

Not normal but ordinary

Living against the culture wars

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Gender has become a key ideological, legislative and organisational concern for the hard right on a global scale. The social acceptance and political representation of trans people and gender non-conformity joins questions of racial diversity, gender equality and climate change as hallmarks of what the right, in their attempt to reshape the political terrain into a series of interlocking ‘culture wars’, refer to as ‘woke’ ideology. While many dismiss the culture wars as a politics of distraction, a way to divert our attention away from deteriorating economic conditions, here I work from the premise that this is only their surface utility. Rather, questions of culture, identity and nation function as legible and charged images through which experiences of infrastructural decline, loss of status and fear of unknown futures are negotiated. In their capacity to condense complex historical processes into powerful moral panics, the culture wars function as a tool for sewing together otherwise diverse constituencies, scrambling older political categories through what William Callison and Quinn Slobodian have described as ‘diagonalism’.¹ Inhabiting the space opened by the crumbling of state welfare and social infrastructure, as well as left institutions (unions, political parties) in retreat, diagonalism allows for constituencies to be peeled off through appeals to nativism, nature or family values. In diagonalist politics, wellness gurus, former Marxists, critics of pharmaceutical companies, gun-toting libertarians, anti-abortion activists, Christian evangelicals, Muslim manosphere influencers, incel podcasters, trad wives, astrologers and more, can find common cause.

The culture wars are propelled by the logic of the zero-sum game. As I have written with colleagues elsewhere, ‘If you believe the fulfilment of another’s desire is always at the expense of your own, then someone else’s

gain, however minor, will always be your loss’.² In Britain, this language of loss is used to conjure a mythic ‘white working class’ who are understood to have been ‘left behind’ by globalisation at the hands of metropolitan elites. In the familiar telling of this story, racialised outsiders – the illegal immigrant, the Muslim, the Black youth – are the immediate beneficiaries of the establishment’s betrayal of the innocent white native. In recent years, we’ve seen this racial story spawn a gendered variant. What Sivamohan Valluvan, Amit Singh and James Kneale have described as the ‘distinctly contemporary nationalist narratives of decline and grievance’ have been remade as a story about the threat of ‘gender ideology’ to proper, dignified gender roles, the family and the nation.³ The culture wars thus frame any increase in relative power and dignity of women or trans people as a threat to men, cisgender people and the national polity as a whole.

The culture wars, however, are not merely a rhetorical exercise but a legislative one. To give some examples: in 2020, the Hungarian parliament imposed new legislation preventing legal gender recognition for trans and intersex people, and updated the constitution in terms drawn from culture war rhetoric, stating: ‘Hungary shall protect the right of children to their identity in line with their sex at birth, and shall ensure an upbringing in accordance with the values based on our homeland’s constitutional identity and Christian culture.’⁴ In the US, there has been a wave of anti-trans legislation, taking aim at participation in sports in schools, gender-affirming healthcare and use of public toilets. In Britain, new legislation has been introduced to prevent access to puberty blockers for young people. At the time of writing, dozens more bills are working their way through national legislatures around the world.

One key legislative and rhetorical focus is on trans women's access to women-only spaces (hospital wards, changing rooms, toilets), but the same gendered anxieties also animate the claim that masculinity is under attack by 'woke' ideology. As Felix Del Campo observes, in the hard right discourse, the 'appreciation of "masculine virtues" as fundamental pillars of an organic, ethnically homogeneous political community appears alongside anti-genderism'.⁵ This concern with 'remasculinisation' is spearheaded by right-wing digital content producers, such as Andrew Tate, Jordan Peterson, Sneako and others who have grown large followings on YouTube and TikTok and via messaging apps and alternative video streaming platforms such as Rumble. As Haslop and colleagues observe in their research on Tate, 'platform affordances, such as visibility, anonymity, algorithmic politics, echo chambers, as well as the "disinhibition effect" ... enable misogyny and anti-feminist activism to thrive in digital spaces'.⁶ As digital life becomes entangled with all aspects of the social, the 'manosphere' – as these circuits of networked misogyny and aggrieved masculinity are known – has set up shop in the cultural mainstream. Teachers, for example, regularly attest to the reach and prominence of manospheric misogyny in the classroom, and to the knowing use of its provocative idiom by teenage boys.

