

## Queer Cost of Living Crisis: Interdisciplinarity (Royal Society of Edinburgh Seminar Series)

Dr Hazel Marzetti, Prof Peter Matthews, Dr Rohit K. Dasgupta and Prof Yvette Taylor

19/04/24

The below conversation took place as part of the Royal Society of Edinburgh funded Queer and the Cost of Living Crisis Seminar Series. This Series is part of Yvette Taylor's RSE Personal Fellowship on Queer Social Justice.

**Yvette Taylor (YT):** Welcome everyone to the 5th event in the Series of [Queer and the Cost of Living Crisis](#), it's nice to see new – and familiar – faces I'm going to say a few words about the series and our speakers, before coming to today's conversation, which in many ways represents a continuation of these issues and conversations: importantly, we previously heard from academics, authors, politicians and LGBTQ+ students and representatives across Scotland, exploring student voices and experiences in cost of living crisis.

In the spirit of open access, we are going to record this discussion – and I'll stop when we come into audience participation and Q+A. And in the spirit of collectively working together to create safer spaces, I'll know we'll commit to the principles of equality, diversity, and inclusion, environment in which everyone feel welcome, respected, and able to fully participate in events and activities.

Today we'll be hearing from myself, here at Strathclyde, and from Rohit K. Dasgupta, University of Glasgow, Peter Matthews, University of Stirling, Hazel Marzetti, University of Edinburgh, we'll each speak for about 15 mins, which should leave enough time for Q+A. And we're a real interdisciplinary mix ... and may we all mix productively!

I'm going to draw on my recently published book, [Working-Class Queers. Time, Place and Politics](#), published by Pluto. Which has been the long-term inspiration, and work, for the seminars' themes in reaching back and forward, across decades, political changes, transformations, and stagnations – or 'crises', that we live through, with and against. The crisis – or otherwise – of being academic (or not), having a place (or not) in higher education (including in HE disciplines and classrooms, as legitimate curriculum content and degree programmes), and as having a space in society (or not), informs all our ways of living. Or not. These are ultimately questions about leading concerned about liveable lives, or of the distribution of life and death. When said that way, these words, are heavy – just as they're heavy to carry beyond our words, or books.

I've said in the that I could tell the story of *Working-Class Queers*, in part, through the images appearing in the book: images are often inserted into books to exemplify lightly, to allow the reader – and the writer – a pause, including pausing in and with painful data. Data which refuses the story of success, of triumph over adversity, or queer working-class life getting better, or of writing another story, without pause – a moving on and away. So, I offer these book images as a way to pause on crises, to see if we can see it, them, us. And to see how these images track between the near and the far, the now and then, the them and us. I recently received an email from a queer academic from a

working-class background, responding to the book. Amongst the many things that were said in that email, they said they'd underlined the following words:

*'One significant place 'where I'm (writing) from' is the University, which itself (un)does queer-class knowledges and practices, in producing data which 'counts''*

So, I show these book images as a way to pause on crises, and what counts. To see if we can see it, them, us. And to see how these images track between the near and the far, the now and then, the them and us.



Location of GWL 1994-2007 (Taylor, 2023: 33).

My situatedness within Glasgow can, in part, be told through GWL. It speaks to the question of 'where are you from?' (I'm from Glasgow, but the pause really is in which part of Glasgow).

Glasgow's uneven regeneration can be told through GWL and has global resonances, and global effects – as we map comparisons and scales of place locally and globally.



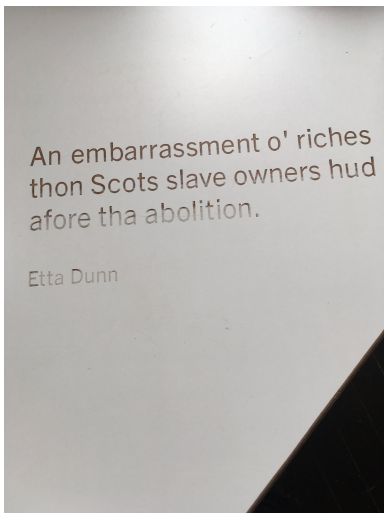
Pebble from GWL (Taylor, 2023: 36).

In this peddle, a gift acquired at GWL, I hold onto the promise and failure of embodied class politics – including a sense of the decline of the Left, it’s slipping away, as well as its grip, romanticisation and the politics of nostalgia for a past that wasn’t ours anyway. I put it down to imagine the promise of new-old solidarities within a global working-class politics. I see my own white hand.



