ETHNOGRAPHIC ENCOUNTERS

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JOURNAL HISTORY

Ethnographic Encounters was founded in **2011** by Zoe Miller, Emily Sheppard and Dr. Craig Lind to provide a platform for undergraduate students in the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of St Andrews to share their outstanding ethnographic research.

Inspired by the **Ethnographic Encounters** project that that second-year students in the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of St Andrews do every spring where they conduct their own fieldwork project, the journal highlights the diversity of anthropological inquiry undertaken by students.

After a hiatus, the Ethnographic Encounters Journal returned in June 2025 with the support of Dr Tony Crook, marking a recommitment to our dedication to showcasing original ethnographic work that reflects the diverse research and perspectives from students within the department.

We remain a student-run journal, and our articles include essays based on fieldwork undertaken during a second-year project to experimental autoethnographic writing. Our online archives can be found at: https://ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk/index.php/SAEE/issue/archive

*With special thanks to the **University of St Andrews' Department of Social Anthropology**.*

EDITOR'S NOTE

We are delighted to present the latest edition of **Ethnographic Encounters Journal.** This Issue highlights specifically projects emerging from the Ethnographic Encounters module, where second-year students undertake their first independent fieldwork. These articles capture the curiosity, reflexivity, and methodological experimentation that often accompany the first experiences of doing anthropological research.

The contributions in this issue demonstrate the breadth of topics that ethnographic inquiry can illuminate. Several articles explore the social worlds shaped through performance and embodied practice. **Chase Hornstein** examines the theatricality and emotional labour of professional wrestling in Scotland, while **Hannah Ryan** investigates how university ballroom dancers cultivate persona both on and off the competition floor. Ethnographic attention is also paid to perception itself in **Tymofii Donets**' article examining tourism photography where even seemingly ordinary acts of image-making can reveal complex social meanings. Moreover, ritual and collective experience also feature prominently: **Grace Pasqualucci Sammartini**'s ethnography analyses the Kate Kennedy Procession as a site where memory, legend, and identity converge, while

Jennifer Matthews explores wild swimming as a ritualised practice structured by immersion, liminality, and community.

Other contributions turn to the cultural meanings embedded in work and everyday practice. **Angel Hu**'s article reflects on the ambiguous meanings of gongzuo (work) and the pressure to zhao gongzuo (seeking job) among Chinese undergraduates, revealing how language mediates anxieties about life trajectories and employment. Contemporary experiences of work are further explored by **Nelly Levytska**, whose piece describes the varied culturally embedded moral economies of employees in the hospitality business. Moreover, **Tara Phillips**' fieldwork conducted at an oyster farm demonstrates how labour can be a relational practice rooted in connected to others people, place and the natural environment.

Finally, we are especially pleased to include, for the first time, a guest contribution from a student at another university. The piece from **Yixuan Liu** (London School of Economics),

based on participant observation in a London Maid Café, reflects on the affective and relational labour involved in performing and producing intimacy within a transnational subcultural setting. We are excited to include this piece as a step toward expanding the journal's network of student scholarship beyond St Andrews.

Together, these articles demonstrate the vitality of undergraduate ethnography: attentive to everyday life, open to experimentation, and grounded in close engagement with people, places, and practices. We hope this issue continues to inspire curiosity about the many forms ethnographic encounters can take.

Sophie Cooper

Editor-in-Chief

EDITORIAL TEAM

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of St Andrews for its continued support of Ethnographic Encounters. Special thanks go to Dr Tony Crook, whose guidance as academic link has been invaluable in bringing the journal back to life.

Finally, we are deeply grateful to our authors for sharing their thoughtful and inspiring work – **this journal would not exist without you**.

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Fighting for Connection: Empathy, Cooperation, and Crowed Work in Scottish Professional Wrestling

Chase Hornstein

Action, Drama, Characters The deep-rooted popularity of professional wrestling in Scotland is somewhat elusive, yet among its vibrant fanbase and practitioners, the uniquely identified theatrical sport-performance is as much a hobby as it is a lifestyle. This article compares two sides of the professional wrestling experience, from a ringside seat at a show in Perth, to the passionate environment fostered in a training school in Glenrothes. Between conceptions of reality and unreality as it pertains to the common attribution of 'fake' to professional wrestling, this article additionally dives into the emotional requirements of participation, from the wrestlers and fans alike, of 'selling' a display of violence through inherently empathetic vulnerability.

To open vulnerably, I will admit that with the opportunity to conduct my own fieldwork came significant anxiety. As the mouthpiece for whoever I would end up speaking with, I wanted to ensure that I did not misrepresent their thoughts, opinions, and realities. Such worries drew my mind to one of the most commonly misrepresented, yet most passionately followed social factions in Scotland; the 'indie' professional wrestling community. Based on the responses I received when trying to explain my project to those not familiar, the words 'professional wrestling' conjure imagery of big, scary people "[acting] out a fight in front of paying spectators" (Smith 2006: 54). If such visions seem familiar, I aim to facilitate a greater understanding of the combination of passion, creativity, and physical ability that relies on the core tenants of cooperation and crucially, mutual empathy, to 'sell' its grand

displays of action.

My journey began with a research trip down an online rabbit hole. Within ten minutes, I had found six independent, or 'indie' promotions with exceedingly varied visual presentations and promised levels of legitimate violence. From advertisements tagged with 'family friendly' to event posters featuring superhero movie-esque ensemble casts of wrestlers, I found it a challenge, albeit an amusing one, to narrow down my ethnography to a manageable field. Based on personal time and distance constraints, I decided to attend a show from local promotion Fair City Wrestling (FCW), set to be hosted in Perth on the 28th of March, two weeks after the start of my research. Those weeks passed, and after a chain of bus connections, I was in the field for the first time.

I arrived at the venue, the Tulloch Institute Club, thirty minutes before the start of the show. All indicators reminded me that I was on an proverbial island; in the corner of a town I was unfamiliar with, at the end of a line filled mostly by parents and their large numbers of loudly excited children. Much of the line held or wore pieces of wrestling merchandise, of which I had none, and chatted about the results of the previous FCW show in town the month prior, which I had not been to. I blame any early separation between myself and the thriving wrestling fan culture in front of me on the new ethnographer's tendency to stick themselves to a wall like a security camera, which I certainly suffered from in the early goings of both of my days of study. Still, as we funneled into the main room, the vibrant atmosphere, in color, temperature, and facial expressions, stoked my enthusiasm. If I was purely an ethnographer when I arrived, then by the time I was directed to my front row ringside seat, spinning floor lights, fog machine smoke, and the anticipatory giggles of kids behind me made me only half-so. I was at a professional wrestling show, and thus, from then on, I had a role to play as a fan.

Following a brief welcome speech from the show's announcer, Stevie Wizard, the show began with a three-person match, amusingly called a triple-threat, for one of the promotion's top prizes: the FCW Women's Championship. The match lasted roughly ten minutes, featuring sequences where two of the wrestlers would "lock up," grabbing each other by the head and arms in a power struggle, then evenly trade offensive moves, such as strikes, slams, and submissions (Chow 2014: 73). They continued until one gained an advantage, at which point they would be interrupted by the third wrestler, who would insert herself into the action and start a new one-on-one confrontation. The progression of sequences took advantage of the moral alignment of the characters in the match, with two of the wrestlers, including the current Women's Champion, Brodie Adler, being presented as protagonists, called "babyface[s]" in wrestling terminology, and one, Ellie Armstrong, as an antagonist, or "heel" (Kerrick 1980: 144).

The split allowed for comprehensible storytelling through the exchange of "heat," or who had the advantage at any given point, which prompts both positive and negative crowd reaction (Kerrick 1980: 145). If a babyface (or 'face,' for short) was on top, the crowd would cheer them on, and just when the face would almost win, the heel would stop them, changing the flow of the story. When the two faces fought, the crowd wanted to see who was best, and when the heel would cut in, they wanted to see them get their commupance. This cycle repeated a number of times until all of the wrestlers began complex, three-way sequences, timing their signature offensive and defensive moves with

each other until the underdog babyface, Eden, managed to pin the heel's shoulders to the ring mat for a referee's count of three to win the Championship for herself. Evidently, triple-threat matches do not require for the current champion to personally lose in order to lose the match, something established in the pre-match welcome speech.

I would later learn the story I saw was a clear example of the basic match template, with built-in sections to establish good-bad dynamics, work out who has the advantage, how they could possibly win, and then eventually build to a 'finish,' where the strengths and weaknesses of each character all come to a head to result in a conclusion. Some version of this formula formed the basis of each of the following five matches on the show; the babyface and heel would start the match fairly even, then after some villanous tactic, the heel would gain 'heat' by 'working over' the face, deliberately and ardently using targeted offense, often on a specific body part so the audience could track the agony the face experienced. They would beat them around the ring, poke them in the eyes, and choke them up against the ropes; the face's expression would be racked with pain as they screamed out to the audience, who would in turn scream their support back, as well as their opposition to the heel's dastardly antics. The same children I witnessed smiling cheerfully outside the club before the show heckled the heels mercilessly, likely held back only by the fear of using curse words in front of their parents. My favorite in the moment was a particularly creative stinger thrown at a tall heel with notable body hair and bald head, who a child sitting directly behind me accused of being a "baby orangutan."

"To speak of movement as a way of knowing implies that the way people move is as much a clue to who they are as the way they speak" (Vara 2024).

It was partway through match number five, a fast-paced, hard-hitting affair for the FCW Junior Heavyweight Title that I noticed my objective eye beginning to slip. Coming in, I had intended to immerse myself in the environment, taking intermittent notes on my phone when I noticed something anthropologically interesting. I kept to this schedule early, but as the show proceeded, instead of writing much down, I instead shrugged away my instinct to remain an academically inclined fly-on-the-wall in favor of letting the show in front of me sink its impression into my memory. I tracked the moves, not to categorize them as displays of symbolism or something equally insightful, but instead as in the same way the crowd around me was: as an engaged fan of professional wrestling. I joined in on cheers when a wrestler lept from the highest ring ropes onto their opponent, or when a face sprung into action after minutes of being 'worked over' by the heels. I was swept away, somewhat, by the fervour of the action. Every punch, kick, grab, and throw communicated a story engaging enough to make me reconsider the reason I was there in the first place.

One of the most remarkable aspects of professional wrestling as a live medium is a concept adapted from its carnival roots called kayfabe. Kayfabe, as I would later be told by prolific Scottish indie wrestler Daisy Jenkins, is the word given to label the live fiction of pro-wrestling; a way to

"keep the integrity of the business to yourself."

The sporting competition which frames the narratives told in a wrestling ring is a 'work,' meaning the outcomes of the matches are predetermined. However, the performers

involved and the promoters running the show decide the actions, physical or otherwise, taken to perform those narratives, sometimes before a show begins, and in the case of the wrestlers, often on the fly during a match. I knew about the existence of kayfabe beforehand, but exactly how heavily it influenced the room took me by surprise.

There was a tangible ebb and flow at play at all times, whether a match was ongoing or not. Due to the unending fiction of the kayfabe, every time a wrestler would perform a move, or yell out a taunt to their opponent, the audience would respond in kind, with a cheer, boo, or taunt of their own. The heel wrestlers would often take visible note of the response their actions would prompt, and prod back in a manner informed by their character. During a one-on-one, or 'singles' match involving the aforementioned "baby orangutan," the insulted heel responded to the heckling by kicking the babyface in the ribs, then leaning out of the ring and braggin to the heckler about how "nasty" it looked. The babyface would use the same tactics, with facial expressions and body language being their main tools to 'sell' their pain, telling the internal story of the match entirely through physicality. Celia Vara describes the logic of using movement to describe facets of one's personality in her ethnography on kinaesthetic empathy, with the quote supplied at the beginning of this section being an especially pertinent way of phrasing it (2024). While more traditional forms of character-building and storytelling are still at play, in the on-site context of a show, the way the performers move does a majority of the job enlivening the story.

"From the outset it was clear that, to have any chance of escaping from the preconstructed object of collective mythology...[I] must instead grasp boxing through its least known and least spectacular side: the drab and obsessive routine of the gym workout" (Wacquant 2004: 6)

To go past the extensively maintained fictional front of professional wrestling, one must, at bare minimum, be in the room while the 'workers' prepare to do their work (Kerrick 1980). Two weeks after the FCW show, I found myself at the Fife home base of Pro Wrestling Ready (PWR Pro), an indie promotion and training school. During my commute to the gym, a relatively expansive unit of a storage facility in the southeast corner of Glenrothes, I was once again struck by classic new-ethnographer anxieties. I was stepping into a world I had only seen the shiny front of, and with no intention of participating physically, the main thought on my mind was that surely, I would be out of my depth. My fears were dashed immediately, as contrary to Wacquant's forays into the "drab and obsessive" gyms of the "pugilistic world," I found the PWR Pro gym vibrant with a sense of shared purpose and enthusiasm equally reminiscient of studio art workshops and stage play rehearsals as martial arts schools (2004: 6).

My first interaction with an out-of-character professional wrestler was, not as I had been preparing for, laden with eye rolls and shrugs in reaction to some random university student poking them with questions, but instead opened with a friendly smile and handshake. The instant warmth came courtesy of 'The last of the Great British Heavyweights', Andy Roberts, the head coach at PWR Pro, who after introducing himself, asked if it was my first day of training. At first flattered anyone would consider me, visibly nervous and actively holding a pencil, a worthy candidate for pro-wrestling training, I then felt a sense of excited anticipation at the prospect of

surveying a gym full of people, who, if anything like their coach, would be effortless to engage in conversation. From my perch in the corner second nearest the door, Andy introduced me to a number of the talent who would be training that day, thus beginning a literal and figurative line of questioning.

My first instinct that I had cracked through the barrier of kayfabe was both true and false. It was true in the manner that both I and the wrestlers I was interviewing were removed from the bounds of live performance. I watched as the group, roughly 15-20 strong, with tenure ranging from nearly twenty years to just a few months, warmed up with stretches and various wrestling-specific movements, such as rolls, body bridges, and by 'running the ropes.' As they moved on to drills, mostly choreographed sequences of moves one may include when planning a full match, I took note of the extensive conversation in the line between wrestlers waiting their turn. One would give advice to another about how to properly land a 'worked' punch, then demonstrate on a third. The curtain was certainly pulled back, but only to me, in my physical presence, was able to view the full extent of it.

With each new person I spoke with, the conversation would begin the same way. We would trade names, but when I asked for permission to quote them in this ethnography, they clarified that I should use their 'ring name.' Ring names are the titles every wrestler assigns to their character, and are often based on one's family or personal connections. Ring names serve as a signature identifier, and also as an indicator of the range to which kayfabe extends. Even in an ethnography designed to gain a unique insight into the hidden world of pro-wrestling, I was given a responsibility to uphold the previously described "integrity of the business," a responsibility I will gladly keep to.

"There's no other hobby or sport that would gather this eclectic a group of people"

My first round of questioning concerning how someone on the 'inside' would describe professional wrestling to someone utterly clueless revealed awareness of a common misunderstanding. "They think it's judo," I was told by Lexi Kimbo, a dual discipline drag-queen pro-wrestler. "Wrestling's like a dance, but it hurts...there's a wrestling language.. .[things] that you don't really understand if you're not in it."

A dichotomy between 'real' and 'fake' continued to appear in further conversations in two common shades, one of genuine misattribution of activity, like how Lexi described, and one of intentional condescension. Current PWR Pro Heavyweight Champion Tommy Kartel spoke to me about the variety of people who diminish the extreme range of efforts that go into professional wrestling because of its pretedermined aspect.

"What's fake about it? I didn't imagine it.. People see it and think they can do it...you need to be able to promote yourself, eat clean, train, that's not cheap." He emphasized how just because an onlooker misidentifies pro-wrestling as a farce imitating combat sports, and not its own multifaceted discipline, that does not mean that it suddenly isn't difficult to do.

This false emphasis on the real-fake dualism became increasingly nonsensical the more time I spent in the PWR Pro gym. To conceive of professional wrestling as "participants [acting] out a fight in front of paying spectators" would ignore the reality of what I was seeing (Smith 2006: 54). As the drills got more complicated and physically demanding, the 'trial by fire'

atmosphere I unconsciously expected was instead replaced by a room of highly motivated, enthusiastic individuals wanting nothing but the best from and for the person across from them in the ring. Professional wrestling proved not to be a liar's imitation of combat, but an inherently empathetic display of extreme creativity and physical skill.

"While seemingly violent and antagonistic, pro-wrestling is actually a practice of caring for the other" (Chow 2014: 73).

While professional wrestling seemed less and less to me simply a subcategory of theater, I was assured principles of the theatrical world heavily applied to the overall presentation. A question I levied to everyone I spoke with was on the nature of wrestling as a form of acting. Current PWR Pro Women's Champion Kate Calloway described that from the perspective of a performer,

"if you think deep, you're maybe an actor, but it's all under the umbrella of pro-wrestling."

Tommy Kartel echoed this viewpoint, firmly stating "I consider myself a pro-wrestler" ahead of settling for being perceived as a combination of other adjacent disciplines. Daisy Jenkins succintly described the middle-ground pro-wrestling straddles "between sport and theater" (Smith 2006: 54): "we're re-actors...when people ask me if I have an acting method, I wouldn't know how to approach it as an actor, 'cause I'm not one."

One of the longest tenured wrestlers in the gym, 'TV's' Umar Mohammed, connected the dots between the theatricality of professional wrestling and its inherent empathetic quality. "It's still for me, theater...it still hurts, but you're pretending that it hurts...if you're getting punched in the face, how are you going to sell that move?" The selling, in a kinaesthetically empathetic way, is what gets the crowd on board with the story. Head coach Andy later stressed the point to the room in-between drills, describing "the face [as] a visual representation of the crowd...it's all about gaining sympathy from the audience."

Umar cotinued on the vein of representation: "When I'm a good guy, it comes across like, what's my beliefs?...I think there's genuinely like only two Pakistani wrestlers in all of Scotland.. .there's not a whole lot of representation there, so I've tried to incorporate that more into my character...for my cousins growing up, I want them to have someone they can look up to." In the same manner that witnessing a suffering babyface motivates the crowd to cheer for their comeback, and looking on as a heel cheats their way to victory tells the crowd to react negatively, seeing a character that reminds the exceedingly diverse audience of professional wrestling of themselves makes them, in all ways, want to care.

I closed each interview by asking if there were any subtle aspects to the business that beginners don't always understand. Almost unanimously, I was told that the most important thing for an aspiring professional wrestler to focus on was to be unapologetically themselves in the ring. Putting yourself on display so that those like you in the crowd can relate with your character, as Umar told me, is both a fantastically efficient way to draw that all-important sympathy, but also to feel comfortable in your own skin. Lexi Kimbo spoke enthusiastically about the overlapping importance of "being true to yourself...[and having] fun!" in both parts of her performance life. Additionally, I heard similar advice from a majority of the gym to build one's character around a version of your personality dialed from as one normally acts to the

extreme. Professional wrestling is a business of exchanging empathy, thus what you put into it is what you get out of it. Contributing what makes one unique into their presentation makes the performance more 'real' than anything else would.