According to Judith Butler, in this right-wing ecosystem, gender has come to function as a 'phantasm', condensing economic and social anxieties. This 'catchall phantasm' allows for gender non-conformity to be figured as 'a threat to all of life, civilization, society, thought' by those who wish to return us to a 'patriarchal dream-order'.⁷ The identification of this phantasm offers a useful means of apprehending the psychic dimension of moral panics. However, this approach suggests that 'gender' is foremost in most people's minds and is the site of dramatic social conflict. In this article, I suggest that the tools of cultural studies might allow for us to grasp the ways in which 'everyday informal life'⁸ can run counter to this mediatised phantasm. Butler's notional solution to the culture wars is to issue what Brock Colyar has described as 'a boilerplate call for collective action by the oppressed'.⁹ While this would certainly be a welcome political development, it nonetheless continues to work on the assumption that people's political attachments are already clearly defined and that the task at

hand is merely to unify them. I propose that instead we need to attend to the ways in which the culture wars may fail to recruit willing soldiers, the ways in which people live against the paranoid logic of *ressentiment*. I am concerned with the contexts in which the psychic pull of identity – and gender identity specifically – may recede in the face of social connections that run along other channels, stake other claims, or offer other pleasures. First, I'll suggest a turn from queer theory to cultural studies as a conceptual move away from a critique of 'norms' towards an assessment of the 'ordinary'. I'll then consider 'conviviality' as a useful theoretical tool, before considering the work of two contemporary photographers, Roman Manfredi and Mahtab Hussain, and their depictions of masculinity.

The problem with normal

The watchword of the culture wars project is 'normal'. The so-called 'left behind' – the abandoned denizens of Britain's deindustrialised heartlands – are understood as 'normal'. But normal does other work too. Professor Eric Kaufmann, author of *Whiteshift* and representative of this hard right project's academic flank says, 'If politics in the West is ever to return to normal rather than becoming even more polarized, white interests will need to be discussed.'¹⁰ Normal here stands for the restoration of an uncontested majoritarianism. And, of course, in their slogan 'adult human female' tweeted ad nauseam and emblazoned on t-shirts, key transphobic lobby group, the LGB Alliance, are staking their own claim to 'normal'. In this, they align perfectly with political elites, including former UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak whose 2023 Conservative Party speech insisted, 'we shouldn't get bullied into believing that people can be any sex they want to be. They can't. A man is a man and a woman is a woman – that's just common sense.'¹¹ Normal here is not figured as mundane or resigned, but as dignified, rational, natural and scientific.

In this context, I want to suggest that queer theory's critique of norms might be more of a hindrance than a help. When 'normal' becomes the explicit framing of a hard right project, there is little to be gained from observing the limitations of 'normal' – it is precisely these limitations that are being claimed and defended. Further, queer theory's critique of normativity has itself become

incorporated into the ‘anti-gender’ movement through its attack on gender studies departments. In this context, we must revisit queer theory to assess its limitations as well as its purchase on the culture wars. As Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A. Wilson put it, ‘normativity has come to stand as the negative force against which the field [of queer theory] crafts its self-definition’.¹² This approach has been highly generative: queer theory has been able to turn its gaze on the habits, rituals and practices of heterosexual or cisgender life, for example in Michael Warner’s influential 1999 attempt to think queer politics of and beyond gay marriage.¹³ In turning our attention to what is already peculiar or idiosyncratic but naturalised in the world of public hetero-performance, the tools of deconstruction were used to shake the apparently stable foundations of heteronormativity. Nonetheless, this approach regularly reasserted the subversive nature of queer lifeworlds and practices, setting up intellectual habits that cannot gain a meaningful purchase on our current conjuncture.

One can trace this intellectual development through the 1990s and 2000s. The rise of gay liberalism – with successful campaigns for gay marriage, adoption rights, and broad social acceptance in many countries – gave a new energy to queer studies, providing it with a clear foil. In the wake of these legislative shifts, and despite the uneven and novel sexual politics of hard right regimes, the radical/liberal dichotomy has proven hard to shake. A critique of Reagan’s or Thatcher’s explicit homophobia was supplanted by an aversion to the way that their neo-liberal worldview had reshaped gay life. Thatcher and Reagan’s political successors dropped the explicit homophobia – politicians such as Tony Blair, Barack Obama and David Cameron actively embraced gay rights while maintaining neoliberal economic and social politics – and queer theory riled against what it called ‘assimilation’. This approach, however, depended on a view of heterosexual and cisgender life as something quite fixed, with norms regulated by state power.

Such a static view of heterosexual and cisgender life is unsustainable. The British state’s interest in enforcing ‘norms’ seems increasingly limited to the use of neglect, in the form of austerity and managed decline, or through carceral technologies of arrest, detention or deportation. These technologies are largely agnostic on the matter of the sexual practices of most citizens. Put in

other words, state institutions simply don’t care if you’re polyamorous or into BDSM, and there’s a fair chance your colleagues don’t either. It’s clear that hetero-life is in a state of significant flux: divorce rates are at a record high; in 2023, *New York Magazine* devoted a whole issue to polyamory; and app-based dating is now the norm. Recent years have seen the rise of non-monogamous dating apps, highly commercial content about and commodities for kink practices, and a broad range of pornography that is easily available. There is a growing market to profit from the ‘alternative’ sexual habits of putatively heterosexual people, for example the dating app Feeld (annual turnover of £39.5 million),¹⁴ the e-commerce site Love Honey and a range of parties and sex clubs. Further, the currency of inclusion, whether we conceive of that as seductive or coercive, loses some value when there is little in the way of functioning state structures in which to be included. The antinomies of assimilation and antinormativity can no longer hold. In many ways, straight life now appears to be modelled on the habits of late twentieth-century gays as much as gay life can now inhabit the scripts of heteronormativity. And though there has been an increase in street homophobia and transphobia in Britain, this should not be seen as a ‘return’ to the bad old days – these are bad new days with their own, specific challenges. As such, different methods of critique and analysis, beyond those offered by queer theory, are needed.