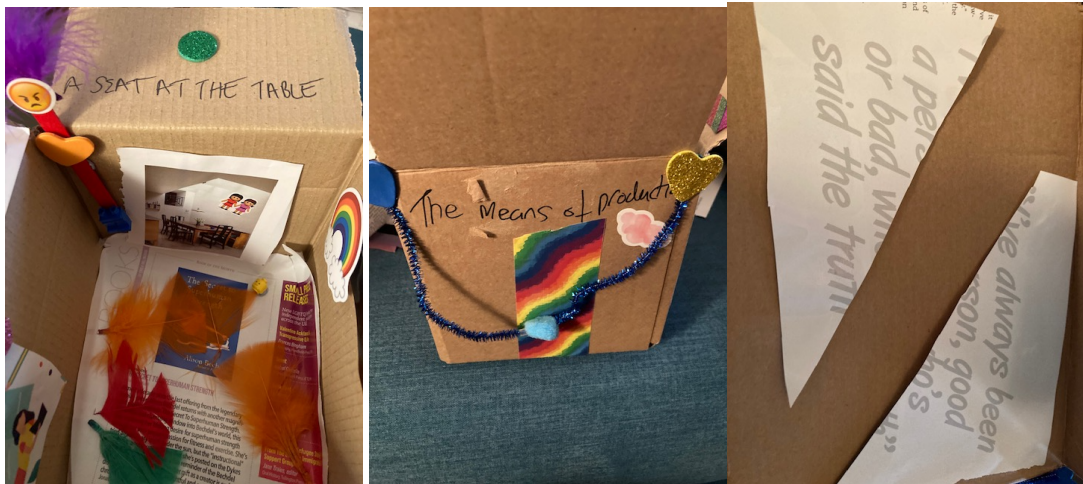
The Archive at GWL (Taylor, 2023: 37).

The Archive assembles and holds our pasts, differently, and we return to it to find ways forward. But the Equal Opps box, so familiar as institutional gloss to spray over and contain inequality – these matters are shelved in contemporary EDI vocabulary and policies.



Etta Dunn’s ‘The Baroness O’Blackness’ opening lines inscribed on a table at GWL (Taylor, 2023: 39).

In post-truth times, there’s the crisis of knowledge – depicted in the torn our message, ‘I’ve always been a person good or bad who’s said the truth’. This was from a queer workshop organized by Hazel that I took part in, and which returns us to queer-feminist responses in and against crisis and as securing some space at the table.



'Who's here, who's queer?' workshop (Taylor, 2023: 154)

For me questions – and maybe answers – are offered when we look at life outside the box, whether that be in terms of normative or queer lives, of institutional tick-boxes seemingly indicative of a transformed world of visibility and recognition, or of boxes discarded as useless rather than useful data.

I'm now going to turn to others in this interdisciplinary space, our shared table of sorts, to continue thoughts on queer and the cost-of-living crisis. I thought we'd go alphabetically with first names -

Hazel

Peter

Rohit.

**Hazel Marzetti:** Hello everyone thanks so much for coming along today, and thank you Yvette for inviting me to speak. The title of the series, the queer cost of living, perhaps has a particularly literal resonance with my own work researching LGBTQ+ suicide and suicide prevention in the UK and where I am therefore almost constantly thinking about the costs of living and about what happens when such costs become too high to bear.

Suicide is recognised as a major public health challenge shaped by social inequalities, requiring complex responses and solutions to prevent it. Globally around 700,000 people die by suicide each year, with around twenty times more surviving a suicide attempt, and amongst those people lesbian gay bisexual trans and queer people are consistently and significantly found to be more likely to both think about and attempt suicide around the world.

Here in the UK, the best evidence available from the National Confidential Enquiry into Suicide and Safety in Mental Health, has found that around 5% of all people who die by suicide in mental health services are thought to be LGB, with trans people making up a further 1% of all those deaths. In my work, I am really interested in developing better understandings of what goes on beyond those numbers, today I'm going to give you a whistle stop tour of two of my completed projects, and one

that has just started and if you have any questions or would like to connect further I'll pop my contact details at the end.

To start this talk I'm going to talk about the Understanding LGBTQ+ Youth Suicide in Scotland study that I worked on between 2017 and 2020, at the University of Glasgow with Professors Rory O'Connor, Lisa McDaid and Rich Mitchell. In this project we were really interested in speaking to LGBTQ+ young people in-depth to develop a better understanding of what had contributed to suicidal feelings, what helped keep young people safe from suicide, and what they believed would reduce LGBTQ+ youth suicide in Scotland in the future. To do so we interviewed twenty-four LGBTQ+ young people aged sixteen to twenty-four living in Scotland, all of whom had thought about suicide, ten of whom had attempted suicide, and of each of those ten they had attempted suicide more than once.

For a bit of key background, in contemporary times suicide most broadly is conceptualised as a mental health problem, most usually the tragic outcome of untreated or under-treated depression. And when we look at studies and policies related to LGBTQ+ suicide specifically, in some places we see this broad approach kind of mirrored, with LGBTQ+ suicide seen as a psychological or mmhmm problem. And in response to this, suicide prevention is usually seen as something that should be provided through mental health services, often through clinical care.