"[Professional wrestling] is a process of mutually becoming vulnerable" (Chow 2014: 80)

I begun this ethnography with an admission of vulnerability, in keeping with the realities of the pro-wrestling business I was privy to in my fieldwork. Despite its outward air of secrecy presented by kayfabe, professional wrestling relies on being able to see the vulnerabilities in the performers, and encourages the audience to reciprocate. The connection between the representational babyface and the crowd cheering them on, and the villanous heel and the chorus of boos that follow them facilitates an ouroboric emotional exchange, where everyone in the room can simply enjoy themselves playing their part in the grand display.

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2

Why We (Don't) Want to Zhao Gongzuo – A Chinese Undergraduate's Perspective on Work in Everyday Speech

Angel Hu

This work is about the lived lexical ambiguity of gongzuo (work/job) for specific groups of Chinese undergraduates. Through my discussion with my Chinese undergraduate friends, I identify how the ambiguous wording to describe gongzuo in our daily talk is closely related to our deeper anxiety about how we wish to live our lives. By examining the tension between the contradicting meanings of those ambiguous concepts, I reveal why we see gongzuo as providing a solution to our anxiety but an unsatisfying one, which in turn explains our paradoxical feeling of necessity and reluctance to find jobs. In my ethnography, I argue that the anthropological approach to 'work/job' needs not only be a structural one, but also a micro and practical one to understand the lived nuances and anxiety about 'work/job' and to provide insights for real actors to resolve such anxiety.

INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to say 'zhao gongzuo (找工作)?'

Its literal translation is 'seeking job', 'zhao (找)' meaning 'seeking', and 'gongzuo (工作)' meaning 'job' or 'work'. Like the English word "work," gongzuo can be both a noun and a verb, and it carries a similar vagueness. Among Chinese undergraduates, zhao gongzuo is a familiar, almost unquestioned phrase. We all seem to know what it means - and that we're supposed to be doing it. The pressure is constant: Posts on social media about the anxiety of not receiving offers, friends frustrated by their internship applications, annoying relatives 'caring' about your career plans, robocalls marketing their job-seeking websites, and the employability index in university rankings.

In this context, 'gongzuo' appears to mean work

as specifically waged labour for us. The pressure of *zhao gongzuo* - the ambient employment anxiety - seems inescapable. Yet I'm pretty sure most of us don't want to zhao gongzuo, but are still unsettled by this pressure. The co-existing feelings of necessity and resistance to zhao gongzuo are difficult to explain, which suggests that there is something unrevealed about how we perceive 'gongzuo', where the word and the act itself seem to be normalised.

With the hope of explaining or even finding a way to resolve the discomfort arising from the pressure of zhao gongzuo, I went on to chat with my friends about zhao gongzuo and the conceptualisation of gongzuo. We are all 'regular' Chinese undergraduates, some studying overseas like me, others in China - we are 'regular' in the sense that there are no outstanding precarious situations in our families waiting for us to resolve, which means material necessity is not our main source pressure regarding zhao gongzuo. Through my conversations with friends, I discovered a few hidden assumptions underlying the discourse of zhao gongzuo, indicating how we understand gongzuo and how it relates to our uncertain futures. These assumptions present themselves as lexical ambiguities that are often overlooked by both anthropological theories of work and the general public. I argue that these ambiguities are central to understanding the tension between necessity and resistance to zhao gongzuo felt by us.

WHAT IS GONGZUO?

"Less time to have fun," Duza replied, as I asked her what her first impression is when imagining herself 'zhao dao gongzuo' (找到工作, succeeding in finding a job).

"Most people's gongzuo is not what they enjoy, but just a means to make a living," Long answered, as I asked what he first thought of when speaking of 'gongzuo' in 'zhao gongzuo'.

> *"If I had enough money - I wouldn't zhao gongzuo. I would do things that I am enthusiastic about"*

Lindsey said, when I asked whether she would still gongzuo if someone suddenly gave her a billion RMB.

"If I succeeded in finding a gongzuo, my first thought would be 'I don't want to gongzuo'. I want to enjoy my life without gongzuo," Kumo said.

To be fair, I wouldn't want to gongzuo if I had a billion to spend. For both my friends and me, our understanding of gongzuo is primarily negative - something painful, to be avoided, an antithesis of life as leisure. But most of us seem to share the consensus that we need to gongzuo. To work is a self-evident norm - it is to live (Harris 2007: 137).

A preliminary and shared conceptualisation of gongzuo by us would define it as something necessary but never desirable. This connotation resonates with anthropological and sociological critiques of 'work' as waged labour in a Western, late-capitalist, post-industrial context, which is experienced as obligatory yet meaningless or harmful (Frayne, 2015; Graeber, 2019; Weeks, 2011).

I had warned myself that there is no generic concept of 'work' that can apply to different cultures (Harris 2007: 142), and that I should not let the 'Western' concept of waged labour in the literature drown out the nuance in our Chinese

individual experiences of gongzuo. Still, the conversations struck me much harder than I anticipated, where I found the theories to be hardly useful in explaining our experiences. This 'mismatch' is not simply a cultural difference. Although specifying their critiques to waged labour as grounded in particular historical and cultural contexts, these scholars still assume a semantic clarity of 'waged labour' - namely, it is assumed that there is a coherent and identifiable set of 'waged labour' that can be the target of critique.

In contrast, in the conversations with friends and my reflections, I noticed that the understanding of 'gongzuo' is much more fragmented and never presents itself as a stable or unified category. For Chinese undergraduates, gongzuo in zhao gongzuo evokes certain restraints, assumptions and judgements, which differ from speaking of gongzuo in general. But these differences are rarely acknowledged consciously in our daily language. This hard-to-notice difference became explicit even just at the beginning of our conversations, when I asked my friends whether they had the pressure of zhao gongzuo. They always gave me a straight yes or no, without questioning what gongzuo exactly is. But when we came to the question of 'what is gongzuo', they always paused and hesitated to give me a definite answer. In this respect, I think, theories grounded in capitalist and post-industrial critiques of waged labour, while helpful for understanding some aspects of gongzuo as waged labour in a post-industrial China, still fail to capture the lived ambiguity and vagueness of gongzuo.

I argue that understanding the subtle ambiguity of different usages of 'gongzuo', is key to explaining our anxiety and confusion when facing the necessity of zhao gongzuo and the perceived meaninglessness of gongzuo.

Compared to a structural and historical analysis that most formal theories use to approach the values of work, I want to look at the atemporal but more vividly lived present to understand work for us.

GONGZUO - WENDING

"Do you have pressure to zhao gongzuo?" At the start of our chat for my project, I asked my friend Kumo, who is currently a third-year undergraduate.

"I don't. I am the type of person who doesn't want to gongzuo in the future," Kumo replied.

"What do you mean by 'doesn't want to gongzuo'? Then what else are you going to do in your future?" This question was not raised for any anthropological concern. It just flowed out, I didn't even pause to think twice.

Facing my confusion about her phrase of 'not gongzuo', Kumo explained that she "didn't mean to not gongzuo completely". What she means by 'not gongzuo' is to exclude a specific type of job: "a wending (稳定) office gongzuo - that requires you to go to a fixed place and work for 8 hours". The adjective 'wending', roughly translated as stable, constant or fixed, is a feature frequently brought up by both me and my friends in our conceptualisation of gongzuo. Kumo said the gongzuo she would consider instead are those that "allow more freedom", like a part-time or short-term job with more freedom in time, in order to support her future plan to live a semi-nomadic lifestyle financially. In contrast to the job she wants to do that emphasises 'freedom', 'gongzuo' in zhao gongzuo is a distinct type of waged labour, which exerts control over the worker's own time in a more neatly disciplined way and requires

long-term dedication, described by the adjective wending. In this respect, wending denotes fixedness and restriction, and the wending-ness of gongzuo is treated as an undesirable feature that needs to be endured. Associated with one's belongingness and control of time, this wending-ness of gongzuo speaks to the capitalist abstraction of time as a discipline for work: where one's time can be bought by their employer, and the salary is a justification to exploit the workers (Thompson, 1967; Graeber, 2019: 84-92).

This concept of wending is also emphasised by Lindsey, but in a positive manner that makes gongzuo a necessity for one's life. Lindsey is currently a second-year undergraduate studying a humanities subject in the UK which she is passionate about, but she has planned to zhao gongzuo in the financial sector after graduation to stay in the UK - a gongzuo she does not see as meaningful in itself. Lindsey told me that she has zhao dao gongzuo, so she is now free of the anxiety of zhao gongzuo. I couldn't understand her statement about 'zhao dao gongzuo' as someone who is still studying but not working. Lindsey explained that what she meant was that she had succeeded in finding a summer internship. Considering that the internship has a high conversion rate to a full-time offer, Lindsey thinks she has more or less zhao dao gongzuo. Succeeding in finding an internship suggests a 'predictable future' for her that allows her to actually get a gongzuo, which in turn suggests wending. She explained her association of wending with gongzuo in terms of gongzuo as a stable source of income, allowing economic independence. In contrast, Lindsey described zhao gongzuo as a non-wending status, suggesting a deep sense of uncertainty for her future, which caused pressure. In this respect, wending is a desirable and necessary status denoting certainty in life, and 'gongzuo' is associated with wending by being this source of certainty. But it should be noted that, this certainty of gongzuo exists only when a stable source of income is present, which usually comes hand-in-hand with the undesirable aspect of wending, as I explained above. Lindsey specified that, gongzuo in zhao gongzuo is wending waged-labour with a long-term prospect. Thus, part-time and short-term jobs, mentioned by Kumo, are also excluded from gongzuo by Lindsey, for they cannot ensure wending-ness, either in a negative or a positive understanding.

GONGZUO, AND KNOWING WHAT TO DO WITH ONE'S LIFE

Not only is a certain type of waged labour assumed to be gongzuo in zhao gongzuo, but certain judgements are also made about the concept of zhao gongzuo itself. Long, a second-year undergraduate who wants to establish his own enterprise, pointed out that he would not use the phrase of zhao gongzuo. He describes zhao gongzuo as a "passive act, unlike (the phrase of) 'seeking/pursuing a career' which is more active". The passive/active distinction here is used metaphorically. For Long, the passivity of zhao gongzuo lies in its motivation. Long thinks that most young Chinese engage in zhao gongzuo simply because of being directionless about their life: "They do not know what to do with their lives; they are directionless". In contrast, 'pursuing a career' is out of a dedicated aspiration, with a clear understanding of what one is going to do to construct a desirable future. He also pointed out how his personal understanding of gongzuo differs from how we publicly use it in the phrase of zhao gongzuo. For him, gongzuo should be

work that people voluntarily do, which is not restricted to waged labour; while gongzuo in zhao gongzuo tends to be merely a means to survive, which most people do not enjoy or voluntarily engage with.

Being directionless and uncertain of the future, as the key impulse of zhao gongzuo, is also acknowledged by a few other interlocutors. Yuzu is a second-year undergraduate in the UK, and she is planning on zhao gongzuo in the financial sector after graduation, despite the fact that she has perceived gongzuo to be 'meaningless for one's life' since a very young age. She emphasised that she would not equate her zhao gongzuo with the zhao gongzuo that seems to have a shared understanding for most people. For Yuzu, the latter is a 'passive' action, while her zhao gongzuo is not. Yuzu explained that she "has decided to zhao gongzuo in the financial sector with a lot of stress but high pay", which is a means she actively chose to achieve her goal of economic independence. Thus, her decision to zhao gongzuo in the financial sector is not zhao gongzuo as we ordinarily understand it, but is a clear "plan for her future". By highlighting the different levels of agency in the two senses of zhao gongzuo, we might understand why Lindsey, although conceptualising gongzuo as meaningless, does not seem to be perplexed by pursuing it, for Lindsey is actively zhao gongzuo with a clear plan for her future.

The judgement of passivity about zhao gongzuo reveals how we understand both gongzuo and meaningful life. For Yuzu and Long, 'knowing what to do with your life' ' differentiates positive gongzuo from zhao gongzuo, highlighting purpose as crucial for a meaningful life. It also explains why most of us feel resistant to zhao gongzuo, as Fan mentioned:

"Most Chinese undergraduates don't want to zhao gongzuo, because they don't know what they want yet."

It also suggests why we view gongzuo in zhao gongzuo negatively if it is just for material livelihood, but not something you genuinely enjoy. This speaks to Graeber's argument when explaining workers' unhappiness with doing jobs they find to be of no value to their lives at all, where he defines humans as comprising purposes, without which we would fall into existential crisis (2019: 242).

Yet, 'knowing what to do with your life' or 'having a plan for the future' itself is ambiguous. The 'what-to-do' and 'plan' can refer to an ultimate purpose in life, or merely something that can prevent you from having nothing to do. But finding the meaningful something is difficult, especially for ones in their early twenties, like us Chinese undergraduates. "It's impossible to figure out our ultimate goal at this age," acknowledged almost all interlocutors, including me.

Combining this with the passivity of zhao gongzuo judged by me and my interlocutors, gongzuo in the public understanding of zhao gongzuo can be seen to fall into the second meaning of 'what-to-do'. Aware of the difficulty in defining a truly meaningful something in life, and because of the ambiguous nature of something-to-do-with-one's-life, Gongzuo becomes a cheap alternative, or a placeholder: it provides certainty by offering something to do, however meaningless, rather than the anxiety of nothingness. Here, the certainty provided by gongzuo goes beyond the material economic certainty, but also encompasses an existential certainty that one values in life - despite it being a superficial one. The need to zhao gongzuo, as to find something to do in one's life, is helpfully noted by Fan: "Most

Chinese parents who want their children to zhao gongzuo are not really expecting them to gongzuo, they just cannot bear seeing the children have nothing to do."

The pressure of zhao gongzuo is much easier to confront compared to the uncertainty of what truly matters in one's life, since the former is apparently a much shorter-term problem than the latter. Not to mention that with a gongzuo, a stable income is guaranteed; as Lindsey mentioned, gongzuo provides wending-ness, a certainty in one's life. The certainty renders gongzuo so tempting compared to the attempt to figure out one's life goal, where the latter appears to be much more uncertain, and if unlucky, even fruitless. In this case, the pressure of zhao gongzuo stems from the worry of a possible failure in knowing the meaningful something in one's life. But the problem of figuring out the something is and will always be present at every moment of life. Thus, gongzuo in zhao gongzuo, is judged to be passive and negative, for it is not motivated by a vision for the future, but rather an escape from a present and persistent ultimate question of life. In this understanding, gongzuo, by providing a superficial something to keep someone busy, allows one to suspend reflection and the search for what truly matters in life. This understanding of gongzuo resonates with the concept of suspension suggested by Biao Xiang to describe a common condition of being in China, which is a status of keeping moving without critically reflecting on the most immediate present (Xiang, 2021).

Having discussed a specific feature of gongzuo, as well as the passivity attributed to gongzuo in the context of zhao gongzuo as used in everyday language, I identify three overlooked ambiguities to explain the tension between necessity and resistance to zhao gongzuo experienced by Chinese undergraduates. The first is the ambiguity of wending. Wending-ness of gongzuo, understood as the certainty it provides, makes gongzuo something desirable and necessary to pursue for a secure life. However, if wending is understood as the rigid restriction gongzuo imposes, gongzuo turns into something to be avoided. Second, the phrase zhao gongzuo itself has dual interpretations. If driven by directionlessness for the future, zhao gongzuo becomes a passive drift; but it can also be an active search, where people can zhao gongzuo as a means to actively achieve their other life goals, like Yuzu and Lindsey. The third ambiguity lies in the commonly used phrase 'knowing what to do with your life', or rather, in the ambiguity of 'what to do'. In the uncertainty of 'not knowing what to do with one's life' as a widely experienced condition of Chinese undergraduates, gongzuo, with the certainty it offers, provides a 'to-do' in life, making itself a ready-made answer to ease the anxiety of nothing-to-do. Yet this 'to-do' provided by gongzuo is simultaneously unsatisfying for its hollowness of 'meaning', making gongzuo both refuge and trap - a non-solution solution which cannot resolve our existential anxiety in the search for a meaningful life.

CONCLUSION

My discussion of gongzuo stems from the shared feeling of zhao gongzuo as a necessity, which unsettles us Chinese undergraduates, but we don't understand such unease. To make sense of our discomfort and even problematise such necessity, we need to understand gongzuo and zhao gongzuo, not only academically and abstractly, but also personally and practically - if this distinction should remain meaningful. The anthropological approach to work has focused

much on a structural and systematic analysis, as Folz and Smith (2024) detail, aiming to capture how broader historical, political, and ideological situations come to shape our understanding of work, and how individual unease can be linked to broader inequality or power dynamics on a systematic level. These formal, academic theories allow us to situate our struggle with work in a structural manner, preventing an understanding of work as merely a 'personal issue' that relies on personal responsibility. But to cope with reality, particularly for individual actors, what we need is not only an 'understanding' of work in abstract concepts, such as colonialism, capitalism and consumerism. These etic perspectives seem to "explain away rather than within problems" (Xiang, 2021) - evident from my reflections on the ethnography, where I found those theories insightful to see the 'structural issue', but never applicable to us Chinese undergraduates, as real agents with our personal struggle with gongzuo, to resolve the discomfort we face in the most immediate present. Through my ethnography, I've discovered why these theories can't be easily applied. The etic perspective on work fails to capture our struggle with gongzuo, not because of the etic-emic divide but because of limitations inherent to structural analysis. To render the critiques coherent and neat, it seems that the nuanced ambiguities in messy reality must be displaced with a supposedly unifying concept, like "waged labour". But as my emic, micro-level ethnography has shown, we, as Chinese undergraduates, experience the concept of gongzuo not as a coherent social fact, but as an unstable and ambiguous term in different contexts, which are often overlooked. By analysing and exposing these overlooked lexical ambiguities, I believe my emic perspective on gongzuo offers not only conceptual nuance that is lacking in an etic perspective in most anthropological studies of work, but also offers practical insights for the actors themselves to understand the unease by the necessity and resistance to gongzuo - or ourselves, as I am one of them as well.

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3

Mud to Menu: Labor at Caledonian Oysters Co.

Tara Phillips

Phillips's paper examines how Caledonian Oysters Co. challenges capitalist conceptions of labor by cultivating reciprocal relationships with people, place, and the natural environment. Through three days of participant observation and engagement with workers, Phillips demonstrates how oyster farming is structured by tidal rhythms that foster ritual, interdependence, and a shared historical memory. These practices create meaningful forms of work that contrast with the linear, profit-driven demands of tourism and broader capitalist economies. By emphasizing reciprocity, communal responsibility, and environmental attunement, Caledonian Oysters Co. reveals how labor can become a relational practice rooted in connection rather than exploitation.

INTRODUCTION

This paper will explore how Caledonian Oysters Co. challenges traditional capitalist definitions of labor by fostering meaningful connections with people and place through ritualistic practice. Caledonian Oysters Co. is one of the biggest producers of shellfish in Scotland. Located in Oban, a coastal town that has become a tourist destination in recent years, Caledonian Oysters Co. is an organization that lies at the intersection of relational networks with the environment and as a self-sustaining community. Established nearly 40 years ago by Judith Vajk and her husband, Hugo Vajk, the farm is operated by Angus, Michiel, and Judith. Over the course of three days, I studied and volunteered at the farm. Using participant observation and first-hand accounts, this essay sets out to explore how oyster farming cultivates reciprocal relationships with the environment and within the organization.

