisingly, it's full of references to reflections. *Beyond the Glass* – a roller coaster of an autobiographical novel – also happens to be one of my favourite books. Appropriately perhaps, it charts the psychological state of its protagonist through their altering reflection. *Beyond the Glass* is the final of four semi-autobiographical books by Antonia White. In her first book, *Frost in May*, (very similar but less existential than Simone de Beauvoir's recently, and posthumously, published novel *Les Inseparables*), she

references *Alice in Wonderland* over four times, though the novel itself is only around 200 pages – her own fascination with mirrors and reflections finding early articulation through reference to Lewis Carroll’s. Perhaps, were I less attuned to the networks of mirrors lacing my favourite pieces of art, this isn’t something I would have noticed. And, coincidentally, without this information my friend happened to select the singularly most perfect lyrics to open their playlist for me.

*Alice in Wonderland. (The Cheshire Cat – which also happens to be the name of a B&B in Gilmore Girls s2.04) Wonderland. Taylor Swift. My best friend’s playlist: “Into the Taylorverse” – yes just like the multiverse – cue Spiderman pointing meme. Spiderman. Andrew Garfield. Tick, Tick Boom. Jonathan Larson. Rent. Tango Maureen – a bop. La Vie Boheme – another bop. “WINE AND BEER”. Also, Jonathon Larson really liked writing songs about the bohemian lifestyle, didn’t he? Back to Tick Tick Boom – love, love, loved the Hamilton girls, André De Shields and MJ Rodriguez performing Sunday. MJ Rodriguez – a legend. Pose – incredible. Elektra Abundance – exquisite. Named after Euripides’ Elektra? I’m not sure. I prefer Medea anyways, though Antigone is good too. Have you heard of Homefire? It’s a contemporary retelling of Antigone in London, and it is...fire!*



Elektra Abundance/Wintour/Evangelista/Ferocity

Talking of fire, and I hate to say it, but season eight of *Game of Thrones*. *Game of Thrones*, the books more so than the show, exemplify a distinct genre which operates on the very basis of our love of intricate networks and how things connect within them. Specifically, I mean the style of storytelling that jumps between the narrative arcs of different characters, seemingly separated by time or space, only to reveal piece by piece how their relationships have always been

converging and their storylines overlap. Other recent examples of this style include Bernadine Evaristo's *Girl, Women, Other* and the *Grishaverse* books by Leigh Bardugo. Do you think of Kaz, Inej and Jesper when you see crows – the girls who get it get it and the girls who girlnt gornt – and this leads me to the final question I want to ask in this article (to which I definitely don't know the answer). Does drawing incessant connections between art and life enhance or inhibit our potential to engage with and appreciate our environment?

For example, recently I was on a guided nature walk and we were invited to sit quietly and reflect upon what was moving and what was motionless in the park scene around us. While I really enjoyed sitting still for a few minutes, immersed in the nature of Russell Square, my mind was far from quiet. When I looked at the (then bare) Winter trees I thought immediately of M.C. Escher's Puddle print. When crows crossed this frame, squawking ominously in the drizzle, I thought of Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising*, though of course *Six of Crows* would have been a far more current and book-Tok approved thing to think of. When we were invited to pick a tree and have a good long look at it, I began thinking about how the scars and texture of bark look exactly like a healing gash on a knee – then getting preoccupied about where I had read a similar comparison. Also, when trees drop twigs and these are decomposed and reabsorbed by the soil at their roots, is that like the tree equivalent of biting your nails? Asking for a friend. Stickman, the eponymous hero of Julia Donaldson's (best known for *The Gruffalo*) children's book also came to mind (– I have nieces). After several minutes of these thoughts I started to panic that I had failed the task we had been set: to simply be, be at one with, and appreciate the nature around us. But now, I'm not sure.



(Escher, Puddle, 1952)

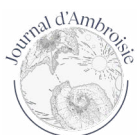
I am certain that, were we to try, we are all very capable of looking at a tree and seeing simply a tree. But, why do so, when instead we can look at a tree and visualise in our mind's eye a kaleidoscopic infinity of trees and like references, generated by recollection to past exposure to poems, songs, documentaries (and the rest) instead? Surely our capacity for recollection and abstract connection

to generate ever growing networks of references is one of the miracles of the human mind. I believe that this propensity to connection, to look at one thing and see it refracted into unlimited shades of (dis)similarity to other items in our memory, and thereafter categorise it in a perpetually expanding network of associations enhances our experience of the world, wouldn't you agree?

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You can google the rest ;)





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## **It's a pleasure to be here: tumultuous twenties and the waning belief in the promise of "our bright future"**

My father was always the one who drove me around, even after I got my driver's license. Even when he no longer had the strength to do so. During a late August drive, as we began one of our last descents down the slithering, twisting road to Kotor, I had to tell him I planned to stay in the UK indefinitely. As I nervously twisted the rings on my fingers, I arranged in my mind each sentence into a perfect, soft and unemotional sequence. Each sentence could cause a reaction from him. Twelfth bend. I calmly declared I intended to apply to universities in the UK.

"So, then" he said slowly, "you've decided to stay there." I listened for the silences in between those words. I listed my plan: Oxford, UCL, York; scholarship programmes, accommodation available, excellent programmes in History and Politics. Sharp turn on the tenth bend. I waited for his reply. With a father like him, no conversation was ever meaningless, and words never simply filled the air. Without taking his eyes off the road, he stated: "You know, with that you will never be able to find work here." Is this the best he had? "That's fine," I blurted, "I do not intend to work or return here anyway."

The rest of the journey was silent, orange-tiled houses grew closer together as our car reached the end of the road. The reason he gave up on that argument still bothers me. It also fuelled my efforts to stay abroad in the last years. My stubborn and fearful father admitted defeat and believed in a bright future for his only child. The pessimist had hope. It's been five years since his passing. I no longer remember his voice, nor to my despair, much of his face. Today, I wonder whether I would have been able to convince him so easily. I still have hope, but these uncertain days—the beginning of my twenties—would have terrified that inexperienced girl on the road to Kotor, not alive long enough to have comprehended what lies ahead.

A person is a microcosm of their time, the love and loss of their era. I couldn't tell you what the essence of youth is, but perhaps it is contained in those vivid memories which you not only see, but can distinctly smell and taste. Lunch breaks on the steps of Portico. Peach-coloured sunsets by Southbank. Pushing past the tourists around Camden High Street. The purple beam of BT Tower, with its far-

reaching message – “Good morning, London”. As with all first loves, I look back at my time in London through a thick haze of idealisation. London would never be less filled with hot summer air, or the soft rain that couldn’t disturb my fast-paced, determined stride. In a city of countless strangers, I belonged. I smiled a bit wider there always, even during those days of grieving my father.

In London, your ambitions grow as high as the Shard. I worked two tutoring jobs, and as a student officer at my university. In the screeching tube, I met many weary eyes. We were the same, indistinguishable clogs of London’s unbreakable machinery. The city does not permit slowing down. You would lose the precious working hours. You lose your rent. You lose your pride. Potentially, also your happiness. The city does not allow failure. Once, the mother of a child I had tutored for weeks took my hand, and rolled up my fingers around a fifty-pound tip. I skipped down the street, clutching onto the bills as the first proof of acknowledged hard work. Several hours later, my boss called up to tell me I was fired. “Fired for your lack of a moral compass, you do not ever take tips.” I should have known better. I was nineteen.

For our last lunch in Gordon’s Square, the girls laid out a summer feast for a hundred. I proudly looked at each of them, memorising each of their smiles, noticing the flashes of concern across their faces. All at the beginning of our twenties, yet all filled with an inexplicable sense of age. We had grown accustomed to dealing with the dodgy landlords of our shoe-box flats. We negotiated with the menace known as the Camden Borough Council. Yet, still, we had the comfort of eating cold cereal at noon, the freedom of going about our lives without anyone yelling “muuum” in our directions. The most unpredictable decade of our lives lie ahead. None of us dared to make long-term career plans, or daydream about what our ideal house or wedding would look like. The dreams formed in London, I safely keep, but hide them away for the time being. Once survival becomes guaranteed, once I won’t have to worry – then I will create, then I will try. The twenties are perhaps the first time our lives are not pre-determined, defined lives from one academic year to the next. It is a time when all those moral lessons bestowed throughout childhood and school are the only guide through the series of decisions awaiting. I wonder now about the Jack and the beanstalk story, would Jack still trade a cow these days, his only source of food and income. Would a flicker of faith and daring to risk make him forsake stability? My generation would keep the cow.

My story is not unique, but rather an entirely predictable trope. A young, well-educated woman, stepping across different cities and homes, slightly lost whilst seeking to find safety and security. As I write this, many of my friends and peers are posting pictures of themselves in caps and gowns. They have finally made it. Exhausted and exhilaratingly happy, they clutch onto the diploma in their hands, as a safekeep for the passage of our twenties. The diploma is a reminder of the all-nighters, of the countless hungover seminars; a reminder the times of silent loneliness and the stabbing feelings of inadequacy have ceased, for now. I think of our twenties as the great unknown, a degree or education merely a semblance of some sense of stability. I don’t think any recent graduate believes in an overnight success, too humbled to say that something is owed to us. It’s also a difficult time to experience any type of rejection or failure, as we barely have time to process,





brush off our ego, and try again. Next payment of bills awaits. Family eagerly awaits. We ourselves are rushing. But there is a sentence repeated, often enough, an outcry, a silent wish. We simply want to be enough.

There is somewhat of a cross-generational perception of the twenties as the *true* formative years of an individual. This is when we are finally settling into our own skin a bit more, and, where a lot of big firsts happen. First time you clean your own Hoover (only then you are an adult, trust me). First time you find those like-minded people who are similar to you. First time you experience great love and liberation in learning to be alone. However, there are many other firsts external to our daily lives. Unprecedented times create an unprecedented generation. Absurdly enough, it's a generation of resolute and opinionated youth, and a generation seeking constant validation. I tend to think of us as *insta(nt)* generation. Even if not all of us might be socially and politically active, there is a deeper awareness of socio-economic, ecological, racial, post-colonial issues at hand. The entire world is at your fingertips. In certain circles I talk about the money saving schemes with Tesco meal deals and the latest episodes of "*Love is Blind*". In others, I learn about the prison-industrial complex. I learned that many friends and acquaintances were sexually harassed, or assaulted. Often over a few pints, someone raised the issue of climate justice. Black lives matter. Trans-rights and non-binary rights matter. Stop Asian hate. I did not know anything about dyslexia, dyspraxia, anxiety and depression few years ago. And I won't even mention the p-word that the historians will write and argue about how we've handled it. It's all a lot to process and digest. When did we transition from faces worried about grades and school crushes to faces worried about the *entire* world around us?