The ordinary and the convivial

I suggest that one way to approach questions of gender and sexual identity in this conjuncture is to bracket queer theory’s lexicon of normativity, assimilation, radicalism and subversion. The tools of cultural studies offer a way to break out of this critical deadlock, paying attention to the ways in which, however powerful ‘normative’ representations appear, people may not live according to their scripts. The gap between mediatisation and everyday life is an important one, which is not to discount the dazzling power of the culture industry but to insist that it is not totalising. The Marxist habits of cultural studies – which insist on the importance of constrained agency, situated creativity, and attentiveness to cultural production in everyday life – are useful here. After all, we make *meaning* in circumstances we’ve inherited too.

As Willis insists, the creative, symbolic work undertaken in everyday life through the codes of dress, gesture and style are communicative: if we attend to these codes, we may be able to locate prefigurative political possibilities.

The lineage of cultural studies I draw on here can be traced to the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham in the UK, first directed by Richard Hoggart, and later by Stuart Hall. Interdisciplinary from its inception, cultural studies brought the method of close reading from literary study to bear on social practices – on how people dress, dance, speak and move. Drawing on history, sociology and anthropology, as well as continental theory, this approach focalised an ‘ethnographic sensibility’ even when its practitioners did not directly engage in ethnographic research.¹⁵ It is this sensibility that I attempt to inhabit here, by turning in the next section to an auto-ethnographic anecdote from my own life, as well as Amit’s Singh’s recent ethnography of an East London kickboxing gym.¹⁶ Importantly, in both its interdisciplinarity and its concern with mediation, cultural studies resists making a fetish out of the empirical or abandoning the theoretical in favour of the purely descriptive. As such, ethnographic insights are opportunities for further theorisation and analysis.¹⁷ Sexuality has been somewhat under-theorised by cultural studies, but its tools remain available to better understand the role of gender, sexuality and sexual politics within specific conjunctures. This approach is concerned with ideology, but more attuned to the Gramscian language of hegemony. Unlike in queer theory, Foucault enters the field as a more minor player here. Nonetheless, a microphysics of power is articulated and examined in the granular specificity of a more sociological register. Taking this approach allows us to attend to the texture of everyday life as it is lived in the teeth of impersonal forms of domination. In other words, how do people live not only *in* but *against* the culture wars?

In returning our attention to vernacular, offline spaces of sociality, we can find ways to relegate questions of normativity to the background. Here I draw on what Paul Gilroy refers to as conviviality: the everyday experience of people living cheek-by-jowl – not the choreographed multiculturalism of corporate diversity nor a self-conscious celebration of ‘difference’, but the ‘messy complexity of social life’.¹⁸ In a similar vein,

Ash Amin theorises the ‘civilities of indifference to difference’.¹⁹ Gilroy and Amin are not suggesting that people live without friction or even conflict, but that there’s a broader reticence towards identity categories than official discourse would suggest. The demotic ethic of ‘live and let live’ – perhaps now reconfigured as ‘you do you’ – may endure beyond the purview of algorithmic capture. Gilroy suggests that conviviality might point to vernacular modes of ‘refusing race and salvaging the human’.²⁰ My concern is less to extend the theory of conviviality beyond race, in order to apply it to sexuality or gender. Rather, I want to suggest that within the convivial arrangements that persist in contemporary Britain, there is already a certain openness to gender and sexual diversity. This is not to say there isn’t tension, friction, violence or outright homophobia and transphobia. As Luke de Noronha reminds us, ‘conviviality only proves generative, conceptually and politically, because it points to the messy, contingent and often unremarked ways in which people live together and care about one another *against the odds*, in societies structured by racial division and hierarchy’.²¹ I take up this insight to suggest that a certain indifference to sexual and gender diversity can be located in everyday life, despite the rising power of transphobic rhetoric and legislation.

Developing this interest in the messy and contingent, my contention is that conviviality should be viewed as distinct from the rise of institutional inclusion or corporate diversity. Conviviality is not to be located in the institutional etiquette of pronouns in your email signature, rainbow lanyards or Equality, Diversity and Inclusion training. Indeed, my wager is that some of these institutional practices, in their shallowest forms, intensify the divisive rhetoric of the culture wars. One must note that these practices take shape and are experienced against the gleaming visual sphere of the culture and social industries, in which racialised and gender-diverse models and actors are increasingly prominent, to the rage and resentment of the hard right. My suggestion is not that their objection is a reasonable or progressive one, rather that the experience of seeing new figures take centre stage in the dreamscape of television, film and advertising is being metabolised through a hard right narrative of usurpation. Further, while the ordinary racialised or queer person cannot be held responsible for corporate aesthetics and their unpredictable consequences, we may

nonetheless wish to take a more sceptical and more vigilant view of our 'inclusion': something rather more serious than 'assimilation' is at stake.