WHAT IS WORK?

There are two main aspects of work on the Caledonian Oysters Co. farm. The first is on land—keeping up with orders, sorting the oysters by size, and bagging them to be sold or brought back to the tide. The second aspect of work is by the tide—organizing and checking up on the oyster beds as they grow. As Angus explained, “One week will be a neap tide. The tide doesn't go out enough to access the beds, and on those weeks, a normal day will look like

maintenance of bags, repairing those, tidying up, running to orders, making sure everything… we are selling is going out on time. It's a lot quieter during that time." Oyster farming at Caledonian Oysters is intimately tied to the changes and cycles of the natural world. This cyclical routine creates a feeling of connection to natural rhythms. Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) in their writing Braiding sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge and the teachings of plants says

"The other half belongs to us; we participate in its transformation. It is our work, and our gratitude, that distills the sweetness" (2013: 92).

Oftentimes, working conditions on the farm are out of anyone's control. As Judith shared, "you're dealing with good weather and bad weather… we've got all the equipment, all the rain gear to beat that." Oyster farming is a unique type of work as it is tied to the natural world and not controlled by human scheduling. David Graeber (2018) in his famous text "Are you in a BS job In Academe, You're Hardly Alone" defines work as labor that should be meaningful but often isn't: "Surveys in Britain and Holland reveal that 37 to 40 percent of all workers there are convinced that their jobs make no meaningful contribution to the world" (2018: 1). Graeber claims that work has become distorted as it over-emphasizes profit and performative busyness, when in the past work has been about cooperation to meet communal and environmental needs (2018: 8). The farm is the opposite of a "bullshit job"—the work not only has a tangible end product, but the everyday experience of the labor is rooted in natural rhythms and a sense of collective responsibility and purpose. Angus, Michiel, and Judith derive fulfillment from their connection with process, place, and people, as opposed to simply doing work for profit. As Angus shared,

"Work has to be fulfilling. I think the concept of work has been perverted, and I think that work is actually something that all humans do and need to do. But it's been twisted into this thing that we do specifically for monetary gain...there is something really wrong with that."

Work on the oyster farm is reciprocal rather than merely extractive–it responds to and contributes to the environment that surrounds it.

The farm is run by a small team of three: Judith, her son Angus, and Michiel Henderick, who came from Belgium in 2019. From the outset, Michiel's idea of work aligned with Graeber's (2018) definition of "meaningful labor" because Michiel values connection and working with nature. For him, the fact that he is outside is crucial: "It's just a nice place, people are nice…there is more of a connection with people." By working at an oyster farm, Michiel, Angus, and Judith have collectively decided to surrender to the tide schedule. Angus says, "It is a ritual aspect for sure. You're so tied to the tide in a way that few industries are tied into a natural process like that." Judith agrees, sharing, "The tides dictated my wedding day, the birth of our children." As Victor Turner (2017) in The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure explains,

"community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elder" (2017: 97).

Bonds are created through all submitting to the tides and natural world; they are "giving recognition to an essential and generic human bond" (Turner 2018: 97). Working with the tides thus shapes and equalizes relationships on the farm, and bonds are formed both within the company and with the external environment.

These bonds, in turn, undermine hierarchical structures as all members of the company submit to the "general authority" of the natural world. Michiel's work, for example, is restricted by the climate as the bulk of his work takes place during tide time. As Judith explains, "...one way or another, Michiel works mostly when it's tide time," which gives him the freedom during the neap tide to pursue other interests and relationships outside of his work. As he shared, what he likes about "working with the tides" is that "during the neap tides, there is not a lot of work here, but that gives me the chance to do other stuff with other people and for other people… I like that you're outside and working with the tides and the seasons."

Kimmerer defines work as "finding balance" (2013: 180). For Caledonian Oysters Co., this balance is rooted in nature, community, and openness to natural processes. Kimmerer goes on to explain, "Our lives became entwined in ways both material and spiritual. It's been a balanced exchange: I worked on the pond and the pond worked on me, and together we made a good home" (2018:121). For Kimmerer, a relationship is built through the act of restoring and caring for the environment. More broadly, this represents how sustained work with the environment creates a sense of interconnectedness. This same interconnectedness is manifested every day on the farm. Over the course of three days, I observed how shared responsibilities, and informal teaching shaped the close dynamic among workers. Michiel explained how "I always considered people I worked with as colleagues. I would never consider them friends. I would never meet out with them outside work. Because the community [on the farm] is really tight. I consider them here as friends." Kimmerer (2013) touches on an idea of the mutual benefit between the land and those working on it. The sense of mutual trust and connection, both interpersonally and with the natural environment, that exists within Caledonian Oysters Co. can therefore be seen as springing from cooperation to work with the tides and meet communal and environmental needs.

SYMBOLISM AND RITUAL

The farm occupies a unique position in that "It is a liminal space, neither a land farm or a sea farm… it's more of a shore farm," as Angus described. It is also unique because of the ever-changing connections created with other people and with the natural environment. As Turner says, "The powers that shape the neophytes in liminality for the incumbency of new status are felt, in rites all over the world, to be more than human powers, though they are invoked and channeled by the representatives of the community" (2017:106). Turner suggests that liminal spaces and relationships connect people to "more than human powers" as works end up creating rituals which leads people to surrender to natural authority. Throughout my participation and observation, it became clear that the process of oyster farming approached ritualistic action through the repetition of tasks and shared language centered around the informal naming of tools and spaces that create a living memory of the past.

Every day, each repetitive and mundane task became infused with meaning in the act of repetition. Judith described everyday work as "very repetitive" and Angus shared how, because of how small the team is, "we kind of make up a lot of our own traditions. Because a lot of our items that we use don't actually have names necessarily. So we kind of just make up

names for things. A lot of the areas on the beds all have names based on who built them or who was here at the time when that was made, it sort of dates it in our heads and that's kind of our tradition I suppose." As Kimmerer says

> *"That, I think, is the power of ceremony: it marries the mundane to the sacred. The water turns to wine, the coffee to a prayer" (2013: 56).*

On the Oyster farm, even simple tasks that have been repeated thousands of times before are done with intentionality and a sense of tradition. In the act of repetition across time, a sense of historical continuity is established, both in the act of repetition and in the naming of tools and spaces, which creates a living and shared memory of the past. More than a mere routine, the daily act of oyster farming not only honors the past but also reinforces group identity through ritualistic action and naming.

The fact that Caledonian Oysters is a family-run business also means that, to external eyes, it has an informal hierarchy. When first speaking to Angus, he introduced himself as the "farm manager" although his mother, Judith, said, "I think I am the boss, but Angus thinks he is the boss." This lack of awareness of formal titles speaks to the farm's structure which is rooted in mutual respect and interdependence. Turner (2017) defines these sorts of relationships as existing within a "generalized social bond" that transcends formal roles and "has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties" (2017: 96). The oyster farm physically operates in a liminal space, and the relationships and bonds formed between people are also liminal. As Turner (2017) described much like with ritual, the liminality of the place breaks down social hierarchies as work becomes a way of life and roles become fluid. Having gone abroad for university, Angus returned to Oban in 2019 to fulfill "a family obligation." Michiel is the only employee not connected to the farm through direct familial ties, but still he feels himself to be intimately tied to the generalized social bond that exists on the farm. As he shared, "In a rural place, I think a lot of community comes out of working and getting to know people. It is less so in a big city." For him, work has been a source of connection: "I know a lot of people because of this place…the nice thing about this place as well, once you get to know one person, they know all the other people too… and then you get to know more people and it just kind of expands." Overall, the farm is shaped by shared traditions and ritual. This, when coupled with the physical liminality of the space and its porosity to environmental factors, allows for hierarchies to be broken down and new fluid roles to be established, both within the company and with the external environment.

TOURISM AND THE EFFECTS OF CAPITALISM

Oban is known as the seafood capital of Scotland. A coastal town in the west of Scotland, it has a population of just over 8,000 people and a large population of visiting guests. In the high season, Oban attracts "upwards of 3,000 guests staying each week" (Omifolaji 2014: 202). Caledonian Oysters Co. has helped maintain the town's status through their work, which has helped capture the interest of tourists. Despite my visit in early March, a relatively low season, on my journey from the train station to where I was staying, I passed nine hotels. Tourism is a force that reshapes the economy and often privileges visitors over local needs. These ideas were confirmed by Angus when he said, "all the industries around here are focused

on tourism." Interestingly, Judith points out how "Oban people are [the] hardest public to attract. It seems like on the west coast, they don't eat so much shellfish as you would imagine." Caledonian Oysters Co. sells all over Scotland, to "Glasgow, Edinburgh and all around this area." Within Oban, their customers are typically restaurants and the fishmongers in town. When the business was first established, Judith explained how "...there was just no market really in Scotland, so we were selling to Scandinavia and England. And bit by bit the market started to increase here, which is great." The Caledonian Oysters team currently produces about a quarter of a million oysters annually, all of which are sold within Scotland. Even still, Angus points out how "the Scottish oyster industry is [not] meeting demand as a whole. There is probably a demand for three times the amount of oysters that are actually produced in Scotland."

Tourism is, by its very nature, an extractive relationship that exists between individuals, the environment, and local communities. This stands in stark contrast to the reciprocal relationships established on the farm. Angus explains how "Tourism is a very tricky industry to do right for any community…you really have to strike a balance between being exploited versus getting something good from your tourism. It's a very hard line to work." Oban is no stranger to this struggle. As Angus shared, "Like everywhere, our community is being taken over by large supermarket corporations and those food practices have really shaped every aspect of our lives.… A lot of our fish is exported or is for the tourism industry, which is pretty common in Scotland…. This in turn feeds into a longer history of exploitation in Scotland, where we export our tourism, and we export our special products. I feel like a lot of that is taken from Scotland and not reciprocated necessarily." Although, it seems that as the farm and tourism are mutually dependent on each other for their economic survival, tourism is also a force that limits the farm and its workers: workers are only able to find jobs in the tourism or seafood production industries, and they often find themselves struggling under rising housing costs.

Indeed, because of tourism and the extraction it brings, Caledonian Oysters have had to consolidate in recent years. While they used to have two sites where they would operate, now, they are moving to just one: "We had this space that we rented from a local landlord… and without getting too Marxist about it, landlordism is a very exploitative practice, at least certainly can be. We found ourselves in a position where we were renting a space, which was originally just a field, that we had made fit for purpose, landscaped, built a structure upon it, and built drainage systems. And yearly, the rent would go up. It was compounding. It seemed a bit unfair, so we ended up leaving." As Kimmerer explains,

> *"In Western thinking, private land is understood to be a "bundle of rights," whereas in a gift economy property has a "bundle of responsibilities attached" (2013: 45).*

The oyster farm having to consolidate their property can therefore be understood as an example of capitalist relations that exist between the farm and the world, whereas life on the farm is closer to a reciprocal "bundle of responsibilities" owed to each other and the environment

Yet life on the farm isn't always sunshine and rainbows; oyster farming is difficult, hard work. In Judith's words, "It is dirty. It is hard work. It's not indoors. You're open to the elements." Angus adds: "It is a very physically demanding job, but

I see that as quite a good thing… mentally I would say the main strain is just the strain of running any business." Despite, or perhaps because of, the challenges, every team member "tries to work in such a way that we are not taxing ourselves too hard. Because we are such a small team, you can notice that." Despite oyster farming operating within a commodity economy and the difficult physical and mental strains it places on each member, the value of the work is not merely monetary—there is value in working together and working with the natural environment. Judith shared, "I think we do, we knock off each other pretty well actually.". From my time volunteering on the farm and through my participant observation I found that work was about the sharing of knowledge both with me and with each other. Relations were rooted in reciprocity, shared responsibility and ritual. Mary Douglas (2003), in her famous work Purity and danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo explains "Order implies restriction; from all possible materials, a limited selection has been made and from all possible relations a limited set has been used. So, disorder by implication is unlimited, no pattern has been realized in it, but its potential for patterning is indefinite" (2003: 1). In the context of Oban, oyster farming is harnessing the "unlimited" potential of the natural environment – embossing "restriction" and "selection" to create a product/system of being, "patterning" the environment.

CONCLUSION

Caledonian Oysters Co. pushes back on the capitalist idea of labor through ritualistic practices and connection. Angus, Michiel, and Judith foster meaningful relationships with one another and with the positionality of their farm in its natural context. My work as a volunteer allowed me to understand the ethos of reciprocity through participant observation. Ritualistic practice and connection—evident in both repetitive work and the establishing of a shared historical memory that bleeds into the present— clash with and resist linear extractive forms of work and capital. Indeed, the very act of work at Caledonian Oysters Co. is structured by a non-human schedule of the tide, which places it in a liminal space that breaks down internal hierarchies and creates a feeling of meaningful reciprocity from the environment. Despite the inherent challenges of existing within and depending on the extractive system of tourism, the workers on the farm maintain a sense of meaning through reciprocal relationships with the environment and each other.

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4

Becoming the Dance: Persona, Performance, and Identity in University Ballroom

Hannah Ryan

This paper explores how university ballroom dancers build and embody persona on and off the competition floor. Using interviews, observation, and my own experience at the Inter Varsity Dance Competition in Blackpool, I show how dancers learn to project confidence, style, and emotion long before the music begins. Beginners often "act" confidence while advanced dancers internalise persona until it feels natural. Costumes, audience expectations, and gender norms all shape how dancers move and present themselves. Drawing on scholars such as Ericksen and Marion, the study argues that ballroom is more than technique: it is a space where identity is rehearsed, polished, and eventually lived. Persona becomes a tool, a performance, and ultimately part of the self.

INTRODUCTION

The moment you walk down the stairs into Blackpool's Winter Gardens during the Inter Varsity Dance Competition (IVDC), you quickly realise that this isn't just a sport; it is a show. You are instantly dazzled by the ballrooms high ceiling, glittering chandeliers hanging from it, decorated columns and balconies along the sides that are already filled with excited spectators. The dance floor below is buzzing with movement, with people practicing their routines one last time before the competition starts. Dancers squeeze through the busy aisles in sparkling dresses and tailcoats, hair gelled in place and faces made up, balancing their costumes and their personas. It is not just about dancing steps correctly; it's about playing the part – a confident, elegant, and refined dancer. The competition doesn't start on the floor. It begins in the way you walk, stand, smile, and even sit down (or don't). Through this project, I attempt an inquiry into how ballroom and Latin dancers develop and embody personas when they dance. Based on interviews with St Andrews student dancers, as well as my own participation and observation, I investigate how confidence, costuming, movement, and persona are intertwined, and how the expectations of the audience, judges, and fellow competitors shape what it means to "dance well."

I took on a dual role as a participant and a researcher. In my first role, I participated in the

IVDC competition as a beginner dancer, which allowed me to experience the entire process of a ballroom competition. In the second, I observed this unfamiliar world in Blackpool, the spectacular home of ballroom itself. While ballroom dancing often appears rigid, I found that dancers perform identity in far more complex ways, depending on the level of dance, gender, and personal style. These personas evolve from surface performance to deeply internalised embodiment.

Drawing on ethnographic thinking and supported by scholars including Julia Ericksen (2011) and Jonathan Marion (2008), this project situates ballroom competition as a site where identity is constantly rehearsed, costumed, and performed.

This paper blends ethnography with my own critical reflections where I question what performance really is, as well as where persona ends and where the self begins.

BECOMING THE PERSONA

Competitive ballroom dancing is about more than technique; it is mostly about being seen. Whether on the floor or when waiting to dance in the next round, dancers are judged not just by how they move, but also by how they carry themselves: their posture, facial expressions, and confidence. The persona that the dancer projects becomes as much a part of the competition as the routine itself. While the role of persona is visible at every level, the way it is constructed and sustained, as well as when it is "on," varies significantly depending on the dancer's experience.

Among beginners, persona starts as a conscious effort. It is a performative act that helps you appear confident when you feel uncertain about everything daunting at a competition: the way your hair looks slicked back(which makes you feel self-conscious), your beginner's dancing skills, or your fear of forgetting the routine.

Elliot, a beginner dancer, described how he gets "super nervous" just before stepping onto the floor and focuses on walking with a sense of purpose and a smile when his number gets called on the loudspeakers. He associates Latin dancing, such as the Cha-Cha, with being "cheeky" and deliberately tries to channel a sassier persona on the floor. However, in his words,

"It's all just a show that I keep confined".

This confidence that he performs with while dancing is temporary and situational. It disappears as soon as Elliot has walked off the floor with his partner. Therefore, his persona helps him get through a performance but ceases to exist as soon as he sits back down with his team.

By contrast, more advanced dancers often describe their competitive persona as internalised, as something that is inseparable from how they dance and, in some cases, how they present themselves more generally. Sofia explained, "Even when I'm practicing, I can't dance without the persona". For her, persona is not a costume to be put on at competitions but an embedded part of her dance identity. She described entering the mindset of "being the winner", "believing in herself", and suppressing any insecurities through excellent posture, gaze, and control. However, she emphasized that

"There is no complete switch. I am still myself".

This distinction between Elliot's outward performance and Sofia's internalised character

shows an important shift in how persona is learned and embodied over time.

Leon, another advanced dancer, echoed this sense of inhabiting a different version of himself. Although he listens to dance music when he gets ready on the morning of a competition to mentally switch to his dancing mindset; it is as soon as he arrives at the venue, he says, that his behaviour changes. Blackpool's ballroom, especially, has that effect on him – "It's magical because it's the place. It's like if you played football in Wembley Stadium. It definitely changes the way you dance". On the floor, he described acting "cocky, above everyone else", a clear performance of dominance meant to stand out to the judges. He also acknowledged that this persona continues even when the music stops playing, not slouching nor sitting down or not being seen snacking. "As soon as you're wearing the outfit, you're held to a professional standard. You're being judged before you dance," he explained. "It's like how you don't want to see your doctor smoking a cigarette outside of their practice." Being a dancer, for him, comes with behavioural expectations that extend beyond the floor.

This process of embodying a persona aligns with what Marion (2008) describes in his "activity-based" ethnography, namely "activity-based" identity, which means that who we are is shaped by what we repeatedly do. He argues that in competitive ballroom, identity is performed and physically ingrained through thousands of hours of training and rehearsal (Marion 2008:12). As he writes, personas are "not as easily discarded as the costuming they match" (ibid). This helps explain why advanced dancers such as Sofia and Leon do not switch off their personas after each round. Instead, their attitude becomes an extension of themselves through habit. Jane Desmond (1993) similarly describes dance as a form of "kinesthetic semiotics" (Desmond 1993:34), where movement communicates identity. Dancers learn how to "speak" a certain confidence with their body. For beginners, the vocabulary may be limited – a forced smile or a practiced walk, as in my own experience. But over time, this movement becomes more fluent. Persona becomes internalised, until it becomes difficult to distinguish between the dancer and the role they are playing. Indeed, when answering whether his persona ever crossed over into his everyday life, Leon stated

"All the time. It's easier not to turn it off. It just turned into me."

