


**Northumbria Student  
Academic Journal**

**Special Issue:  
Neurodivergent and  
Queer Identities  
2026**

<https://doi.org/10.19164/nusaj.v2i1>

**Edited by Līga Reimane**



**Northumbria Student Academic Journal  
ISSN: 3033-4217  
Volume 2 Issue 1**



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Special Issue — Neurodivergent and Queer Identities 2026

(Volume 2 Issue 1 | pages 1–9)

<https://doi.org/10.19164/nusaj.v2i1.1872>

*Article*

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## **A Mask Within the Closet: A Case for Intersectionality in Queerness and Neurodiversity Research**

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### **Abstract**

Research has demonstrated overlaps in neurodivergent and LGBTQIA+ identities and communities, yet academic frameworks still pontificate over models to handle these identities. Researchers have not kept pace with the lived experiences reported by these people. This article presents Intersectionality Theory, as conceived by Crenshaw (1989), as a theoretically robust and practically necessary framework for researching the intersection of queer and neurodivergent identities as it inherently evolves and does not require us to wait for the resolution of the ongoing medical-versus-social model debate in neurodiversity research for meaningful dialogue to continue. Drawing on existing literature, the current UK policy context surrounding ND and queerness, and preliminary observations from a Northumbria University PhD study exploring the experiences of queer parents with children on the ADHD assessment pathway, this article examines parallels between neurodivergent and queer masks and closets, the crossover in histories of the pathologisation of these communities, and compounding discriminations faced therein. The article makes a case for intersectionality as a foundational approach to this under-researched area.

**Keywords:** intersectionality, queerness, LGBT+, neurodiversity, parenting, family, ADHD, autism

**Date of Submission:** 31 March 2026

**Date of Acceptance:** 15 May 2026

## ***Masks Within Closets***

Spend time in queer (LGBTQIA+) or neurodivergent (ND) community spaces and you might start to see overlaps and grey areas between intersecting identities. A needed area of improvement in academic research is how it handles, discusses and addresses multiple intersecting identities. During the recruitment phase of a current Northumbria University PhD research project, *Understanding the Unique Experiences of Queer Parents with Children on the ADHD Assessment Pathway*, some queer and neurodivergent participants have expressed that when they ‘unmasked’ their neurodivergent identity, they sequentially discovered other identities concealed within. While unmasking and coming out are sometimes conflated (AMR Therapy, 2025; Price, 2022), early participants in the Northumbria study have expressed that unmasking their neurodivergent identity enabled them later to ‘come out of the closet’ as queer, or vice versa. Additionally, some neurodivergent or queer people seem to express that the further down this rabbit hole of self-discovery they go, the borders between identities start to blur. Preliminary observations suggest that identities like ‘neurodivergent’, ‘queer’ and ‘parent’ are not always neatly boundaried, that non-conforming identities may feel shared within family structures, and that the ‘neurodivergent’ and ‘queer’ identifiers appear closely cohesive.

The parallel between ‘masking’, meaning to hide a neurodivergent identity, and being ‘in the closet’, meaning to hide a queer identity, has been somewhat explored in academic research (Radulski, 2022). Both are used as protective mechanisms where concealing our identities may provide some protection in unwelcoming environments. Both coming out and unmasking entail introspection, coming to terms with our own identities and some self-acceptance. Both can be complex, emotional and traumatic, as well as joyous, liberating and freeing.

## ***The Overlap — Are All Queers Neurodivergent?***

No, but there does appear to be a significant overlap, represented in academic research. Estimates collated across studies suggest that anywhere between 30 and 70 percent of neurodivergent people also identify as LGBTQIA+ (Blair, 2025), and that there are overlaps between people with gender dysphoria and ADHD/autism (6–26 percent), higher than the general population (Thrower et al., 2019). Other studies have explored this blurred line with varying degrees of findings, and a further study found that 14.5 percent of those in a ‘sexual minority’ reported having ADHD compared to 7.5 percent of a heterosexual group (Orantes et al., 2025). Other research has found that autistic people were three times more likely to identify as trans (Warrier et al., 2020), or eight times more likely to identify as asexual than their allistic (non-autistic) peers (Weir et al., 2021). One theory is that neurodivergent people, being less constrained by social norms, may be more open to exploring other non-conforming identities such as queerness (Warrier et al., 2020).

This distinction matters: where early participants in the Northumbria University study expressed that they not only think of queer and neurodivergent identities as parallels, existing simultaneously, but that they *feel* the same. It appears that, although preliminary and anecdotal, there is some interplay between these identities.

### *A Semantic Impasse — How to Talk About Neurodiversity and Queerness*

Academic frameworks are still considering the correct semantic approach to neurodiversity — a term which was popularised by sociologist Judy Singer in the 1990s, who made the case for neurological variances to be recognised and respected as natural human variations (Singer, 1999). Do we use medicalised terminology which can focus on deficit and treatment, as a medical model, found in the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2022)? Or do we take a sociological or neurodivergent route, using neutral, sometimes more validating and sometimes ND-positive language (think ‘ADHD superpowers’)? Although the neurodiversity approach, where it applies, and how researchers can use this is also contested (Dwyer, 2022). The sociological approach lends itself more to exploration of how ND people are disabled by their environments and is more likely to talk about ‘neuro-difference’ or different ‘neurotypes’, natural variations in brain development which do not require pathologisation or treatment. In and out of academic research there is still significant disagreement over which approach to take, given that neurodivergent conditions are usually lifelong and sometimes pervasive. Sometimes a medicalised approach is a practical necessity, as stigmatising language can persist in clinical settings and be slow to unlearn (Daswani et al., 2025; Healy et al., 2022). Proponents from within queer and neurodivergent spaces argue that neither a medical nor sociological model can truly capture the nuance and reality of what it is like to be neurodivergent (Chapman & Botha, 2022). Recent research concludes there is no right-or-wrong way to talk about ADHD, but that the interplay between models should be acknowledged (Nicholson & Lee, 2026).

Pathologising and medicalised language and frameworks, juxtaposed with alternatives which validate lived experience and identity is an experience many LGBTQIA+ people have also had, historically, where queerness has been considered disordered before a valid identity. This battle is also still being fought, in particular when it comes to trans identities, where a recent rolling-back in social acceptance and legislation to protect the rights of trans people has taken place in the UK and abroad.

Further parallels may be drawn between the relatively recent removal of homosexuality as a disorder from the DSM in 1973 (Drescher, 2015), and the current debate around whether ADHD is ‘overdiagnosed’, and whether it is a medical condition or simply a different neurotype. Both queer and neurodivergent communities are also exposed to interventions advertised as therapeutic intended to disrupt or challenge these identities (Stevens & Kirby, 2025).

### *A Policy Moment*

In the UK, there is still yet to be a full and formal response to Parts 1 (England, n.d.) and 2 (England, n.d.-b) of the ADHD Taskforce report, yet the former Health Secretary, Prime Minister and Chancellor have all voiced concerns regarding ‘overdiagnosis’ of ADHD, autism and mental health conditions. Although Wes Streeting stepped down as Health Secretary in May 2026, the policy directions he initiated, including the independent review framed around ‘overdiagnosis’ (Streeting, 2025), and the continued implementation of the Cass Review (Cass, 2024), remain in effect and continue to shape the landscape for both neurodivergent and trans communities in the UK. In response, a paper by 32 UK experts was published in the *British Journal of Psychiatry* in March 2026, which argued that there was no evidence that ADHD is over-diagnosed in the UK (Cortese et al., 2026). Additionally, the independent review’s interim report, published in spring 2026, acknowledged that epidemiological estimates of ADHD and autism appear relatively stable, and that rising diagnosis rates more likely reflect improved recognition and decades of unmet need rather than overdiagnosis (Department of Health and Social Care, 2026), though its final report is yet to be published at the time of writing.

Arguably one of the most striking examples of medicalisation being used at the intersection of trans and neurodivergent identities is the NHS policy landscape following the publication of the Cass Review. The Cass Review, an independent review of NHS gender identity services for children and young people published in April 2024 (Cass, 2024), led to the banning of puberty blockers for under-18s and, by March 2026, the suspension of new referrals for gender-affirming hormones for 16 and 17-year-olds. Alongside this removal of access to gender-affirming care, new NHS guidance now mandates that all children referred to gender clinics be screened for neurodevelopmental conditions including autism and ADHD (Riedel, 2025). The stated rationale is a ‘holistic assessment framework’, but critics argue that this effectively treats gender dysphoria as a neurodivergence issue to be explained away rather than a valid identity to be affirmed, an approach which some have compared to conversion therapy (Riedel, 2025). Notably, these policy decisions were until recently driven by the same former Health Secretary. Streeting framed the ADHD review around ‘overdiagnosis’. This convergence illustrates precisely why an intersectional framework is needed: the same institutional actors are simultaneously delegitimising both neurodivergent and trans identities, and those who sit at the intersection of both face compounding barriers to accessing support for either. Research drawing links between neurodivergence and queerness must be conducted with care, to avoid providing further ammunition for those acting in bad faith, and this is itself an argument for an approach which centres lived experience over medicalised categorisation.

The political narrative of ‘overdiagnosis’ rather than addressing years-long assessment waiting periods is invalidating and stigmatising, and parallels the queer experience, where waiting times for trans and non-binary people referred to gender identity clinics are estimated to be years or decades long (Gender Clinics — TransActual, 2026).