However there's a second conceptualisation offered of LGBTQ+ suicide, and that is one of suicide as a response, to homophobia, biphobia and transphobia in wider society, in essence a social problem, often located within the actions of so-called bad apples who might bully or commit hate crimes. And therefore it is suggested that interventions in this instance would tackle those external origins through anti-hate work. What is clear is that whether in policy or research the idea that LGBTQ+ people are facing systemically higher rates of suicidal distress is taken as a given.

In the LGBTQ+ Youth Suicide in Scotland project however I think the key thing we learned was about the contributors to LGBTQ+ suicide and the importance of thinking about how those psychological and social factors interact with one another, and the ways in which LGBTQ+ specific contributors, and those contributors known more generally to impact upon young people, and indeed all people who experience suicidal thoughts or who attempt suicide, and how they can exacerbate one another, resulting in suicidal distress. This is particularly important as when it comes to considering LGBTQ+ suicide unfortunately often the research focuses just on those LGBTQ+ factors alone, and forgets to think more holistically about LGBTQ+ people as more than just a sexual orientation or gender identity.

Now this isn't suggesting we should forget about those LGBTQ+ specific contributors, but instead it is to say that they must be thought about in interaction with other elements of people's lives, other identities, other experiences. To explain this I'll share a couple of examples from our research.

Now adverse childhood experiences such as abuse and neglect are well established as having a significant detrimental impact on young people's mental health and are associated with a much higher prevalence of suicidal thoughts and attempts. Many young people in this study had experienced physical, emotional or sexual abuse, and here on the slide we see Yasmin discussing the ways in which she internalised the abuse that she faced from her stepfather, beginning to believe

that she was not meant to be happy, and in turn making her feel somewhat hopeless, something that we know can contribute to suicidal distress.

For some the home environment became difficult after coming out to a family. So Lily here acts as one example of a range of instances of what we've termed queer entrapment, that were found throughout participants' narratives. Those participants described parental non-acceptance of LGBTQ+ identity as presented to them as unable to be changed, even if later it was. And whilst participants' parents were presumed to be expressing a rejection of a child's LGBTQ+ identity in a manner that suggested it was perhaps possible to separate sexual orientation or gender identity from a child as a whole person, for the participants that gender identity and sexual orientation was such a fundamental part of their sense of self that rejection of it was understood as a rejection of them as a whole person.

Young people in the study spoke about how a broader community climate in which they lived acted as a subtle yet important contributor to suicidal distress. And this could include subtle everyday comments, questions or looks, that reinforced the idea that being cisgender and being heterosexual was expected of them, and that it was thought about as being normal and desirable, creating a climate in which bullying and isolation were possible.

We can see in the quote on the slide describing homophobic bullying at school as a very normal, routine, and expected part of his experiences as a non-binary, gay young person, and this is really common across participants in the study. Many participants had experienced bullying within a school environment, but for young people who had had difficulties with coming out school could also be a place in which there was a great need in order to achieve and do well, to move away to university, which for the majority of participants in this study was the only gateway they envisaged to living away from home, and therefore schools could be quite a pressurised environment.

For two participants in this study a problem experienced with an educational assessment had acted as a catalyst for a suicide attempt. It was not however that these individual experiences of difficulties at home or in education that created the suicidal crisis, but instead a constellation of multiple of these experiences that came together in ways that made the participants feel the cost-of-living had become too high, and that life therefore had become unliveable for them. It was within this context that suicide could become visibilised as a way of escaping from the situation to which the participants felt there was no alternative available resolution.

Although understanding these contributors is a really important part of the puzzle I was also interested, given the wide recognition of LGBTQ+ people as experiencing systemically higher rates of suicidal distress, in what was being done about it. And so I was delighted in 2020 to join the Suicide in/as Politics project, where I've worked with colleagues Professor Amy Chandler, Dr Anna Jordon and Doctor Alex Oaten to critically analyse the UK's suicide prevention policies and political debates 2009-'19, chosen as the eleven year period following the 2008 financial crash, as recessions are known to have a significant detrimental impact on public mental health, and in particular on suicide rates. Within this we were really interested in understanding how policies and political debates attended to communities who are known to be disproportionately affected by suicide, and so within this work I led on LGBT suicide.

To start the project we completed a critical policy analysis of eight suicide prevention policies in use across the UK during the time period, and a little over seven and a half thousand references to suicide in the UK's four parliaments and assemblies. Then in the second phase of the research we took those findings from phase one out and shared it with communities known to be disproportionately affected by suicide, through a series of creative workshops to see what they thought. And it is the findings from phase two that I'll briefly share with you now.