The difference in levels is also evident in how dancers respond to the crowd. Elliot said that seeing his team cheer for him made him happy, but that the audience didn't otherwise affect his performance. Personally, I also found that the spectators all blend into the background when I dance; I don't really pay attention to them, instead concentrating on maintaining my smile and avoiding stepping on my partner's feet. Sofia, on the other hand, described performing for the audience and that she simply "wants to make them happy". She always offers a show of confidence even when she doesn't feel it. Leon also mentioned how the audience is what he draws energy from to project his persona: "If they're all on their phones, it just makes you feel stupid. If there's no crowd, there's no energy." The contrast between these approaches shows how persona in dance is not static. It evolves alongside the dancer's experience and confidence. While it may begin as a conscious act, over time it becomes second nature. Many dancers' personas become part of their life-course identity. It does not switch off when the music stops (Penny 1999).

APPEARANCE AND AESTHETIC LABOUR

For the IVDC competition, like all ballroom competitions, appearance is crucial. From self-tanning to make you visible under bright lights, to heavy makeup that accentuates your features from a distance to gelled-up hair that keeps it from moving when you're dancing, preparing for a competition involves aesthetic labour that goes beyond technical training. This process often begins hours – if not days – before dancers step onto the floor. Mine started two hours before the opening of the doors at 6 am: one hour for makeup, one hour for hair. Leon described putting on his tail suit, which is required as an advanced dancer, as a transformative act. "Once the tail suit is on, you can't slouch," he said. "You have to stand with a straight spine – it's tailored that way." The outfit imposes a physical discipline that shapes how he dances and moves, emphasizing how he holds himself throughout the day.

In contrast, Elliot, who is newer to competition, admitted feeling awkward in his buttoned shirt and slicked-back hair. Sofia, on the other hand, explained how her costume shapes her movement: long skirts and open backs require upright posture and straight knees; even the satin shoes, she said, "make your feet visible, so you have to stand nicely." For her, the outfit acts as a tool not an accessory. Her experience ties in with Caroline Joan Picart's (2002) description of ballroom costume as a tool for visual illusion: helping to

"generate the illusion of weightlessness and mystery" through "delicate, gauzy materials" and the elongation of the dancer's lines (Picart 2002:350).

It enforces the aesthetic and emotional tone of the performance.

Ericksen (2012) describes this kind of preparation as "aesthetic labour": the bodily work dancers perform to align with competitive ideals. She notes that "the body project is not simply something dancers do; it is who they are" (Eriksen 2012:52). This resonates with all three dancers, who stated that success in ballroom is as much about looking the part as dancing it. As Sofia put it:

"You always have to look perfectly dressed. That's part of taking it seriously."

Appearance also plays a role in how dancers are viewed by the judges. Leon argued that looking the part demonstrates commitment and legitimacy: "Wearing the right clothes shows you're invested, because it is an aesthetic sport – it's all about the looks." He also added how anatomy plays a role in the aesthetic of dance: "Having the wrong shoulder blade type, like forward shoulders, doesn't work for dancing, neither do supinate feet; you need to be using the inside of the foot for stability. Height is important because the taller you are for ballroom, the better you're seen. Your movements become much more elegant because you create bigger lines with your body. Working out, obviously, and having the right haircut – a bald dancer, unfortunately, just won't get good marks." In ballroom, looking good is all about being visible, believable, and competitive. The aesthetic expectations of the sport shape how dancers prepare and perform themselves.

PERFORMING GENDER

Gender is actively constructed through movement in ballroom dancing. Although the structure of partnered dancing establishes male and female roles, the lead and the follower, the way these roles are performed varies. Dancers

are expected to embody a set of gendered characteristics that are stylistically legible. Leon described how gendered performance shifts between ballroom and Latin styles. In ballroom, masculinity is associated with control, elevation, and leadership: "wide frame," "actually leading your partner rather than throwing them into lines," and the appearance of doing everything with minimal effort. In Latin dance, the male dancer must appear more physically expansive and assertive- displaying energy through the back, spine, and upper body, while allowing for expressive, flirtatious qualities that read as confident. "Short dancers are good with Latin but seen as less masculine in their lines, so they have to go for a speed approach instead " he says. For followers in Latin dance, femininity is especially expressed through sexual hip action, finger styling, and more exaggerated facial expressions. In ballroom dance, Sofia described how feminine movement requires subtle control of the posture, fluid arms, and detailed hand styling. She noted that she channels different moods through body language, adapting her energy depending on the dance.

These embodied performances reveal how ballroom dance implements clear codes of gender movement. Yet the pressure to remain within acceptable bounds can limit how dancers explore or express themselves. Richardson draws attention to this with his concept of 'effeminophobia' - the fear of not appearing masculine. In ballroom, male dancers must be expressive without appearing effeminate, especially when performing routines that are often sensual or flamboyant. Niall Richardson (2018) writes that "what protects the gender-dissident male ballroom dancer from being read as effeminate is that he is paired with a female body performing excessive femininity" (Richardson 2018: 207). The presence of a hyper-feminine partner, in other words, reinscribes the male dancer's heterosexual role.

This creates a fine line for dancers like Elliot, who is relatively new to ballroom and still finding comfort in the performative aspects of Latin dance. He described the experience of dancing flamboyantly on the floor as "intimidating", because he was trying to be expressive but not exaggerated, playful but not "too much". While he noted that he wasn't exactly self-conscious, the gendered persona in Latin dancing felt unnatural to him. This response directly reflects the kind of social constraint Richardson identifies even with a supposedly expressive art form; not all expressions are equally accepted, especially when they blur traditional gender lines.

For followers, femininity is also performed, but not passively. Sofia described adjusting her posture, gestures, and gaze to project different styles depending on the dance. She acknowledged that some leads are "more feminine," and some followers "angrier," showing that while ballroom enforces roles, it also contains a range of expression within those roles. This reflects Allison Leib and Robert Bulman's finding that ballroom dancing allows for complex hybrid expressions of gender. Their study showed that men were encouraged to develop qualities such as "emotional sensitivity and graceful physicality" (2007: 611) alongside traditional strength, while many feminist-identified women actively enjoyed performing stylised femininity. Ballroom, they argue, offers a rare space where dancers learn both to conform and play with gender codes.

That ambiguity is also built into the structure of the dance itself. While roles are named as "lead" and "follower," both dancers must be attuned to each other at all times. As Eriksen

(2011) notes, following is not a passive act. Sofia explained that her job was to embody a confident persona and control the emotional tone of the routine. In her words, her performance is to match her partner while also to "make the audience believe" in the mood she is creating. Ultimately, ballroom dancers do not simply replicate gender roles, they negotiate them. Within the steps of the sport, dancers find space to express strength, grace, dominance, vulnerability, and desire – all filtered through persona.

LEVELS, LEARNING AND EMOTIONAL PERSONA

While persona in ballroom dancing is often discussed as a matter of image, it is also shaped by emotional expression, musical interpretation, and above all, experience. As dancers advance in skill, their persona tends to shift from something external and performative to something internal, layered, and emotionally grounded. Before stepping onto the floor, Elliot focuses on posture and smiling. "I remind myself to look confident," he said, admitting that this felt like acting, something he had to consciously switch on. For Elliot, persona remains a visible performance of confidence without much emotional depth behind it.

By contrast, Leon described shifting between dances by embodying different moods: "You get lower, angrier, more passionate for a tango," he said.

"You're trying to feel the emotion, not just act it."

In his account, each dance requires an emotional reset right after it– an ability to transition between personas that are physically distinct and emotionally charged: "As soon as the dance is done, you forget that dance to get into the mindset of the next one. The music helps a lot." For many, persona is no longer a mask worn during performance, but a role learned, refined, and internalised through time (Penny 1999).

Desmond (1993) argues that movement and gesture act as "primary social texts" through which identities are formed and recognised. In ballroom, these texts are structured around style, rhythm, and music (Desmond 1993). Different dances require different emotional codes: the lightness of a quickstep, the sharp staccato of a tango, the softness of a rumba. Being able to read and perform these moods convincingly is something dancers learn over time. It cannot be fully taught, only developed through practice and embodied understanding. An interesting perspective is that each ballroom genre is a distinct "landscape of desire," where dancers project different identities and emotional tones (Picart 2002). Leon's embodiment of aggression in tango and elegance in foxtrot reflects this landscape. Even the way he bows, he said, must carry the feeling of the dance that just ended – an indication that persona is maintained beyond the final step. For Sofia too, the emotional register is essential: she channels passion or poise through gesture and expression, using music as an emotional guide.

These examples show that persona is not static but grows with the dancer. While beginners often rely on surface-level markers of confidence, more advanced dancers develop an emotional mindset that allows for complex, shifting characters. As dancers progress, their persona becomes less about appearance and more about mood or timing. Ultimately, experience enables dancers to move from acting like someone else to becoming that person.

CONCLUSION

This ethnographic project has shown that persona in university ballroom dancing is ultimately a costume worn during performance and a complex and evolving part of how dancers express, embody, and negotiate identity. Across interviews and observations at the IVDC in Blackpool, it became clear that persona is shaped by a range of intersecting factors such as level of training, gender norms, emotional tone, and belief in yourself. While beginners focused on surface confidence and short-term performance, advanced dancers like Leon and Sofia revealed personas that were deeply embedded in their physicality, movement, and attitude both on and off the floor.

What began as an exploration of performance gradually became a study of identity in the world of ballroom. In this context, ballroom becomes a site where personas are continually rehearsed, tested, and internalised. As a beginner dancer and ethnographer, I was able to observe persona in others and in myself. I experienced what it means to perform confidence even when it does not feel natural – to hold posture, keep smiling, and present an image of control while navigating nerves and technical challenges. This dual role gave me insight into how personas are constructed from within. Ultimately, persona in ballroom is not a fixed role or an artificial act. It is a learned, felt, and embodied expression that reveals who the dancers want to be.

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5

The Beautiful Sight - Yours and Others. Anthropology of Tourism Photography

Tymofii Donets

This paper explores the practice of tourism photography based on my fieldwork conducted around St Andrews Castle. Involving my personal experience of doing photography while migrating from country to country and demonstrating some of the experiences of tourists taking photos next to the castle, I reflect on tourism photography as a social practice through the aspects of 'tourist gaze' , the power of controlling vision and knowledge, memory practice as well as 'play' and 'performance'. What different meanings could individuals acquire about themselves while taking photos next to famous sights? To what ends do they use these materials?

The tall black thick tripod with the phone on top is looking into the young tourist girl who occupies the place in the centre of the gates that lead to the castle ruins. The several-second timer set on the camera phone seems eternal, reaffirming the tension between an almost falling metal black creature through the wind and the constant stable smile of the tourist, directed in front. After the 'click', the time and space are captured, producing another set of possible 'selves'. The smile disappears, and the girl, squinting from the sun, tries to take a look at the photos made. The tripod is taken under the shoulder and departs on another journey with the tourist, who roams around each unknown corner of the castle, producing multiple photos of herself 'for fun'. It seems like each area of these ruins is a separate scene, where completely different stories are enacted, and relationships are formed with new characters. And I am, in a similar constant process of roaming, trying to capture myself in such different places to me. In my own selfie pictures in front of mountains, at museums, in castles, or after submitting my application for study at the college, through which I try to experience the transition between different countries, people, loss, and hopes. Similarly, standing for the first time somewhere in the snowy bushes of the Alps mountains, scared of getting lost, but with straight hands, I am photographing myself smiling. Every time my mother tries to take a photo of me, I become confused and irritated, not knowing where to put myself, and often just

spread my hands into the sides as I did in my childhood all the time. Almost like a sign of flying over the places, or feeling welcomed, or just being desperate of what to do in front of the camera and a photographer. I am in flux between being a tall tripod with the camera, trying to fix everything around, and the posing individual, looking into the camera around surroundings that I never knew before and which will never be the same.

Does the camera and photography help to reassure me about my existence and familiarity with a specific place or people? What am I paying attention to the most? Who am I taking these photos to, and will I ever come back to them again?

The advancements of global travel in the Renaissance period shaped the need to document the exploration of new cultures and territories, trying to process and give meanings to new realities at the same time demonstrating the difference between 'us' and 'them'. The recording which happened through oral, textual, or visual practices helped to curate specific versions of the world, creating representations about others to present it to the people 'at home' (Boorstin 1985 as cited in Robinson and Picard 2009:2,). The development of photography in the mid 19th century shaped new opportunities for closer and more immediate, objective representation of reality, particularly for tourists for whom the camera became the main guide and frame of the world. Walter Benjamin's concept of 'here and now' exemplifies this immediate aspect of photography, particularly how aspects of accessibility and fast production of the camera allow the producer and the viewer to approach the subject represented in a much closer look (as cited in Robinson and Picard 2009:3). With the active spread of photographs in the popular media like books, TV, social media, they created a sense of 'imaginative mobility', through which it is possible to project a sense of any place without travelling to it as well as overcome uniqueness of new realities by such active reproduction of them (Larsen 2006:244). Observing such a 'passive' experience of consumption of photographs, the question arises of how the medium perpetuates the modern notions of 'consumerism' and consequently destroys the 'authentic experience' of environments and social relations produced there (Larsen 2006). Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu (1990) has argued how photography works as a machine and practice to naturalise rather than disrupt larger social conventions, sustaining specific subjectivities and ideologies (as cited in Crang 1997:364). Alongside considering photography as a medium of reproducibility and 'passive' consumption of reality, it is interesting to reflect on how it involves creative aspects, allowing social agents to shape different understandings of reality and form various social relationships. With the technologically manipulative capabilities of the camera, photography works not towards knowing the surface of reality or its truth but towards transforming its surface and controlling it (Slater 1995:230). In this essay, I would like to explore the practice of tourism photography based on my fieldwork conducted around St Andrews Castle. Involving my personal experience of doing photography while migrating from country to country and demonstrating some of the experiences of tourists taking photos next to the castle, I am interested in reflecting on tourism photography as a social practice through the aspects of 'tourist gaze' and the power of controlling vision and knowledge, memory practice as well as the 'play' and 'performance'. What different meanings could individuals acquire about

themselves while taking photos next to the famous sights? To what ends do they use these materials?

The topic of tourism photography was selected because of personal curiosity to understand how people differently self-represent themselves and connect it to my practice of taking photographs while being in new places. The fieldwork was conducted involving the primary focus on qualitative methodologies of participant observation as well as the improvisatory practice of asking passerby tourists to take photos of me in front of the castle. Being photographed by others helped me to establish a more direct and spontaneous connection with the participants while paying attention to the details each individual places importance on and understanding the ambiguity felt while being in the frame of others. Throughout the whole process of fieldwork, I felt a particular tension in asking others to take a photo of me, sometimes standing in front of the castle for half an hour, passively looking into the eyes of people, and promising myself that for sure I will approach the next person walking by. Probably, I did not have enough trust in others, or I just was not ready to be in a vulnerable position in front of strangers who were actively looking at me. It is interesting to assume that I would feel freer if I were placed within a group of other people for a photo, or if the photo was taken by a familiar person to me. After such short photo sessions, I asked photographers a couple of questions, being curious for what purposes they take photographs next to tourist sights, on what aspect they focus on, and to what ends they use these materials. Alongside these methodologies, I conducted a couple of short interviews with museum coworkers around the town to understand their responses to tourism photography observed daily, their connection to it, and to reflect on the general practice of preservation and memory making. I am holding my hand straight or in my pockets, gently smiling at the camera in front. I should probably always be smiling. Another 'click', and…

Three young Polish tourists take a photo of one another at the same spot, almost not changing poses and composition. Later on, while taking the photo of me, they started negotiating between themselves and trying to choose the best angle and perspective for my photo next to the castle. The photo ended up featuring a close-up of my face with a blurry background of the castle's small part. As they said, the photograph serves as historical evidence which produces further discussions and as a confirmation that

'*I have been there*'.

Intently looking into the camera of the photographer while two other friends were navigating his hands, I felt that it was also a confirmation of my existence, our communal looking, seeing, and acknowledging each other. It is also a specific type of confirmation that depends on the view and always movable perspectives of the photographer. In the moment of the 'click,' I become like a plastic or plasticine, the form of which is regulated by the stranger. In such moments specific interaction is established between the 'I' of the photographer and the 'other', the photographed subject, promoting the attitude of 'ethno-topia' with the feeling of power and epistemological possession of the subject in the frame (Nichols 1991 as cited in Panakova 2019). This idea of power and 'possession' could be associated with the larger Western epistemology of equating knowledge with visual representation, thus seeing means knowing (Larsen 2006). Moreover, the practice of looking within tourism photography involves

the whole technology of production which depends on larger social standards of representation. John Urry, who widely researched tourist practices, introduced the term 'tourist gaze', arguing that our vision is socio-culturally constructed and depends on our beliefs, norms, and values acquired from previous experiences (Larsen 2006). We are living in a bubble of shared meanings and representations, being in a relational network of tourists, sights, and markers (MacCannell 1999 as cited in Larsen 2006:246). Markers involve us in the journey, through which we try to identify the authentic symbolic elements of specific tourist sights to conventionally reproduce them further. The tourist gaze is further influenced by the belief in 'expert' photographic knowledge, acquiring an understanding of collective representations within popular media like social networks, postcards, and newspapers (Yeh Hsiu-Yen 2009:205).

'I do like observing these professionals, I am not as bold as some of these photographers, I am taking pictures of the buildings or myself only',

added the old man after taking a photo of me. Professionalism could be acquired through knowing the grid rules, placing people in the right spots (e.g. golden ratio), or knowing how to appeal to the audience, as shared with me by an Italian tourist, trying to take multiple photos of me from different perspectives. Thus, tourism photography is a confirmation that involves the differentiation of 'I' from 'other' and familiarization with the subject framed, promoting different power dynamics and structuring based on wider aesthetic, and socio-cultural conventions. Who becomes the bold 'professional' and how come?