### *A Case for Intersectionality*

At least until the debate around the linguistics to use when discussing queer and neurodivergent people has been resolved, a case can be made for using Intersectionality Theory as a baseline approach to research in this area. Intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, emerged from her critique of what she called the ‘single-axis framework’, where laws written to tackle discrimination tended to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories. Crenshaw argued that Black women were forced to choose one of these lenses through which to frame their experiences, but never both simultaneously (Crenshaw, 1989). She argued that this approach erased the experiences of those on the intersections, whose discrimination could not be understood by examining just one identity or the other. The framework was also described by Crenshaw as ‘provisional’ and designed to be applied to overlapping identities, where existing frameworks fail to capture distinct experiences of marginalisation (Cho, Crenshaw & McCall, 2013).

The parallel to queer neurodivergent experience is striking. A queer parent navigating the ADHD assessment pathway alongside their child may not experience queerness and neurodivergence as separate, neatly bounded challenges. Power structures gatekeeping access to treatment in systems shaped by cis-or-hetero-normative assumptions about family structure may compound stigma already experienced personally by a parent, particularly when combined with ‘overdiagnosis’ rhetoric and the burden of justifying a diagnostic criterion to access support. This is the kind of experience that a single-lens framework, either examining queerness or neurodivergence in isolation, but not both, could miss.

An intersectional approach allows for the consideration of these nuances without requiring the medical-versus-social model debate to be resolved first. Intersectionality focuses on lived experience, now. It does not demand that researchers agree on whether ND conditions are a disorder, a difference, or a disability before they can meaningfully investigate how queer families navigate the assessment pathway. Instead, intersectionality considers what happens where these identities meet, and by its very conception addresses situations where the terminology and consideration of overlapping or intersecting identities may not yet exist (Crenshaw, 1989). While academics debate how to talk about neurodivergence, intersectionality provides a framework which centres lived experience and examines structures of power rather than being constrained by ongoing definitional debates.

Importantly, an intersectional approach also acknowledges that the impact of having one's validity questioned, whether through 'overdiagnosis' rhetoric, trans healthcare gatekeeping, or the rolling back of rights, including that these impacts do not affect all people equally. Women, people of colour and working-class people are often and systematically underdiagnosed for neurodivergent conditions (Dwyer, 2022), and queer neurodivergent people may face compounding barriers when institutional doubt about one identity is used to gatekeep access to support for the other. An intersectional lens makes this compounding visible and helps to centre those most impacted.

Emerging concepts like 'neuroqueer' theory, which expresses an inseparability of queerness and neurodivergence (Walker, 2021; Stevens & Kirby, 2025), could complement an intersectional framework, though intersectionality remains the more established and methodologically versatile lens for empirical research. Arguments could be made that the emergence of these new theories demonstrates a need for clarity in academia and beyond.

### ***What Is Next for All These Queer Neurodivergents?***

Whatever stance clinicians, researchers, educators and the public take on these identities, there should be some urgency. The neurodivergent and queer communities are under attack, and lived experience should be centred ahead of debates over language. As this researcher continues to explore these intersections through their PhD, the voices of queer parents navigating the ADHD assessment pathway will remain central. Their experiences, of masking, of closets, of compounding barriers, are not waiting for academia to settle on the right language. An intersectional framework ensures that crucial research in this area should not either.

### ***Positionality and Reflexivity***

Jo McCormick (they/them) is a queer, neurodivergent PhD Candidate at Northumbria University who has worked to empower queer and neurodivergent people in corporate and community settings. Their research uses Intersectionality Theory as a basis to examine the specific experience of queer parents with a child or children on the ADHD assessment pathway in the UK. They hope their research, informed by their own experience of growing up in the North East of England queer and neurodivergent, will serve as a protest and a historical record capturing these sensitive, nuanced and important experiences.

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Special Issue — Neurodivergent and Queer Identities 2026

(Volume 2 Issue 1 | pages 10–19)

<https://doi.org/10.19164/nusaj.v2i1.1873>

*Literature Review*

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## **Potential Impact of the Government SEND Reforms for Neurodivergent Children and Young People**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the potential impact of the UK government’s proposed education reforms on neurodivergent children and young people. Recent white papers outline significant changes to the structure of SEND support in mainstream and specialist education, including a strengthened universal offer, new National Inclusion Standards, and a tiered system of Targeted, Targeted Plus, and EHCP provision. While the reforms promise increased funding and a focus on inclusive practice, concerns have emerged regarding reduced access to personalised support with the introduction of standardised specialist provision packages. There are currently few details of what support will be provided in these packages. The language used suggests a behaviourist and ableist viewpoint, raising questions about how well the reforms will meet neurodivergent pupils’ needs. Additional concerns include inconsistent implementation of inclusion standards; high student-staff ratios and the potential for continued school alienation among neurodivergent learners. Although the reforms aim to improve mainstream inclusivity, this analysis highlights that without meaningful consultation, neurodivergent-affirming evidence, and structural changes within schools, the reforms may inadvertently reduce support and statutory protections for neurodivergent children.

**Keywords:** SEND, neurodivergence, inclusion, education, disability

**Date of Submission:** 31 March 2026

**Date of Acceptance:** 13 May 2026

## ***Introduction***

The recent publication of two education white papers by the United Kingdom (UK) government has caused a high degree of concern among families of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). These white papers set out the UK government's plans for education reform and the overhaul of the current legislation in place to support children and young people with SEND. There is particular anxiety about how the proposed changes to whom will qualify for the highest levels of support will affect neurodivergent children.

Since the Children and Families Act 2014 replaced Statements of Need with Education and Health Care Plans (EHCPs), the number of children on these plans has steadily increased, rising from 3.3% in 2015/16 to 5.3% in 2024/25. While the rate of increase is concerning, the percentage of the whole school population with an EHCP remains small (UK Gov, 2026a). The increase has resulted in spending on EHCP provision regularly exceeding funding. Sibieta and Snape (2024) report that between 2018 and 2022 the overspend has consistently been £200 to £800 million over the funding available, a deficit of 2–7% of local authority SEND budgets. This is unsustainable and a clear indication that the current system is not working. Data available from the UK Government (2026a) shows that neurodivergent pupils currently make up approximately 44%\* of those with EHCPs, a figure that is rising. As a result, these reforms are of particular relevance to neurodivergent students and their families.

In response to these concerns and others, the UK government have set out their plans for educational reform in two white papers, *Every Child Achieving and Thriving* and *SEND reform: Putting Children and Young People First* (UK gov, 2026b, 2026c). To sit alongside these, the Department for Education (DfE) (2026a–d) have provided some supplementary documents outlining how they envisage some key aspects of the reforms working in practice, as funding to support the move towards more inclusive practices will be available to them from September 2026, ahead of the passing of legislation on the reforms, which should come into force in September 2029 (Roberts, 2026).

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\* It is not possible to give an accurate figure as only autism is counted as a distinct type of SEND; other neurodivergences are included in other categories. ADHD, for example, comes under Social Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH), which is a broader category including a range of mental health and other conditions. This figure is made up of those children who are on the SEND register for autism and SEMH.

## **Discussion**

### ***Outline of Proposed Reforms***

The main intention behind the reforms appears to be to make the universal offer for all children in mainstream schools more inclusive, allowing a greater proportion of children to thrive in schools without the need for additional support. The government's aim is that, over time, this will reduce the number of children who require an EHCP or are on the SEND register (UK Gov, 2026b, 2026c). The reforms set out an extra £5.3 billion of funding over the next 3 years to support mainstream schools in becoming more inclusive and to provide more specialist provision places, both within mainstream schools and in special schools. The government are also pledging £200 million to provide continual professional development (CPD) training for all teachers to upskill and bolster the confidence of teachers to deliver more inclusive classroom practices. Schools will also be able to spend their additional SEND funding on training (UK Gov, 2026b, DfE 2026d).

For students who need more assistance than the universal offer provides, schools are currently required to make their 'best endeavours' to meet the needs of SEND pupils within school (Education Committee, 2025). Where they cannot do this without additional support, they can apply for an EHCP, which is a statutory document drawn up by the local authority with input from professionals, the school, the child and their family. The plan is individual to the pupil and provides extra funding for schools and access to outside support (Education Committee, 2025). Under the proposed reforms, all SEND students will have an individual support plan that sets out the provisions required. This will fit into one of three categories: Targeted, Targeted Plus and EHCPs. Those in the Targeted category will be provided with extra support within the school. Targeted Plus provision will include access to in-school inclusion bases as well as additional support from 'Experts at Hand', education and health professionals such as educational psychologists, and speech and language therapists employed by local authorities. The Government is pledging an additional £1.8 billion over three years to local authorities to fund this. Pupils who need more specialist or one-to-one support will still be able to apply for an EHCP, but under the reforms, this will take the form of access to provisions set out within a limited number of standardised specialist support packages rather than a bespoke set of supports linked to their specific needs. The vision is that post-reform, EHCPs will only be required for those pupils with the most complex needs (UK Gov, 2026c).