So here we have a collage created by Holly in one of our workshops, responding to data on what politicians and policymakers had said about LGBTQ+ suicide, and in particular to this quote we can see at the centre of the image, from Northern Ireland's suicide prevention policy Protect Life 2, which says that sexual orientation, bisexuality, and homosexuality are risk factors for suicide, particularly in adolescence. Now although this image might look really bright and joyful, celebrating themes of love, community, family, and marriage, from the explanation of this collage, which I've shared an extract from over on the left of the slide, we can see that this joyfulness, some might say pride, is coming from a real place of resistance to the pathologisation of gay and bisexual sexual orientations, in which Holly describes how for her homophobia is the real risk factor.

Explaining the piece Holly [interviewee] spoke about a time at which she'd gone to hospital to seek help during a suicidal crisis and mentioned that her partner was a woman. This then, she felt, became the only thing that her clinician wanted to ask her about. And that was difficult for Holly not only because she felt hugely supported by her partner and her community – and so this pathologisation of her sexuality was hurtful – but also because it prevented her from disclosing to her doctor all the things that she felt had contributed to that crisis.

This explanation from Holly really connects to those same issues that we were talking about and were brought up by the young people in the first study, that within social, political, and research narratives we've become so used to LGBTQ+ people being viewed as at risk of suicide it's been extremely difficult for understandings to push beyond an almost pipeline explanation of LGBTQ+ as at risk of homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia – sometimes called minority stress – which are then understood as leading to suicide, rendering it virtually impossible to think about why some LGBTQ+ people experience minority stresses and go on to feel suicidal whilst others don't.

We now move onto this second collage by Will [participant], who attended a different workshop series from Holly. His collage is entitled 'I am not a risk factor: The light at the end of the tunnel is a rainbow', and Will's piece here responds to the same quotations as Holly's, as well as a second one that we see further down the piece, from the Scottish parliament. And again I understand this as an image of resistance, in which we can see the spatial positioning of this representation of a politician to communicate a kind of far off or out of touch feeling about politicians more broadly. This reflects a broader sentiment expressed by participants, which we can see over on the right-hand side, explicitly expressed by Sam, who was in a third workshop series, that whilst politicians wanted to be seen as saying the right thing about LGBTQ+ communities' mental health their inactions were felt to be indicative of a low level of commitment to change. And indeed there was some evidence of that in the policies themselves.

So this is a quote from Preventing Suicide in England's strategy, which states that only some high risk groups should be selected for prioritised prevention, and those would be the groups that were able to be monitored and evaluated for effectiveness. Unfortunately, at the time there was a lack of

prevalence data on the rates of suicide in LGBTQ+ communities, and therefore without being able to guarantee a quantifiable outcome there was a lack of willingness to invest in interventions for LGBTQ+ communities. However, simultaneously there was in evidence efforts being made to improve data monitoring called for within the policies, resulting in a maintenance of what we've called a statistical dead end.

Participants also commented more broadly on suicide prevention methods promised within the policies and political debates, and these promises tended to focus on kind of individualistic ideas of suicide prevention. Things like surveillance methods, restricting access to lethal means, encouraging people to talk about suicidal feelings in order to connect them with support, often through the form of clinical care. And whilst participants were welcoming of the idea of talking about suicidal feelings, they were concerned that focusing on this alone could be short-sighted, and that along with encouraging people to talk about suicidal feelings there also needed to be material and structural changes, with participants critiquing the contribution of austerity politics, border controls, and lack of public services on people's suicidal distress. Without changes to these some participants suggested that rather than preventing suicides we might only be able to postpone deaths.

Participants particularly critiqued encouragements directed at suicidal people to reach out and to talk, because it appeared to take as their starting point the idea that suicidal people weren't already trying to do this. Participants draw on their own experiences to discuss times at which they, or their loved ones, had reached out, but there simply hadn't been support available. This was a thing that they felt that governments could and should intervene into. They made the case for an almost hypocrisy that saw governments telling suicidal people to reach out at a time where current demand for mental health services was not being met, and indeed that people reaching out faced dismissive receptions, and were either refused or significantly delayed access to treatment due to extremely long waiting lists, with one participant, Sam, talking about how the current system appeared to try and funnel as many people off in different directions for webpages and apps, which she felt were dead ends away from reaching the care that they so often needed and desired. This dismissiveness at a time when campaigns were constantly telling people to reach out also appeared to me to enact a type of silencing that invalidated the distress that was felt.

Now as I said this is a real whistlestop tour and I'm aware that I'm coming to time, but I have curated a digital gallery of all of the art and poetry from across this project. So if you'd like to know more you can have a look here. There's a QR code, but I'll also drop it in the chat. Or alternatively if you'd like to talk there's going to be a Q&A later on I think. And otherwise please feel free to get in touch. I'm always absolutely delighted to have a chat with people. And there is a the website for the new project that I'm about to start, following Suicide in/as Politics, so thank you very much.

YT: Thank you so much Hazel, that was brilliant. And people can be starting to think about questions, you can put them in the chat, but I think for now we'll move on to our next speaker. Lots of claps Hazel. Peter are you ready to go?