Standing on top of the public terrasse with a view of the Eiffel Tower in Paris together with my girlfriend, one couple approached us asking to take a photo of them. Teasing me, my girlfriend said that I am professional and that I shall take a photo, emphasising my experience studying anthropology and film. The couple praised my photo, after which several other people approached me asking to take the same 'beautiful' photo of them. For most of my life I did not have a passion for being photographed or doing photos for others in such a staged way, rather through my interest in street/documentary photography I try to explore the conditions around me, making certain meanings of who I am and what is my relation to surroundings. Tourism photography allows one not only to frame and 'possess others' but also confront various possible 'selves', or through interactions with new environments to explore individual desires and dreams (Robinson and Picard 2009:10). By looking at and confirming the 'other' through the camera, be it a castle or a person selling ice cream next to it, it is possible to reformulate the understanding of oneself and own influence. These observations connect with larger tendencies in studies of tourism called 'practice turn', which pays attention to embodied, performative practices of tourists rather than looking at representation and meaning (Larsen 2006:254). The process of photographing unknown settings allows me to engage in the form of play or performance (Crang 1997:362). This perspective encourages us to think of what stands beyond the reproduction of tourist 'markers' or conventional motifs 'I have been there', looking into new unexpected roles that may arise through such staged photographic play. Why did the couple want the 'beautiful' photo exactly from me, and what did they experience as the couple photographed by me 'professional' with the background of the Eiffel Tower? Integrating

Gell's theory (1999) of art as enchantment technology, it is interesting to reflect on how the photographic process through the mutual technical coproduction and play between the producer and the subject could become a vehicle for reimagining the reality (as cited in Hoskins 2009:161). While my experience of migrating from country to country after the war began in my Motherland, I found the process of actively photographing my new environment as the desire to find new meanings and recreate particular stories, consequently processing my unique version of a new reality and my place in it. In the case of photographing the couple in Paris, being in the position of tourists, I was still involved in the production of a specific mode of reality, reflecting the individual presentation of the 'ideal' couple and being in Paris in front of strangers smiling at me. In turn, the couple, while reproducing the common tourist patterns of being photographed in front of the Eiffel Tower (smiling, hugging each other), were able to experience the unique performance of love to each other. In this process they might feel and trust my 'professionalism' based on observed experience of how I behaved with my girlfriend before the photographic encounter, further producing personal understandings of love directly interacting with my photographic gaze. The tourism photography practice builds 'emotional geographies' for its practitioners, which enables them to produce their 'desired togetherness, wholeness, and intimacy' (Robinson and Picard 2009:16). Even by engaging in the active reproduction of 'markers', tourists are involved in the act of self-production. Both producers and subjects initiate improvisatory performance, through which they explore the various social roles and relations.

How and who will remember such moments?

Meanwhile, the tall tripod continues its travel around the castle with the running tourist, taking photos only for 'close people', as putting photos on social media 'adds additional pressure and a side of overthinking the content being shared'. The tourist believes that her family members are fond of getting photos of her in unusual places where they have never been themselves. Indeed, most tourists take photos for the sake of preservation or sharing, particularly with close people. Remember the last time your grandparents asked you for nice photos from your recent trips or your friends who missed the last group holiday and are desperate to see how it went? It is interesting to think about how we choose the photos and the people with whom we would like to share them. As an object, the photograph could be recontextualised and filled with emotional significance, depending on the people who are dealing with such materials (Robinson and Picard 2009:24). It acts as a central prompt for memories and the creation of further stories, allowing to observe what is significant to the producer and creating specific narratives that could support the development of social relations (Crang 1997:368). The museum worker from St Andrews shared with me that she has the tradition of selecting specific family travel photos once a year and making a collection, being involved in the process of curation. She further prints them and adds various titles and notes to them, sometimes sending these physical collections to her dad in Canada. She receives the photos from other family members too, but she emphasised that the photographs of others are mostly focused on 'daily lives' only. It becomes interesting to reflect on how individuals create a significance of every 'worthy' picture to share through material framing, settings where the photo is taken, and people involved, and how this significance is further being used as a tool to develop relationships with others. Furthermore, the

question of power over who gets to decide what to share and who is responsible for this becomes prominent. Standing outside of the castle area, I noticed the group of people where the two ladies were photographed by the older man. It was a family, where presumably the father was taking photos of daughters for the sake of 'recalling this memory in the future'. They shared that they sent all of the photos later on to the family Whatsapp group chat, and in most cases, it was done by this older man. In this case, the family performs itself, allowing the vision of the 'father' to structure its specific understanding and reproduce it for a future as a 'carrier' of that understanding. Using popular conventions and 'markers' around tourism photography, we orient ourselves toward the future to preserve specific meanings and create a 'base' that could serve for the creative production of further dreams, stories, and relations. We come back to the same tourist famous sights, year by year, taking similar smiling photos, so in the future, we could notice the change 'how fat I have become'. Another 'click' to remind us how different we could possibly be.

It is a question if we ever come back to these almost similar photos with repetitive poses, views, buildings, and smiles. If not, we definitely engaged in the process, performance, or 'play', recognising the difference between oneself and others, building connections or lines of separation, understanding unknown aspects of the self, or finally feeling an intimate connection with others. And also we created the material attribute which could not only remind us about our past but also encourage us to dream, creating new realities we have never imagined before. Despite the tension, I produced multiple photos of myself next to the famous castle in Scotland with the help of others. It's not a single selfie of myself in the snowy Alps, being scary, but a full-height photo of me next to the castle, I could call my new home. Photo of myself, confirmed by the strangers, who are similarly exploring this castle.

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6

Cultural Upbringings and Jobs

Nelly Levytska

This paper looks at the multicultural front-of-house employees at Rusacks Hotel and how work ethics, emotional labour and ties to hierarchy are shaped by culturally embedded moral economies. Based on auto-ethnographic reflection and interviews, it makes vthe case that conceptions of commitment, limits and professional behaviour are heavily influenced by inherited culture narratives rather than just personal preference. While UK standards emphasise balance, personal development and critical contact with management, precarious experiences in Eastern Europe encourage diligence, obedience and self-sacrifice. These competing viewpoints give light on how employees in the hospitality business negotiate, reinterpret or disobey cultural conventions on a regular basis. By bringing theory and lived experience into the dialogue, the paper demonstrates that work is a culturally rooted habit, and it highlights the importance of management strategies that respect multiple moral worlds rather than enforcing a single normative paradigm.

Work consumes much more than just our hours but also takes up our thoughts, anxieties and perceptions of self. This is especially apparent in multicultural work environments such as hotels, in which staff members from all over the world add not only their professional skills but also deeply rooted cultural perceptions of what it takes to work well, be an accountable employee, exhibit dedication, and preserve personal time. This paper will focus on the front-of-house staff at the Rusacks Hotel. Through an incorporation of auto-ethnographic reflections and interviews, this paper illustrates moral economies of labour with cultural roots, the shaping of relationships to hierarchy, and the effect this has on emotional labour experiences in day-to-day professional duties. The objective of this research is to continuously examine how lived experiences both support and challenge dominant academic explanations, rather than merely integrating personal or ethnographic findings into theoretical frameworks. In doing so, this research solidifies the case that we can only fully comprehend the nuanced ways that culturally inherited ideas of work impact modern hospitality environments by maintaining theory and ethnography in an evolving, constructive tension.

Every oversimplified idea that employment is a universal economic activity pursued in a culturally neutral setting is vitally refuted by the anthropology of labour. Instead, academics have consistently maintained that work is morally and socially significant. Barley and Kunda (2001) assert that

> *"Work is not merely instrumental; it is a socially situated practice imbued with cultural*

meanings",

such understanding, as per Barley and Kunda, sets the stage for investigating how various upbringings produce unique moral and affective connections to work (2001:82). In certain cultures, hard effort is associated with family honour or heavenly approval. In others, it is linked to the values of personal fulfilment and independence. This indicates that opinions regarding long hours, overtime, hierarchy and leisure are moral decisions influenced by shared histories rather than being simplified to individual preferences or pressing financial need. Growing up with a mother and a father with a highly materialistic outlook on life paved a way for an unspoken pressure to have a similar work ethic, beginning in primary school academia and proceeding into GCSEs, A-Levels, University and work. With mum and dad, it was not as simple as work and home as separate entities; instead, only work existed above family dinners, trips, Christmases, birthdays etc. After moving from Ukraine to the UK at a young age, there was a notable cultural difference observed which started off with the way my friends' parents would react to a bad grade or a need for a break, and then continued to the simplicity of the way my work colleagues treat the responsibilities at work and the ability to let work be just work. Thus, the original hypothesis was reframed. The more perceptive inquiry is how different moral economies of work manifest themselves in the common area of a hotel, and what conflicts or alliances result from these interactions, rather than why certain coworkers "work harder" or "draw stricter boundaries".

The preservation of strong work ethics in many Eastern European contexts is persuasively explained by Hann (2002). Through looking at post-socialist culture, the consensus established was that although the fall of state socialism created new political and economic opportunities, it also left people concerned that the only surefire way to protect themselves from precarity was to work hard – "The collapse of state socialism left behind a legacy where hard work is often tied to survival instincts, not individual self-realisation" (Hann 2002, p.57). Such practice spreads throughout Europe with migrants who are employed in the hotel industry. It may manifest as a hesitancy to decline overtime, an almost instinctive compliance with orders from superiors, or a propensity to gauge one's own value by measurable output. These patterns are historically charged reactions to social insecurity rather than just habits.

One of my colleagues from Rusacks has showcased much of Hann's notion. Klaudia joined the reception team in 2022 and opted to change to the concierge team a few months later. Klaudia and I, despite having 15 years between us, have found many similarities in our opinions on work responsibilities, with many, if not all, of our views originating from an Eastern European upbringing. Last winter Klaudia was appointed as acting concierge supervisor, however she realised not long after how inhumanely demanding the position would be with late hours and unmanageable responsibilities that Klaudia just did not feel like she signed up for, despite working within the team for three years. Upon having a discussion with her about it – more so what made her resist openly speaking to management about her concerns – Klaudia's response was as follows:

"Well you know how it is, it is a job and despite not signing up for the bad of it, even if the bad can easily be resolved, only if someone listens, it comes hand in hand. I do not have the ability to let work be work, I only know work as a way of life and even more so a way to survival. Sometimes it does take life

out of me, but I also would not have a life without this job. I also just do not want to whine, sometimes I sit there and think "you have got to be kidding me" but at the end of the day, that is just how these things go."

Klaudia's viewpoint directly ties in with Hann's statement surrounding hard work being tied to survival instincts as opposed to individual self-realisation (Hann 2002). Hann's narrative, however, runs the risk of solidifying post-socialist labourers as mired in the past. This is made more difficult by the anthropological glances from Rusacks, which reveal instances in which employees deliberately defy or reframe these ingrained moral logics. One may come across Eastern Europe workers who actively foster leisure activities as a subliminal protest against family stories of unrelenting labour. This emphasises how crucial it is to view cultural upbringings as a resource that people negotiate, sometimes by embracing it and other times by slightly challenging it, rather than as an unchangeable script.

A distinct constellation of moral and structural influences on attitudes towards employment may be seen when looking at the UK setting. Holmes contends that, especially for recent graduates, work in the UK is strongly related to concepts of personal growth (Holmes 2001). Many people develop their sense of self, demonstrate their ability and act on adult identities through their employment. This does not, however, always equate to a culture of unrelenting sacrifice. In their analysis of over-qualification and under-employment trends, Lloyd and Payne1 (2016) note that British workers are increasingly navigating the job market with a form of guarded ambivalence (2016). A more ambiguous attitude towards the workplace is shaped by "a growing tension between over-qualification and under-utilisation, which shapes a more ambivalent attitude to the workplace" (Lloyd and Payne). To put it another way, many Brits, in part as a safeguard against systemic disappointments, want their employment to be meaningful and respectable, but they also refuse to let work take over their lives. This is not to imply that British workers have a less moral or serious attitude towards their jobs. Rather, their work ethic is intertwined with cultural norms that value emotional health and work-life balance in addition to hard effort.

Another notable individual within the Rusacks front-of-house team is Alisha. Alisha started working within the housekeeping team when she was 16, later being recruited into the concierge team, moving onto being part of the reception team with a promotion to supervisor at 21, a position that she later stepped down from. In addition to working within Rusacks, Alisha has a nail and hair business that has picked up dramatically over the last year which led to her requesting a 0-hour contract from the hotel to balance out work pressures. Alisha is admirable not only because of her passion and her work ethic, but because of her ability to maintain a work-life balance. With a very open approach, Alisha says no to shifts as opposed to sacrificing days off, time with family and friends, nights out, trips abroad, etc. and at no point has she ever come up with an intricate excuse for saying no, just a simple 'cannot work here'. Unlike Klaudia and I, Alisha grew up with the UK outlooks on work, and she is not afraid to emphasise her personal needs and push for a work environment that supports those.

This changed the way I perceived what could otherwise look to be a straightforward lack of "hustle". It demonstrated how historical and structural factors, such as welfare state and rising educational costs, produce new moral economies where preserving one's own time is

seen as morally right.

Another essential theoretical framework for examining work attitudes in the hotel industry is Hochschild's groundbreaking idea of "emotional labour". According to Hochschild, emotional labour is the process by which workers control their emotions to elicit specific emotional states from clients, thereby marketing emotional performance in addition to intellectual or physical services (2012). The quintessential venues for this kind of emotional business are hotels. The role requires the ability to smile at visitors, diffuse concerns, and remain composed under pressure. However, comparing Hochschild to anthropological findings implies that the way employees respond to this emotional control is also influenced by culture. Working with people gives room for every bad day reflecting in every interaction with a guest, making it that much more difficult. For example, Isla tends to cry when dealing with a difficult guest and whilst it is by no means an absurd reaction, is it the right one to have? Contrary to Isla, I lean towards answering attitude with attitude, but is that a better reaction to have? It is difficult to establish 'right' and 'wrong' when it comes to working with people whilst being a human yourself. In line with Hochschild's theory of deep acting, employees from cultures that value stoicism, for instance, might view grievances as personal affairs that should never interfere with the professional façade. Employees from environments that value emotional authenticity, on the other hand, may participate in surface acting combined with a lot of backstage venting, viewing shared frustration as crucial form of self-care. This demonstrates how local norms regarding emotional display, poise, and what it means to be appropriately "professional" inevitably filter Hochschild's universal theory.

Deep cultural conditioning is also reflected in attitudes towards workplace hierarchy. Questioning a superior might contain moral implications of disrespect or even danger in some post-socialist or post-authoritarian contexts, evoking past histories where speaking up could have disastrous effects (Hann 2002). This influences modern reactions to managerial orders in ways that go beyond simple confidence or charisma. Holmes (2001), on the other hand, emphasises how being open to criticism, questioning, and suggesting changes is a component of professional identity in the UK, especially among recent graduates (2011). It is frequently regarded as proof of critical thinking and participation rather than insubordination. In the Eastern European culture that I grew up with and later, most obviously observed through Klaudia, there is an evident hesitation when discussing concerns with a manager. Both of my parents are Ukrainian business owners, and as a child I would hear their complaints about whiny employees. Thus, I was brought up with and work with my mother's voice in my head – "It's a job, it's not going to be easy, but you do not take days off and you do not whine, you simply get on with it. You can cry when you are home but is there any point in that?". My mother always told me I attempted to revolutionise what does not need to be and that is an aspect of my personality I have put aside in work, but I do wonder how many promotions I missed out on or how many difficult days I forced onto myself by not openly speaking to management about any concerns. A crucial finding from the anthropology of work is shown by this discrepancy: what constitutes "good professional conduct" is never completely impartial or objective. It is usually intertwined with historical legacies and local moral economies. When workers move across borders, these residues don't just disappear but instead accompany them and subtly but significantly influence

workplace relations.

One of this study's more profound conclusions is that ethnographic material frequently challenges theoretical ideas rather than just illuminating them. For example, the lived data indicates that people continuously negotiate local moral systems, even if previous research persuasively demonstrates how work is integrated in these worlds. Employees selectively support, modify or challenge cultural scripts in light of shifting contexts and individual goals rather than passively enacting them. Similarly, the hospitality setting both validates and complicates Hochschild's (2012) notion of emotional labour as a commercialisation that threatens estrangement (2012). A more intricate connection than simple exploitation is shown by the fact that, whereas some employees certainly portray emotions for compensation, some also find true fulfilment and pride in perfecting their duties. In Isla's case, she was denied a duty manager position for her professional inability to remain unbothered whereas in the case of my managers, their career growth was rooted in emotional control and surrender to commodification. Yet again, it is a difficult concept to establish a 'right' and 'wrong' with. Such situations necessitate a more complex theoretical framework that acknowledges both agency and constraint. Instead of being viewed as inflexible determinants, cultural inheritances seem to be variable repertoires, collections of dispositions that people can use, modify or even reject based on the situation. This deep comprehension enhances discussions of managing diverse hospitality workplaces in practice as well as in anthropological theory.

These observations have real-world ramifications for hospitality administration. With the hospitality industry being one of the most inherently multicultural ones where the diversity of employees brings varied cultural attitudes towards service, hierarchy and customer interactions are crucial. Thus, successful management calls for more than just general leadership abilities and cultural literacy. Management could prevent misinterpreting these actions by acknowledging that some employees may feel morally obligated to take on every extra shift while others see work-life balance as a sign of professionalism. The goal is to promote nuanced, courteous behaviours that can avoid unintentional exploitation or misunderstanding, not to indulge cultural preconceptions. Throughout my research, from both auto-ethnography and interviews, my opinions on work ethic have most certainly changed. What I grew up with and up until now believed to my core has been altered by taking an objective stance. The concept of being "better than" and the unspoken competition such mindsets bring has been reshaped through this work. Conversations with Klaudia have validated my upbringing, however, the conversations with Alisha and other team members shined a light on how much more open a work environment can be. Within a hospitality job, the option of not liking your colleagues does not exist; Rusacks has seen its employees through their best and worst days, often being the reason why the bad days were more manageable. With that level of openness in private life, there is room for improvement to have the same level of openness in work life too. While the inability to raise concerns with management is often an internal hesitation, management may also aim to create workplaces where a variety of work ethics are recognised and balanced rather than reduced to a single normative model by realising that people are navigating complicated moral economies that are the result of histories much larger than themselves.

Labour is never just a contractual agreement between an employer and an employee, as this investigation of how cultural upbringings influence attitudes towards labour and ethics within the hospitality industry has attempted to demonstrate. History, social anxieties, individual aspirations and ethical systems all converge there. While the theoretical works of scholars offer invaluable resources for observing these complexities, the complete picture of these dynamics only becomes apparent through ethnographic engagement which involves attentive listening and critical reflection on lived experiences. A fuller, more complex picture of work ethics is the outcome, one in which employees from various backgrounds embody deeply engrained moral economies, perhaps subtly altering and occasionally reaffirming them, rather than just 'having different attitudes' in a superficial sense. In addition to advancing anthropological discussions, these revelations pave the way for more equitable, culturally aware and successful hospitality management. To conclude, this study aims to make the case that in order to fully comprehend work in multicultural environments, it must be viewed as a profound cultural practice that is influenced by individual and personal narratives which should be approached with nuance, empathy and care, rather than merely as an economic necessity or personal preference.

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7

The Kate Kennedy Procession: A Revival of History and newfound Identity

Grace Pasqualucci Sammartini

This ethnography examines the 99th Kate Kennedy Procession in St Andrews, exploring how remembrance, revival, and identity are produced through participation in this annual ritual. Drawing on participant observation, informal interviews, and the author's own positionality as a member of the Kate Kennedy Club, the study argues for the sensory and interpretative dimensions of fieldwork. Findings reveal that the procession operates as an act of historical commemoration, animating factual and mythical narratives central to a local, 'St Andrean' identity. Through embodied performance, participants and spectators experience a temporal suspension, reviving memories, values, and symbolic figures. The procession reshapes personal and collective identities, fostering a united community while allowing individuals to project their own meanings onto key characters such as Lady Katharine. Ultimately, this ethnography argues that the procession constitutes a flexible, contested cultural space in which history, legend, and personal memory intersect, highlighting the subjective nature of anthropological interpretation.