### ***Potential Effects of the Reforms***

If the reforms in the white paper are implemented, the current highly individualised approach to drawing up EHCPs will be replaced by several standardised specialist provision packages, which will form the

basis of the new plans. Students who qualify for this extra support will be granted one of these packages and will have access to all the provisions within it (UK Gov, 2026c). At present, there is little detail in the white papers about how many specialist provision packages there will be, what they will focus on and how much scope there will be for personalisation within them. This has created a degree of concern amongst parents of SEND children and organisations supporting them. A further Department for Education (DfE) document (2026a) outlines a little more information on what is envisioned for specialist provision packages. Unfortunately, there are few concrete details of the support they will provide, and the language used indicates a behaviourist and ableist viewpoint. This is particularly concerning for neurodivergent students, as it can lead to a focus on the observable behaviours, and how they impact others, rather than the person themselves and their unmet needs, which are the cause of those behaviours (Goodall et al, 2022; Ryan, Watchorn and Evans, 2024). This is an unfortunate common occurrence even in those working with disabled people (Friedman, Van Puymbrouck and Gordon, 2024).

At first reading, the spirit of the reforms seems to be one of inclusion, with the focus on improving the universal offer by using evidence-based pedagogy to develop National Inclusion Standards to inform best practice and offer guidance on how schools can improve their accessibility for the most commonly found SEND needs, including neurodivergent conditions (UK Gov, 2026b). The success of the proposed reforms depends on schools applying the National Inclusion Standards equally and consistently. Before December 2025, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) did not specifically assess schools on inclusion (National Governance Association, 2025). Since December 2025, OFSTED have graded schools on inclusion; at the time of writing, 11% of schools assessed (99 out of 928) were found to have inclusion practices that were below expected standards. This data was calculated by collating the grading for inclusion for the 928 reports published between 1st December 2025 and 6th May 2026 for government-funded mainstream schools. The number of schools falling below the required standard for inclusion needs to be monitored, especially once the National Standards for Inclusion come into force. There also needs to be careful thought given to what accountability measures there will be for schools who fail to meet the required standard for inclusion as well as the procedures put in place for parents to seek help if their child's needs are not met by a school but they fall below the threshold for being granted an EHCP.

There is a range of pressures on schools and teachers that may impact their ability to meet inclusivity standards, examples of this are school league tables and performance-related pay. The Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA) has indicated that when schools are encouraged to focus on improving their position in league tables, it can take focus away from providing a quality education (ACCA, 2026). This view is supported by The Sutton Trust (2026), which reported that 41% of school leaders who responded to their survey believe that some schools actively discourage

applications from SEND pupils. The report goes on to say that the top schools for attainment have up to 50% fewer disadvantaged pupils with SEND than the average comprehensive. Staff at these schools rebut this, stating that it is not down to their SEND status, that they are discouraged, but rather due to the lack of funding (Phillips, 2026), as the largest SEND group, neurodivergent students are likely to be the ones most affected by this trend.

Although more funding has been promised, it comes with an increased level of scrutiny on inclusion and additional responsibilities for schools, through the National Inclusions Standards. The government has committed to using evidence-backed research and expert advice to inform the National Inclusion Standards and the specialist provision packages. This commitment is positive, but with little information as to where this will be sourced, there is cause for concern. Victor-Aigbodion and Eseadi (2024) found that most research into the experience of neurodivergent students in schools was written from the perspective of teachers, with little from the point of view of the students. Neurodivergent students' experience of school can be vastly different from that of their neurotypical peers and put them at higher risk of experiencing school alienation (Fisher et al., 2025). If the evidence used to formulate the details of these reforms does not include research on the lived experience of neurodivergent students and seek advice from neurodivergent professionals, then it is conceivable that the risks of school alienation will not improve. School alienation is often a result of not feeling seen, heard or valued by teachers and peers (Mirfin-Veitch, Jalota and Schmidt, 2020). Feeling alienated from both academic and social experiences in school can lead to higher levels of dysregulation for students, resulting in expressions of boredom, truancy or hostility to teachers or peers (Hascher and Hadjar, 2018). There is already a tendency for some education professionals to adopt a behaviourist viewpoint of neurodivergent students, which can lead to unhelpful attitudes and barriers to affective support (Ryan, Watchorn and Evans, 2024). Without careful implementation, these reforms may not reduce this.

### ***Potential Challenges to the Success of the Reforms***

The general environment within mainstream classrooms and the expectations put upon neurodivergent students can often lead to dysregulation. Large class sizes and hard surfaces increase noise levels and create social and sensory challenges which can be difficult for busy teachers to mitigate (Mirfin-Veitch, Jalota and Schmidt, 2018). It would take changes at a governmental level to address staff-to-student ratios or reduce class sizes. Student-to-staff ratios in the UK are the 5<sup>th</sup> highest in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, at 19:1 in primary schools and 17:1 in lower secondary schools (OECD, 2024). However, there is no focus on reducing ratios or class sizes in the white papers. Goodall et al. (2022) highlight that sensory dysregulation caused by the classroom environment can be helped by students having access to sensory rooms, something mentioned as best practice in both white

papers (UK Gov, 2026b & c). Access to sensory rooms does not promote inclusivity; while they are beneficial to students with sensory sensitivities, they require students to leave the classroom to access them, resulting in a loss of learning. In order to improve inclusivity, the conditions within the classroom that cause the dysregulation in the first place need to be addressed.

The overarching tone of the reforms focuses on making all schools more inclusive and accessible. The increase in funding going directly to schools and to local authorities to provide more specialist support alongside inclusivity training for all teachers should aid this. The proposal for evidence-based inclusion standards, highlighting the most common support needs, especially if sourced from neurodivergent-affirming sources, has the potential to benefit neurodivergent pupils by increasing knowledge of their challenges and the types of support that might help.

There is a lot to give hope in the reforms, but there is also a lot to cause concern, primarily due to the lack of details in both the white papers and the supporting documents. There is still a prevailing ableist and behaviourist view of the challenges experienced by neurodivergent students. Building truly inclusive classrooms is a big challenge made harder by high student-to-staff ratios, which are not addressed in the reforms. In order to be more inclusive, already busy teachers will need to understand the underlying cause of any challenges their students have; without this, it can impact their ability to help. The use of sensory rooms and support bases to help students regulate removes students from lessons, which may in turn affect their progress. The changes proposed to those who will qualify for an EHCP and the form that they will take are extremely concerning for families of neurodivergent children. It is important to note that white papers are not final policy documents; there will be a period of consultation before the required legislation is written, and there will probably be further changes as any resulting bill passes through parliament.

## ***Conclusion***

Overall, the proposed reforms set out some positive steps but rely on already overstretched school staff to make classrooms more inclusive and on schools as a whole to adhere to the National Inclusion Standards. At present, the statutory support set out in EHCPs gives neurodivergent students and their families a safety net if schools are not meeting their needs. If, as is suggested, EHCPs become less personalised under these reforms and fewer children can qualify, a significant proportion of neurodivergent children are likely to be affected. A lot will depend on the results of the consultation on the white papers and the evidence base used to formulate the specialist provision packages and the National Inclusion Standards, but at present, there is reason to be concerned that these reforms will remove support and rights from neurodivergent children.

### ***Background of the Author***

The author is currently an occupational therapy student and is neurodivergent with two school-age neurodivergent children. They also taught in secondary schools for 12 years and are currently a school governor.

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Special Issue — Neurodivergent and Queer Identities 2026

(Volume 2 Issue 1 | pages 20–29)

<https://doi.org/10.19164/nusaj.v2i1.1874>

*Article*

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## **Neuroqueering Masculinity: An Analytic Autoethnography of Masking, Gender Expression and Fluid Sexual Identity**

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### **Abstract**

This paper adopts an analytic autoethnographic approach to explore how a neurodivergent, queer man’s shifting gender expression and experiences of sexual identity illuminate the limits of binary understandings of masculinity and femininity (Anderson, 2006; Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011). Drawing on queer theory, neuroqueer theory and Jungian analytical psychology, it examines how social pressure, masking, diagnosis, crisis and psychedelic experience shaped my movement between more masculine and more feminine forms of self-presentation. The paper argues that gendered expression is better understood, in Jungian terms, as a dynamic interplay of psychic energies rather than as a fixed binary, and that neurodivergent and queer lives may make this instability especially visible. In tracing my own experiences from childhood to the present, I suggest that unmasking and individuation can be read as parallel processes of becoming more integrated, less performative and more internally coherent.

**Keywords:** autoethnography, neuroqueer, queer theory, neurodivergence, masking, gender expression, Jung, anima

**Date of Submission:** 8 April 2026

**Date of Acceptance:** 19 May 2026

## ***Introduction***

This paper explores how my experiences as a queer man, and later ADHD and autism diagnoses, have shaped shifting forms of gender expression and sexual identity across childhood, adolescence and subsequent years. It asks why the categories of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ never fully captured my experience, and why my sense of self became more fluid following diagnosis, unmasking, psychological distress and psychedelic exploration. The argument is not that binary categories are meaningless, but that they are too narrow to describe the complexity of lived experience.

I use the terms ‘masculine’, ‘feminine,’ ‘gay’, ‘straight’ and ‘bisexual’ here in a deliberately stereotypical and historically contingent sense, not as fixed or universally valid truths. The paper is therefore not trying to naturalise those categories, but to show how they were used, felt, resisted and reworked in my own life. This analytic autoethnography draws on memory, reflective writing and personal experience while preserving confidentiality through omitted or altered identifying details. By combining personal narrative with theoretical interpretation, this paper aims to critically examine how neurodivergence, sexuality and gendered self-expression are shaped through lived experience (Anderson, 2006; Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011). Unlike purely evocative autoethnography, analytic autoethnography seeks not only to describe experience, but also to connect personal experience to wider social and theoretical structures.