**Peter Matthews:** So thank you very much for inviting me today to talk about the queer and the cost-of-living crisis. And what I'm going to be talking about is derived from a major research project that I'm leading, funded by the Nuffield Foundation. I'm Professor Peter Matthews, professor of social policy in LGBT studies at University of Stirling, and I'll be coming at this from that very social policy focus. So when I come at this issue I start from the premise that the challenge, as ever, actually is



that we know very little still about LGBT populations. Indeed my project was the sort of first project in Great Britain to be looking at LGBT people's experiences of accessing welfare and how they might accumulate assets to support their own welfare over their life course.

And this is basically because we've only really started data collection in major surveys around twenty years ago, and this still is only on lesbians, gays, and bisexual people in a very boring limited sense of it. That's literally what the question asks. We've now all experienced the question because it was in the last census. But actually what I find very interesting when, now we are gathering this data is we see at a societal level quite a complex, and possibly contradictory story around LGBT experiences and how they might interact with the cost-of-living crisis, and what the outcomes for individuals might be.

And coming at this from a social policy perspective, for me it's important to understand existing income inequalities if we want to understand the cost-of-living crisis, and how current social policy, and in particular social security policy, might interact with that, and then what the impact might be on LGBT people. And this is where we get into what I find is quite complex and contradictory. Because if we look at the previous research on LGB populations in the UK gay men on average earn less than heterosexual men, whereas lesbians on average earn more than heterosexual women. And some of this is down to occupational segregation and occupational choice, so it's down to sort of different experiences of child rearing and things like that. But also there is still something within sort of gay men and lesbians beyond that that's not, yeah, an unexplained difference between the heterosexual population there.

But then also if we look across bisexual populations they have much poorer wellbeing and much poorer outcomes than anyone else. But also, interestingly as well, LGB people are more likely to live in the private rented sector, and we know a lot from the research on generation rent and the private rented sector more broadly around the high costs in the private rented sector, but also low quality of housing in the private rented sector as well. So that's going to be an impact for them.

Also, from my own research many years ago as well, we know that in Scotland lesbian, gays and bisexuals are more likely to live in the most deprived neighbourhoods in Scotland. And I think this is particularly interesting because those neighbourhoods aren't sort of trendy inner city gentrifying neighbourhoods, sort of the traditional gaybourhoods. If you know deprived neighbourhoods in Scotland, they are peripheral social housing estates, and not necessarily good places, nice places to live in.

Moving onto my own research project. So in this project we've analysed some really large datasets at a UK-wide level, so Understanding Society, The UK Household Longitudinal Survey. We're also looking at The Family Resources Survey, which is run by the DWP, that collects data on, you know, the fieldwork is particularly focused on people who claim benefits and people who are experiencing material and financial deprivation. But also The Wealth and Assets Survey, which we always joke if anybody comes to your door and knocks on your door to say 'do you want to take part in The Wealth and Assets Survey?' just slam the door in their face. Because it collects so much data on wealth and assets, and if you take part in it you have to sit there with your pension statement and everything for hours going through the questionnaire. But it's a really, really rich dataset. Nowhere else in the world has a dataset like it.

For our analysis here though we get more of this complex picture. So from our analysis so far we know that gay men are more likely to claim working age welfare benefits. We think this might be down to the fact that gay men are more likely to work in sectors like leisure and retail where you're going to cycle in and out of employment more likely. But also interestingly lesbians when they have children are more likely to claim child-related benefits than their heterosexual counterparts. So it's just that lesbian mothers have lower household incomes because of the way that child benefit now works.

Bisexuals are more likely to claim disability benefits, and really interestingly that's even when you control for disability and ill health within the model. So it's not just that bisexual people are more likely to be disabled and experiencing ill health. When they are experiencing those things they are then more likely to have a very low income and have to access disability benefits.

And also, we'll move onto wealth, and the sorts of assets that we expect people to gain over their life course to support their welfare in the long-term. We see a very bifurcated distribution for gay men. So we have this large proportion of gay men with very few assets living in the private rented sector, but on the flipside you have people like me, who are more likely to own assets over £250,000 which make, basically in the UK makes you a wealthy person. Lesbians across the piece are less wealthy than their heterosexual counterparts. And then when we look at the bisexuals they are basically more likely to experience hardships across a range of different outcome measures.

But now I want to sort of now move onto, so that's the kind of, the big picture, the demographic picture, what about social security? What's happening here, with the interactions with social security? And this was a really key interest in our project. And I just want to start off by saying that there was never a golden age of the British welfare state, and it's a myth in social policy that I really, really hate. The welfare state, as it was created in 1945, was designed around Beveridge's liberal ideas of creating an extremely parsimonious welfare state. Beveridge's biggest fear was that by creating the welfare state we'd stop the middle-classes and the respectable working-classes saving for their own betterment. And so it's always been a very parsimonious welfare state.