In light of these limitations, we must turn our attention to the spaces beyond institutional capture – the interstitial leisure spaces of pubs, parks, gyms and shared residential worlds, not least what remains of social housing. There is much to be gained from attending to how people navigate offline spaces beyond the purview of the HR department. Further, in turning to photography (as I will do shortly), we can take stock of representation not as a reflective medium but as a constitutive one. As Kobena Mercer puts it,

once culture is understood as the medium in which social subjects 'make sense' of their lived experiences in language, discourse, and other symbolic codes that determine shared perceptions of reality, then representation gains primacy as a first-order activity in which identity is itself a production that constructs the positions from which we interpret and act in the social world.²²

If we pay attention, therefore, to the spaces in which gendered identities play out beyond or against the hyperbolic, phantasmic constraints of the culture wars, we may be able to locate practices from which we can construct a more robust counter-imaginary.

In the gym

A few months ago, I took a lunchtime class at my local boxing gym. I've boxed on and off, fairly casually, for the past seven years. The boxing gym closest to my house is a well-established family-run space – its primary aim is to train fighters and it uses recreational classes and personal training to generate an income. As such, a cross-section of the local community uses the space, both adults and children, albeit for slightly different purposes, some aiming to become competitive fighters, others to get fit and learn a new skill. The gym smells of sweat and leather. Under the thrash and thud of people smashing the heavy bags, music plays through the speakers rigged up in the corners of the cavernous space. What tunes depends on the coach – happy hardcore, jungle, afrobeats, grime. When you get to know both the coaches and the timetable, you can guess whose phone is plugged into the speaker before you come through the door. This lunchtime, only my second or third visit to this gym, I

noticed that someone in the class was definitely a kid – maybe a young teenager, 12 or 13, perhaps. I suppressed my concern that perhaps he ought to be in school and got on with warming up. Then there was someone else, a boxer whose age I couldn't pin down. Maybe also a child? Baby-faced and stocky, but with a self-possession that seemed unlikely in a youth. As someone of a similarly modest height, I ended up sharing a bag with him. We ran through the drills and he was kind and patient, taught me how to slip his shots (which were much quicker and stronger than mine), touched gloves with me between rounds, and performed all the conventional habits of training together. At the end of the class, he packed his stuff up and got on a motorbike. That seemed to resolve the question – he was not a child, after all.

The following week, I was warming up with a skipping rope on the gym floor, my mind wandering. The same boxer came over. Sorry, maybe this is a weird question, but how old are you? I laughed. 36, I said, a bit ruefully. *No way! I swear I thought you were a kid. Like a teenager. But you're all tatted up*, he said, gesturing to my inked shoulders and calves. *So I figured, you couldn't be a kid*. I told him the confusion had been mutual, and we both laughed till the drills started. This happens to me sometimes and is a common experience for butch dykes, as well as many other gender non-conforming people. As we left, after class, touched fists, he said *next time, bro* and I realised that perhaps some confusion still remained. We had been unable to discern very much about each other – not age, perhaps not gender, certainly not race. The channels of recognition, if we are to use this term, were full of static. Though we have come to view misrecognition through the lens of violence, erasure or domination, here I suggest something else is at play. Though we were not transparent to each other, nor even legible through the grammar of identity, we were nonetheless engaged in a complex practice of co-operation, mutual respect, trust and humour.

I have similar interactions – in which conviviality is not dependent on transparency – with some regularity, but I have selected this example because its setting is instructive in its contradictions. Singh's recent ethnographic study makes some suggestive interventions on boxing gyms as having a particular set of affordances – both atomising and collectivising. On the one hand, Singh observes the neoliberal logic underpinning the

gym's ethos, in which the insistence that fighting is a meritocracy leads to the derision of those who cannot perform the requisite bodily functions. Equally, the gym is a space in which the usual identity markers – race, gender – can fall away, undermined by the immediate, visceral experience of training, sweating, fighting. He suggests that there's a strong sense of responsibility towards each other in these spaces, observing, 'You have to rely on your training partners for sparring, therefore requiring mutuality and respect.'²³ Singh borrows from Butler, as well as Pierre Bourdieu and Gilroy, to theorise shared choreographies of the body as 'carnal convivialities'. He observes that 'Sparring requires one to lend one's body – with its vulnerability as well as its training and skills – to another, in service to mutual improvement.' In this space, the identity of 'fighter' can supersede the markers of race, sexuality and gender.