The term neuroqueer is used here in Nick Walker’s sense of a practice and perspective that actively subverts both neuronormativity and heteronormativity. Walker describes neuroqueer as both an identity and a verb: a way of queering neurocognitive norms, and of refusing or undoing pressure to conform to dominant scripts of behaviour, embodiment and identity (Walker and Raymaker, 2021). Jungian psychology is used alongside this, particularly the concepts of the anima and individuation, to interpret the integration of gendered opposites not as pathology, but as part of psychological development.

## ***Theoretical Framework***

Neuroqueer theory offers a useful way to understand how neurodivergence and queerness are not simply parallel identities, but intertwined experiences shaped by shared pressures to appear ‘normal’. Walker’s account of neuroqueering explicitly links the queering of neurotypicality with the queering of gender and sexuality, arguing that dominant norms of cognition and embodiment are socially enforced in ways that resemble the enforcement of heteronormativity. In this framework, a neurodivergent person may find it harder, or less worthwhile, to maintain the performances demanded

by social life, which can make identity feel more fluid, fragmented, or context-dependent. Walker's later work further develops neuroqueer theory as a challenge to the compulsory performance of neuronormativity, arguing that neurodivergence and queerness often intersect through shared experiences of masking, social regulation and identity performance (Walker, 2021).

Queer theory strengthens this reading by showing that sexual and gender identities are socially produced and maintained rather than simply discovered as stable inner facts. Adrienne Rich's concept of compulsory heterosexuality names the cultural force that makes heterosexuality seem default and other orientations seem deviant, while Judith Butler's theory of performativity argues that gender is socially enacted through repeated behaviours and norms rather than emerging as a purely natural essence. At the same time, contemporary discussions of transgender experience complicate any interpretation that gender is therefore entirely arbitrary or exclusively socially produced (Rich, 1980; Butler, 2024, 1990). Together, these ideas suggest that identities such as 'gay', 'straight' and 'bi' are not just internal truths but legible positions shaped by power, repetition and social sanction.

Jungian psychology offers a different but compatible vocabulary for thinking about integration. Jung's anima describes the unconscious feminine dimension in a man, while individuation refers to the process of becoming more whole through the integration of unconscious and conscious aspects of the self (Jung, 1968). Read cautiously, this framework allows experiences of feminine feeling, masculine presentation, or sudden gendered insight to be interpreted not as literal misrecognition, but as encounters with inner psychological material that resists simple binaries.

Masking and unmasking sit across these frameworks. In neurodivergent and queer lives alike, masking often functions as self-protection: a way of hiding traits that provoke ridicule, exclusion, or discomfort in others (Walker, 2021; Walker and Raymaker, 2021; Price, 2022; Hull et al., 2017). Late diagnosis, crisis, therapy and introspection can destabilise the effort of masking and make room for more authentic expression, though that process may be painful as well as liberating.

### ***Early Ambiguities***

For most of childhood I appeared fairly neutral in gender expression. I was not especially masculine or feminine by conventional standards. I was independent, intellectually competitive, aesthetically minded and often socially sensitive. Frequently, I felt left out, wandered alone, or cried when excluded.

I had close friends of all genders and early attractions that do not fit neatly into a simple ‘gay from the start’ narrative. Some experiences with boys occurred in secrecy, including with a socially popular boy who bullied others seen as different. Looking back, these experiences sit awkwardly within any neat later label.

### ***Coming Out and Social Reorganisation***

At 13, a conversation in the park gave me a definition of ‘gay’ that suddenly made sense of experiences and feelings I had not previously had language for. I immediately came out as bisexual to my best friend and girlfriend. The social response from boys was often hostile, and PE changing rooms became a place of dread.

What followed was not just homophobia but social reorganisation. Male friendships became harder to sustain, and I increasingly found belonging with female friends and other queer people. I identified briefly as bisexual before settling into a gay identity.

One interpretation is that heterosexual desire became psychologically less available because it was not the part of me that could be safely lived. Under homophobia and compulsory heterosexuality, it is plausible that the mind narrows what can be felt, admitted, or socially defended in order to reduce conflict (Rich, 1980). That does not mean those attractions were never there. It means that what becomes conscious can be shaped by what is survivable.

### ***Masking and Masculine Performance***

By my second year of college, I was tired of having almost exclusively female and gay male friends. I wanted male friendship and some sense of belonging with straight men, so I made a deliberate decision to present more ‘straight’. That meant dressing more masculinely, suppressing feminine mannerisms and voice patterns around men, and delaying coming out when I moved to university.

This was my first major conscious round of masking. For a neurodivergent person already consciously monitoring tone, behaviour and social acceptability, this additional layer of gendered

performance became exhausting over time (Price, 2022). I performed straightness through kissing and flirting with women, partly for safety and partly to access male friendship and status. The performance delayed suspicion but did not prevent later exclusion. I found myself once again pushed out of male belonging and recast as ‘one of the girls’.

That period taught me that gender expression was highly responsive to environment. Masculine presentation felt useful around men because it reduced risk, while feminine expression felt easier around women because it felt socially safer. From a neuroqueer perspective, this is not just style choice but adaptation under pressure: a bodymind learning how to survive in a social world that polices both masculinity and femininity (Walker and Raymaker, 2021).

### ***Crisis, Diagnosis and Loosening***

By 22, during my fourth year at university, I received an ADHD diagnosis and was sliding into a severe mental health crisis. My friends struggled with my mental state and gradually distanced themselves, leaving my partner as my only real social connection.

During and after that period I began therapy, explored psychedelic experiences, and developed a more consistent yoga and meditation practice. Although painful, this isolation also reduced pressure to perform normality. With fewer people to impress, some of my masking around neurodivergence, emotion and sexuality began to loosen, alongside growing exhaustion from the constant monitoring and performance involved in appearing socially acceptable (Price, 2022; Hull et al., 2017).

This stage can be read as neuroqueer in Walker’s sense because the loosening was not simply personal growth in a vacuum, it emerged through a changing relationship to norms and expectations. It also resembles the beginnings of individuation, in which a person is forced to face what has been split off or suppressed rather than continuing to maintain a socially acceptable surface (Jung, 1968).

### ***Psychedelic Disruption and Integration***

A significant psychedelic experience undertaken during a period of psychological exploration came after my relationship ended and felt like the culmination of years of meditation, therapy and psychological self-exploration. After a period of inward withdrawal, I experienced a profound disruption of ordinary selfhood and a detached observer perspective.

Research on psychedelic states has suggested that such experiences can temporarily loosen habitual patterns of selfhood, identity and social cognition (Carhart-Harris et al., 2014), which may help contextualise the intensity of the experience described here.

From there, I experienced a bright ball of light as my core self. Then, for about a minute, I felt entirely feminine and believed I had been a woman all along and would need to transition in order to live authentically. Soon after, my sense of masculinity returned and I crashed into confusion, followed by about two weeks of shutdown, during which I had little language, no clear personality, and a very unstable sense of identity. In psychological terms, this resembled a prolonged dissociative or freeze-like response following overwhelming emotional destabilisation, in which ordinary self-organisation temporarily became difficult to maintain (Van der Kolk, 2015). I retreated into meditation, journaling and reading.

I do not now interpret that experience as proof that I am literally a woman. Nor is this paper intended to deny the validity or stability of binary transgender identities. Rather, it focuses specifically on my own experiences of shifting gender expression as a neurodivergent queer man, while recognising that many transgender and nonbinary people describe experiences of gender that differ substantially from those explored here.

Instead, I understand the experience as a powerful encounter with feminine energy, or in Jungian terms with the anima, that made it impossible to keep treating masculinity and femininity as sealed-off opposites (Jung, 1968). What changed was not that one category replaced another, but that the binary itself ceased to feel adequate for describing my own experience. The experience seems closer to integration than conversion: a confrontation with something previously disowned that needed to be held rather than eliminated.

### ***Gender, Unmasking and Individuation***

After that experience, shame around my sexuality and feminine expression largely fell away. I became more confident moving fluidly between masculine and feminine expression, shifting depending on context but from a place that felt intentional rather than forced. My sense of self now feels more able to hold both energies without needing to collapse into rigid boxes.

Around the same period, an autism diagnosis and further unmasking coincided with the re-emergence of attractions to women and earlier memories that did not fit neatly into 'gay'. This does not mean that the diagnosis caused the attractions, rather, the process of learning more about my neurodivergence coincided with a loosening of the identities I had been using to survive. Walker's account of neuroqueering helps name this: the more a person resists dominant norms of cognition and embodiment, the more they may become open to forms of selfhood that are less stable but more truthful.

Jungian language is useful here because it frames the movement not as confusion but as development. If individuation involves integrating split-off material and becoming more whole, then the post-trip, post-diagnosis period can be read as a movement toward greater psychic coherence (Jung, 1968). The point is not to replace one label with another, but to allow the self to become less organised around fear and more organised around integration.

A possible way to conceptualise this is through a 'dynamic energy model' of gendered selfhood. In such a model, masculinity and femininity are not fixed traits assigned by sex or orientation, but flexible psychic energies that can be expressed in different proportions across contexts and over time. Neuroqueer lives may make this especially visible because neurodivergent people often cannot, or do not want to, keep performing the same social script everywhere.