And because of that it was designed in a very gendered and heteronormative way. The basic unit of welfare in the UK is the family, and the family is supposed to have a male breadwinner who keeps that unit going. And in a paper with my colleague Lee Gregory, in *The Journal of Social Policy*, we suggested that the social citizenship, that it was argued the post-war welfare state created in 1945, was actually a social cis-het-izenship. It was designed around a very specific type of citizen, and queer lives really don't fit into that.

So to understand this more we conducted over 110 interviews with LGBT people who claimed welfare in the last eight years, and from that I just wanted to pick out some key findings that might be useful for our discussion today. So first of all we did find queer joy. So as well as those sort of awful stories that kind of link to the previous presentation, around sort of suicide – yeah, the welfare state is grim, it has you living in poverty – we did also find stories of queer joy. Actually we didn't find stories of people being rejected by their family, and actually people did have a lot of support from their families and a lot of support from kinship networks to understand the benefits system and access the benefits system.

We also have come up with this idea of the queer cushion, and this is the logical families, the families of choice, who are sharing financial and material resources amongst themselves. But concerningly though in our research we found that trans people could be excluded from these support networks. Now we're moving onto kind of the late stage of our analysis as well what we also uncovered is a real issue around the overlaps of shames. So there is a shame around accessing the benefits system, and this is going to overlap for our LGBT people with the shame of their identities. Yes, they might be out and proud now, but there will have been times in their life when they have been ashamed of who they are.

Most problematically we see this among disabled queer people, who are, when they are applying for PIP, personal independence payment, a truly awful process, they're having their sexual and gender identity questioned by the system, particularly their gender identity questioned by the system. But they're also having their identity as a disabled person questioned by the system. And so that really, yeah these people are more likely to engage in this system, from what I've said already, and those experiences are going to be quite poor.

In terms of future research, I think there's so much more to be done on lesbian, gays and bisexuals. From the data we have we've barely started to scratch the surface here to get this big picture of what's happening out there. But also there's some really exciting opportunities for understanding trans experiences. There's some amazing research coming out of Sweden and The Netherlands, where using administrative data – because trans people show up really obviously in administrative data, because their gender markers change, if they remain within the binary – and so you can do some amazing research on outcomes using administrative data for trans people. It's really telling us a lot, and I think it'd be really exciting to explore those opportunities to tell us more, to really understand what's happening in terms of the cost-of-living crisis and LGBT people.

But to end, in terms of thinking about what a queer state might look like, I've talked about social policy a lot, I think going back to that idea of how the welfare state was created, one thing that has really come out of this project is we, to queer social security benefits we need to focus these around individual needs. And I've put this in a very basic way of we have a taxation system that's based on the individual, we have a benefit system that's based on the heteronormative nuclear family. We need to scrap that. That's outdated, it was outdated in the 1970s, it was outdated in 1945. But we need to redesign that system around individual need. And I'd say that was a queer act. It removes heteronormativity from the system.

Another thing I'd like to explore as well is the idea of universal basic assets. So rather than a universal basic income the idea that you're given a chunk of assets when you're a young person and then you can decide how you use them in your life. And part of that could be exploring your queerness and becoming yourself in the world. And that's, one of the findings in our research was sort of people losing assets, getting into debt, in that process of discovering themselves. So a universal basic asset gives people that solid foundation to work from. And I'll end there.

YT: Thanks so much Peter. Lots of really interesting ideas, lots of food for thought there. We might be asking you to redistribute your assets at some point Peter. But for now we'll move on to Rohit. Thanks Rohit.

**Rohit K. Dasgupta:** So thanks a lot Yvette for inviting me to participate in this. So I'll move you all away a little bit from the UK to India, which is the field of my research. And this work actually came out of this AHRC grant that I got called Framing the Nation, which looked very specifically at the twin issues of the COVID pandemic and The Citizenship Amendment Act, which I'll speak a little bit about in the presentation, and how it was impacting people in India. So it's going to be a little bit scripted, I've got a bit written, but, yeah, there are no jokes, but if there are they'll be all scripted.

So this project started life when I was leaving Kolkata in May 2021, in the wake of a devastating outbreak on COVID-19 in India. The tragedy which saw hundreds of thousands lose their lives was an outcome partially created due to the negligence of the Indian government, which particularly had shattering impact on vulnerable communities, queer and trans people, working-class, and the caste oppressed. I develop queer patchworks as an approach to narrate the various ways through which queer and trans communities in India have been navigating survival during this extraordinary moment. My interlocutors lived marginalised lives within various forms of precarity shaping their lived experiences, from everyday homophobia to caste and class discrimination and joblessness.

Niharika Banerjea and Kath Browne ask 'what makes life liveable for LGBTQ people outside of equalities legislation?' thus offering us a new way to explore liveabilities across transnational boundaries. And this provides for me a very useful framework to disrupt and to understand the contemporary moment. So WhatsApp texts, digital conversations over Zoom, cooking together, and on the banks of the River Hooghly form the patchwork of this project. These narratives stand as a form of witness, belonging, intimacy, and care, where lives are not just a tragedy waiting for death, but also resistance and refusal to accept the status quo.