And I don't want you, as the reader, to despair. I am immensely proud of you. There is so much personal growth waiting to happen, so much disappointment and joy to occur along the way. Our generation takes each careful and calculated step forward, hoping to finally find that widely-talked about prosperity in adulthood. Uncertainty may intoxicate us with cynicism, that nothing of our dreams will ever come about. A sceptic cannot get heartbroken twice. But living in these insane, fiction-like times, taught me to weave the pattern of my life only according to my measures, since doing it for anyone else is simply- pointless.

I finally have more sympathy towards my father's fearfulness and unwavering bitterness. Expectations of family and friends reigned in his ambition, but ultimately, many life decisions were entirely his. It was not my masterful presentation during the last drive that circumvented another dispute, but it was his kindness – he did not stand in the way of my own path. And I know how special it is to even have the option of a choice, to be in possession of your own agency. Many had their agency taken away, even before they learned to walk or could understand the social system and institutionalised structures of marginalisation. I hope our generation will find it in their heart and mind the collective effort to bring that change.

My father's silence wasn't about a bright future, in London or Kotor, or anywhere. Each twist and bend of this unforeseen road into the twenties, for all its joys and disappointments, is completely mine.



Alitza Nichole Cardona

*edited by  
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## Social transitions: Going back to “home”

Spaces of silence resemble the shadows and contrasts between objects. The differences between objects are almost always understood through the necessary pauses one may take to appreciate them. The stillness of a moment can lead you to contemplate the consistency of the imaginary, as well as the structure of your reality. Silence is like the shadow of the spoken word. It is used to understand contrasts and intensities between moments and descriptions. Spaces of silence support the viability of creation. Silence aids you in describing sequences of spaces, places and meaning. The construction of meaning as the result of emotion and associations, generates rhythm. Your rhythm in relation to others is contained as a fundamental aspect of perspective. Meaning is produced when value is created from associations that shape one’s understanding of the surrounding social constructions.

I do like to talk, a lot, but I have come to love silence even more. Perhaps, it was that change was a constant, like a filmstrip flickering frame after frame. I would always stick pictures upon a wall. Whatever little decoration that represented and felt familiar emanated some sense of home. As I constructed home, I also understood that home was within a sense of associations and a relationship with context. From an individual’s circumstance, relationships are subsequently created to take part in others’ stories. These stories shape situations that may become constants as they relate to the surrounding environment supporting memories and sense. All these processes construct, shape and nourish the context. Acts of silence were part of a necessary measure to fully comprehend the intangible relationships affecting a possible meaning of home. At sixteen I did not fully understand how value could be created through relationships within a context. I had just begun to understand how sense is constructed through a sequence of experiences and that these may contain different forms. I was certain, sense had something to do with the rhythm of time and interlocking moments with the others.

It was the foster care system. A large body of the state, a space within the infrastructure of a system containing places filled with uprooted feelings and scattered hopes. In it, I was a number and a transferable being in a state of production. As I changed places, I started to notice the walls where the beds of the other girls were. These girls, the ones that lived with me and moved without me, transferred their own sense of home in each stroke of painting, photograph and decoration they brought with them. We changed spaces, places, and walls.

The girls and I became acquainted with many faces as time and circumstances changed. As each month passed, the compositions of objects and illustrations became windows to their awareness of change. Spaces and places were reimagined. Photographs were exchanged and drawings were replaced, but there was always something that made each piece of the wall a reflexive object of their essence. Within each configuration created on the walls, girls like Monica constructed something irreplaceable but transferable. A need for structure compelled us to visualize stability. When constructing images of stability, girls like Monica never aspired to an idea outside her experience. She was constant within change—her ontological foundations were dynamic inwards—. Monica resembled a building, built of meanings and experiences, independent of the other's gaze. This is how I saw her, how I saw the other girls and myself. Their world, like mine, was fragmented. Our fates were being assimilated into an inheritance formed, mainly, by the emptiness of the other. The others, our carers, inherit us in fragmented states of meaning unsupportive of our maintenance. As Monica, Stephanie, Marelis, Nicole and many others were all becoming independent circumstances with a common nature. Each one formed their own vision of home in objects and images that adorned their thin slice of the wall. I realized then, that the sense of home was, indeed, transferable. Home was being ceaselessly re-imagined while remembered, it was a concept that within a particular circumstance, struggled to plant roots.

I have come to cultivate many questions in life regarding the possibility of generating circumstances of meaning. I constantly daydream of constructing transferable worlds of signifiers and subjects independent of the possible certainty and consistency of their original context. For me, this has been a constant need. Now at thirty, there is one question that could only be fully developed with silence. How much of our individual and collective intangible worlds are imbued in the physicality of the environments we choose to create? Through many court hearings, I became aware that the answer to this question could have everything to do with perception. In courtroom truths are re-valued in their contrast to others and their intensity is measured through spaces of silences and recorded actions. A judge is at present evaluating how each truth is structured to fill a fluent narrative of consistencies. A court is a scenario removed from time, naked of context and dressed in the stories that were transferred to a moment by its keepers. Time is then embedded in the word that is used to condemn or alleviate the subject. Each story is established in contrast through the necessary pauses. Stories are elaborated while they are remembered when engaging with trauma, loss, happiness, and many other reasoned emotions through valued outcomes.

Growing up, I noticed that context had a way of shaping beliefs through powerful points of reference represented by individuals, objects, or places. The rapport sustained by the silence that came with acknowledging the difference of circumstances between these points of references had in certain situations made my non-negotiable beliefs overturned. These references could be violent and unjust in the pursuit of their own interests. These interests were dressed by the conditions of stories that had been shared outside of their essential context within the confines of a courtroom. After the silence, there it was, the love of my aunt and my grandmother, and the caring nature behind their persistence which

transferred me to a stable state. In the exchange of topics, within this recollection, compassion is a constant represented by the care of a relative's interest in adopting me as they believe in me, my capability to live and to produce. The transference from one place to another state, restated my significance after the violence. I became aware that meanings were transferable in the empty discourse of speakers too hypocritical to follow their own words. Rage and happiness followed the detachment my body felt from the world after winning that court hearing. As my perception changed, the concept of a family changed its meaning and my notion of order rendered as unfixed and independent. I came to realize that language is as material and as real as the verbs that relate to my hands. I also realized that the orientation of actions is going to produce outcomes as narrow as the belief of possible realities. All the possibilities of the social, of the order and of the social order were embedded in how I conceived myself in relation with the other. The others are them, the people, the sea of many personalities converging in my context, their actions related to my understanding and other circumstances. The social comprehends the stories that ground our time in each other's realities. Our stories are intersections of circumstances and expanding truths. We commence to understand society when we understand this. We could also challenge society's contained propriety when we question the necessity of an immediate, material context.

I moved around eight times in my developing years. Many urban landscapes uprooted my orientation. Some nights I gazed at the hospital where my aunt worked from my room. In many ways I missed her while in hunger. Foster children don't necessarily have a good amount of food available if they are not subscribed to welfare programs. I only knew the place where I was located, as the social worker had allocated me there without making any notice to my relatives. As I paused, submerged in thought, I noticed my body's spatial relationship with my aunt's workplace. The existence of some type of relationship between my circumstances and hers felt like a hug. I came to believe that I was able to intuitively identify the nature of relationships, tangible and intangible like those which are embedded in the surrounding built environments. I think spaces of transition are as intense and beautifully significant as nature's ecological phenomena – spatial and human relationships converge within an assumed time-. I fed my sense of home from these relationships. Gradually I became part of a system of corresponding and vulnerable relationships which nurtured my consciousness of a community.

For many of us—the children of the system— home, both its environment and our sense of self within it, is understood from its properties. These properties are formed through the arrangements of things, associations of places, our capability of movement and our capacity of production. We get to experience the properties of spaces through their unfixed nature. Their significance while constructing places like “home,” changes with movement. While moving, social justice becomes relevant in a world without a sense of control from its producers. Children are also producers, but in this case, lacking the consistencies that amount to their potential if they do not innovate upon the concept of stability. Innovation in this circumstance could be viewed as the result of a crisis, when children start analyzing the production of value and meanings, beyond their



situation. Silence has a way of reformulating, restating, and reinterpreting things. Its impact is largely felt within the perspective presented here. In these circumstances, the individual is acknowledging the transferable nature of the intangible. Choosing to produce value within detrimental circumstances is an act of resistance. Alternatives found in the other rituals and practices could communicate foundational options for conception, creation, and generation of significant places of experience, especially when one's context is not constant. This is why global education is important. While it is not possible, yet, to experience multiple realities with one body, the vicarious nature of the virtual, like social media, expands an awareness of the other's experience. The visual properties of the process of socialization, that have been supporting the creation of intangible realms such as Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook, are having immediate effects upon our built environment. This situation has the ability to expand contrasts between people's circumstances, differences, and intensities, thus creating alternative and supportive social landscapes.

*Liking, commenting, sharing and upvoting* have become actions of engagement that have the capability of shaping shared circumstances of reality. Despite the intangibility of these actions, they form and shape our circumstances amongst others. We share the articulation and imagery of actions. We economically sustain the effects of shared discourses and their objects virtually, through a collective experience. Currently, aesthetics, collective opinion, and morality can be seen as globally transferable learning experiences through their value, as compositions of symbols of significance and representation. These experiences, much like the photographs on a wall, construct their own sense during our ceaseless motion. Experiences and their value shared through online social networks are in search of a home, in us, as their objects. We are individual links, open to possibilities and of transformation through caring and sharing — much like I was. Experience exists in a dynamic exchange of continuous actions. Viewed as an object of value, they can reshape mindsets. However, viewed as a composition, shared experiences can reveal the networks that support a constant production of actions, allocated in processes of communication and orientation. As a productive force the consistency of shared experiences keeps an object attached to a scope of understanding, a conscience — contextualized, fixed, and shared—.