### ***Sexuality and Social Legibility***

My sexuality also seems to have been shaped by social pressure rather than simply expressed as a stable inner essence. Looking back, I can see early attraction to both boys and girls, but only the heterosexual side was publicly legible and socially allowed. Under heteronormativity, it is easy to see how a person might settle into a simpler label that reduces friction, even if that label does not capture the full range of desire (Rich, 1980).

This helps explain why my gay identity became so dominant after coming out at 13. It was not necessarily false, but it may have become overdetermined by safety, belonging and social readability. In a homophobic environment, a stable label can function as shelter, even if it also

obscures complexity. That is especially plausible for bisexuality, which is often pressured toward one pole or the other because ambiguity is socially difficult to hold.

This framework also shapes how I interpret the men I have known. I have seen gay men who are bullied and pushed out by straight male groups and men whose public identities and private experiences did not align neatly, suggesting how shame, secrecy and social pressure shape what can be publicly acknowledged.

That is why it often feels as if the ‘evidence’ of sexuality is locked behind subjective experience. Queer theory already tells us that categories are socially produced and policed, while neuroqueer theory adds that some people may be less able to maintain those policed performances over time. Together, my experiences suggest that sexuality may be less like a fixed fact waiting to be discovered and more like a lived negotiation between desire, fear and social legibility.

### ***Discussion***

My experiences suggest that the masculinity/femininity binary felt too blunt to adequately describe my own lived experience of gendered expression. What I experienced was not a simple move from one side to the other, but repeated shifts in presentation, attraction, shame, confidence and integration. The more pressure I felt to be legible to others, the more my gender expression hardened into performance; the more pressure eased, the more fluid and internally guided it became.

The same pattern appears in sexuality. Under strong heteronormative pressure, desire can be organised around what is safest or most socially sustainable rather than what is most open or complex. This does not make identity fake. It means identity can be adaptive, context-dependent and reorganised by survival (Butler, 1990; Rich, 1980).

Neuroqueer theory helps explain why the loosening of one set of norms can destabilise another. Once I began to unmask neurodivergence and reduce the constant cognitive monitoring involved in social masking, the demand to maintain a single, coherent social persona weakened. Once that happened, gender and sexuality became less like fixed destinations and more like dynamic processes. This fluidity also resonates with queer theoretical work that frames identity as temporally unstable, socially negotiated and resistant to fixed developmental narratives (Halberstam, 2005). Jungian individuation gives a complementary account: aspects of the self that had previously felt divided or suppressed began to feel more integrated.

## ***Conclusion***

This autoethnographic account suggests that under strong heteronormative and neuronormative pressure, sexual identity and gender expression can reorganise around social survival. In my case, ‘gay’, ‘straight’ and ‘bi’ were not simply transparent descriptors but adaptive scripts that shifted with context, fear, belonging and self-understanding.

Neuroqueer theory and Jungian psychology offer a language for what the binary could not explain: not confusion, but integration through instability (Jung, 1968; Walker and Raymaker, 2021). My experiences lead me to think that some people may live with more fluidity in attraction and gendered feeling than current categories acknowledge, but that they do so unevenly depending on the social cost of disclosure.

I am deeply grateful for what these experiences have taught me. I no longer feel compelled to confine myself within boxes that never fully held the reality of my experience. Rather than seeking certainty through definitive labels, I have become more comfortable living with ambiguity, fluidity and change. I am not concerned with proving myself straight, gay, or bisexual; I simply find myself drawn to people.

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Special Issue — Neurodivergent and Queer Identities 2026

(Volume 2 Issue 1 | pages 30–39)

<https://doi.org/10.19164/nusaj.v2i1.1875>

*Article*

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## **Masking, Legibility and Neuronormativity: Neuroqueer Representation in *Heartbreak High***

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### **Abstract**

‘Neuroqueer’ scholarship has explored how neurodivergence and queerness shape one another, as well as the practices of resisting neuronormativity and cisheteronormativity. While autistic representation has grown more visible on contemporary television, scholarship identifies similar problems with representation: stereotypes, gaps in authenticity and a lack of intersectionality. Through *Heartbreak High*, this article argues that Quinni’s representation matters. The show represents masking as a shared technology of normativity across disability and sexuality. Using neuroqueer theory, critical autism studies and research on camouflaging and stigma, this article develops the concept of neuroqueer legibility, covering the processes through which a character comes to be legible as both autistic and queer and the risks attendant to this legibility. Analysis of *Heartbreak High* shows that the series diverts responsibility for interpretation away from the individual and the individual’s deficit. Through Quinni’s disclosure and her deteriorating relationship with Sasha, the series shifts focus towards relational misattunement and institutional discipline.

**Keywords:** neuroqueer, neurodiversity, autism, queer, representation, masking, intersectionality, television

**Date of Submission:** 31 March 2026

**Date of Acceptance:** 11 May 2026

## ***Introduction***

Autistic characters have become more visible on television. However, scholars continue to argue that increasing visibility is no guarantee of representational quality. Fictional representations can offer some resistance to stigma. They can also reproduce deficit thinking, ‘flatten’ autistic experience, and use disability as a plot device rather than as a social reality (Jones, Gordon and Mizzi, 2023). Studies of television and disability show that representation is a product of form: the inclusion of autistic characters is often conditional on their ability to fit within televisual narratives of productivity, romance and social competence (Aspler, Harding and Cascio, 2022).

*Heartbreak High* is a school-based television series set at Hartley High that concerns adolescent relationships, sexuality, peer dynamics and institutional life. This article foregrounds Quinni, an autistic queer student, and Sasha, her romantic interest, in episodes that stage self-naming, masking and relational conflict. Chloé Hayden’s lived experience as an autistic actor informs Quinni’s self-naming (Vrajlal, 2022). It is in Season 1, Episode 2, ‘Renaissance Titties’ that Quinni comes out as autistic and states that she is ‘good at masking’. Season 1, Episode 6, ‘Angeline’, complicates disclosure by showing recognition not as resolution, but as strain in Quinni and Sasha’s relationship.

Here, ‘neuroqueer’ offers a useful lens for understanding the intersection of autism and queerness. Stevens and Kirby (2025) define neuroqueer as a theoretical lens and a set of practices through which neurodivergent and queer lives resist normative demands. Similarly, neuroqueer theory is described by Barnett (2024) as a challenge to dominant ideas of sociability, gender, and the properly legible self.

This article contends that *Heartbreak High* is a useful case study because it depicts autistic and queer identity as a common problem of legibility. Specifically, the series frames masking as a strategy of navigating neuronormative and heteronormative expectations rather than as personal dishonesty or dysfunction, as with Quinni’s storyline in Season 1, Episode 2, ‘Renaissance Titties’ and Season 1, Episode 6, ‘Angeline’ (‘Renaissance Titties’, 2022a; ‘Angeline’, 2022b; Vrajlal, 2022; Netflix Tudum, 2024).

The article also addresses a larger question for neuroqueer scholarship: what should good representation look like? Following Kafer (2013), representation is valued not because it makes visible marginalised identity, but because it makes visible structures that make inclusion conditional.

## *Literature and Theoretical Framework*

A neuroqueer reading cannot be based on purely individualising models of deficit. Contemporary scholarship on neurodiversity shows that pathologising accounts of autism are not neutral descriptions, but rather shape institutions, research priorities and everyday language in ways that demand conformity from autistic people (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021). In response, neuroqueer theory identifies autism and queerness as part of common systems of normalisation, emphasising lived experience and opposition to normative expectations (Stevens and Kirby, 2025).

Mallipedi and VanDaalen (2022) point out that autism cannot be fully understood outside of its relationship with race, gender, sex, and class. Nair, Farah and Boveda (2024) have criticised neurodiversity discourse for most often centring white Global North perspectives. While Crenshaw's (1989) foundational work on intersectionality still stands today, it demonstrates how social identities are structured through intersecting systems of power and therefore cannot be added together. Therefore, when analysing representations of autism in media, we need to look at not just whether the autistic person is visible in their depiction, but also whose life is represented as 'normal' and whose life is marginalised due to structural inequalities.

Two further theories are critical: camouflaging and the Double Empathy Problem. Camouflaging refers to the methods autistic people use to disguise or compensate for their autistic traits in order to avoid stigma in social interactions (Cook et al., 2021). Studies demonstrate that camouflaging is impacted by societal expectations of acceptance as well as the consequences of disclosing one's autistic identity (Perry et al., 2022). The Double Empathy Problem provides a counterpoint to the deficit theory of autistic individuals, which holds that communication failures occur mutually and stem from asymmetrical communicative norms rather than from an individual's cognitive deficits (Milton, 2012). This is important for neuroqueer analysis, since the primary concern is not whether an autistic queer character meets the dominant culture's social expectations of success, but whether a particular text represents difficulties as problems for the individual, institutions, society, or all three.

This approach differentiates sympathy-based representation from representational critique. As Jones, Gordon and Mizzi (2023) argue, television often employs recognisable autistic stereotypes such as exceptional intelligence, social naivety, or emotional opacity. These stereotypes may seem positive, even if they limit what autism may represent. Instead of asking whether a text contains positive autistic stereotypes, a neuroqueer analysis focuses on how it distributes interpretive authority. Who explains whom? Whose version of events does the audience believe? Does a text portray differences as problems primarily for the individual or for institutions? Since both autism and queerness are typically subject to

outside interpretation and demands for self-legitimation, this question is particularly pertinent whenever they coexist.