The theory of normativity's coercive power to shape our interactions does not seem to offer much analytic purchase on how people are able to shrug off the impositions of identity under particular circumstances, such as in boxing gyms. And to deem these instances 'radical' or anti-assimilationist threatens to undermine precisely what makes them worthy of our interest. In these ordinary interactions, in which gender, race, even age, are held in abeyance, we can discern some compelling possibilities. Of course, as Jasbir Puar and David Eng note, an understanding of the provisional nature of identity is already built into the foundations of both Marxist and queer theory. Eng and Puar observe that both Marxist and queer theory 'underscore the fact that the subject is necessarily opaque to itself and eminently imbricated in a web of social relations and responsibilities, a self with primary ties to unknown and unknowable others'.²⁴ What cultural studies offers is a method for attending to the particular locations, methods and practices through which this web of social relations passes and is shaped.

My aim here is not to obscure or deny the continuing operations of prejudice nor the institutional operation of discrimination. Conviviality is not a theory of the colour- or gender-blind liberal subject. But if we overstate the extent to which the culture wars are hegemonic, we run two risks. The first is a kind of nihilism in which we are unable to grasp political opportunities or excavate resources for hope. The second is that we risk imagining political subjects as both flat and coherent. Instead, my

argument works from the premise that there is likely a productive disjuncture between the kinds of digital content that people consume and the way they behave in their interactions with others. Not in all instances: we know, for example, that some participants in incel subcultures commit acts of violent, indeed, fatal misogyny. But we ought to be more circumspect in our assumptions about how the ambient culture war rhetoric shapes everyday interactions.

Roman Manfredi

WE/US by Roman Manfredi is 'an intergenerational photography and oral history project that celebrates the presence of butches and studs from working-class backgrounds within the British landscape'.²⁵ Though the framing of identity and representation is central – the subjects share an identity and have been chosen on this basis – the work itself points us to other interpretations. Manfredi shoots the subjects in places that matter to them. It is the suburban, small town or semi-rural locations that capture my attention and seem to offer an interesting riposte to the culture wars binaries. As Valluvan points out, 'the distinction that remains perhaps most defining of this need to cleave today's political ructions into neatly irreconcilable camps, one aloof and idealistic, the other rooted and earthy, is the one that is drawn between metropolitan cities and provincial towns'.²⁶ By insisting on lesbian life with some shared style, energy, tone and warmth in a variety of locations – rural, metropolitan, semi-urban, industrial, post-industrial, provincial – Manfredi makes these neat distinctions untenable.

This habit of associating queerness with the urban is politically promiscuous – after all, the 'coming out' story that has dominated queer life for decades is usually one of escape to the big city. But coming out assumes one has the choice of being 'in' the closet to begin with. For many butches and studs, an affiliation with masculinity predates sexual identity. Indeed, for some, queer sexuality is identified by playground homophobes or anxious adults before they had the chance to work it out for themselves. In *Stone Butch Blues*, for example, a foundational text of butch and trans identity, the protagonist is the subject of homophobic bullying and violence before she herself is able to identify her sexual or gender identity.²⁷ While many of the oral history interviews talk of the first

visit to a gay bar or the call of urban queer life, the images themselves depict a rather different relationship with place, one that retains a set of deep attachments to mixed spaces not defined by identity. The greater focus in the oral histories on activism and discrimination – as well as parties, relationships, pride, power, sport and family – speaks to the ways in which a more ethnographic approach (as in the images) can yield something distinct from interviews. As Manfredi said in HUCK magazine, ‘I wanted to place us in [residential] environments because we’re often only ever photographed in our underwear, in a sexualised or eroticised way, or in clubs. We do that ourselves and we need to claim that and it’s fine but you don’t expect to see us in an everyday setting.’²⁸ By shooting the subjects in locations that matter to them, in ‘everyday settings’, the images draw attention to identity as always unfolding *somewhere*, tethered to time and place, rather than in the frenetic non-place of digital life.



Laura, Wembley, London © Roman Manfredi

It is no coincidence that Manfredi’s exhibition was co-curated by the path-making photographer Ingrid Pollard. Pollard’s work comprises both portraiture, documentary and landscape, focusing on rural spaces. Notably, her most famous work *Pastoral Interlude 1982-1987* has been consistently subjected to a kind of paranoid interpretation, assuming that its depiction of black walkers in the English countryside is one of anxious unbelonging. In a 2022 interview in the *Guardian*, Pollard observes,

‘People immediately say ... It’s about alienation. It’s about white landscape, Black people. [...] It gets bashed into whatever shape people want to put it in.’²⁹ In the face of reductionist interpretations of her work, Pollard insists that these images are a commentary on the construction of place; racism is present – undeniable and explored – but has no monopoly on meaning or experience. Pollard’s artistic vision coalesces beautifully with Manfredi’s work. The exhibition offers a powerful rejoinder to the story of English decline, masculinity in crisis and provincial-metropolitan antagonism that has dominated life in Britain in recent years. It says, there are other masculinities: Other Englands too.