The Kate Kennedy Spring Procession is organized by the Kate Kennedy Club, and departs from St Salvador's Quad, on a Saturday in April each spring. The procession traces its roots to medieval, pagan, and Christian spring rites, with Fifers commemorating "Cath Cinneachaidh". Legend has it that in the fifteenth century, the beautiful niece of Bishop James Kennedy, Lady Katharine, came to stay in St Andrews in both the spring of her life and the spring of the year. Idolised by all, a festival emerged from two separate origins, and it became Kate Kennedy's Day. On the 5th of March 1926, the procession was formally revived under the club thanks to two students, Donald Kennedy and James Doak, inspired by J. M Barrie's rectorial address on "Courage", with the assistance of Principle Sir James Irvine. The Club has since maintained the tradition of Kate's yearly Spring Procession, with the exception of the WWII and Covid periods. Today, the event celebrates the town's rich history, and will see over 150 students, locals, and university staff dress up as historical figures who have made an impact on St Andrews.

Explosion of colours, sounds, and smiles greet me

as I pass by the streets. My name is called, and I wonder where my purpose lies within this strange parade. My feet feel warm on the foreign pavement; my hands grip the familiar wooden cross I bear. I feel blessed to live a few moments back on this earth, in the country that calls me their patron. Different cloths drape the people around me, and crowds stare at us whilst holding strange objects that flash light. Centuries have transformed my surroundings…a Cathedral lies in ruins and - what are those loud metal creatures? I am faced with contradictions, feeling strangely back home in a different time. Archbishops and royals parade behind me, and a horse drawn object covered in daffodils carries a beautiful woman…Katharine! She will wave and smile, sip whiskey from a quaich and lift people's spirits with the promise of Spring. A peculiar reality indeed!

INTRODUCTION & METHODOLOGY

These are the words I envision St Andrew to say, if he were to lead the Kate Kennedy Procession today. I begin this ethnography with an attempt to place the reader within the deeply transformative experience that is participating in the procession. The following study will discuss themes of remembrance alongside revival and identity based upon conversations, participant observation, and personal involvement carried in the field between March and April 2025. Throughout this process, I have come to realise that the diversity of human nature means anthropological research is interpretative, sensitive, flexible and contested. I aim towards an objective analysis, allowing anthropological knowledge to honour the voices and requests of participants; however, it should be noted that this work also reflects my active participation in organizing the procession as a current member of the Kate Kennedy Club. My interpretations and conclusions are undeniably shaped by this relationship, distancing this from the original criteria of 'empirical fieldwork' outlined in Malinowski's Argonauts of the Western Pacific (1922). I hope this unique positionality will provide an alternative to rigid methodology, to create a transparent, sensory, and subjective interpretation, in line with some elements of autoethnography (Culhane & Denielle 2016). Whilst my fieldwork forms the basis for this analysis, I will consider historical contexts and draw on external ethnographies to inform the discussion. This stands in line with Kuper's argument on the limits of an exclusive Functionalist approach; in the prioritization of fieldwork, it often ignores history (Kuper 2015). I hope to give justice to student voices, friends, and local St Andreans, as they unlock the temporal and spatial journey surrounding this tradition. A powerful sense of historical revival permeates the procession, involving spectators and participants in a mystical experience of remembrance. With this comes an awakening of memories, emotions, and personal symbolism. This ethnography argues the surprising and immersive revelations give new meaning to the identities of people involved.

REMEMBRANCE

A recurring aspect which defined my fieldwork was the procession's significance as an act of remembrance. From the long costume inventories and logistical planning in the weeks prior to the Procession, to the scrupulous last-minute fittings, decorations, and polishing of armour, everything is planned with an intent to present the characters at their best. It is interesting to consider the passionate investment that goes into this relatively 'ephemeral' reality, lasting only a

couple of hours (Telle 2023:47). When speaking to other club members, almost all of them testified to a dedication to honour the stories of people that have contributed so much to the town and university. Students Paula and Sofia revealed how their participation connected them to Scottish culture and opened their eyes to histories of St Andrews which would otherwise go unobserved. The procession therefore assumes a devotional and educational power as an act of historical remembrance. It is interesting to consider how this commemoration acknowledges a history that is infused with myth and legend, reflecting a contradictory force between truth and mystery. This can be seen through the main character, the mystical Lady 'Katharina'. Whilst her uncle's status as Bishop Kennedy presents factual evidence, her own identity lies lost in the realms of legend. Only the bell in St Salvador's Quad bears witness to her name, forming a fascinating, mysterious character. This characteristic of the procession is no novelty to the context of Scotland, who's culture reflects a unique link to folkloric rituals. Anthropologist Guidicini alludes to the tradition of performing Scottish personhood through active engagement with civic space (Guidicini 2020). Similarly, Emily Donoho studies the history of 'insanity cures' in the Highlands, observing the relevance of magic to Scotland's identity (Donoho 2014). It is clear that this fusion between reality and legend fits within a specific culturally Scottish context. The historical remembrance of the procession is therefore also dedicated to the memory of these unique, mystical legends.

FROM REMEMBRANCE TO REVIVAL

My personal involvement on procession day, the 19th of April, revealed a fascinating quality of this tradition: its ability to create a temporal, spatial reality which has the power of revival. By creating a temporal reality , I mean to convey how the physical experience of the procession, involving more than 150 characters in costumes, immersed viewers and participants in a unique realm of time and space which departed from 21st century St Andrews. Seremetakis alludes to how senses act as a 'polytemporal portal', crossing temporal boundaries (Seremetakis 1994). This crossing of boundaries resonates with the procession, as the sensory experience of re-enacting rolesis able to immerse participants in a new dimension. This context then allows for the revival of memories through breaking the rational boundaries of time, creating a strange reality where characters, actions, and feelings lost in the past come back to life. Kari Telle's ethnography, focusing on the Cakranegara procession in Indonesia, argues a similar point. When analyzing the featured Hindu-Balinese imagination demons, Telle observes how this Cakranegara procession was the one occasion to let demons 'flourish in bursts of life' (Telle 2023: 49).

This brings me on to a second revelation in relation to this force of 'revival'. There is a sense of the procession becoming a system which goes beyond the aesthetic, physical presentation of a parade, and operates as a pilgrimage to resurrect values, people, and memories belonging to the past. This first came through my conversations with Mark. As an honorary life member, he has dedicated most of his life to the procession, and the club owes a great deal to his artistic wisdom and heraldic knowledge. For Mark, working to keep the procession holds deep significance:

'My strongest and enduring reaction to the whole Procession tradition - including the many

generations preceding its banning and then resurrection- is that it is, quite unconsciously, a deeply atavistic celebration of Spring (cf Easter, Nauroz, etc). In this iteration it is- again unconsciously- the festival of Spring personified as Persephone returning from the Underworld with her trail of the honoured dead. Kate is Persephone, whose by-name is Kore - the Maid.. I have used the adverb 'unconsciously' twice, intentionally, as every time I have urged this understanding on the participants, they have laughed it off dismissively. I suppose this is because they are far too 21st century and tech-savvy to acknowledge our dark, compelling natures! I hope this may be useful.'

Mark explains this, I note the Latin Sursum Corda engraved on fireplace behind him. He smiles, translating this as 'Lift up your Hearts'. Classical tradition and history are invaluable to Mark, and he often appears concerned on the impact of secularization and technology on our current society. The procession therefore presents the metaphorical revival of 'Spring', and with this, the restoration of the historical and cultural narratives surrounding the Procession. Katharine seems to assume the symbolic mission of resurrecting these fading traditions in the face of augmenting technology. Further, It is interesting to note how Mark stresses 'unconsciousness' within his reflection. It testifies to how personal interpretations of and interactions with this tradition cannot be easily framed within a rational, academic explanation. One of the greatest values of this fieldwork was precisely the interactive, everchanging subconscious meanings and relations to the procession.

If we return to analyse the Procession as a tradition of remembrance, then Telle's ethnography provides more insight to this. She notes the relation between both 'invisible' and 'visible' forces in Hindu Balinese culture and defines the 'internal aesthetic' as a hidden meaning to the procession which is reserved for forces of the invisible, 'niskala realm' (Telle 2023:47). Diverting from Mark's desire to reanimate cultural values, Telle argues for a significance in attempting to entertain and communicate with the realm of spirits. In some ways, I think this strongly resonates with the Kate Kennedy Procession. Firstly, the physical act of interpreting a character does, in many ways, invoke a sensory feeling of connection with that person's spirit. This revelation became apparent through a discussion with another figure who is involved with the commentary of the procession, preferring to remain anonymous. They stated how they like to think of their role as a 'magic, narrative voice', with the objective of informing spectators as characters presented outside Holy Trinity Church. In a moving moment, they revealed to me how the procession helps them commemorate their late daughter Katie.

'You see, my daughter's name is Katie, and my wife is Elizabeth. These are the names engraved on the two bells in St Salvador's Chapel. When I saw the carriage with the Lady Katharine approaching, I saw Katie. To me, the Lady Kate is Katie.'

This touching description presents the procession as a powerful, devotional act of remembrance to Katie. Their sensory participation in the procession was able to transport personal memory through time (Seremetakis 1994). This acts as an opportunity to keep Katie's memory alive. Therefore, in some ways the procession gains symbolism as an act that is restoring contact with these 'invisible' spirits (Telle 2023).

NEWFOUND IDENTITY

We have considered how remembrance and revival are interpreted by the outside, but it is interesting to examine newfound identities within the revival of the past, considering how involvement with The Kate Kennedy Procession directly affects the identities of participants. These newfound identities became apparent through my ethnographic research, as I noticed how the procession introduces new meaning to the personhood of those involved. Interviewing university students Isa, Lis and Sofia revealed the intense sense of belonging this 'collective endeavour' instilled (Telle 2023: 51). In the multicultural, fast paced environment of St Andrews, Lis states;

'Even just for those three hours, the procession fosters a sense of belonging in this town that for many students isn't necessarily home. It let me feel like a part of something, part of the unique, special town that is St Andrews.'

Sofia also testifies to this shared space, explaining how it incorporated her within a celebration of Scottish culture for the first time, and acted as an opportunity to meet and connect with locals. We can observe then that personal identities are affected by a constructed 'imagined' community (Anderson 2005). In this case, the community is generated through participation and/or involvement to the procession. Frank, a charismatic honorary member and participant in the procession, recalls how his favourite aspect of the day is precisely the ability to create a unified group, merging students and locals in what he coins a 'People's Procession'.

In some cases, the procession causes personal identity to assume a quest-like, near missionary quality. For the many locals involved, their selfhood is shaped by a belief and commitment towards the values of the procession. In response to the question 'what is the Kate Kennedy Procession to you?', David replied with Gustav Mahler's quote:

'Tradition is not the worship of ashes, it is the preservation of fire'

'To me, this is the essence of the procession…to maintain the spirit, freedom of thought, scholarship and humanity of St Andrews.'

This specific purpose of the procession, described so well by David, fosters a sense of devotion and purpose to the people involved in its organization. Throughout difficult past times, when the club struggled to improve itself, Frank, David, and Martin recall their intense conviction and battle for the procession to 'continue to do good'. The procession has transformed them into missionaries, with the role of preserving and representing the values of this tradition.

During my participant observation, I noted how students undertook the parade with a light-hearted attitude, laughing and enjoying the costumes. To many this tradition forms part of the unique experience that comes with being a St Andrews university student. The morals behind this centenary old tradition do not diminish it's festive, joyful nature. Most students were visibly immersed in this ritual, affected by a subconscious sense of duty towards their role. This approach to cosplaying the characters, defined by celebratory devotion, testifies to the procession's ability to communicate and shape the identity of university students.

An aspect which shines through this discussion of 'identity', is how the procession provides scope for flexible, varied interpretations, and meanings. Participants are not forced to conform

to specific, historicised identity of 'The Lady Katharine', or a forced understanding of what the procession must signify to them. This fluidity enables interpretations which resonate with individual personhood and grant space for human difference. A club member, Robbie, captured this point when he revealed:

'I don't want to see a picture of the Lady Katharine. I like that she is a mystery, because everyone can interpret her as they want. I love that I have the freedom to picture her in my own mind'

The open-ended, ambiguous nature of the procession allows for participants to draw personal symbolism and meaning from this tradition. To Mark, 'Katharina' relates to his own principles for culture and history. Others attach significance to their own identities and can commemorate lost ones through this revival. University students, friends, and club members reveal various communal feelings , historical awareness, and celebration attributed to the procession. The possibility of a free dialogue between the procession and personhood, and a free formation of meaning within this is, in my view, what provided me with such an insightful, varied and open ethnography.

CHALLENGES

This wouldn't be a transparent ethnography if I were to overlook the challenges which defined the experience of this fieldwork. Fundamentally, this has been an immersive, totalizing journey as I have both participated as the organizer of this year's procession and simultaneously attempted to draw anthropological meaning from this. Due to these varying roles, I was at times challenged in the attempt to produce of an ethnography which honours research above the personal views I hold towards this tradition.

The active nature of fieldwork was another surprising revelation. On procession day, I would have never expected to have to redirect a tractor and traffic jam trapped on South Street. As Telle alludes to, the physical impact of processions often make it difficult to resonate cultural, ritual purposes with authorities (Telle 2023: 51). In this case, the interruption traffic was a difficult reality for the Scottish police force to face. This quickly testified to how the reality of fieldwork manifests itself differently from any theoretical prediction an anthropologist can develop. The chaotic, overwhelming experience of the day allowed me to immerse myself completely within the field. This sensory involvement provided unique observations and details. The primal importance of executing a detailed, immersive fieldwork shines through here, as I do not think I would have been able to comprehend the varied meanings of this tradition without this.

CONCLUSION

The present work has aimed to produce an insightful, authentic ethnography on the 99th Kate Kennedy Procession, considering its significance and the relation it holds with the town and university today. Discussing this yearly ritual has revealed its primary role as a force of historical remembrance. Beyond this, my personal, sensorial experience in the procession has revealed the power of 'revival' the tradition possesses, suspending time and allowing for the resurrection of past memories and people. The testimony of various locals and students unveils the procession's decisive, transformative impact on personal identity. The varied responses, from community building to symbolic interpretations

of the Lady Katherine, have supported the argument for the subjective nature of anthropology. I am incredibly grateful for this immersive journey, and to everyone involved in this ethnography. From collaborating and helping shape meaning out of this weird, yet wonderful part of St Andrew's identity, thank you!

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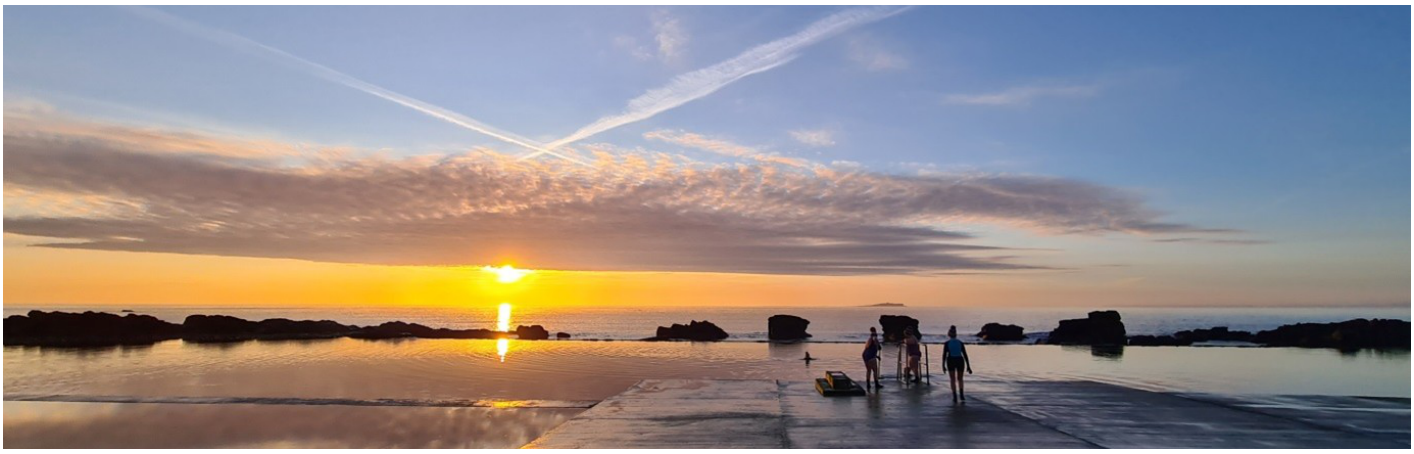
8

Down By The Cool of The Tidal Pool: A Rite of Passage.

Jennifer Matthews

Being an avid wild swimmer, this ethnographic project brought six months of participant observation and autoethnographic reflection at Cellardyke Tidal Pool to life. In examining wild swimming as a rite of passage, the narrative follows three recurring phases – arrival, immersion ("the dook"), and post-swimming community ("the circle") – to explore liminality, incorporation and hierarchy. Drawing on theories of ritual (Gennep), liminality (Turner), and grid/group analysis (Douglas), the study demonstrates how leisure practices reproduce social structures while offering spaces for resistance and renewal. Ultimately, wild swimming emerges as both a personal and collective ritual, intertwining physical sensation, emotional connection, and cultural meaning.



Picture 1: Cellardyke Tidal Pool

PROLOGUE

"For a man to pass from group to group […] he must fulfil certain conditions." (Gennep 1960: 1).

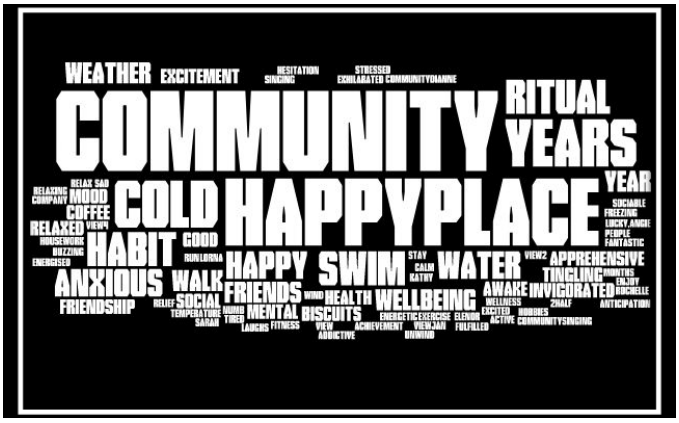
When at high school I always wanted to be part of the in-group. I would try anything to be accepted. Like a fraternity. The rejection feeling never leaves you, even in adulthood. A rite of passage that never materialised. When positioning myself as an observation participant within a wild swimming group, I never thought those feelings would surface again during my fieldwork (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002; Tedlock 1991: 70). Setting my alarm for 0630, most mornings for the past six months has become a

ritual (Picture 1). Wild swimming opened a Pandora's Box of ethnographic data, from individualistic point of view and from within a community group (Tedlock 1991: 72). The daily steps to wild swimming entail what one could call distinct chapters: the arrival, the dook and the circle. These distinct chapters are the foundations of this narrative ethnography (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002: 3; Tedlock 1991: 69). The characters are the members of the wild swimming group. The setting is Cellardyke Tidal Pool. The plot begins with the history of the tidal pool, a 'happy place' for everyone. The "thick description" (Geertz 1972) endeavours the narrator to bring this group to life, without removing a personal autoethnographic account (Tedlock 1991: 72; Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011; Poulos 2021: 7).