### ***Approach and Corpus***

The article uses qualitative textual analysis, bringing together close reading of characterisation, narrative structure, setting, performance, visual framing and selected formal features, with ideas from neuroqueer theory and critical autism studies. The corpus is *Heartbreak High*, Season 1, Episode 2, ‘Renaissance Titties’ and Episode 6, ‘Angeline’, as these episodes stage disclosure, masking, and subsequent relational strain (‘Renaissance Titties’, 2022a; ‘Angeline’, 2022b; Vrajlal, 2022; Netflix Tudum, 2024).

Instead of treating the episodes as exemplars, the analysis examines how the performance, character interaction, setting, narrative sequencing and dialogue configure autistic queer legibility as private, relational, and institutional. The article also discusses, where relevant, how the organisation of looking, listening, response, and spatial exposure in the scene makes disclosure a formal event rather than just a spoken statement.

### ***Neuroqueer Legibility and Masking***

One of the main reasons *Heartbreak High* does this is that it explicitly identifies masking instead of implying that Autism exists in the absence of a stated connection. Quinni’s date with Sasha, in Season 1, Episode 2, ‘Renaissance Titties’ is defined by both sensory and social factors before Quinni discloses her autism. After being surrounded by noise and people and feeling over-stimulated by them, Quinni withdraws into a restroom with Darren where she can better self-regulate. She subsequently tells Sasha about her autism and states ‘I’m good at masking’ (‘Renaissance Titties,’ 2022a; Vrajlal, 2022). The way the scene was staged is very important because the disclosure comes from embodied discomfort, spatially withdrawing from a group of people and attempting to repair relationships rather than some distant explanation. The bathroom scene foregrounds Quinni’s embodied response; its relative enclosure, following the preceding overcrowded social scene, creates a movement from public overstimulation to a more controlled environment. Quinni’s later disclosure is therefore prepared as a negotiated process rather than simply as a plot device. Darren’s participation also matters because it mediates regulation rather than staging Quinni outside social context. The sequence shows autistic communication emerging through setting, performance and response: Quinni pauses, sits still and speaks slowly, while Darren adjusts his communicative pace. Legibility is therefore established through relational attention rather than solely through Quinni’s speech.

Quinni's self-naming becomes a performance of relational risk. For the scene to produce recognition, Sasha must listen, interpret and respond to the disclosure. Autistic characters are often coded but not named. This representational practice can enhance stereotypes while denying autistic self-definition. Scholarship on media representation shows that using identification can reduce ambiguity; however, its value depends on whether the text supports understanding or creates an explanatory spectacle (Jones, Gordon and Mizzi, 2023).

Across this sequence, 'masking' serves as a technology of legibility. Quinni is attempting to present herself as readable as possible as a partner, friend and student within a neuronormative space. In a romantic context, Quinni masks through perceived norms of romance, such as timing, responsiveness, and emotional performance, to create a sense of intimacy. The transition from a crowded public place to withdrawing to the bathroom to explain what was happening provides masking a spatial and temporal structure: Quinni's body registers pressure prior to language, providing an account of that pressure.

Camouflage literature portrays masking as exhausting identity labour, prompted by stigma (Cook et al., 2021), as well as a neuroqueer strategy for negotiating recognisability within a socially constructed relationship of intimacy based upon normative notions of recognition (Stevens and Kirby, 2025).

While the show depicts unmasking/disclosure as neither simply nor necessarily an emancipatory endpoint, Season 1, Episode 6, 'Angeline', illustrates how Quinni's plan to attend a book signing relies on routine and predictability. Meanwhile, Sasha consistently disrupts this routine with competing social demands, such as going for gelato, conversing with someone Quinni has not met, and attending Amerie's party ('Angeline', 2022b; Netflix Tudum, 2024; Netflix, 2026). Misattunement is illustrated through conflicting temporal structures: Quinni's need for scheduling and recovery time is set against Sasha's preference for spontaneity, producing conflict through rhythm, pacing and performance rather than dialogue alone. Recognising Quinni's needs is difficult not only because of the spoken disagreements but also because of differences in pace and performance. In the book-signing sequence, Quinni's stillness contrasts with Sasha's outward-facing social energy, making discomfort visible through bodily composition rather than exposition. Cuts between interactions interrupt Quinni's anticipated route through the event, so the scene's form mirrors the loss of predictability that Sasha fails to recognise as an access need. Although Quinni may describe her experiences to others, they must still adapt to those descriptions. Literature regarding neuroqueering warns against viewing disclosure as always safe or preferable, and literature on stigma notes that autistic

individuals often face penalisation both for concealing and for revealing differences (Botha, Dibb and Frost, 2020; Stevens and Kirby, 2025).

Minority stress research helps clarify this point. Botha and Frost (2020) show that harm experienced by autistic people is produced not by autism itself, but by stigmatising environments that generate chronic vigilance, concealment and strain. Thus, when we view Quinni's masking as an adaptation to these conditions, we are invited to consider the link between affective difficulty and structural pressure, as well as the neuroqueer significance of the series.

The double empathy problem makes clear what is at issue with Quinni's masking. In a deficit model, Quinni would be treated as the source of communication failure. In a relational model, however, communication failure arises from mismatched expectations and unequal authority in interpreting each other's actions. Across the selected episodes, *Heartbreak High* moves towards this relational model by showing that social difficulty does not reside solely in the autistic subject but develops within relationships that privilege one mode of legibility over another (Milton, Gurbuz and López, 2022).

### ***Schooling and Institutional Normativity***

The school setting intensifies the argument, as it is in this space that normativity is organised and enforced. As Barnett (2024) describes, neuronormativity is enacted by the institutions that regulate legitimate behaviour, embodiment and relationality. Hartley High fulfils that institutional function by making sociability, compliance and stable self-presentation seem normal. Similarly, Strand (2017) argues that neurodiversity and intersectionality need to be considered together because institutions distribute recognition unevenly across bodies and identities. Representation scholarship often presents autistic inclusion as successful assimilation into these norms, while the institution itself remains unexamined (Jones, Gordon and Mizzi, 2023).

*Heartbreak High* partly defies this pattern. Hartley High mediates Quinni's relationship arc; the pressures surrounding disclosure, romance and acceptable conduct are staged through school routines, peer gatherings, and adolescent social visibility ('Renaissance Titties', 2022a; 'Angeline', 2022b). The school is a social space where intimacy is observed, interpreted and regulated by peer expectations. Hartley High's formal importance lies in how private negotiation becomes publicly legible. Quinni's communication, affect and romantic needs are read through a culture organised around sociability, flexibility and appropriate conduct. From a neuroqueer perspective, autism and queerness are theorised as part of dominant scripts of normality (Stevens and Kirby, 2025). An autistic queer student, therefore,

encounters multiple systems of legibility that may render self-knowledge unreliable or excessive (Mallipeddi and VanDaalen, 2022).

The school setting demonstrates why neuroqueer legibility is political, not just personal. Schools distinguish between behaviour that is seen as mature, appropriate and socially competent and behaviour that is seen as disruptive or excessive. Quinni's need for self-regulation within those boundaries clarifies that inclusion can depend on self-management rather than institutional accommodation.

An intersectional qualification is still needed. Neurodiversity scholarship has been criticised for centring white, Global North assumptions, and media representations have historically favoured a narrow range of autistic characters (Nair, Farah and Boveda, 2024; Jones, Gordon and Mizzi, 2023). *Heartbreak High* expands neuroqueer representation by explicitly tying autism, queerness and masking together, but it does not, on its own, solve the broader exclusions that characterise autistic visibility. Thus, it is important not as a total solution, but as a case that helps clarify the standards by which future neuroqueer presentations can be judged.

## ***Discussion***

*Heartbreak High* makes the politics of neuroqueer legibility available for analysis by showing how Quinni's masking is produced through sensory pressure, relational expectation and institutional space ('Renaissance Titties', 2022a; 'Angeline', 2022b; Stevens and Kirby, 2025). The series locates misunderstanding in relationships and institutions as well as in the autistic individual, offering a stronger form of representation than models of inclusion that reward conformity.

These pressures matter beyond a single programme because representation can still reward only those forms of difference that remain manageable, familiar and socially legible. Scholarship on autism representation warns that sympathetic depictions can be absorbed into neoliberal narratives of self-management and resilience (Jones, Gordon and Mizzi, 2023). Neuroqueer theory resists that reduction by insisting that recognition is structured by power and that 'acceptance' without institutional change is limited (Stevens and Kirby, 2025). *Heartbreak High* does not entirely escape these tensions. However, the series provides a framework for thinking about autistic queer life as relational, political, and shaped by the demand to be readable.

Neuroqueer representation should therefore be assessed by whether it exposes the institutions and norms that produce misrecognition. On that basis, *Heartbreak High* makes a meaningful contribution: the series presents masking as a negotiated response to unequal social conditions and shows that

apparent personal difficulties can be problems of normative design. Strong neuroqueer representation requires this shift from individual deficit to structural and relational critique.

### *Conclusion*

Future studies on neuroqueer representation should focus on how texts can redistribute authority, refocus misunderstandings, and resist treating marginalised identities as an attractive commodity for ‘diversity’, in addition to analysing inclusion measures. The suggested standards are high; however, it is this higher demand that provides the basis for neuroqueer criticism’s strength. Representation is therefore an issue of design: of spaces, expectations, temporal structures and interpretive norms, rather than solely about individuals’ characteristics.