Relating to another's experience helps us understand another dimension of processes given our understanding of them as objects. One could consider that when "home" is the subject, actions that lead us to it become the object. Culture dresses the object through beliefs, language, and behavior. Technology enables our capability to support the object's intensity and our capacity to broaden the sense of its scope within a narrative. Intensity, as a dimension, may not be necessarily ruled by superficial exchange of information, but by understanding meaning. We adapt our social sense of its value in relation to the uncontrollable nature of circumstances. It is the uncontrollable uncertainty that becomes the nature of hope. We cannot control the ways our sense of hope is created through crisis as this may also be an individual experience which is not necessarily shared. The experiences produced after sharing and caring have the potential of creating unforeseen circumstances, much like what happens when an experience is so intense that non-negotiables get overturned. Objects may get reshaped and

restated within the constant processes of hope. Amidst the intensity and the feelings that come with abrupt change, it could be acknowledged that effort, as a product, may shape our personality in essence, but it is our character that socially defines it.

We may be trying to produce value upon social processes without understanding their potential shared meaning. In many ways, social sense about an object is introduced through places like social media, leading to acquired value through potential meanings. Usually, an object is understood as valuable because others recognize a fragment or a part of their identity in it. Processes of deconstruction, where personal and collective needs of an object are acknowledged add up to an individual's character. The characteristics of an object are constantly informed in a world in transition. They are constantly signified and exchanged in situations such as social media. The problem of implementing value lies in the forms we ignore the others' identification process towards an object. How synergies are idealized within a single group's aspirations that may not be shared by the context. Throughout the years, while I experienced different places, people representing great power visited the communities where I lived. They communicated their desire to help and aid those in need. Their message was clear. Their possible ignorance towards the process of implementing a strategy to satisfy the community was even clearer. This problem is not created necessarily by choice but because choosing to relate to others is currently not being seen as an investment, our world strives and nourishes from individuality. The messages of value of the representatives of those with power were successfully created each time they pretended to listen, but the needs of our communities were beyond the aspirations of the productive performance that came with their social power. Not enough conversations about ethics are held. Not enough of its impacts are felt. Real inclusion and equality are topics much explored without observing, listening, and feeling. But still, we are lighting up bridges as a symbol of action, creating songs, and challenging each other. In doing these, we are elevating moral pursuits in a "participatory" operation that resembles a community. Interaction relies on the spaces of silence to tailor the act of socially caring.

It can be inconvenient to interpret a world in motion and accelerated change with the theories of the past alone. History has a way of just representing the few. We may discover more dimensions to an object when we recognize the needs for it. Those are the reasons that appeal to shared experiences beyond individual aspirations. As part of the social circumstances of others we may inherit only fragments of their stories. It can be useful to consider that a good portion of these shared circumstances are also produced by violence and unmet necessities which are not necessarily recorded in shared history. To see, represent and believe in others has the capability of building the trust needed to support a larger scope of shared histories. Successful messages cultivate a network of meaning while orienting actions. Maybe, we can orient meaningful actions without the validation of an idealized place, such as home.



Elizabeth Rose

*edited by  
Andrei Andronic*

## Wave after wave: reflecting on the role of water in our literature, lifestyles, imagination and experience

I put off writing this article for a long time, afraid that there could be nothing original left to say about waves, water, or why we are drawn to it – so long contemplated, and regularly committed to literary interpretation have these concepts been. However, appropriately, one of the most compelling and reassuring features of waves is their timeless, fluid, perpetuity, and yet, even in their unfailing recurrence, no two are ever the same. This realised, the following article comprises an exploration into our long relationship with waves, the beneficial qualities they confer to our health, happiness and wellbeing, and the entirely unparalleled effect they have on our imaginations: the latest wave in an ever rising tide of literature on the subject.

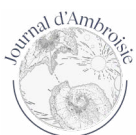
Indeed, there are as many oceanic metaphors, odes and elegies, as there are seashores – if not more! From Homer to Melville and Genesis to Woolf, writers since time immemorial have been moved to describe the trajectory of human history through reference to, or metaphorically by, the motion of water. We are also in something of a renaissance in the genre of meta commentary on the role of water in literature. Building on the tradition, perhaps initiated by Charles Sprawson in *Haunts of the Black Masseur* (1992), we can now look to Laing, Lee, Landreth, Tsui for examples of how the historic, the literary and the personal become inextricably linked when connected to bodies of water. (I would particularly recommend Tsui's *Why We Swim* (2020): in this non-fiction/memoir/love-letter to swimming, she explores the elements of survival, wellbeing, community, competition and flow that, together, explain our age-old addiction.)

It is the paradoxical nature of waves – their fluid constancy and constant fluidity – I think, that renders them both elusive to and so deeply appealing to artists and poets. The contradiction, between waves' perennial dependability and unpredictability, that makes them so powerful an allegory to the fluid states of the human experience and psyche, that similarly defy easy confinement or description. We are gripped by 'waves' of grief/hysteria/joy/anxiety. Relief and relaxation wash over us 'like waves'. Our vision is 'flooded' with light, and our

minds with memories. Similarly, recollections are called from the 'depths' of our minds, and we are regularly 'immersed' in a given task or 'inundated' by work. In our motion too we find ourselves 'going with the flow', or 'floating' through life when things are fine, and struggling to 'keep afloat' or 'our heads above water', when they are not. And in our marking of time, we speak of 'new waves' and 'changing tides'. In our thoughts, movement and perception of time itself, we speak in aquatic analogy. In such small descriptors we encompass a vast history and shared experience of both the violent and calm extremes of the motion of water. Water is, on earth, after all a universal human language. Across time and cultures this is evidenced by tales of voyages and their disruption (Odysseus'), floods (Noah's), and parting seas (Moses'), to name but a few. And beyond tales and legends, our very history as a species is punctuated by periods of mass migration across waves. Today, even the most land based among us, use the language of swimmer, water and waves to explain the more enigmatic and intimate movements of our mental states. Perhaps this is because, since we have walked on earth, ocean to oasis, we have lived with and *because of water*, and in this universally understood language of waves and fluidity, we can most effectively convey sentiments incommunicable by any element less ubiquitous or essential.

Waves are not just the subject of our ancient and contemporary imaginations, however, they also frequently represent the source. Several of the most acclaimed thinkers in literature and history, from Lord Byron, to Iris Murdoch and Benjamin Franklin to Albert Einstein, relied on immersion, or travel across and through waves, to find inspiration for their work. Oliver Sacks CBE, the neurologist, historian, writer, explained that "[t]here is something about being in water and swimming which alters the writer's mood, gets his thoughts going, as nothing else can. Theories and stories would construct themselves in [my] mind as [I] swam to and fro, or round and round..." (Sacks, 1997). So much did his swims inspire him, that he frequently had to stop and come to shore to write down the "[s]entences and paragraphs [which] would write themselves in his mind" (*ibid*). Einstein (who probably needs no introduction), though he could not swim, also wrote to a friend: "A cruise in the sea, is an excellent opportunity for maximum calm and reflection on ideas from a different perspective" (Einstein, 1922/3). Both these experiences have been shared by *countless* others. Why, I wonder. Is immersion or voyage necessarily always a catalyst for deep thought? Or is it the isolated, suspension from the present via the liminality of a water journey – between two places and uncontactable by others at either of these – that generates a state of mind so free as to be conducive to revelation? Perhaps it is the mental liberation and vulnerability that arises from surrender to an ineffable ocean, or the fact that swimming, or deep connection with waves, can feel like falling "into some other world, adjacent to our own", a place perhaps, where creativity thrives? (Laing, 2011) This last thought is echoed by Tsui, who suggests that, "each pool is in fact a potential portal", and "when we immerse ourselves, something is awakened...a vital new sense discovered" (Tsui, 2020). This vital sense, I argue, whether one of peace or inspiration, is fundamental to our collective drive to create, and explains why, as the tides rise and fall, we come back, relentlessly, to the waves.

Beyond its power as catalyst and amplifier of creativity, water also confers a





whole host of other mental, spiritual and physical benefits. There is a reason why swimming is the most popular sport in England today (Tsui, 2020) and there is a reason why millions of people listen to wave and deep ocean playlists on Spotify everyday, while they work, practice mindfulness, or try to sleep. Indeed, we have relied on water-based cures for our ails, physical or not, since ancient times, with Ancient Egyptian royalty bathing in essential oils and the promotion of thermal springs for good health in Ancient China and Japan. Euripides' wrote that "the sea restores the maladies of man" in the 5th century BC. As Tsui has observed, even though throughout most of history people weren't sure *why* being immersed in water made them feel better, they did know it helped (Tsui, 2020). Today, among other things, the miracles of modern science can enlighten us as to why this might be. Besides the obvious benefits of swimming as a sport – being low impact and highly exacting – the very pressure of water on the body is good for physical health. When we are immersed in water, it pushes blood away from the extremities and towards your heart and lungs; this temporarily elevates your blood pressure and makes your heart and lungs work harder" (Tsui, 2020), and over time builds cardiovascular endurance so that your blood pressure actually gets lower in the long term. Dr Hirofumi Tanaka is a leading professional on the subject of how our bodies move, and age, and is a keen promoter of swimming for health. He has observed how, as well as surpassing the rates of diminishing blood pressure for walking and cycling, swimming is also the best sport for those living with chronic pain or diseases like arthritis since "it stimulates mobility - without pain - and circulation" (Alkatan, 2016).