So I'll just take you a little bit through my methodology. So methodologically speaking this work builds on the critical cultural studies tradition of Stuart Hall, tracing the relationship between community making, care, and queer liberalism through diverse cultural texts. Given the very important intervention that was made by Günel and Watanabe about the changing nature of fieldwork that has been engendered through the pandemic, neoliberal working conditions, and expectations of work-life balance, family and professional obligations, spending a long time in the field has been virtually impossible. And responding to these fieldwork challenges they offer a patchwork ethnography, to respond to short-term field visits and the very fragmentary nature of data collection, which are both innovative and also not bound by the fixity of disciplinary ethnographic demands.

And I think I should probably also mention over here that something that, you know, Yvette asked earlier in the kind of seminar today, what counts as knowledge production? And I think that's something I'm really quite keen to also, you know, discuss as part of this work. Doing fieldwork, in India and more broadly in South Asia, has been a challenge during those two years, and has been patchy and anxiety ridden. I made three trips between 2019 and 2021, navigating visa regimes and strict border lockdowns. At the same time I also got involved in multiple mutual aid groups, springing all over WhatsApp, and attending community meetings on Zoom and Skype. These ended up becoming the field for my research, Ethnographers have been adapting to various fieldwork challenges, but there has been very little attention paid to how these practices are also reshaped by our own lives and personal concerns.

So I also offer queer patchwork as a framework to refer to a state of mind which includes encounters with the precarities we witness and the injuries we've personally suffered during this pandemic. So for me the patchworks is not just about the process of doing fieldwork, but also the very writing of it, given the multiple disruptions and tough life conditions which has also required a need of creative interpretation of concepts and stories that are built within these queer patchworks.

So what I'm going to do is I'm going to present you with two narratives, which I call assemblage one and assemblage two, and then hopefully by the end of it I'll be able to just pick a few things out. So the first assemblage is lockdown and limits of liberalism. I'm sitting in a roadside teashop with Amuldo. Amuldo lives in Barasat, a suburb of West Bengal. He had just lost his job during the first lockdown when the garment making factory he worked in laid off workers due to the lack of orders and a halt in production. Dire months followed, during which Amuldo was convinced that it was the state government who was to blame for his current situation. And I've got one of the quotes over there, so I won't read through it. But basically he says 'I will die of starvation rather than COVID'.

During the first lockdown within days we saw signs of mass hunger, with growing queues outside relief centres distributing food and essentials. The government of India was unprepared with even elementary protection like the mass deployment of PPEs, hospital beds, procuring oxygen, or providing relief. In fact, as Hasmandar points out, the response was, and I quote, 'locking down the poor through a stringent and draconian programme that was indifferent to the majority of the workforce in the unorganised sector, many of whom worked in India's entertainment and creative industries'.

So a few days later I was waiting again for another friend, this time an actor in the Bengali film industry. I was in the Barista café, it has been almost two years since I was last there. As I walked to place my order I was told 'you can't order in person any more sir. Find a seat and use the QR code to place your order. You will need a WhatsApp number in order to place your order'. I protested, I did not have an Indian phone, so I will not be able to do any of that. This was a new digital India, new but also already very present, or rather, should I say, one of the multiple Indias that exist. But cafés like Barista which have sprung all over in the last two decades cater to the new professional disposable income class. The idea that one would not have a working smartphone to place their order, to come here is unthinkable. And I wondered if this was exactly the kind of neoliberal India that Amuldo was railing against.

The benefits of globalisation had hardly made any difference to Amuldo. It was far easier for him to blame the Bihari migrants and Muslims. It was easier than accepting that it was the lack of robust cultural policy or labour rights that had lost him his job, rather than migrants who had moved here. Amuldo was hopeful that somehow if the Saffron Party came to power in Kolkata all would be well – and by Saffron Party he means BJP, which is the current kind of Hindutva, you know, neo-fascist party which is in the centre. So then we had this conversation, 'but what about the poor record on women's rights and LGBT rights? They will threaten our very existence'. To which Amuldo says 'what do those rights mean to me when I can't even eat? You fight for these rights. I need to feed my family'.

And I kind of want to invoke Lauren Berlant over here and ask 'what kind of political and economic demands does this present moment raise and require of ourselves? How does one remain compassionate in light of these contradictory, born through anxious feelings about a changing

political economic order, actions and sentiments? Is Amuldo right about the failure of coalitional politics, and is it worth to reflect on the very material disconnect between our lives and how we perform queerness, fluctuating between liberal identity politics and fraught, precarious liveable conditions?