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Special Issue — Neurodivergent and Queer Identities 2026

(Volume 2 Issue 1 | pages 40–47)

<https://doi.org/10.19164/nusaj.v2i1.1865>

Article

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## ‘The Vampire Is Prone to Be Fascinated with an Engrossing Vehemence, Resembling the Passion of Love’; Carmilla, Queer Abjection, and Secular and Religious Modes of Patriarchy

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### Abstract

*Carmilla*, by Sheridan Le Fanu, is a classic of lesbian and queer literature, offering a surprisingly explicit (for its day) and shockingly tender (in its way) dark lesbian romance. Underexamined, however, is the way in which Le Fanu, through *Carmilla*’s persecution and ultimate undoing, examines the symbiotic relationship between secular and religious politics as disciplinary arms of patriarchy, who act violently against queer subjects that are made abject by both men of science and men of God. In this article I examine how Le Fanu presents the dual operating of these forces against *Carmilla*, and how his subtle sympathy for both the vampire and Laura probes at the limitations of these forces’ ability to discipline queerness. I do so with reference to how this same symbiotic relationship remains apparent in our own day, especially regarding the anti-transgender moral panic that regularly dominates our headlines, analysing how *Carmilla* relates to our current moment through policy analysis and contemporary feminist theory. With this context in mind, I trace the ancestry of our current moment to the similar patriarchal crackdowns of Le Fanu’s time and before, exploring how *Carmilla* herself prefigures many of the ways these forces operate against transgender people today.

**Keywords:** Carmilla, queer, Sheridan Le Fanu, abject, transgender, transfeminism

**Date of Submission:** 31 March 2026

**Date of Acceptance:** 11 May 2026

## Introduction

For some time, the question of queer rights was framed as one where the secular is pitched against the religious. Anglophone Christian opposition to equal marriage has often positioned the practice as a ‘desecration of a sacred institution created by God for the purpose [of] procreation’, which reduced marriage to little more than a secular ‘fetish’.<sup>1</sup> In the 2020s, the limitations of this framing have become acutely clear. Christian religious conservatives have co-opted feminist and scientific language to frame their concerns in terms of ‘biological sex’, while secular institutions have frequently participated in, rather than opposing, anti-queer crackdowns. I contend that both secularism and religiosity can function as twin arms of patriarchy, through a process of abjection (defining ‘what human life and culture exclude in order to sustain themselves’) towards queer subjects.<sup>2</sup> I explore this through a feminist reading of Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla*, a text whose ‘tentative tone’ paints a complex portrait of the way these forces are deployed to discipline queer expression and sexuality.<sup>3</sup>

## Literature Review

Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* examines the process of classifying queerness, while Silvia Federici’s *Caliban and the Witch* also proves insightful; *Carmilla*’s final undoing in the Karnstein crypt overtly evokes a witch hunt. Talia Bhatt’s work elucidates the present focus on these forces on transgender people. *Trans/Rad/Fem* is not peer-reviewed; unfortunately, there is presently a paucity of academic work on transfeminism. To initially build institutional knowledge requires at first utilising sources not within that knowledge, hence why I am citing Bhatt, whose work has itself been noted as an important resource on ‘the epistemicide of trans women’s voices’ in academia.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the points I draw from Bhatt’s work will be supported by referencing Kaitlin Kelly-Thompson and Amber Lusvardi’s analysis of the legal and rhetorical aspects of contemporary transphobia. Finally, Ardel Haefele-Thomas’ work is a useful resource for any reading of *Carmilla*’s queerness.

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<sup>1</sup> Austin Cline, ‘Common Arguments Against Gay Marriage’, *ThoughtCo*, <<https://www.learnreligions.com/marriage-is-for-having-children-250076>> [accessed 4 February 2026] (8–9).

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Childers and Gary Hentzi, ‘Abjection’, *The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995). <<https://www.proquest.com/docview/2137894284/1E57AA3455A402FPQ/1?accountid=12860&sourcetype=Encyclopedias%20&%20Reference%20Works>> [accessed 22 May 2026].

<sup>3</sup> Ardel Haefele-Thomas, “‘One Does Things Abroad That One Would Not Dream of Doing in England’: Miscegenation and Queer Female Vampirism in J. Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* and Florence Marryat’s *The Blood of the Vampire*”, *Queer Others in Victorian Gothic: Transgressing Monstrosity*, ed. by Ardel Haefele-Thomas (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012), pp. 96–119 (p. 96).

<sup>4</sup> Yanyan Zhu (2025) Talia Bhatt. *Trans/Rad/Fem: Essays on Transfeminism*. 2025, *Women’s Studies*, 54:8, 1015–1018, p. 1018, [doi:10.1080/00497878.2025.2565492](https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2025.2565492)

### ***Theoretical Framework***

The patriarchal framework that *Carmilla* portrays poses religious Christian and secular forces not as internally consistent and fundamentally opposed, but as aesthetic and rhetorical modes that can both be employed by patriarchy to discipline queer subjects through a process of abjection against the perceived virtues of God *and* Nature. They are particularly vicious towards Carmilla, whose crossing of sex boundaries and forced degendering allows a reading of her as transfeminised. Le Fanu also probes at the limitations of this system, especially the inability of these forces to re-discipline Laura.

### ***Abjection and Erasure***

The nature of Carmilla's affections directly relate to her abjection. Carmilla's attentions were 'like the ardour of a lover... she would whisper, almost in sobs, "You are mine, you shall be mine, you and I are one for ever"'.<sup>5</sup> The idea of Carmilla and Laura joined as 'one for ever' conjures the image of a lesbian marriage, and evokes Bhatt's argument that lesbophobia is preoccupied by '[t]he specter of the lesbian' as 'a threat to the *family*', seemingly making Carmilla 'the *typical* romanticised [vampire]... identified as a metaphoric symbol of threat to established ideological boundaries' (Le Fanu, p. 30).<sup>6,7</sup> *Carmilla* superficially appears to follow this typicality when Baron Vordenburg mentions that his ancestor 'had been a passionate and favored lover of the beautiful Mircalla' before her death (Le Fanu, p. 154). In life, Carmilla was sexually available to men; only in monstrous, abject undead does she violate heterosexual ideological boundaries that 'cannot permit reproductive assets any bodily autonomy' because the 'body is a resource for The Nation' (Bhatt, p. 270). If Carmilla cannot serve her biologically ordained function under patriarchy, she may as well be (un)dead. Carmilla's positioning reflects what Michel Foucault has called 'the invention of homosexuality' around the time of *Carmilla*'s publication; 'sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was... the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage ... [T]he sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species'.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Carmilla is made a separate species by her love of women, something less than human. Baron Vordenburg's 'voluminous digest' on matters of vampirism implicitly describes Carmilla's affection for Laura as 'an engrossing vehemence, *resembling* the passion of love' [emphasis mine] (Le Fanu, pp. 152–153). Scientific documentation seemingly

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<sup>5</sup> Sheridan Le Fanu, *Carmilla*, (London: Pushkin Press, 2020), p. 48.

<sup>6</sup> Talia Bhatt, *Trans/Rad/Fem*, (Self-published, 2025), p. 93.

<sup>7</sup> Ashley Donnelly, 'Denial and Salvation: The *Twilight* Saga and Heteronormative Patriarchy', *Theorising Twilight: Critical Essays on What's at Stake in a Post-Vampire World*, ed. by Maggie Park and Natalie Wilson, (Jefferson: McFarland and Company Inc. Publishers, 2011), pp. 178–193 (p. 180).

<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, (New York: Random House, 1978) p. 43.

reveals the falsity of Carmilla's queer affections. Contemporary politicians echo this sentiment when advancing rhetoric centred on 'protection for cis girls from predatory men in public restrooms'; a Representative in Arkansas claimed that sport segregation prevented 'transgender girls from "intentionally going against the weaker sex" meaning cisgender girls'.<sup>9</sup> These figures 'coopted the language of feminism' to enforce 'traditional gender norms', appealing to secular morality to enforce conservative Christian values (Kelly-Thompson and Lusvardi, p. 498). The transgender girl who wants to run with the other girls in her class cannot be credited with earnest athletic ambition, or a desire for camaraderie with her peers. She can only ever be an intruder, a cheater, a pervert, something fundamentally abject that must be expelled. Likewise, Carmilla cannot be allowed to have truly loved Laura. We are reassured that what Carmilla expressed was scientifically verified as dishonest, dirty, and lesser than the real/heterosexual love Mircalla shared with her male lover, because Carmilla is made *inherently* dishonest, dirty and lesser by her queerness.

### ***Secularity, Religion, Discipline, and Carmilla as Transsexual***

Carmilla's undoing in the Karnstein crypt could be read as the moment where 'Laura's father and General Spielsdorf... [ostensibly] restore the heterosexual, white, patriarchal order by murdering the Styrian queer vampire' (Haefele-Thomas, p. 106). Le Fanu employs clinical language, describing how 'two medical men... attested the marvellous fact, that there was a faint but appreciable respiration, and a corresponding action of the heart' (Le Fanu, p. 148). This language echoes '[t]he violence of the medical diagnosis' that underpinned Victorian 'men of science' seeking to categorise and police queerness (Haefele-Thomas, p. 118). We might similarly consider Katrina Karkazis' argument that the proliferation of a strict 'biological' sex binary in today's political rhetoric is partially because '[b]iological factors hold appeal and power [since reference to "biology" and "science" lends... the appearance of neutrality and thus objectivity]', obfuscating how some 'definitions of sex are at odds with the understanding that sex involves multiple biological and social factors'.<sup>10</sup> Spielsdorf declares that Carmilla's fate will be sealed by 'the Inquisition [which] will be held according to law', and Carmilla's corpse is 'placed on a pile of wood, and reduced to ashes' (Le Fanu, p. 145, p. 148). This language is evocative of witch hunts, and considering the earlier clinical language and Spielsdorf's invoking of the legal system, reflects Federici's argument that the hunts were 'not just a product of

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<sup>9</sup> Kaitlin Kelly-Thomson and Amber Lusvardi, 'Transgender Bodies Are the Battleground: Backlash, Threat, and the Future of Queer Rights in the United States' *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 58 (2025), 496–500, p. 498.