In body and mind alike then, waves promote mobility, fluidity, flow. There is undeniably a deeply therapeutic and almost meditative power in connection to waves. As Williams, journalist and environment author, has identified, "[o]ur nervous systems are built to resonate with set points in the environment" (Williams, 2017) and perhaps nowhere is this more tangible than between tide and breath – the ceaseless ins and outs, that define both life and ocean. In water, "the rhythm of how we breathe...changes us. Deep breathing research is in its infancy, but we know that this pace of breath is soothing" (Tsui, 2020). And on land, this alignment is recognised in the yogic practice of ocean, or *ujjayi*, breath, thousands of years old, and through which even our vicarious imitation of wave motion and sounds, is effective in reducing anxiety, quieting the mind, strengthening the nervous system and stabilising blood pressure, among a myriad of other benefits.

Even proximity to water is calming, healing. Whether it is simply feeling *better* after a walk by the river, or the fact that, miraculously, "patients recovering from heart surgery have been found to need less pain medication when there are nature scenes at the foot of their beds; an image that includes water [being] even more effective than an image of an enclosed forest in reducing anxiety during the postoperative period" (Tsui 2020). It seems obvious then that, as Williams suggests, working to increase public "blue spaces", as well as "green spaces" in urban areas should be an imperative, not merely an ideal (Williams, 2017).

In all the ways explored above, waves enrich, inspire, describe, elongate and improve our lives. Upon discovering the exhilarating joy of open water swimming,

the protagonist of *The J. M. Barrie Ladies' Swimming Society* exclaims, "You need to keep this a secret! Or tell the whole world! I'm not sure which." To conclude, I think we need to do the latter. I can't wait to go for a swim.

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Liliana Allouche

*edited by  
Elizabeth Rose*

## **Revenge or self-defence? Considering the role of gender in the legal application of these arguments, and the urgency of their review in instances of domestic abuse**

*Trigger Warning: domestic abuse, male violence against women, sexual violence, emotional abuse, murder*

In 2009 and 2012, two widely reported domestic abuse cases shook the French and international public spheres – those of Alexandra Lange and Jaqueline Sauvage. Both their husbands subjugated them and their children to decades of domestic and sexual abuses. To save their lives, both women killed their husbands. While Lange killed her husband as he tried to strangle her, Sauvage killed him hours after he beat her. However, only Lange was acquitted by the French judicial system; Sauvage was sentenced to ten years in prison. In 2016, and only after 430.000 people signed a petition asking for “la grâce présidentielle” (presidential pardon), François Hollande, at the time French president, overrode the court’s decision and suspended Sauvage’s sentence (Morenne, 2016). Both cases opened and fuelled controversies surrounding the justified, or legitimate conditions of “violence as self-defence” to resist or escape domestic abuse.

The *World Health Organization* defines domestic abuse against women as a major public health concern. Indeed, the violence committed by intimate male partners on women accounts for most acts of sexual and physical abuse. Between the ages of 15 and 49, 27% of women reported that they are or have been in an abusive relationship (WHO, 2021). However, the numbers are estimated to be much higher due to the lack of reporting and convictions of such crimes.

The repercussions of domestic abuse on women can be compared to that of “victims of torture or war, and their symptomatology likened to a post-traumatic disorder” (Kirkwood, 1993). Moreover, many boys, raised by an abusive father figure, may perpetuate the same abuse owing to this being their sole experience of a family model. Yet, despite the dangers for women and children of all genders, domestic abuse, and violence against women more broadly, continue to be misunderstood and tackled as a “women’s issue”. This leaves perpetrators of

such violence out of the discussion and enables them to forgo identification. Although all genders can be victims and perpetrators of domestic abuse, the focus in this article remains on the heterosexual relationship, in which the husband is the abuser and the wife the abused. This perspective allows me to address the broader issue of how gender norms and patriarchal stereotypes of behaviours make the concept of self-defence ill-suited to application in instances of domestic abuse. Why should Lange's defence be applauded while that of Sauvage be condemned? How does this condemnation rest on antiquated understanding of domestic abuse and unfair gender dynamics?

Consider the case of Alexandra Lange for instance. Lange, a French woman, was married for seventeen years to an abusive man who perpetually beat and humiliated her and their children. One night, in June 2009, he attempted to murder Lange by strangling her. She was able to grope for a knife near her and kill him with one stab (Lange, 2012). Lange was later acquitted as her violent resistance was recognised as an act of legitimate self-defence rather than that of a murder. Her actions fulfilled all the conditions required by the French law to justify the killing and officially label it as an act of self-defence.

Indeed, self-defence can only be argued if there is a legitimate threat of the attacker inducing harm, if the defence is in direct response to aggression, and if the attack did not come from state's authorities. In Lange's case, since her then husband was strangling her, she was the subject of real and unjust aggression – qualifying her retaliation as self-defence. Besides, the fact her defence was immediate to the aggression disqualified all accusations of premeditated murder, an aggravating factor that neutralizes all claims of self-defence in France.

The resistance must also meet inextricable requirements in the context of domestic abuse. A disproportionate use of force undermines any claim of self-defence (Uniacke, 1997). This means that the circumstances of the event must be such that a reduced use of force would not have been effective to preserve the defendant's safety. Self-defence, and especially the use of lethal force is justified only if no other option was available, such as escape or help from competent authorities. The action must also be necessary. Prior to the event, Lange did report her then husband to the police, however, they refused to record her complaint as the abuse was deemed to be "insufficiently violent". Besides, as the aggression happened at night, when only Lange's children were present, she could not ask for help or escape due to being mostly physically immobilised. Only when actions conform to all the above-stated conditions can a claim of self-defence be recognized.

While in principle the set of conditions that qualify self-defence arguments, delineated above, seem eminently fair and sensible, they fail to account for the gendered dynamics of domestic abuse.

For example, one major limitation is the immediacy component of the requirements, as this eclipses long-term abuse contexts and the power relationships between an abusive husband and an abused wife.

At three p.m., on the day of her husband's death, Sauvage alleged to have been violently awakened by her husband before he ravaged her with blows and threatened to kill her. She recalls that following his last punch, she went into the bedroom, took a hunting rifle, and shot him three times in the back. While Sauvage maintains that all these actions were carried out in rapid succession, the neighbours vouched that they did not hear the gunshots until 7pm. For the French jurisdiction, this four-hour time gap belies any possibility of self-defence, laying the grounds for premeditation. Subsequently, the prosecution classified the act of violence as revenge rather than self-defence (Fitz-Gibbon, Vannier, 2017).

As argued by Houel, a French psychologist specializing in crimes of domestic violence, a female victim of violence kills not to seek revenge, but rather prompted by "her own perception of the situation, her subjective experience of degradation, isolation and terror" (Houel, 2017). She also contends that the so-called "Syndrome of the Battered Woman" leads to a "dehumanising context" in which women are not themselves anymore (Ibid). This is indeed evident in Sauvage's direct statements; she was "no longer herself" after the assault, it was as if "no one could control" her anymore. She described the last punch as a "spark" that made everything "explode" (SeptÀHuit, 2017).

The fact that Sauvage shot her husband in the back, in a position of vulnerability, was held as an aggravating factor, as the aggressor could not have hurt the victim. This seems, however, a flawed understanding which ignores the outdated but ongoing power relations between Sauvage and her husband, between women and men. From a legal standpoint, lethal resistance is justified as it "befits the paradigmatic case of a one-time fight between two men of equal size and strength where one, acting in self-defence, injures or kills his assailant" (Fitz-Gibbon, Vannier, 2017). Yet in most, if not all, domestic violence situations there is an imbalance of power within the couple. Women tend to be "more often than not less strong" physically than their husbands, and escaping is rarely a possibility (Houel, 2017). Thus, the husband retains the monopoly of force. If a woman tries to defend herself, she risks escalating the violence from the opposing party and thereby suffering further, more serious repercussions (Bradfield cited in Hubble, 2009). Hence, the immediacy component for self-defence utterly excludes the dynamics of domestic violence.

A further issue with self-defence as it is, is the disregard for the inadequacies of states' structures to prevent these abuses and the incapacity of authorities to sympathise with abused women. Like many abused women, Sauvage had never filed an official complaint or taken the initiative to leave her husband, fearing she would not receive adequate support from the authorities for her and her children. This was held against her and undermined her appeal for self-defence in the trials. The courts argued that she had other alternatives to the use of violence. These claims reflect the extent to which the French legal system remains oblivious to the wider dimensions of domestic violence situations.

As stated by Sauvage's daughters, the court did not and could not understand their mother's "distress" and the fact that she genuinely did not think she had

another choice. To claim domestic abuse, the French law on self-defence requires medical proof of the abuse, which is not a simple task, especially if the abuse is of a psychological nature. Abused women are often reluctant to consult a doctor and if they do, they may find other excuses for the injuries; consequently medical records documenting physical abuse are non-existent or at least not accurate. Abandoned by the institutions that were supposed to protect her, and trapped in an abusive hellscape, after forty-seven years of nonviolent resistance Sauvage believed she had no other choice but to kill her husband to stay alive, yet the courts gave her a ten-year sentence.

The necessity for the immediacy component and the state's failure to comprehend and address domestic abuse are affected by an underlying gender bias on self-defence.

This concept and the system that supports it were made for and by men to the extent that they can often result in a "site of re-victimisation and injustice for women victims of domestic violence" (Fitz-Gibbon, Vannier, 2017). The case of Sauvage is nothing but the embodiment of the gendered nature of self-defence, and that of the "largely silenced victimisation of women victims of domestic violence" (*Ibid*). Sauvage's act of murdering her abusive husband, was viewed by the court as an irrational act of revenge. Whereas from the battered woman's perspective, whose life was under constant threat of death and violence, knowing that fleeing was not a realistic option, Sauvage's act was one of self-defence, nothing else.

Finally, considering Foucault's concept of bio-power and Butler's interpretation of this allows us to better understand the underlying gender bias which has led to the current ill-suited idea of self-defence in domestic abuse cases. The term bio-power refers to an internalised power that is legitimised via uncontested assumptions of social norms. It is wholly part of the nature of the modern states' power structures. It manifests itself by the subjugation and domination of the population. In other words, normative assumptions, become "scientific truths" to which everyone is expected to comply. Butler applies this conception to gender norms, arguing that gender binary norms of patriarchy or heteronormativity are so widely accepted and recognised at the social, political, and economic levels of power structures that they become inescapable to one's identity and way of thinking. Gender norms are infused in state's structures.