SETTING THE SCENE

Since August 2024, I have been a wild swimmer. "Being there" alone I was invited to sit in the circle (Malinowski 1922). The most important part of the experience was being immersed in the water. Through time the group brought a belonging feeling. The group was excited for my research: Whether swimming was a ritual or a habit or to some becoming even a chore: "I had to have a break. Swimming became an obsession". I became a "situated narrator" (Tedlock 1991: 77). I "identify the consciousness which has selected and shaped the experiences" of swimming (Tedlock 1991: 78).

Cellardyke Tidal Pool has seen change since 1933. Constructed to encourage community swimming, tourists and gatherings including model boating. During research monochrome photographs of the "The Bathie" or "The Cardinal Steps Bathing Pool", brought the pools history to life. I remember during my childhood swimming in the pool, ignoring the caution signs. You see the pool fell into disrepair. Holidays abroad became preferred; indoor pools replaced the baltic water of the North Sea. The "jewel" of the East Neuk fell apart because of the very water that made it a tidal pool. Zooming forward to Covid, outdoor activities brought the community together; the sad state of the pool propelled a group of local ladies to rejuvenate the tidal pool (Cellardyke Tidal Pool 2025). These local ladies, through time named themselves "The Nae Ritchers" or "the no rights", meaning "no right in the head" for going in the North Sea (Hancock 2025).



Picture 2: The word cloud data.

PROPS IN PLACE

Imagine the shock when doing my questionnaire that someone announced "this is not wild swimming. We are in a tidal pool" (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011: 277). This statement threw me. This was not the first time that I would feel sad. Wanting the questions to be answered as soon as we came out the water, I chose a Saturday morning. I provided biscuits, pens and clipboards. In hindsight, I should have thought about the shivering hands trying to write. Two interlocutors volunteered to interviews. I wanted to capture the sensual elements (Bates and Moles 2024). Like when you close your eyes

and go to your happy place (Deakin 2000: 3).

Picture 3: Gopro Sensual Experience (Lewis 2025).

The video provides a visual experience of the senses in the water (Picture 3) (Pink 2006: 42-43). The word cloud from answers provides concrete narrative data (Picture 2). Observing and listening brought downsides: "are you recording", feeling like a spy in the camp (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002: 52). The conversations became hushed. I took distance, went swimming later, came out later and gave space. It worked to an extent: When I stop sitting in the circle or offered a "shivery bite" I will know the rapport I have built up has been destroyed (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002; Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 141). Biscuits are important, like a reward for eating your veggies as a child. A shivery bite is a sugary reward, usually in the form of an abernethy biscuit. They are enjoyed by all: Captain Blue shouts: "I have the biscuits."

THE CAST

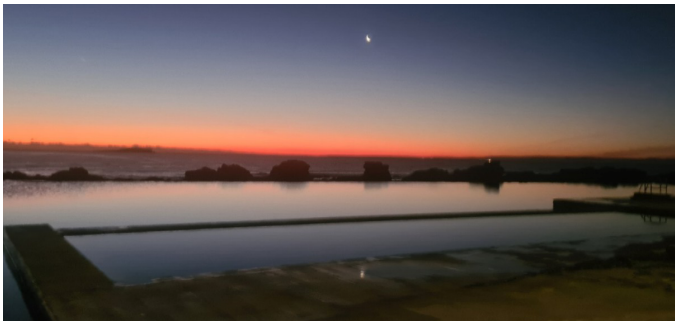
Picture 4: Colourful dry robes along the seawall.

Dry robes align the sea wall (Bates and Moles 2024: 895) (Picture 4). Everyone has a favourite colour. This narrative revolves around colourful characters (Ghodsee 2016: 35). In the circle they come together in a vignette; I observe them as their characters come to life (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002: 182).

The Pink Lady, who wears florescent pink dry robe, shoes and trousers, cannot be missed. She is the mind behind organising events. She has a reputation for wearing pink lippy at seven in the morning. She welcomes all with compassion. Tangerine Lady is the retired nurse, an academic who can converse on many subjects. She loves swimming lengths; I struggle to keep up. She can be found with her legs over the outer wall of the pool as she "loves the sun on [her] skin in the water." Her orange obsession includes her car, although she prefers to cycle to the pool. The Captain Blue is a retired Navy officer, who is a central figure. She sits against the seawall. She loves the swim as a self-confessed "water baby" and prevents her "being grumpy." As a newer member to the local community, she loudly welcomes people. The Red Twins are identical in dress: red robes and red Crocs. They sit together. One is the photographer of the group, never missing an opportunity to capture "antics and shenanigans." The other has lived in the community her whole life, knows everybody (and their business), hence the whispers. They are swimming sisters. Cyan, the length counter has a serious exterior but a wicked sense of humour. One should not get in the way of her swimming; you will get a look. Her colour stands out in the circle like her laugh, facial expressions and her love of being part of the community. The Grey is a central character; without her I feel someone is missing. She loves swimming but absolutely hates seaweed and never looks down in the water. She asks me to clear a path for her: "This is what makes this wild swimming! The blasted seaweed!" She is passionate about the

community as a business owner and loves the pool being used. She is up for a laugh is first to sing and reads out amazing written poems about anything and everything. She flicks her hot water bottle off her feet, with her legs as a sign to all it is time to move. She always sits with her back to the sea, facing the group. Wetsuit, the retired teacher from my school, has been walking "doon" for a swim for decades. She loves floating on her back, being left alone. When she does talk, she has a vocabulary of Neuk dialect that brings memories or lessons to all in the group: "you are looking dirkish" or "you are a witch. Grab your besom." She never hangs around the circle as she is always shivering, and her hip gives her jib. The Elder, is the oldest at 80 who amazes me. She is always busy rushing away but enjoys the passing chat and the "lovely water." She has used the pool since before I was born. She used to ditch her clothes after the coastal walk and jump straight in. She has a little white drying towel which she has had for years. I like her idea of "chatting on the passing"; Every day she states: "it is just a good start to the day." Like all stories there are backing supporter characters who add to the circle. These characters will appear throughout the narrative, adding more colour to the daily dook. The additional actors bring change to the swim as they swim only "when in the right frame of mind" (Camouflage Blue).

CHAPTER ONE: THE ARRIVAL



Picture 5: Sunrise at 7.00

"Swimming is a rite of passage, a crossing of boundaries." (Deakin 2000: 3).

0700 is early (Picture 5). People are tired. Wetsuit says, "If I wake up, I get up." Observing the setting up of gear, I notice people use the same peg every morning. There is an unannounced hierarchy of who goes where, Captain Blue is there first and sits central. There is a note of excitement in the air. "I cannot wait to get in the water." We wait until everyone has arrived. Apart from Tangerine Lady who is usually late. The morning chat covers the night before antics or the excitement of an upcoming event. The feeling of anxiety touches the air. Emotions come to the surface through nervous laughs, jack-jumps to warm up or a rendition of "high-ho it's off swimming we go." Tangerine Lady says, "I need this." The whole daily experience of the chapters of swimming, feel like a daily rite of passage. The group go in the water as a separate community from society then come together as a group of liminality in the water and when they come out, they are rejuvenated, different. Going in is great to observe. The sound effects are vocal. The tidal pool acts like a sound wall, with chatting, laughing and singing providing surround sound. The arrival sign posts a separation from the larger community, a ritual which brings only the dookers together and leaves something of their past behind. This could be sleepiness, stress, aches and pains, and just a great start to a new day. Being in the water is transitional: like cleansing emotions, reflection on the day ahead and the anticipation of "achieving something." (Gennep 1960).

CHAPTER TWO: THE DOOK

"When you swim, you feel your body for what

it mostly is – water – and it begins to move with the water around it." (Deakin 2000: 3).

The senses come alive when you leave the ladders, pushing yourself away from land. The pool is not deep, only in the central channel your feet cannot touch the bottom. The group spreads out; individual routines take over. Cyan counts the lengths; the others rely on her to count. A new sense is born in the tidal pool. A sense that makes this chapter most special to me, you must be there to feel it. Captain Blue says, "I feel like a little kid!" Once past the initial cold-water shock, the discussion of temperature ensues. Babs, the retired postie has her plastic octopus topped thermometer, which was launched in first before we go in. Over the past few months, the temperature rise has been phenomenal: from 5.2 degrees to 12.3 recently, this makes the group stay swimming longer:

"I don't want to get out."

"Let's do two more lengths."

"That's an odd number. We can do three more. To make it even."

"Ok. Twist my arm."

In the water the ladies have their own habits. The Red Twins state that "nothing beats a good natter while in the sea." Others swim on their own with purpose: Elder says, "I like to make sure the Isle of May is still there." Some bob about while wearing their Cellardyke Tidal Pool bobble hats. It is a symbol of belonging to the pool. Anyone can purchase them from The Grey's shop. The Lookout, who lives next to the pool, is a weak swimmer but feels safe "bobbling about with friends."

This chapter merges two of my research theories together in a water bound way. The sense of "isolation" (Gennep 1960: 26) as a group makes it unique as we are "betwixt and between." (Turner & Turner 1967). We are a community in the water in limbo. We become a group in the water, connected by the water. The water cleanses our senses and makes us feel together through the tingly feeling. The separation of the group in the water, doing their own thing or in mini clusters recalls the strength of individuals in a group. The group has nucleus of characters that are central figures. The types of established members of who is and isn't allowed in become a "clash of wills." (Douglas 1982a: 2). As Pink Lady said: "there are no rules in the group all are welcome. (The rules of admission were weak) What started as 5 are now 35." The rules today are stronger:

Pink Lady smiling while swimming said: "We will need to add you to the group chat."

I smile, elated. "That would be fantastic. Then I would know if swimming plans changed. Especially with advance warning from The Lookout."

A few mornings later, before I started my research, Pink Lady approaches. She looks annoyed.

"Sorry admin has decided to add no more members. I am Fkin fuming about this. Sorry about that outburst."

This is the second time I felt hurt. I reply. Feeling deflated "I understand. Thanks for asking anyway."

We swim off in different directions. Mary Douglas's group/grid theory comes to life in the pool (Douglas 1982; 1982a; 2019). I look around me. I used to be an individual with no aspirations to join the group. Then being accepted through words allows me to join in with

the routine but not having the complete privilege of being a group member. I am in a high gridded rules position but low in the group. Others are rewarded through loyalty and secured in their place through respect and positioned in the hierarchy. The upper level is the "small-scale" (Turner 1997: 93) society, the faculty who potentially "coerce" members to follow the core group. Thus, returning to high school and the closed clique, who have a selective recruiting method (Douglas 1982a: 5). My interlocutors tell stories of "fission" (Douglas 1982a: 6), of break off groups called Wild Skins and Menopausal Mermaids. I ask how many times I must go through the daily process to bring about admission: "repeatedly, most important, since they secure for the individual a permanent right to attend or participate" which leads to what Gennep calls "habituation" (Gennep 1960: 178). I feel there, as do others but I am not there (Turner 1997). However, like all the ladies in the water I return to enjoy the senses water gives me and ignore the emotions the group gives me, after all I am here to enjoy my swim wishing like others that "I could stay in longer."

CHAPTER THREE: THE CIRCLE

"Come out a whistling idiot." (Deakin 2000: 4).

Once through the drying routine which is a chore for all, the circle comes to life. Incorporation of the group has a new status or a "confirmation of a bond as rejuvenated swimmers "sensing achievement" and "ready for anything." (Gennep 1960: 29). It resembles a circle at a party for games or a sporting team. The more I participant the less random the positioning appears. The main characters sit central against the seawall, apart from, The Grey who always sits with her back to the sea. The rite of passage feels complete; the community has come together as fellow swimmers and friends. The eating and drinking and sharing of biscuit's are a rite of incorporation which holds no bars (Gennep 1960). Shivering with the cold, their preferred hot drink in flasks or mugs which are personalised: Rainbow Hat's china cup has the slogan: "dry robe wanker!" The topics of conversation can bring in the whole circle or breaks off into individual discussions. For most this aspect is the most important part of their morning swim. The friendships that have been forged over a lifetime, by the locals born and bred. Rainbow Hat said, "I love my swim but the community of friendship we have made will last a lifetime." The incomers who are new to the area and to the pool are made welcome. Tangerine Lady said: "having lived in Anstruther for 20+ years coming to the pool three years ago is the first time I felt that I belonged to the community." This sense of community interested my research, close to home. Although I have lived in Cellardyke for over Forty years I am considered an incomer. The Crafty Purple lady said: "my husband and I have become a part of the community because of the tidal pool."

DISCUSSION

This narrative of swimming with a group became almost an obsession (Wacquant 2004). I forgot why I swim in the first place. I believed that the more I went the more I would be accepted. The rite of passage to me was not a one-off event, like the first time anyone goes wild swimming, everyday felt like a ritual of process (Gennep 1960: 177). I did not want to miss a swim. My research thesis became twisted: focused out of the water. My interlocutors provided their

stories on how they feel:

"We have been in the group for 5 years. Feel ousted." They nod in agreement. There is a pause.

I listen. Check I am recording. I wait.

"Certain members took over the group. Becoming more powerful, undermining others. Last year the damage was done. Some members avoid swimming at 0700, they go later. It's like a clique. They welcome strangers on false pretences."

I see the emotions of anger and upset. I sip my coffee. I respond.

"If we go back to the beginnings of the group the point was going for a swim, not being alone, right?"

They laugh. Breaking the tension.

Pink Lady responds "Yes, my husband used to go with me, not to swim. Then others asked if they could join me, so the Nae Richter's were born. We used to go after work."

I said "What's going to happen? Are you avoiding the protagonists?"

They both try to talk at the same time. Laugh. Pink Lady smiles.

"We are going to start our own group. We will be called the "Sun Downers". Would you like to be a member?"

"Absolutely. That would be cool."

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GUEST FEATURE

"Welcome Home, Princess": Performing Care and Creating Belonging in a London Maid Café

Yixuan Liu | London School of Economics

Project Description

This piece was originally produced for AN298 Ethnographic Research in London, a compulsory second-year course in Social Anthropology at the London School of Economics taught by Professor Catherine Allerton. The course trains students to design, conduct, and write up an independent ethnographic project in London.

Throughout the Winter Term, students develop practical research skills, including observation, participation, interviewing, listening, analysis, and ethnographic writing, while receiving workshop-based guidance on ethical dilemmas and fieldwork challenges. For the summative assessment, each student completes a 4,500–5,000 word ethnographic essay based on their own research.

9

"Welcome Home, Princess": Performing Care and Creating Belonging in a London Maid Café

Yixuan Liu

This piece examines the affective, embodied, and relational labour that shapes everyday interactions inside Usagi Maid Café, a maid café in London where I conducted participant observation as a volunteer. Through attention to gestures, voice, costume, choreography, and emotional performance, this piece explores how intimacy is produced, negotiated, and commodified in this transnational subcultural setting. Drawing on feminist anthropology and theories of affective labour, it traces how maids balance a playful work-persona with the demands of service, customer expectations, and backstage exhaustion. Rather than treating the café as a site of escapist fantasy, the piece highlights the tensions, contradictions, and creative agency that emerge through the maids' situated practices. It reflects on my own positionality as both worker and observer, and the ethical complexities of researching intimacy and performance.

INTRODUCTION

Just around the corner from the museum, the Maid Café feels like it belongs to a different world. The rose-pink window frame and hand-drawn illustrations: stars, ribbons, a white rabbit in a frilly maid outfit, hint at something childlike and gentle. The drawings are imperfect, but in a way that feels sincere. Plush toys press softly against the glass, and a chalkboard reads:

"*Welcome Home, Master and Princess.*"

When I first entered on a quiet afternoon, the outside world dissolved. Warm air, the scent of milk tea and cakes, the soft glow of fairy lights, and the steady hum of an anime theme song filled the room: pink chairs, strawberry placemats, hand-folded notes with heart stickers. Everything had been arranged with care and love. The café seats no more than eighteen people, and yet the attention to detail was overwhelming in the gentlest way.

A maid stepped forward and welcomed me with a soft "Okaerinasaimase, Goshujin-sama, Ojō-sama (Welcome home, Master and Princess)", forming a heart with her hands.

Another guided me to a seat with a precise, ceremonial movement, without ever touching me. Her name tag read "Mashiro," outlined with

bunny stickers. Before I had fully settled into the seat, the maid had returned to my side. She stood with her hands gently folded and gave a small bow. "Please let me take care of you today as well." Her voice was soft but perfectly timed to rise just above the lyrics in the background. The song whispered the words in Japanese: I want to spend time only with you.

The figure of the maid has a long history, rooted in domestic service under European patriarchal households. However, in Japanese ACG (anime, comics, and games) culture, the maid has been reimagined through subcultural aesthetics. Detached from historical servitude, the maid became a figure of play, often entangled with cuteness, submission, and fantasy. In Akihabara's maid cafés, where the maid cafe originates, the live interaction between maid and customer stages a particular kind of intimacy: scripted, playful, and full of deliberate care.

Reflecting on my first visit to the Maid Café in early January, I would have described it as excessively pink, slightly cramped, and a source of vague fantasy. Now, in May, almost nothing about its appearance has changed. Yet instead of calling it absurd, I would describe it now as carefully constructed, soft-edged, and dreamlike in a way that feels deliberate.

As a customer in the early days of fieldwork, I felt detached, unsure of how to position myself within the space of the cafe. The interactions around me appeared theatrical and controlled, but the boundaries were not always stable. I witnessed two instances in which male customers crossed lines of appropriateness in their gestures toward the maids. On another occasion, a man, likely homeless, rushed in from the street and began undressing before being escorted out. These early moments left me with a sense of unease, reinforcing the common assumption that spaces like maid cafés are closely tied to fantasies of sexuality or male desire. And yet, as I spent more time inside—first as a regular visitor and then as a volunteer working behind the scenes—I began to notice something more complex. Behind the fantasy lay a rhythm of real affective labour, mutual care, and quiet collaboration.

This essay is not about defining what a maid café is. Instead, I ask:

how is a fantasy world like the Maid Café made and sustained through everyday practices of performance, attention, and shared belief? What does it mean to "belong" in a space where intimacy is staged, but still felt for both customers and the staff?

METHODOLOGY

This ethnography is based on participant observation at a London Maid Café between January and May 2025. In the first month of fieldwork, I visited the café six times as a customer to gain an initial sense of its aesthetics, customer rituals, and staff dynamics. From February onward, I began volunteering three to four evenings a week, assisting with cleaning tasks backstage in exchange for homemade meals from Miss Wang, the owner. Over time, I built close relationships with Manager Miss Wang, Mako (the head maid), Ukiyo and many others. In total, I worked alongside twenty-seven staff members and observed a wide range of activities both in front of and behind the scenes. I recorded my observations in handwritten fieldnotes after each shift or visit, focusing on gesture, tone, objects, and spatial arrangement. With permission, I reviewed message books and staff-run social media accounts. Sensitive details, especially those related to private lives, have

been anonymised.