<sup>10</sup> Katrina Karkazis, 'The Misuses of "Biological Sex"', *The Lancet*, 394. 1898–1899, p. 1898.

popish fanaticism’, as ‘the secular courts conducted most of the trials’.<sup>11</sup> Federici argues that neither of these forces acted on their own initiative; ‘[r]ationalism and mechanism... were not the *immediate* cause of the persecutions’, and neither was religion; ‘most important... was the need of European elites to eradicate [witchcraft] which... was threatening their political and economic power’, employing secularity and religiosity as means to that end. (Federici, p. 204). Certainly, the way these modes collaborate to execute Carmilla is overtly patriarchal; ‘a sharp stake [was] driven through the heart of the vampire’, the triumph of corrective phallic penetration over her norm-flouting lesbianism (Le Fanu, p. 148).

Carmilla herself also prefigures contemporary transphobic anxieties about transgender people, especially transgender women. Laura describes Carmilla as ‘above the middle height of women’, speculating that perhaps she could be a ‘boyish lover’ in ‘masquerade’ (Le Fanu, p. 43, p. 49). General Spielsdorf describes Millarca in terms that the Arkansas legislature echoes, a ‘fiend who betrayed our infatuated hospitality’, infiltrating by trickery a space where she did not belong, to menace a vulnerable girl with the phallic threat of ‘the penetration of fangs’ despite her feminine appearance, evoking ‘the standard tropes of the glamorized blood/sex/euphoria relationship’ (Le Fanu, p. 20; Donnelly, p. 179). Crucially, when she is disciplined, *Carmilla is denied her sex*, degendered by being treated like a (deviant, abject) man (lacking any kind of male privilege, obviously; she is only a ‘man’ insofar as is necessary to deny her gender). Consider Federici’s criticism of how Foucault’s analysis of the ‘disciplines to which the body has been subjected... has collapsed female and male histories into an undifferentiated whole’; overt legal enforcement of heterosexuality in the period Foucault describes was restricted to those the *state classified as men* (Federici, p. 8). The “‘Labouchere Amendment”... criminalised sex between men (it simply ignored sex between women)’, and the original buggery clauses in the Offences Against the Person Act 1861 solely concern penetrative intercourse.<sup>12</sup> This is echoed in contemporary anti-trans politics; the ‘language of the [sports] bills... does not prohibit children assigned female at birth from participating on boys’ sports teams’ (Kelly-Thompson and Lusvardi, p. 498). Transgender girls are subject to ‘degendering’ as ‘men’ through explicit disciplinary enforcement, while the transgender boy is allowed to run with his classmates only because he is ‘regendered’ into the ‘weaker sex’ (Bhatt, p. 131; Kelly-Thomson and Lusvardi, p. 498). Carmilla’s treatment evokes Foucault’s (abject) male framework; she is degendered and diagnosed by medical men, condemned by holy men and executed brutally by lawmen. Le Fanu created not just a lesbian

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<sup>11</sup> Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, (New York: Autonomedia, 2004), p. 169.

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Bennet and Nicolas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* 5<sup>th</sup> edn (Oxon: Routledge, 2016), p. 266.

vampire, but a thoroughly *transfeminised* lesbian vampire. Carmilla's treatment highlights how the boundaries of patriarchy, and the disciplinary methods that enforce them, through a process of abjection enacted by both religious and secular forces together, are *not* a vexing new development of the 2020s. Their contours can be detected in *Carmilla* over a century before the current anti-transgender moral panic.

### ***'Sneaking Sympathy'***

Any readings of *Carmilla* as endorsing the righteousness or even effectiveness of heterosexual patriarchy's religious and secular enforcers are complicated by Le Fanu's 'sneaking sympathy' for Carmilla. (Haefele-Thomas, p. 96). Le Fanu never fully commits to 'an external Othering' of Carmilla in a way that would neatly position her as a cautionary threat to patriarchal sexual propriety (Donnelly, p. 180). The authority of Vordenburg and the Inquisition is undermined as 'Carmilla's... interest in women does not definitively mark her as perverse... rather, the homoerotic desire shared by Carmilla and Laura brings their likeness to one another' into focus.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Laura frequently gushes about Carmilla, '[h]ow beautiful she looked', 'her fine eyes', the fact that 'she was certainly the most beautiful creature I had ever seen', indicating that attraction to women is not a phenomenon restricted to vampirism (Le Fanu, p. 65, p. 63, p. 42). The revelation of Mircalla's centuries-old portrait as 'the effigy of Carmilla!' is a major hint to the reader about Carmilla's monstrous secret, yet this is also where Laura learns she and Carmilla are both 'descended from the Karnsteins', bonding the pair even closer, through blood (Le Fanu pp. 63–64). Le Fanu actively emphasises Carmilla's similarities to Laura in the moment that should logically most serve to make her an abject outsider.

Le Fanu also gives the reader reason to doubt Vordenburg's assertions that Carmilla does not feel 'real' love; 'I have been in love with no one, and never shall [...] unless it should be with you' (Le Fanu, p. 65). Contrasting Carmilla's deeply romantic moonlit confession to the sterile, dusty, documentation of Mircalla's long-forgotten affair makes a mockery of the latter, with Carmilla even implicitly dismissing her previous heterosexual relationship as loveless. Laura herself never admits aloud the 'love growing into adoration' for Carmilla that she acknowledges internally; even after Carmilla 'kissed [Laura] silently', Laura will only speak of a non-specific 'affair of the heart' (Le Fanu, p. 47, 65). Carmilla, however, makes the unspeakableness of Laura's feelings spoken, makes *real* what Vordenburg claims cannot even be named as love. *Carmilla* leaves significant room to doubt the self-appointed arbiter of who is so inhuman that she cannot feel 'real' love. Certainly, *Laura's* feelings are not mere 'engrossing vehemence', easily dismissed when Carmilla is gone (Le Fanu, p. 153). The

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<sup>13</sup> Renée Fox, 'Carmilla and the Politics of Indistinguishability', *Carmilla: A Critical Edition*, ed. Kathleen Costello Sullivan (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2013), pp. 110–121 (p. 114).

inquisitors ‘are not entirely successful’ in undoing Carmilla; Laura’s account concludes on the tantalisingly ambiguous note that she has often ‘started, fancying I heard the light step of Carmilla at the drawing-room door’ (Haefele-Thomas, p. 106; Le Fanu, p. 156). Furthermore, despite the narrative being framed as Laura’s later recollection, the prologue does not indicate that she left a widower. Seemingly an unmarried spinster at twenty-nine, one of the first things we learn about Laura is that she has ‘died’, a parallel to Carmilla’s vampirism symbolising her own sexual unavailability to men (Le Fanu, p. 8). ‘Le Fanu leaves the reader to wonder whether Laura will join her queer, Eastern European ancestral forces’ in abject undeath, beyond the reach of her father and General Spielsdorf (Haefele-Thomas, p. 114).

### **Conclusion**

My analysis of *Carmilla* builds on previous readings concerning primarily lesbian themes into a more broadly feminist one that focuses on the long-running symbiotic interplay of religious and secular patriarchal forces. Exploring this concept’s relationship with racial politics may prove fruitful. Haefele-Thomas’ paper touches on miscegenation anxieties in *Carmilla*, and Bhatt’s writing explores this intersection at length. As mentioned, there is not presently an established body of academic work on transfeminist theory. There is significant potential for future research employing this theory towards literary analysis, especially synthesis of these concerns with philosophy of science, towards research interrogating the conventional view of the secular/religious binary.

There is a pressing need for such research. If we as academics do not acknowledge and actively resist the exploitation of the worst epistemic tendencies and vulnerabilities within systems of knowledge production, we become complicit in the harms caused by e.g., ‘unacceptable departures from medical law and policy’ such as those observed in the Cass Review, a document ‘invoked frequently’ not because it is well-researched and scientifically rigorous, but because of the epistemic power it grants to ‘police gender’ by virtue of aesthetic association with secular academia.<sup>14</sup>

This process is both necessary and possible. The forces whose methods and anxieties Le Fanu channelled have, over a century of discrimination, repression, and murder since the publication of *Carmilla*, failed to snuff out the subjects they routinely abject; instead, the ‘trans moral panic’ is ‘a facet of a wider patriarchal agenda to *retrench* male-supremacy and regulate people’s gendered autonomy’ [emphasis mine] (Bhatt, p. 270). Regardless of her abjection, the world will never be rid of the fluid, ambiguous possibility of Carmilla’s light step, just outside the drawing-room door.

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<sup>14</sup> Daniel G. Aaron and Craig Konnoth, ‘The Future of Gender-Affirming Care — A Law and Policy Perspective on the Cass Review’. *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 392(6), 2025, 526–527 (pp. 526–527).

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