When an abused wife kills the abusive husband, Butler's interpretation of bio-power is particularly evident through the inversion of the "ideal victim" stereotype (Christie, 2018). When victims of domestic abuse fall out of the typical gender norms of submissive victims, they are deprived of all empathy and are criticised for not properly fulfilling their traditional gender role.

Sauvage's strong and determined character, for example, described by her entourage, and confirmed by the fact that she did not shed a tear in court, was outside the archetype of the "submissive battered woman", a prescribed gender norm (Fitz-Gibbon, Vannier, 2017). The fact that she was described as a "modern woman" was taken to mean that she put herself into that situation. The implication

being that a “modern woman” cannot be a victim of domestic abuse, as she is independent enough to escape or report her husband.

The concept of self-defence, as it stands, ignores the dynamics of domestic violence, the power relationship between men and women, and reinforces gender biases. The same pattern is also found in the wider context of sexual violence and male violence against women as similar power relationships and gender bias apply. While Canada has made an abstraction of the necessity for the immediacy component in the plea for self-defence, recognizing the “Battered woman syndrome”, this is just a start. The aim should not just be that of rectifying the law but that of deconstructing the gender bias in states’ structures to resist antiquated gender norms.

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## Here comes the sun: A Guiding Light for Our Inner Labyrinth

Spring is knocking at the door. However, storms and the cold wind keep returning, the coldness overwhelms, and our world seems to be hanging by a thread. Everything feels unpredictable, both *the* world and our own private worlds seem to be very fragile. It's especially cold in the attic of this little wooden house. As the weather gets warmer, we are reminded that our planet is boiling. The differences between the seasons slowly vanish. No wonder, we feel confused, when one day it's sunny and warm, the next morning snowy and ice cold. In the restless rat-race of today it is challenging to switch off and focus on ourselves. We are bombarded with tragic news day by day: war, aviation, natural disasters, and the list goes on, and on, and on. How can we stay healthy in a world that is getting sick?

Are we in the rat-race in order to shift our focus and distract us from all the noise around us? Can we really stay in "flow" in our lives, focused on our work?

*"The purpose of the flow is to keep on flowing, not looking for a peak or utopia but staying in the flow. It is not moving up but a continuous flowing; you move up to keep the flow going. There is no possible reason for climbing except the climbing itself; it is a self-communication."* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) Csikszentmihalyi strived to find what makes individuals happy and found that in the state of "flow", in moments and activities which we enjoy the most, we reach this condition. This can be felt when being focused on our work, doing a sport activity that we enjoy, or when using our creativity and creating something. The goal is not to be the best, but to feel truly in tune with what we do. It's not easy to stay focused when we are bombarded by notifications left and right, our phones flood us with stimulation that keeps our sense of peace out of reach. Finding balance between remaining informed about the tragic news of the day and holding to sanity and peace is a ceaseless challenge.

No wonder that life tends to be a labyrinth at times. We tend to forget to stay present. However, as we grow and age, we learn more about ourselves and after a while the labyrinth we live in becomes less scary and easier to navigate in. What is the right route for our labyrinth and where is its exit? We find our pure, naked selves, certain in our core values and strengths and able to fulfill the potential we hold within. What can we do in order to find what truly makes our souls shine? There is no recipe that works for all. However, in being open to trying all manner



of things and moving in disparate directions, perhaps we may reach a suitable destination. Let's make a map to guide us through our maze; first, plot our main steps along our map. Second, identify the fuel that helps us reach these steps – for example; determination, strength, dedication – and finally, afterwards we set goals that make these steps achievable. For example, when we set a goal to run a half marathon: first we write a training plan, then we determine our goal like building strength and set smaller goals -- like training four times a week.

It is essential and also inevitable to get to know ourselves better along the way. In order to form a map that helps guide us through our maze, we should dive deep into ourselves. What is our true identity? Where is our deeper drive, the little child within? Sometimes we have to peel off the pressure of society and focus on our own happiness. It is a lifelong journey, but all the little steps add up. We build the base(ment), then the floors, and finally, we reach the attic.

Consequently, in the darkness of the labyrinth, the light enters. When connecting better to ourselves, we can connect to other humans better as well. The connection can be found in nature, with our cultures and people who surround us. Being surrounded with the right people helps us find our focus. It goes without saying that the people in our lives have a big influence on us. For this reason, we have to be mindful with whom we choose to connect. However, we have to understand that we are part of a network depending on our origins and family. This is why it is necessary to zoom out of our lives and get a broader picture of the people around us. *"We have to set the framework for our lives, but to do that we need to understand where we come from. Only those who know where they have come from and the burdens they carry can see where they can go from here."* (Orvos-Toth, 2018)

The best way to do it is by asking questions- both to ourselves and those closest to us. How well do you know the history of your family? Do you notice repeating words that only your relatives use? Do you find similarities in your actions and way of thinking? These patterns are important to identify, especially if you have the motivation to change some of them. This consciousness enables not only personal growth, but societal growth as it ripples out. In this case, by creating a broader picture of our family, it helps us understand who we truly are. That's why I encourage you, dear reader, to go to the attic, take your box with old photographs and start asking questions. It is a never-ending process of self-discovery.

As spring arrives, the rays of sunlight gleam upon us and nature awakes, we take our paintbrushes and let our creativity unfold. There is so much magic in us, but to make it visible, we should find our voices. This can be quite a challenge in our crazy world, but we should keep on moving. There is no need to be afraid of making a detour at times. Each stage of life has its own beauty, and our generation has great potential in solving the problems of the 21st century. Let's go out into the sunlight! But first, let's remember to take a deep breath and let our inner compass guide us through our personal labyrinth.

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Sunset Gunther

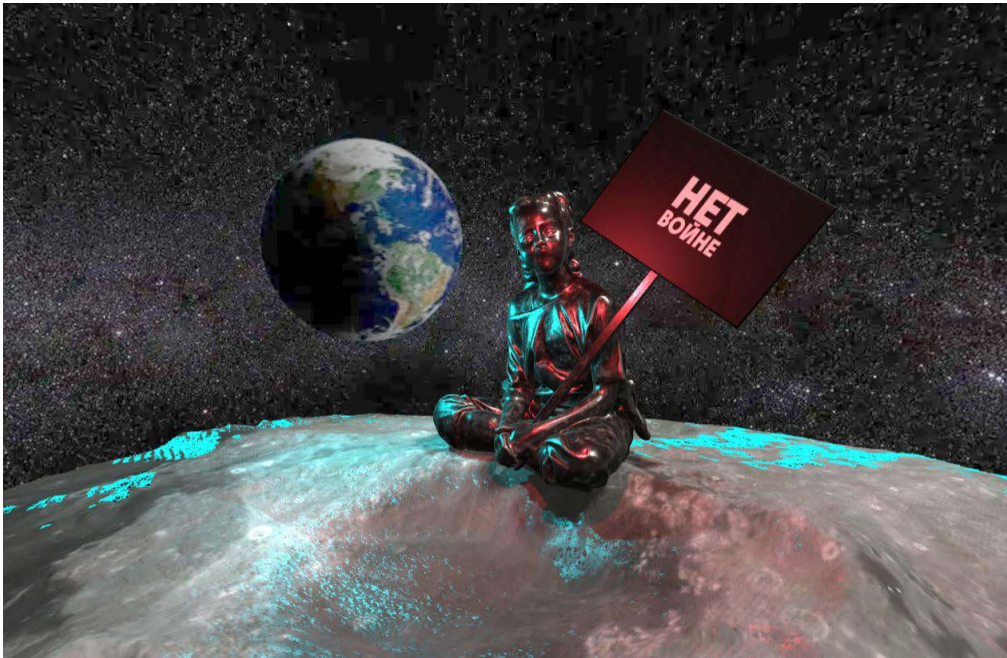
*edited by  
Laurine Heerema*

## Hope for Peace

I met a giantess, while walking past the deserted Red Square. She sat there holding up a sign that said “No to War” in Russian. I asked what her name was, but she didn’t answer, maybe because her mouth was sealed. She was made of silver, about 15 feet tall, and silent like the bloody red square I was standing on. I couldn’t forget this encounter and when I reached my home in the centre of Instagram, I started to search for her. Soon I found out that she was in the friends list of my manager Georgij and seemed to be affiliated with the Artificial Museum<sup>1</sup>. In my research I also found out that she was first seen on the moon. She must live a “jet set” life, I thought, she must be something special. Her name on Instagram is Nadezhda Miru<sup>2</sup>; in Russian that has two meanings: “Hope for the World” or “Hope for Peace”. She exists in Augmented Reality. That means that she is a filter we can choose to put on the reality that surrounds us. The reality, which has never felt so grim and dark, like it has for a month now, when the Russian government decided to start a war in Ukraine. A war without common sense; as if any war ever had a common sense. A present for all the warmongers in the world. A filter of madness and despair. A way reality should never be augmented. And yet, it seems that the augmentation broke the artificial barrier and spilled out into reality, like a leaking oil tanker that spills dark crude oil onto the white ice of the arctic pole cap. The sirens are howling in the distance, reminding us about the catastrophe and we reply by reposting the gruesome sound, filling up the echo chamber of our social media bubbles.

Who are we helping when we, every ten minutes, repost the tragedy we witness from afar? Are we becoming the dark crude oil that covers the surface of the ocean, blocking the light that the inhabitants of the sea need to stay alive? While doing my research on Nadjezhda, the Instagram stories of my friends are filled with the most gruesome, latest news from the front line: “Massacre in Bucha”, “Read Amnesty International Report about War crimes”, “New Evidence of Rape and Torture Committed by Russian soldiers” . When we share, when we repost, are we creating compassion or numbness, anger, despair, consciousness, or escapism? Maybe it’s just everybody for themselves, lonely heroes in self-therapy, because in front of the doom scroll, we are all alone. Maybe it’s that we must all suffer together, reliving the worst of this war, to show we didn’t forget about the ones we left behind, because, in our pain, we are all united. We are the press, we are the war press, we hope to motivate to fight, to resist, for the good

cause, for justice, for liberation, for denazification, for our nation! Notifications piercing the minute of silence, echoing in our filter bubbles. And that brings me back to the peaceful giantess Nadezhda, sitting on the moon, holding up her sign; hope is a silent survivor.