The next time I heard from Amuldo it was a WhatsApp message. So I've got the message over there. He sent me a video that was doing its rounds on several WhatsApp groups. The video had an image of a group of people attending mosque, taken weeks before the lockdown was announced in India, which purported that Muslims and mosques were primarily responsible for the spread of COVID. When I challenged Amuldo about the misinformation that was being spread he doubled down to tell me this was all part of a larger conspiracy, where the West Bengal government was playing appeasement politics by not challenging the Muslim community.

Showing solidarity or challenging Islamophobia has often led to this charge of playing appeasement politics. In fact even as recently as march 2022 the prime minister himself accused the West Bengal chief minister for appeasement. In the course of this kind of, you know, thinking about surveillance, thinking about care, I also wanted to use Amuldo's account to show how incitement and hate was being conducted through WhatsApp vigilantism during this global pandemic, demonstrating the tensions between sexual and class precarity, alongside religious otherness.

So I'll move onto my next assemblage, which I call queer care. Shiuni is a trans sex worker. In our first conversation since lockdown was announced she sent me a single sentence, '[Indian language]', 'we will not live'. I sent her a strong sympathetic reply back saying she should not lose hope and wanted to know if she wanted to meet up. At this point Delta was ravaging through the city, and I was cautiously trying to isolate and also make arrangements to return to the United Kingdom. We decided to have a quick chat on Zoom.

When I saw Shiuni I told her she looked tired. She gave me a slight smile to say she needed space to breathe. The lockdown in India has, amongst other things, revealed that for some people like Shiuni there was no before and after the COVID crisis. As caste oppressed trans women working as a sex worker her body had already been marked for failure, a slow death, to again borrow Berlant's term. Berlant notes that slow death does not prosper in traumatic events, but it is rather an ongoing process of temporal environments through the ordinariness of everyday life.

The structural inequality that frames the lives of people like Shiuni adds to the suffering. Populations that are marked for wearing out. Shiuni made these constant references to shomage, shomage or society, which debilitated her. Jasbir Puar argues that debilitation is a product of capitalist exploitation, where certain subjects are coded as non-productive, and debilitation functions as a form of value extraction for otherwise disposable bodies. Shiuni was particularly irritated by the many NGOs who she said 'use me to get their funds and are not even providing the basic food that we need to survive'. Paul Boyce has argued that the construction of male-to-male sexuality put forward through HIV/AIDS programming in India prescribed particular sexual subjectivities and categories which are widely contested, and intervention and support programmes premised on donor expectations rather than community demands.

This was something that was repeated by other trans activists, such as Reinar Roy, a trans activist with Shombabuna Trust, who along with local organisers at that time started to fundraise for 250

trans people with a fixed monthly income of 2000 rupees, or £20 per month, for a brief period whilst other forms of employment were closed due to the lockdown. Shiuni describes her life as a struggle, one that has been ongoing for a while, with the hope that this will change. In many ways she was optimistic. This was a transient period and it would not stay the same for long. She saw the pandemic as a manifestation of how everything, from the queer rights movements to local politics, has been driven by capital exacerbating precarity, especially within the trans community in India.

Sara Ahmed argues that we struggle against structures, but struggle doesn't always lead to transformation. Rather it is the slow chipping away of the oppressive structures that have caused it in the first place. Shiuni has been doing this work of chipping away at the oppressive structure since 2019, when I first met her, challenging funding regimes, donor interventions, and privileged NGO workers. Shiuni saw initiatives such as the fundraiser, which was led by grassroots activists, as effective ways of supporting the community, especially when large NGOs had been quiet, and not providing the support that individuals such as her expected. This was a direct example of queer care according to her.

Queer utopian narratives would serve to imagine a future through normative imaginaries engaging in a politics of visibility and homonormative legitimacy, instead of questioning the very nature of where this aspiration leads to is exactly the kind of issue which marks bodies such as Shiuni's for slow death. How do we then understand queer care, and what exactly can queer care look like? Shiuni tells me, and I've got the quote over there, so I won't read it. Care of course is a contested term, who is cared for and who is deserving of care?

When the pandemic struck and the west quickly called for a lockdown, implementing furlough schemes to safeguard its workplaces, places like Indian saw contracts cancelled, garment manufacturers and producers losing billions as the border closed. The government scrambled to put together flights and quarantine hotels whilst it's own migrants were left in limbo as they lost jobs, were unable to travel, and sanitised using disinfectants not meant for the human body. Bodies of daily wage workers, just like trans people, were not seen worthy of state care or state intervention.

Shiuni's unhesitating narrative stands as an invitation or beacon through which painful, sometimes shameful, experiences and feelings are pressed into recognition. Shiuni and I met briefly just before I left Kolkata. We went for a walk by the river Hooghly. As the lights dimmed around us and we looked at the distant horizon Shiuni asked 'will things ever be the same Rohita?' The question remained unanswered. So I'll end at that. Thank you very much.

YT: Thank you so much Rohit. That was great. I'll just stop our recording.

End of Transcript.