That the masculine subjects in question are mostly women gives the work an unusual capacity to challenge expectations around class, place and belonging. The story of Britain’s deindustrialised hinterlands, ‘left behind’ by metropolitan elites was essential to the Brexit project and the nationalist convulsions that continue in its name. As observed, this narrative is a gendered one. It is assumed that Britain’s working class men have been usurped by gender radicals, antiracists and their protectors in the political elite. Gender non-conformity is viewed as the tip of the ‘woke’ spear. It is to this story that these striking images offer a quiet but powerful rejoinder. Masculinity in crisis seems a little silly in the face of Manfredi’s photographs. What crisis? The idea that men are wondering how to be men appears a little melodramatic. The photographs appear to say, *Try being a dyke. Try having tits and a face tattoo. Try street harassment.* Worked-on bodies – familiar with the regime of macros and protein shakes – are presented alongside but never in comparison with softer frames. There is a frank, confident sexuality on display, in which age and race are held within that sexual confidence, not in spite of it. Youth is sexy; so are wrinkles. The subjects wear suits or sports bras, leather jackets or sherwanis. There is no ‘normal’ here, no centre and margins.

Though a small number of masculine dykes have joined the ranks of ‘gender critical feminists’, butches and studs experience similar social penalties to many trans and non-binary people. As one of the oral history interviews observes, ‘Those lesbians that have somehow decided it’s not okay to be trans are the same lesbians that would have told me that it wasn’t okay to be butch.’ These shifting antipathies reveal the culture wars to be

a labile and enduring presence, in which queer life is shaped by – and is by no means immune from repeating – broad social prejudice. The speaker notes that this anxiety about gender displayed by ‘extreme political lesbians’ revolved around questions of *style*: ‘they wanted people to wear knit-your-own trousers and dance without a rhythm’. In its embrace of swagger – as well as the ‘dykes and faggots against transphobia’ badge I bought at the exhibition gift shop – the exhibition makes clear where it forges its alliances. There is a palpable sense of ease and political expansiveness, with an organic diversity that feels genuine, unforced. The composition as a series allows a productive mediation between group and individual, never letting one stand in for the other, nor allowing them to become antagonistic. The title *WE/US* offers a method for this mediation. As pronouns become highly politicised, it’s refreshing to be reminded that we already have a gender inclusive language of collectivity, there for the taking: We; Us.

Mahtab Hussain

Manfredi’s photographs share a striking compositional similarity with Mahtab Hussain’s series, *You Get Me?*³⁰ Hussain’s first body of work, *You Get Me?* was inspired by his own experiences of growing up in Glasgow and then Birmingham as a young Muslim man. The series, which took nine years to complete, is an intimate engagement with masculinity, self-esteem, social identity and religion in a multicultural society. Shot between 2008 and 2017, its subjects face high unemployment and racism. In these years, the ‘War on Terror’, with its violent policing, surveillance and infiltration of British Muslim communities, reshaped the lifeworlds of working-class British Muslims. From 2015 onwards, the controversial Prevent agenda – which sought to infiltrate the social and cultural lives of British Muslims – was put on a statutory footing with the passing of the Counter Terrorism and Security Act. This legislation compelled public sector workers (in schools, hospitals, social services and so on) to report service users they felt were ‘at risk of radicalisation’. Prevent disproportionately impacts both men and Muslims, with leaked Home Office documents naming ‘British Muslims, particularly males aged 15–39’ as the scheme’s target.

This conception of Muslim masculinity as threat-

ening or dysfunctional has long roots in the British national imaginary, with lurid stories about Muslim men animating the archive of Britain’s colonial rule in South Asia, North Africa and the Middle East. In contemporary Britain, however, it is Pakistani and Bangladeshi men who are most often invoked as troublesome Muslim folk devils, associated with misogyny, violence and cultural insularity. Since the 2010s, stories about ‘Muslim grooming gangs’ have been a consistent source of fascination and a key recruitment tool for the hard right. While a longer engagement with the facts of organised sexual exploitation is covered elsewhere and beyond the scope of this article, it is useful to note the particular confluence of place, race and gender in the cynical repetition of these stories. While sexual abuse is endemic across society, the ‘grooming gangs’ captured the nationalist imagination precisely because they could be used to evidence the abandonment of Britain’s towns and cities by the metropolitan elite, acting in defence of predatory racial outsiders.³¹ Though Hussain’s work does not make explicit reference to the moral panic surrounding ‘grooming gangs’, his photographs nonetheless offer a powerful rejoinder to the construction of Muslim masculinity as violent or threatening.