@nadezhda\_miru

## FOOTNOTES

1 An ongoing Art Project and a Platform for Augmented Reality Artworks, that is located in different cities on earth and since recently also on the moon <https://artificialmuseum.com>

2 Nadezhda Miru is a an Artist and "Gesamtkunstwerk" (roughly translates to "total work of art" in German) whom you can follow on IG @nadezhda\_miru or visit her website [nadezhda.vision](http://nadezhda.vision) to find out more about her.



Ysabel Cacho

edited by  
Shanti Lara  
Giovannetti-Singh

## Unpacking Lessons from the Balikbayan Box

Last summer, I moved three times to three different cities located on three different continents. New York, Manila, and Barcelona. There's a lot of emotional and physical baggage to unpack (or repack) there. Frankly, I'm still not overly fond of seeing a suitcase or a moving box, although I'm slowly learning to get over this. Each time I had to uproot my life, several *balikbayan* boxes held nearly ten years of my past in their cardboard confines to take overseas.

In Tagalog, *balik* means "to return," and *bayan* means "country." Together, those two words form *balikbayan*, which translates to "return to the country." To non-Filipinos, the *balikbayan* box looks like a meager cardboard box packed with canned goods, candy, and clothing. The box is wrapped with cling foil to ensure safe delivery back to the motherland.

### Labels don't matter

"Where are you from" is a good conversation starter, but it could also be a conversation killer, depending on who is asking. Globalization has made the world feel smaller and more accessible, as testified by ERASMUS programs, expats, and even the Internet. In this increasingly multicultural world, making a big deal out of where people are from only widens the distance between individuals.

The question "where are you from" has gotten more complicated now that I've left New York behind. I'm still trying to navigate the answer. I don't think my Filipino identity should cancel out my identity as a New Yorker. Still, equally, I value this new identity and don't believe it can replace the one I was born with. To do so would be to discredit the work I put into building both those identities. But unfortunately, not everyone can understand the concept of a hybrid.

A friend and I were recently at a restaurant in Spain. One of the waiters approached us after our meal and asked where we were from. My friend told him I was from the States. He pressed on and wanted to know where I was *really* from. (Really? We're still asking "really from" as a form of validation?) My friend replied that I

was born in the Philippines– and so was this waiter. But that answer wasn't good enough, and he wanted to know if I was "half" or "full." Is this information crucial? I asked him. He said yes. I didn't think this was his business, so I didn't reply. I don't understand the point of asking where someone is "really" from and whether they're "half or full." Unless you're an immigration officer or while filling petrol, those are two questions that should never be asked.

The only required labels were the sender and receiver information I needed for my *balikbayan* boxes to reach their destination. If it's not required for custom or shipment, we agree that labels are outdated.

### **You can't bring everything with you**

Even though the *balikbayan* box had no weight limit (since it was sent home by a sea carrier), I couldn't pack everything, meaning some were destined to be left behind. Adrenaline and exhaustion forced me to decide what to keep, throw, or donate. But while you may have a set agenda and excel file of itemized boxes, life has its agenda, so there were many things I wanted to keep that were unfortunately lost in transit. And by "things," I mean people.

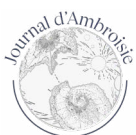
This has happened before, but it doesn't make it any easier. You can't take everything (and everyone) with you, no matter how hard you try, no matter how desperate you are. Regardless of the number of "let's keep in touch!" promises made. This is not always the case. Some friends make it through the next phase of your life. Others, however, will simply slip through your grip. This is not on purpose; it seems to happen naturally. The friends who once defined your college memories are nothing more than distant memories. Your partner-in-crime at work becomes another LinkedIn connection.

But why not simply "reach out" to these people? I hate being reminded to reach out. I really do. I hate reaching out simply "for the sake of" (Whose sake is at stake? Mine? The person I "have" to reach out to? Or the other person who reminded me that I "have" to do this?)

My relationship with this person is not a little check box I need to tick off at the end of the day. Saying "hi, how are you?" shouldn't feel like a chore. Besides, I believe these connections are symbiotic: the responsibility of saying "hi" is shared equally between both parties.

### **Keep on tracking**

There's always social media. Or is there? Social media has changed a lot since I first moved from my home in Manila to the US when I was 18. Then, it felt like a lifebuoy, something I desperately clung to while trying to stay afloat amidst waves of homesickness and schoolwork. Today, social media feels like the tracking number I'm given when I ship my *balikbayan* box off. I find myself absent-mindedly refreshing the page to see if there's a significant update– which usually isn't.



Social media offers a glitzy way to engage with people. Promises of follows, likes, stories, stickers, gifs, and memes can make it look fun. But without an actual effort to engage, social media, in the end, is merely an illusion of connection.

Yet this is not always the case. Hopefully, amidst the pixels, numbers, and data, there's a friend flesh and feeling on the other end who is present, not just online.

### Make space

The essentials have been packed, and everything else is either thrown or donated. The box is carefully labeled, and a tracking number is issued. The vast size of the box makes it tempting to pack to the brim, stuffing every breathable space with traces of my past. But overpack, and certain items will get crushed or pushed out of the box. One of the last lessons the *balikbayan* box offers is to make space.

Beyond the confines of the *balikbayan* box, making space is a humbling lesson. Looking back, I suppose space is one of the final puzzles of making connections. Connections are complex. Connections almost feel like a living being that needs the occasional tending to—on both receiving ends. Once the essentials are in place, certain old relationships phase out; it's vital that they do because that makes space to allow new connections to grow in their place.



Zsófi Lázár

*edited by  
Andrei Andronic*

## NATO and the struggle for democracy

Truman's past dreams for NATO fade into impossibility in face of the shelling in Mariupol. The Ukraine conflict and the subsequent invasion has been an education in indecision as Russian aggression has undermined NATO values like democracy, the rule of law and emphasis on human rights. Though the establishment of this organisation in 1949 had previously been cited as a turning point in the history of the West, the current crisis has sharply revealed its bureaucratic inefficiencies and organisational flaws. Moreover, it has shown a fundamental reluctance to stand for its principles in threats toward countries outside the traditional "Western" sphere.

"An armed attack against one or more of them...shall be considered an attack against them all". This central role taken by Article five in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation agreement should be seen as an effort to caution those seeking to undermine its stability, and a deterrent against nationalist militarism in Europe. With Soviet expansionism perceived as the greatest threat to democracy after the end of the Second World War, it was seen as necessary to include the option to retaliate following any attacks against NATO members and their allies, with "such action as (NATO) deems necessary, including the [use of armed force](#)" (NATO, 2011).

However, the refusal of NATO to induct Ukraine into its membership body represents a serious failure of strategic insight and a surrender to Russia's basest tactic of intimidation. Since 2020, Ukraine has been one of the body's "enhanced opportunity partners", making "significant contributions to NATO-led operations and missions" that has its roots in the 1997 Ukraine-NATO commission. This originally allowed for discussion on security issues and enabled the furthering of a Ukraine-NATO relationship without a formal membership agreement. Further, since the accession of Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia, Russia has demanded a formal veto on a potential Ukrainian induction and has recently threatened "political and military" consequences towards other traditionally "non-western" countries like Finland or Sweden if they attempted to join. The acceptance of countries like Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary in 1999 into NATO through the *Partnership for Peace* program marked a [milestone](#) (NATO, 2011) for the organisation. Despite its aggressive stance and the atrocities that are now being committed in its invasion of Ukraine, it would be a severe miscalculation



to allow Russia to dictate terms. The policy of appeasement is one that has historically been futile – for NATO to adopt the hope that Putin might be satisfied with Ukraine is not only insulting to the Ukrainian population and NATO values, but highly unrealistic.

Without acknowledging merit in Putin’s criticisms of the alliance, it is clear that NATO’s significance and focus as an organisation has shifted since its inception in 1949. An early focus can be seen on minimising the recurrence of nationalist movements in Europe, as the organisation originally claimed to do in the 1950s. However, the détente of the 1960s marked a tangible shift within NATO towards using the sphere as a political instrument, which has continued until today. Moreover, the role of the Alliance as a ‘stabilising’ tool for Eastern Europe and Central Asia emerged only in the 1990s through new partners and Allies from the former Soviet bloc. This can be seen in the early 2000s with the establishment of the [NATO-Russia Council](#) (NATO, 2011) and other attempts to coordinate on security matters of joint interest, highlighting that to some extent NATO endeavoured to cooperate with Russia and other non-traditional Western partners.

On the other hand, NATO’s policies and membership process have seen much criticism. To achieve NATO accession, member-state hopefuls must upgrade their militaries in line with modern ‘western’ standards and even make political changes in accordance with NATO values. They are requested to settle ethnic or territorial disputes peacefully, show their commitment to human rights and the rule of law, and promote social justice and economic freedom. These changes are often made through the issuing of a “membership action plan”. Though some changes are important and valuable in upholding human rights, it is clear that it also forces countries to conform to traditionally “western” working methods and structures that may not necessarily be suitable.

This has also led to allegations of NATO “expansionism” which can be seen as undermining the basis upon which the cautious agreement and geopolitical stability was established. In particular, an alleged “pledge” (Itzkowitz Shiffrinson, 2016) by Secretary Baker to Gorbachev in 1990 that NATO’s borders would move “not one inch eastward” brings contention to this debate and has been invoked by various Russia leaders as a promise barring NATO from its expansion. The American rebuttal points to hypothetical phrasing and the lack of a formal, written agreement afterwards. Moreover, declassified materials show unmistakably that no formal pledge between countries was ever made. Even President Bush opposed the plan. Though formality states that no breach was committed, Russian criticism of NATO expansionism should therefore not be seen as unfounded. NATO has amassed a number of member states eastward of its original position, and has made no promises to stop its expansion.