CO-PERFORMING FANTASY AND SCRIPTED INTIMACY

At the Maid Café, with the exception of a few temporary helpers, nearly all staff members are Chinese international students. Over time, I began to recognise a small circle of regulars, mostly Chinese-speaking students, who often requested the same maid or sat at the same table. Meanwhile, themed events tended to attract new guests, including local anime fans and even tourists. Intimacy and care are not one-sided or simply service-driven by the maids. Interactive scripts and performative care co-construct it.

On a regular day at the Café, the performance follows a familiar script: the maid bows, calls the guest “master” or “princess”, and gently guides them through a menu of staged interactions. Each gesture is practised but flexible, leaving room for improvisation based on the customer’s mood and the maid’s energy. These routines produce a form of care that feels soft and predictable – something between play and hospitality.

On Special Event Days, however, everything feels heightened. The café was reservation- only on Valentine's Day. Two female employees were dressing as otome game characters as the perfect boyfriends. It was a time for game-lovers to enter a familiar world they had already spent hours inside, via a screen.

At the door, I ran across a white girl wearing a black jacket with dyed pink hair and thick boots. She was quietly checking her phone and smoking. When I requested a cigarette, she said her name was P and that she had just left a Korean class. At first, she didn't say much, but I could tell from her eyes that she was very excited. Inside, she sat by the window and took a laptop from her bag. A bit later, her friend came. Opening the game together, they started carefully matching the outfits of the café personnel to the in-game characters. They looked at little details, including the angle of a tie, the button fastening, and the shine on a pair of glasses. Every little game brought them joy.

Both girls sat up straighter when Xavier came dressed in a deep red coat with silver accents. One of them said softly, "That's him." He strolled over slowly, glanced at them, and remarked, "Good evening, Princess. Your return to the realm is an honour. His voice was deliberate, quiet, steady. They both responded right away. P covered her mouth and turned to her friend. Her buddy held her breath.

He gave them the menu and enquired whether they wanted to start the Valentine’s mission. Though the language was dramatic, they took it seriously. Flipping through the laminated sheets, they referred to him as "Xavier-sama." It was beyond a menu. They already knew the script for it. They had previously played this game, but now they were inside it.

Later, when taking the photo, P selected the shy confession posture. Xavier turned his gaze a little away and placed a hand over his heart. Just before the shutter, he remarked, "I hope tonight stays with you." The moment seemed calm and weighty. The two of them looked at the picture later. They said nothing of framing or blur. They nodded after reading the handwriting on the edge. “My dearest Princess”. That sufficed. Their replies were not overstated. They were genuine. Their movement, shoulder leanings, and voice softening when they spoke to him all revealed it. They weren't only observing

a performance. They had joined it.

For the consumers, that blurring may be appealing. The maid doesn't have to be real in the same sense as a friend. She just has to match the emotional tempo the client identifies.

You know her smile is work-related, but you still smile back. That decision is what gives the café its function. Everyone inside decides to adhere to the same guideline. The customer reacts; the maid plays her part. Its significance is shaped by the effort put into it. It's not about being duped. It's about creating something magical and gentle that nevertheless seems worthwhile to hold onto.

OBJECTS OF ENCHANTMENT

Inside the Maid Café, objects are never just functional. Each carries emotional meaning and helps sustain the fantasy that the café promises.

I remember one evening when Mako sent a message saying the weekend event still lacked a pink die. Not just any pink, but the right kind. Manager Wang looked at me, smiled, and said we should try the adult shops nearby. We walked through Soho in the dark, checking dice trays in shops that smelled of rubber and perfume. One Indian convenience store had loose dice behind the counter, but they were too dark or filled with glitter. When Manager Wang held up a lilac die, snapped a photo, sent it to Mako. She replied with an angry face and said, “No, we needed a pink that felt dreamy”. She emphasised that where it came from did not matter, pink alone was the rule.

Wang later explained to me that any object that enters this room must match a visual logic, sweet, unified, filtered through a hint of fairy tales. Eventually, in the corner of a basement stall, we found one that worked. Fluffy pink, the colour of bubble gum. The next day, it sat on the table. Rolling a one meant a heart-hand photo with a maid. A two invite a ketchup charm drawn on your omelette rice. A three gave you a soft “thank you for coming home today.” The die was small and cheap, but it activated a whole set of interactions. Its colour had to blend with the room.

At the Maid Café, how something looks matters more than where it comes from.

This rule also shapes how food is served. When someone orders omelette rice, the maid asks whether a magic picture is desired. Most guests say yes. Miss Wang cooks the dish and hands it to the maid, who then rehearses a ketchup drawing at the side table. A heart, a cat, or a pair of wings. They help each other fix crooked ears or uneven lines before bringing the dish to the table. Then, in a soft voice, the maid chants, “Moe-moe magic, moe-moe heart, be happy today.” The chant varies each time. Mashiro might use snow words, and Haru adds a cheerful bark. Phones rise. Clicks follow. Guests whisper, “So cute.” An ordinary meal becomes a tiny stage performance.

“Chekis”, the Polaroid photos, hold a different kind of meaning. These small instant photos are taken with a maid after your meal, often in a chosen pose, and decorated with handwritten messages or drawings. Each photo captures a moment of scripted affection. Guests are asked if they want a “nyan-nyan” pose or a heart. One shy customer once posed stiffly. The maid leaned in and told him to relax. After the shutter, she decorated the border with stars and wrote, “Thank you for coming home.” He read it, smiled, and tucked it away. That photo stayed. Others don’t. I’ve seen maids peel off stickers from

cheeks they dislike, whispering, "My face looks weird." Unflattering ones are quietly thrown away. Only photos that match the mood of the Café are allowed to remain.

Another item sits quietly by the counter: the message book. Each one, decorated with glittery stickers and labelled with a maid's name, invites customers to leave drawings, thanks, or short letters. At the end of the day, the maids gather to read them aloud over leftover curry, often laughing, sometimes quietly moved.

But their meaning doesn't always last.

One evening, I heard a short conversation near the register. "She said she won't be back for them."

"Are you sure?"

"Just throw them away."

Without hesitation, two thick message books were dropped into a black bin bag without hesitation.

A pink die, a bowl of rice, a cheki photo, and a glittery message book. None of these are just props. Their meaning only takes shape within the moment of play. Each one holds value when it becomes part of an interaction, part of a shared rhythm between maid and guest. When the stage is empty and the performance ends, they return to being ordinary things. What gives them life is not what they are, but how people use them to care, to connect, and to create something fleeting yet real. In the Maid Café, objects carry emotion not because they last, but because they are held, looked at, and gently believed in.

Crossing the boundary: blending between persona and self.

At the Café, the boundary between performance and self is not fixed. Each maid moves between her role and her everyday identity, often without drawing clear lines. Over time, some parts of the character begin to settle into her behaviour. The persona is not discarded when the shift ends. It is repeated, absorbed, and gradually folded into the self.

This overlap is most visible in the backstage routines. Maids pay much attention to their makeup, rehearse their magical chants, and take selfies in costume. After work, some remain in the café to take pictures under the lighting they like best. They study the images closely and ask each other whether they still "look like a maid". These gestures are not understood as labour. For many, the role becomes a way of being worth recording and sharing.

One quiet Sunday, I saw two maids filming TikTok dances outside the café under the afternoon sun. They were still in full uniform, wiping sweat from their necks between takes. One fixed her bangs in the reflection of her phone and said, "Okay, genki mode (switch to the energetic model)" before stepping into a practised smile. The choreography was simple, but it had to feel light.

"The cuteness had to feel effortless,"

one of them said. After each take, they bent over the screen to review. They weren't chasing technical precision. Instead, they were aiming for a mood, a way of being that aligned with what a maid should look and feel like. The maid persona extended beyond the café and into social media, photo albums, and self-image. Over time, the lines wore down. Not with a single moment of collapse, but through soft repetition. Eventually, the performance wasn't just for others. Part of them wanted to become

her.

But this absorption is not always consistent. In moments of discomfort or disruption, the line between fantasy and reality can quietly fracture. One evening, a cheerful maid named Nemu went quiet after interacting with a male customer who made her uncomfortable. Her shoulders tensed, and her voice lost its brightness. After serving his drink, she stepped into the kitchen without a word. That night, she told me she had tried to stay in character, but in that moment, she just wanted to walk away.

During a staff meeting, the manager reminded everyone: "If you ever feel unsafe, you don't need to keep performing."

At other times, something softer emerges. A man in his seventies, dressed in a formal suit and tie, visits the café almost every week. He says he is a retired professor. He always orders omelette rice and several happy hour tokens (10 pounds for 10 minutes), not for the food, but to talk to the maids. He tells them about his daily anxieties, his past travels, and his quiet loneliness. The maids respond gently. Sometimes they stay in character. Sometimes they don't.

One smiled and said, "It sounds like the real world has been difficult again. Let's give you some magic today."

Another one replied with more personal details and said the professor's situations were similar to her grandpa, and suggested he engage in more outside activities.

Before leaving, he wrote in the message book: "I really admire your performance."

Such interactions reveal how performance at the Maid Café is not always about maintaining illusion, but about offering a framework through which care and connection can be meaningfully expressed, even when the persona slips.

Not all performances end gently. Rin's case shows that when someone stops taking the performance seriously, the shared fantasy starts to fall apart. The boundary between self and role is not just about work, it holds the essence of the café.

Rin was the first maid in the Café's history to be dismissed. She had been popular at first, welcoming customers with warmth and energy. But over time, her co-workers noticed she often vanished mid-shift, hiding in the restroom to play video games on her phone. "Sometimes we'd be about to introduce 'the other maid from the magical world,'" one colleague said, "and she'd just be gone."

The final incident came when Rin sat next to a customer and began fixing a cosplay wig, speaking in an ordinary tone and criticising other maids' makeup. She had fully stepped out of character in front of a guest. In the next team meeting, Mako announced that Rin had "graduated." The word softened the fact of dismissal but signaled something real: the performance had broken down.

These boundaries are also crossed in quieter ways. One afternoon, a few maids were sitting at a side table during a break, talking about food. When someone nearby asked a casual question: What kind of filling was in the dumplings? One maid immediately leaned forward. Her voice shifted. She didn't call anyone "princess" or "master." She answered like a student, chatting about which shop had the best flavour. In that moment, the role dropped away entirely.

Moments like these reveal that the maid's identity is not something always worn. It is

activated. At the Café, the performance is not continuous, and it does not need to be. Unlike the fully immersive cafés of Akihabara, the Maid Café allows space to pause, to step in and out of character. The fantasy does not rely on permanence, instead, it relies on choice. Everyone inside knows it isn't real. But everyone agrees to believe in it, together, for a little while. And that's enough to make it feel like magic. These moments show that fantasy in the Maid Café is neither rigid nor purely escapist. It is fragile, responsive, and always negotiated between comfort and control.

MORE THAN A MAID CAFE

As I spent more time with the staff, especially after becoming close with the manager, who often came to my flat for dinner, I began to gain a deeper understanding of the working system of the café and what made the Maid Café unique. Unlike maid cafés in Akihabara or Hong Kong, where performance is shaped by commission systems, customer rankings, and the pressure to maintain popularity, the Maid Café operates on an equal, hourly wage structure based on the UK minimum wage. At first glance, this may seem like an unimportant administrative detail. However, over time, I came to realise how profoundly this structure reshapes the atmosphere and working environment of the café.

One afternoon, I worked alongside a new maid who had worked for two years in a maid café in Hong Kong. She hummed throughout her shift, chatting with customers and colleagues with happiness that caught my attention. Behind the bar, I asked her how she felt about the Maid Café.

"It's so much better here," she said, smiling. "In Hong Kong, every day you're stressed about whether anyone will request you as their specific maid by calling your name. Your pay depends on it. But here, even if I don't take a single cheki or no customer knows about me today, we all still eat dinner together after work."

She illustrated to me the details of typical maid cafes. In Hong Kong and Japan, many maid cafés operate under far more rigid and hierarchical systems. Uniforms are often based on the aesthetic of the "French maid", and their design varies according to the customer's ranking system, which means that the more elegant and colourful the costume, the higher the maid's position. Maids are typically young and are expected to strictly adhere to physical and behavioural standards. For example, gaining weight is not permitted. If a maid can no longer fit into the largest size of the standard uniform, she is quietly asked to resign.

The London Maid Café makes no such demands. There are no ranked uniforms and no pressure to maintain a specific body shape. Most maids wear similar outfits regardless of seniority, and performance is never quantified in terms of sales or popularity. What matters instead is reliability, presence, and care for others. Praise is often given for small, quiet gestures, such as helping another maid rehearse her chant, adjusting someone's hairpin before a photo, or staying behind to clean without being asked. These are small gestures, but they reveal a different ethic of labour: one grounded not in visibility or profit, but in co- performance and shared pleasure.

That same evening, I invited Manager Wang over for dinner at my flat. Over hot pot and jasmine tea, she shared the story of how the Maid Café came into being two years ago. Listening to her, I began to understand more

clearly why the Maid Café is not a conventional maid café. She told me that when she decided to open the Maid Café two years ago, there was no business plan at all. A classmate had invited her to co-found the café, and she simply said yes. "I just thought it would be fun to do something with people who love ACG culture", she said, laughing.

"Whether it makes money or not does not matter. I could always go back to Shanghai and let my parents fund me forever."

That comment revealed something important. The Maid Café was never designed to be a profit- driven enterprise. It was born out of a desire to build a space where anime lovers could enjoy something together. Not commercial, but rather a project started by a financially secure international student who wanted to create a room for her passions.

Originally, there were two partners involved. But before the café even opened, one of them suddenly disappeared, what Wang, the manager, called "running away." That period, she said, was almost unbearable.

"I was in the kitchen cutting onions alone, crying, and wondering if I should just shut everything down."

It was then that Mako (the leader of the maids) stepped in. She had only been a part-time student hired to help plan events, but suddenly she found herself taking over all the operations, including scheduling shifts, managing supplies, and running the floor. The team started to take shape. Together, they stayed up late designing event charts, adjusting the menu, and decorating the interior by hand. In Wang's words, "We built [the Maid Café] piece by piece, from scratch."

This space is not driven by profit, but by shared affection and imagination. It gives customers a brief break from daily life, and at the same time, offers the maids a place of comfort and belonging, like a shelter.

Ichika works as a high school physics teacher during the day. After class, she hurries to the café to change into the costume of an "18-year-old washed-up idol." While fixing her makeup one evening, she told me,

"At school, I have to be serious, I have to act like an adult. But here, I can sing, dance, and act spoiled. Putting on this identity feels like a relief."

Hena and Pupu are students in medicine and biology at two different universities. Their schedules are packed, and the pressure before exams can be overwhelming. Yet each time they tie their aprons, they smile and say, "Working at [the Maid Café] is the only happy moment in my week."

Most of the maids come from well-off families who can afford international tuition fees. The salary isn't what matters. Many of them arrive in luxury clothes. Expensive bags rest casually in the corner of the changing room. Some spend their earnings on new cosplay outfits or a cute dress they saw online.

At the bar, it's not unusual to see more than just the staff on shift. Maids who aren't working that day still come by, dressed in their regular clothes, helping to serve drinks or tidy up. Many live nearby in student housing or shared flats. The café has become a spot they pass by every day, a place they stop in just to say hi. After closing time, we often gather at the entrance to smoke, sketch, watch anime, or brainstorm ideas for the next themed event.

This is not a business in the conventional sense. It

feels more like a subcultural shelter, a space built collectively by Chinese international students. On the surface, it's all about performance. But underneath, it's a way of being together. Here, they've found a rhythm that doesn't belong to school or work. And more importantly, they've found people who don't need them to explain who they are.

Maybe that's why the Maid Café feels so different. It doesn't survive on profit or the pressure to maintain a marketable persona. It survives because people keep coming back, not just to perform or to be served, but to stay a little longer.

CONCLUSION AND REFLECTIONS

The Maid Café is not simply a stage for fantasy to make profits. It is a space where care, belonging, and co-performance are gently crafted through everyday gestures.

What sustains its magic is not illusion, but the quiet agreement to believe together, even if only for a little while.

Unlike commercial maid cafés shaped by rankings or desire, the Maid Café follows a different rhythm. Its maids are not performers to make money, but students building a community in a foreign city.

Reflecting on this project, I must acknowledge several limitations that shaped both what I was able to observe and what remained beyond reach. As a researcher, I made the conscious decision not to wear a maid costume or actively position myself in front-stage service, in order to avoid interfering with the natural flow of interactions between maids and customers. That is the reason why I did not mention too much information about customers in this report.

Instead, I took on a backstage role, folding napkins, cleaning floors, preparing drinks, and gradually becoming part of the cafe. This gave me access to informal scenes of shared labour and intimacy among staff, but it also meant that I observed far less of the customer experience, especially the more gendered dynamics that often structure conversations around maid cafés. Unlike many previous studies, I did not focus on performance as a spectacle of gender, desire, or identity. Also, while maid cafés have Japanese origins, their adaptation here creates tensions of cultural borrowing and reinterpretation that this essay does not fully explore, but which remain analytically important.

My cultural and linguistic advantages also shaped the data collection. As a Chinese student familiar with the aesthetics of ACG culture and fluent in Mandarin and Japanese, I could easily understand the everyday jokes and subtle emotions that circulated in the room. I was also an insider, not only to the language but to the shared cultural world of Chinese international students in the UK. This enabled trust, but may have reduced my sensitivity to what an outsider would have found strange, difficult, or meaningful. I could understand without always questioning.

Finally, this research did not aim to offer an explanation of maid café culture in general, nor to make comparative claims across national or commercial contexts. The Maid Café is highly specific: a small, self-funded café built by Chinese international students, operating in London, with limited commercial ambition. The themes of care, collectivity, and co- performance explored here are rooted in that specificity.

I once believed that anthropological research required clear research questions and constant inquiry. But at the Maid Café, I gradually realised that when a researcher enters the field with too strong a sense of purpose, relationships can become strained. In my first few weeks as a volunteer, I asked almost nothing. I simply wiped tables, washed cups, swept the floor, and cleaned the corners of the kitchen. Slowly, the staff stopped seeing me as an outsider. They began offering me snacks, stickers, and handwritten notes. I was added to the event planning group chat and invited to co-design new theme days.

I once spent an afternoon with Wang laying down flooring for the café, cutting and fitting vinyl tiles on our knees from 3 to 7 p.m. That evening, as she smoked by the doorway, she said to me,

"Meeting you and other staff has been such a gift. I used to feel like I was trying to erase all traces of myself from this world. But now, being here with you all in London and creating happy memories, which makes me feel lucky."

I never expected an interlocutor to share something so personal. That moment made it clear: we were no longer observer and observed.

I celebrated my 20th birthday at the Maid Café. They brought me cake and cards. Mako always saved me a pack of my favourite cigarettes.

"When you return from Japan, let's start a rock band."

I did not approach it as a site to be researched. I became part of it. I lived alongside a group of girls who didn't care about the idea of fieldwork, and yet gave me a field more vivid than I could have imagined. And when I heard those words again, "Welcome home, Princess", I realised that somehow, I truly had come home.

It is a story beyond sexuality or commodified intimacy, about how we understand maid cafés, not only as spectacles, but also through the lens of belonging, labour, and diasporic togetherness.