Like Manfredi, Hussain is concerned with capturing the texture of the lifeworlds from which the subject emerges. Though some of Hussain’s images are closer to documentary, with the subjects eating or sleeping, in many, the subject looks directly into the camera. As in Manfredi’s images, there is an open, frank sexuality here. As Helen Trompeteler observes, the photographs deploy three-quarter length composition, with the subject in the centre of the frame, a representative mode familiar from formal Western portrait painting. Hussain deploys this mode in a novel fashion, as all of the images are in a landscape mode to allow for a greater balance between sitter and setting.³² As in Manfredi’s work, location is of tremendous significance here, with the textures of quotidian residential architecture (the deep orange-red brick walls of houses in Birmingham’s Sparkhill or Small Heath, for example) given formal weight beyond functioning as ‘background’. As in *WE/US*, dialogue between photographer and sitter was key to this work, and Hussain quotes from his interlocutors at length in interviews and in the exhibition’s accompanying book.

Comparing these two exhibitions yields other com-



Black hat, black glove and bling © Mahtab Hussain, *You Get Me?*, 2012

elling possibilities too. Queers and British Asians are often assumed to be insular, defined by idiosyncratic attachments, outside of the mainstream. More acutely, these are communities so often assumed to be antagonists, with South Asians – and specifically Muslims – cast as uniquely homophobic. This was a key dynamic in Britain as the meteoric rise of gay rights became intertwined with the domestic and international politics of the ‘War on Terror’. If we read these exhibitions together, however, this homonationalist framing can fall away. The subjects in these two exhibitions may not know each other, but they are engaged in a choreography of the body in which they might implicate each other through the way they dress, move, carry themselves. In other words, they are all engaged in the repertoires of masculinity. As Jack Halberstam said in *Female Masculinities*, ‘although we seem to have a difficult time defining masculinity, as a society we have little trouble in recognizing it’.³³ Reading these images in dialogue, their similarity suggests a shared set of references, aesthetics and gestures.

In these images, bravado, fronting, cockiness, swag

is its own pleasure, and offers pleasure to the viewer too. These butches, boys, studs and men have style. They pull their caps low, keep fades fresh, pour whole pay cheques through needles into tattoos that refuse the bourgeois demands of respectability. There is an extravagance at play, sometimes borrowing from hip hop culture’s heavy jewellery, sportswear and branding. In a photograph titled ‘Black hat, black glove, and bling’ the displacement of the character of the sitter into these accessories highlights the constructed, composite nature of masculine style. The sitter’s beanie is pulled low, shading one eye, and his heavy chain is caught in his teeth. The ostentation of his pose is provocative and playful, highly sexualised yet its implications are unclear; does the chain in his mouth signify force or docility? The cast of his gaze, up through his eyelashes, adds to the ambiguity of the image, in which femininity and masculinity cannot always be differentiated. Similar aesthetic modes are at play in Manfredi’s image titled ‘Gideon’ taken in East Farleigh, Kent. The sitter, astride a motorbike, has a face tattoo on their right temple, the word ‘FERAL’ inked just under their hairline.

Yet this claim is an ironic one; there is a softness to their pose, their mouth forming more of a pout than a sneer. Their figure is framed by lush foliage, blue skies, fluffy clouds. The masculinities in these images are marked not by their distance from femininity but by the theatricality with which strength and vulnerability are patterned.



Gideon, East Farleigh, Kent © Roman Manfredi

If the pleasures of style – ludic, creative, cheeky, knowing – can be admitted and enjoyed, they may offer some protection from the seductions of the militarised, paranoid, crude and violent masculinities circulating via the social industry’s predatory algorithm. They may, too, offer some respite from the concern that masculinity is intrinsically ‘toxic’, to use the language drawn from a rival plane of the digisphere. Rather, attention to the expressive possibilities found in dress, gesture, voice and bearing may be a point of productive connection shared across gender identities and sexed bodies. The shared masculinity is one of a working class at some ease with Britain’s multiracial composition. Perhaps also one at greater ease with gender diversity than we might imagine. This is particularly significant in a time in which the question of English masculinity surfaces in political debate as an anxious, fractious, paranoid thing, a thing on which so much rests – not least, we are led to believe, the dignity of the nation. The culture wars assume a beleaguered masculinity as well as an aggrieved whiteness. Neither seem especially significant here.

Though imagined to inhabit different worlds, these photographs tell a more complex story. The spaces of working-class life are often shared, and Britain’s towns, villages and housing estates encompass a more relaxed diversity than the culture wars would have you believe. Though portraits of individuals, these images are also depictions of a set of convivial possibilities. They say: *This pub is my local, I box in this gym, I know these streets, I live on this estate, I buy chips from this takeaway, I am from here.* The subjects look outwards. They return our gaze. But they also invite us in, allowing us to see these spaces as convivial ones, not owned by any particular group. It is easy enough to imagine Manfredi’s subjects and Hus-sain’s subjects crossing paths, sharing spaces, touching gloves in the gym, catching the same bus, reaching for the same pair of AirMax in the shop, chatting at the barber-shop. While we cannot assume all of their interactions would be seamless, free of misapprehension, resentment, prejudice or confusion, equally, we can see in these ordinary shared lifeworlds an alternative to the anxious, fractious presumptions of the culture wars.

Indifference to difference?