In part, this can also be seen in the hugely problematic nature of NATO’s foreign influence. Its many military interventions can and should be called into question for their short-sightedness and lack of efficiency. Examples can be found during the Yugoslav wars, the intervention in the Kosovo-Serbia conflict in 1998 and the 2001 intervention in Afghanistan. The first two examples can be seen as arising

in the wake of strong nationalist mobilisations in their countries which lead to a power vacuum that destabilised huge regions of Europe. Despite clear violations of human rights and ethnic cleansing, NATO's indecision during these conflicts led to the displacement of thousands of people prior to intervention. *Operation Enduring Freedom* in Afghanistan aimed at promoting conditions for "self-sustaining peace", though it ultimately exacerbated many of the tensions and hostilities within the area and worsened Afghanistan's geopolitical state.

Questioning NATO is now more essential than ever. In some ways it has been a force for good, promoting peace and stabilising international diplomacy as an unmistakable deterrent. However, it is far from being the "[foundation stone of transatlantic peace and freedom](#)" (NATO, 2011) that its establishment had aimed for. Its indecision, lack of efficiency and its use as a political arena to propagate those issues most important to "Western" states has irreparably damaged its credibility - or, perhaps worse yet, it has exposed that the NATO Truman had dreamed of may have never existed at all.

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## Draco, Causes We Care About



Ell Welsford

*edited by  
Elizabeth Rose*

## Stuck in the Cis-tem: How Outdated Healthcare Systems Harm Trans People

### Introduction

For those trans people who seek to medically transition, access to gender-affirming healthcare is vital. Sadly, trans people are all too often shut out from the very systems of healthcare supposedly designed to help us.

The reality of trans healthcare is typically characterised by long waiting lists, segregation, gatekeeping, and lack of provision, and in many countries it is entirely absent. Trans people are pathologised and stigmatised, and, in some cases, outright criminalised.

However, there is a shining light at the end of the tunnel. We can overcome these barriers and labyrinthine structures: trans healthcare can and must be desegregated, and the needs and experiences of patients must be heard and put first. We deserve to be treated with dignity and respect, and access to gender-affirming healthcare is a crucial part of that.

### Brief History

Although trans people have existed in every culture throughout human history, the roots of modern transition-related medical care can be found in its classification as a disease by sexologists in the late 19th Century. Richard Krafft-Ebing's 'Psychopathia Sexualis' is seen by some as the first work to (incorrectly) classify gender incongruence as a mental disorder, describing it as the final stage of homosexuality, which he also considered a disease ([Mulder, 2019](#)). Ideas like this have been highly pervasive in the development of transition-related healthcare, and pathologisation is still prevalent in most modern trans healthcare settings.

Magnus Hirschfeld's Institute of Sexology in Berlin was an early attempt at providing gender-affirming care. Opened in 1919, the institute centred the experiences of trans patients, rejected pathologisation, and carried out the first recorded gender affirming genital surgeries in history ([Mulder, 2019](#); [Khan, 2016](#)).

However, in the early 1930s, it was attacked by the Nazis, its efforts tragically cut short ([Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, no date](#)). Books were burned and institute members were killed, sent to concentration camps, and forced into exile.

In the following decades, many of those in need of gender-affirming care had to travel across continents to seek out specific individuals willing to help them ([Khan, 2016](#)). Others were able to access care more locally, despite patchy and limited availability/provision ([Playdon, 2022](#)). In the 1960s, several medical practitioners who had been disparately dealing with transition-related healthcare came together to form specialist institutions ([Playdon, 2022](#)). Thus, the Gender Identity Clinics (GICs) were born.

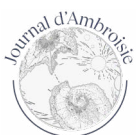
However, this model was not one built with trans people's best interests in mind.

In the UK, the Charing Cross GIC was founded by John Randell, a self-professed eugenicist who believed that trans people were delusional and mentally ill ([Playdon, 2022](#)). The GIC pathologised trans people and Randell presided over a medical regime of gatekeeping that withheld treatment from all but those who were seen as capable of passing as their true gender (Faye, 2021; [Playdon, 2022](#)). Some early patients were even subject to electroshock therapy (Faye, 2021).

Transphobia and gatekeeping were, and still are, central components of the GIC model. In many countries, trans people are still forced to act out sexist gendered stereotypes in order to access affirming care. The World Professional Association for Transgender Health standards of care still require people to live 'in a gender role that is congruent with their gender identity' for a year before certain surgeries can be carried out ([2012](#)).

In countries such as the US and Canada, centralised and specialised GICs have been phased out in favour of more adaptable systems that offer treatment on the basis of informed consent at local health centres (Faye, 2021). Elsewhere, particularly in the global south, access to gender-affirming care is extremely limited or even illegal (Transrespect versus Transphobia Worldwide (TvT), [2014](#) and [2018](#)). It is often simply unavailable through normal medical channels (TvT, [2014](#) and [2018](#)). Trans people are, therefore, frequently forced to seek out treatment without medical supervision, for example by DIYing hormones after buying them through alternative vendors, especially online or through black markets (TvT, [2014](#) and [2018](#)). The health risks of such alternatives are obvious. Others travel to neighbouring countries for private medical care, however this is usually prohibitively expensive (TvT, [2018](#))).

Where transition-related healthcare is offered, it is often through a process that is intrusive, dehumanising, and humiliating. Across the world, trans people face long waiting lists ([Savage and Bauer, 2021](#)), and GICs often remain as steadfast gatekeepers of medical transition. Gender-affirming care frequently remains locked behind mental health diagnoses. Of 54 countries in Europe and Central Asia surveyed in 2021 by Transgender Europe, an NGO, only Malta and some parts of Spain had depathologised transition-related healthcare ([TGEU](#)). We need to start doing better *globally*.



## Mapping the Gaze

The UK is an excellent example of a broken system. It still relies on the GIC model, under which almost all transition-related care is accessed through a specialist clinic. To access gender-affirming healthcare through the NHS, you must be referred by your GP to a GIC, after which you are placed on a waiting list. Once you have reached the end of the list, you are psychologically assessed and may be deemed eligible for medical treatment such as hormone replacement therapy, hair removal, voice therapy, or gender affirming surgeries.

This sounds simple enough, however the process is mired with ill-educated professionals, long waiting lists, bureaucracy, gatekeeping, and even outright transphobia.

It is common for people to not even get past the first hurdle without any trouble. Although GPs are required to refer patients to a GIC, they often don't. This may be because they don't understand the process or because of their own bigotries. Reports of hostility are accompanied by stories of those GPs who insist on referring trans people to mental health services instead, or the referrals that are promised but never sent.

There are 14 adult GICs in the UK. I'm currently on a waiting list for one of them and, for a first appointment, the anticipated waiting time is officially four years and four months long ([GIC, 2022](#)). However, this number is somewhat misleading. The listed wait times don't take into account the fact that the amount of people on the waiting list is growing whilst the speed at which the GIC is processing patients is actually declining. Some have estimated that the true waiting time, if referrals continue to be processed at their current rate, is actually in the range of 25 years or more ([u/anti-babe, 2021](#)).

When I asked my GP for a referral to a GIC in October 2020, they were seeing patients who had been referred in September 2017 ([u/anti-babe, 2021](#)). As of April 2022, they are seeing patients who were referred in December 2017 ([GIC, 2022](#)). In this time, the amount of people waiting for a first appointment has grown by around 3,000 ([Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust, 2022](#)). What makes this worse is that this isn't even close to the longest waiting list for a GIC in the UK—The Laurels in South West England holds that title ([DPT, 2022](#))!

Imagine being asked to wait for any other life-saving treatment for that long – and it often is life-saving. Trans people are especially at risk of death by suicide. A 2014 survey found that 27% of trans young people in England had attempted to take their own lives and that 89% had considered doing so ([Youth Chances, 2014](#)). Research by [Stonewall in 2017](#) had those numbers at 45% and 92% respectively. Although more research is needed, studies have shown that gender-affirming care can improve quality of life and reduce the likelihood of suicide ([Nobili, Glazebrook, and Arcelus, 2018](#); [Turban et al., 2020](#)). Numerous professional bodies, including the Endocrine Society, have repeatedly emphasised the life-saving nature of this care and condemned those attempting to restrict access (Endocrine Society, [2020](#) and [2021](#); [@lgbt, 2022](#)).

Even once people finally get an appointment at a GIC, things aren't much better. The first appointment (and second too, in most cases) is a psychiatric assessment intended to determine whether you are "trans enough." This often involves intrusive and frankly irrelevant questions about, for instance, peoples' sex lives or childhoods ([Healthtalk, 2022a](#)). I've read accounts of trans women having their care delayed because they weren't wearing a dress or makeup ([Healthtalk, 2022a](#)). Others tell of psychiatrists refusing to diagnose them because they didn't want to come out to their abusive and transphobic family members or because they had not changed their name ([Healthtalk, 2022a](#)). Those who are disabled, fat, neurodiverse, or from ethnic minorities are subject to even more gatekeeping on the basis of their intersecting identities (Faye, 2021; [King, 2021](#); [Zhang, 2021](#); [TransActual, 2022](#)). The process is especially difficult for non-binary people, who often fail to meet psychiatrists' expectations of what it is to be trans. It's gatekeeping, pure and simple.

Once past the diagnostic assessments, trans folks are met with further waits to access actual treatments, such as hormone replacement therapy (HRT) or surgeries. A recent freedom of information request reveals that, at the London GIC in 2021, the average wait between first and second appointments was about 17 months, while those who were discharged after completing their treatment had waited an average of almost four years since their first appointment ([Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust, 2022](#)).

It is no wonder that many British trans people choose to save up to pay for private treatment or take the risks of DIYing HRT. The former can be expensive, and, with growing demand, there are now several month long waiting lists for many private providers. Plus, private gender specialists are often the same people who work in the GICs, which means that there's no guarantee that you'll be free from problems such as gatekeeping.

Actress and YouTuber Abigail Thorn perfectly summed up the way that accessing gender-affirming care makes people feel in [her speech to London Trans Pride](#) in June 2021. She said: 'When my doctor refuses to treat me, and makes me use a segregated healthcare system, I am humiliated.'

## Solutions

The solutions to the trans healthcare labyrinth are strikingly simple in principle, although entrenched beliefs and institutionalised transphobia may make them difficult to implement.

Gender-affirming healthcare must be desegregated and integrated into general practice. Trans people shouldn't be forced to wait years for treatments that cis people can access from their GP. We need an informed consent model in which a trans person can be directly referred by their GP to local specialists, such as endocrinologists or speech and language therapists, rather than psychiatrists. Being trans is not a mental illness and should not be treated as such. Psychiatrists have no place in transition-related healthcare. We must end the systems that pathologise and gatekeep trans people and replace them with systems of

accessible, inclusive, and adaptive healthcare.

We need to recentre transition-related healthcare away from diagnostic assessments to the choice of patients. Decisions about our care should be made with *our* input and participation. We deserve a say in how we are treated and how that treatment is delivered, and we deserve to be listened to.

We need to train more specialists and ramp up education for healthcare professionals and support staff so that they understand trans issues and healthcare pathways. Trans specific counselling also needs to be made available, to facilitate discussions and to allow people to explore their identity and the options available to them. This could help provide some of the support that is crucially missing from current systems.

Of course, there is also a desperate need for more funding for transition-related healthcare systems, however, we also need to strengthen and increase funding for healthcare systems more generally. Good quality healthcare needs to be readily available and free at the point of use for all, trans people included.

In the UK, some of these solutions are already being implemented by NHS pilot clinics, however these schemes are relatively small and their impact is likely to be limited in the short term. They need to be radically and rapidly expanded and developed. There is no need for centralised gender identity clinics or the psychiatrists who populate them. We need to desegregate, decentralise, fund, and educate for trans healthcare.

Transition-specific healthcare systems are labyrinthine and difficult to navigate but they don't have to be. Their current chaotic, yet oppressive, design gatekeeps, delays, and denies healthcare for trans people—withholding a basic human right. We need to break free and demand better.

*If you're in a position to do so, please consider donating to a relevant cause supporting trans people's access to gender affirming healthcare. For example, in the UK, the Good Law Project's [Transgender Legal Fund](#) or their [crowdfunder for a judicial review into GIC waiting times](#).*

*You can also show support by [signing this petition](#) to ensure trans people are fully protected under any conversion therapy ban in UK.*

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## Draco, Causes We Care About



Hannah Kloft

*edited by  
Elizabeth Rose*

## Colonia Mundus: The role of ants in the Anthropocene

### Introduction

Honey-makers, plant pollinators, and the beloved mascot of cereals, the honey bee has gotten a majority of the press when it comes to endangered insects. Within the bee's scientific order, *Hymenoptera*, however, lives a cousin who hasn't always been quite as popular: the ant (Ward 2007). Found on every iceless continent, ants have been around since the dinosaurs. Rich with evolutionary experience, there are now over 12,000 species of ants worldwide performing incredible feats that are crucial to the survival of not just their own species but ours as well (Lach et. al 2010). Since the climate crisis is impacting every ecosystem on Earth, I want to emphasize the need to examine all the key players - starting from the ground up.

### Below the Surface

On a hot August day, you may have noticed ants crawling single-file through your kitchen floor or city sidewalk, circling around a tiny drop of ice cream, working in perfect harmony like a well-practiced K-pop band. Where have these small creatures come from? Better yet, where are they going? While their habits are as diverse as the number of species in their family, a large number of ants create their elaborate homes underground in colonies. Some of these colonies can be up to eight meters deep, and some spanning up to 24 miles long, the complex networks of ant colonies serve a multitude of purposes.

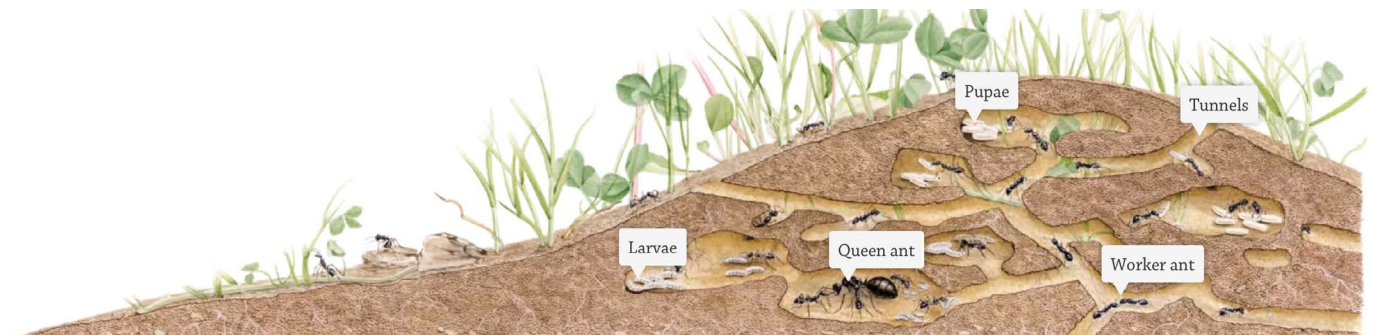


Figure 1 [DK Find Out 2022](#)



Figure 2 **Medium**

As you can see in Figure 1, goals can range from protecting and feeding the Queen, taking care of broods (eggs, larvae, and pupae), and storing food for the rest of the colony through intricate tunnels. Ant diets typically include organic matter and seeds, and their removal and redistribution of these is key to soil decomposition and plant seed dispersal within the ecosystems they inhabit - which is most! In addition, the process of burrowing tunnels turns over topsoil, which is crucial to surface hydrological processes and ecosystem fertility (Cammeraat and Risch 2008). In fact, ants turn over as much soil as earthworms, a vital means to aerate and distribute nutrients in the soil (Raman 2021). How do they do it?

### **Worker Ants + Communication Networks + Above Ground**

Most of the ants you have seen are likely to have been worker ants. Worker ants are a sisterhood of caretakers, food scavengers, waste disposers, and conflict mediators within the colony (Durant et al. 2019). Worker ants are highly skilled and multifaceted, they are also all female as male ants stay in the colony to reproduce with the queen. However, unlike other bigger-brained species, ants do not rely on learned behavior to perform tasks, they do so instinctually. Incredibly, even though they do not have ears, lungs, or audible means of communication, they can transmit messages through pheromones and vibrations which are detected in various parts of the ant's body (Holldobler and Wilson 1995). Indeed, without using words, ants can communicate twelve distinct messaging fields, ranging from danger alerts to creating territories, to sexual conveyance (Holldobler and Wilson 1990). The impressive system of communication that they have created is a testament to the closely-bound network in which they thrive. It is evolutionary networking at its best! This propinquity can be physically seen in the incredible structures they have made. Beyond their vocabulary, communicated instead by their very bodies themselves, lie a range of awe-inspiring feats of engineering. Ants craft rafts, bridges, and ladders - where the beams are their bodies and the suspension mechanisms their coordination.



Figure 3 [Chemistry World](#)

By latching on as their sisters crawl over them, ant bridges can be formed to connect the colony to the next mission that lies ahead. In the case of some species, like the fire ant *Solenopsis*, thousand-member rafts are perfectly engineered to float across rivers and survive floods without the loss of any member for hours (Milius, 2014). Whether you interpret these acts as an example of evolutionary perfection or improbability, or indeed both, I think we can all agree that ants serve as the ultimate exemplar of connection.



Figure 4 Doris Ratchford/ Flickr

By latching on as their sisters crawl over them, ant bridges can be formed to connect the colony to the next mission that lies ahead. In the case of some species, like the fire ant *Solenopsis*, thousand-member rafts are perfectly engineered to float across rivers and survive floods without the loss of any member for hours (Milius, 2014). Whether you interpret these acts as an example of evolutionary perfection or improbability, or indeed both, I think we can all agree that ants serve as the ultimate exemplar of connection.

Human animals, nonhuman animals, and the myriad of other species that live on this planet depend on healthy soil for water filtration and plant flourishing.

However, we've seen the anthropogenic devastation that has occurred in recent times, specifically since the start of the Anthropocene era, and the consequences are dramatic. According to the Soil Science Society of America, "Almost 35% of all greenhouse gases (GHG) released into the atmosphere due to anthropogenic activities since 1850 are linked to land-use changes" (SSSA 2013). And while soil science may not be the sexiest topic in the world of climate change, much of what the world depends on lies below the surface. Whether it be the depths of the ocean or the soil under our feet, some of the most intricate and vulnerable places on Earth are those that are not seen by humans. Considering the fragility and importance of ant colonies, we can see the ways in which a heating planet will affect the well-being of ant habitats: as Sankovitz points out, "Temperature is an important aspect of colony growth and survival; the centers of these nests are particularly important for providing a favorable microclimate for brood development" (Sankovitz and Purcell 2021). In a study done at Harvard Forest, a long-term ecological research site, researchers found that ants who live in warm, tropical ecosystems – which is where the majority of ants live – are at the highest risk of species loss from rising global temperatures (Diamond et al., 2011). In the most extreme cases, an "increase of just 2°C in the ant's body temperature was the difference between a fully functioning ant and one that was disoriented and constantly falling over – their critical thermal limit being around 46°C. At just 4°C above their thermal limit, the ants could not move at all" (Crew, 2021). We can see the gravity the anthropological impact can and, at this rate, *will* have on some of the longest living species on this planet. Bearing this in mind, it is essential that in order to decelerate the rate of climate change and protect non-human animals, such as ants, and the vital role they play in global ecosystems, we actually look to them as examples of how to collaborate in quiet but crucial ways.

Ant colonies, composed of expansive tunnels, physically represent the importance of community and cooperation, especially when it comes to combating climate change. We know that it will take widespread collaboration to prevent the worst outcomes for the most vulnerable populations to catastrophe, human animals and nonhuman animals alike. Ants also serve as reminders to the human species that just because we cannot see, feel, nor hear connections happening outside of our consciousness does not mean they are not valid. Whether it be a man speaking on the metro in a language we don't recognize, a child dancing thousands of miles away to rhythms we have yet to feel, or the vibration of an insect we cannot decipher, connections are nuanced and vital. If we recognize our own ignorance of others' means of connection we can begin to discover the ways in which we are actually *all* connected.

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## Edition II. *Networks and Labyrinths*

April 13, 2022

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