The story of the culture wars divides the world into a series of binaries; yet the tools of deconstruction, on which queer theory has been so reliant, offer little to our analytic arsenal. While, of course, the binaries of ‘woke’/normal or metropolitan/provincial must be challenged, to reveal their cross contamination or interdependence is insufficient. Rather, we must look for the ways in which everyday life might already furnish us with possibilities beyond confected culture wars antagonisms. In turning my attention to masculinity here, as a vector of convivial possibilities, I attempt to build on the insights of Les Back and Shamser Sinha who draw our attention to the ‘paradoxical co-existence of both racism and conviviality in city life’.³⁴

First, I have selected exhibitions which insist that provincial, suburban and rural spaces also contain convivial possibilities. Second, I pause on spaces, methods and aesthetics associated with masculinity’s excesses, with bravado, arrogance, homoeroticism and aggression. For this reason, boxing gyms recur in the ethnographic research as well as in both exhibitions, as potent examples of locales in which characteristics associated with mascu-



Young boy, white boxing gloves © Mahtab Hussain, *You Get Me?*, 2010

line excess can be productively channelled into healthy, convivial modes of engagement. While the culture wars are propelled by digital ‘content’, boxing is resolutely analogue, requiring presence, focus, cooperation and discipline. Though content relating to fitness is a key genre in the ‘manosphere’, the actual practice of training or fighting relies on a kind of humility in which ‘carnal convivialities’ become possible. Of course, as Andrew Tate’s career as a professional kickboxer attests, not everyone will take up these possibilities. Nonetheless, gyms are a regular feature of suburban areas and small towns as well as urban spaces, offering a way to view conviviality as the preserve not of regions but of practices. In this way, the provincial/metropolitan divide recedes in significance.

In their work on desi pubs, Valluvan, Singh and Kneale suggest that these South Asian-run boozers have become multiracial social spaces. This is particularly significant because the pub is claimed by melancholic nationalists and culture wars opportunists as a symbol of white English decline. According to these writers, the desi pub offers an opportunity to dislodge this story. But,

they say, ‘that dislodging is undertaken undemonstratively, where there is not a particularly pointed attempt to fill in that displaced, vacant normativity with an alternative minoritarian equivalent around which the assumed subjectivity and symbolism of the space is to be exclusively staked’.³⁵ To take up this analysis in regards to Manfredi and Hussain, we might argue that they depict masculinity without a normative referent, without exclusionary claims. There is not a critique of normative, bourgeois, white or indeed ‘male’ masculinity here – one doesn’t appear to be needed. There is no attempt to say ‘this is the true masculinity’. What is shown here is profoundly ordinary, but need not be normal.

While a concern with the quotidian rather than the normal offers an alternative to culture wars antagonisms, the portrait mode allows for the ordinary to also be the site of dignity and meaning. Here, working class masculinities often rendered provocative, threatening or dysfunctional are elevated by their depiction within the form of fine art photography. Butch and stud masculinities have historically been rendered failures to achieve

proper womanhood. Further, as discussed, Muslim men have become sites for racialised fantasy and nationalist scapegoating. In this context, the particular form of the portraits is notable: in almost all, the sitter meets the eye of the audience. As Hussain observes, 'It was the gaze that I was drawn to, that direct look at the audience. For me, that was power in its purest sense, knowing that someone was going to look at you, judge you, but you too were able to judge them.'³⁶ Holding eye contact is often understood as an expression of masculine power. Here the sitters look out, they hold our gaze, but they are also objects of the gaze, the looked at, the desired. This experience of direct eye contact, of the gaze, has some interesting implications for thinking about conviviality. Scepticism about conviviality often centres on the way it has often been taken up in relation to fleeting encounters in public space. Critics suggest these kinds of encounters tell us relatively little about how people actually live relationally. In portrait photography, however, the fleeting encounter is expanded: one can contemplate the art work for a prolonged period, and the sitter never looks away.

To ask viewers to engage with working-class masculinities as sites of grace, composure, sensitivity and style is a powerful antidote to the culture wars. These images offer a method for refusing the fiction of the normal citizen, the innocent dupe of the metropolitan elite. At its heart, this story relies on a certain conception of the hapless working class subject, whose stolid social conservatism is under threat by the pernicious forces of wokery. This smug embrace of ignorance is nowhere more apparent than in the blunt pseudo-science of 'adult human female' or the banal resentments of anti-feminist backlash. These exhibitions suggest we can counter this cultivated ignorance by attending to the complex reality of everyday interaction. Travelling at ground level, rather than in the stratospheric fiction of newspaper columns or social media's grubby resentments, we can attend to the vernacular ways in which people refuse the culture wars. The ordinary convivial socialites of certain rural, suburban and inner city spaces may contain within them a plausible antidote to a rising inchoate fascism. This antidote is not coded in the language of celebration, nor even the statist grammar of recognition, but in a kind of collective self-confidence, relaxed in the face of other ways of being. It is perhaps in this breezy indifference to

difference that we may find the resources to uproot our own analytic habits.

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