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IDENTITY, CREATIVITY AND PERFORMANCE SPACES IN WALES AND SOUTHWEST ENGLAND

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ABSTRACT

Globally, performative spaces and venues of artistic creativity are governed by sets of conventions which impact the creative process. In this article, we discuss the experiences of four different creatives, operating in four different creative spaces. A poet and football player, a theatre producer and script writer, a gallery curator, and a ballet dancer have all shared their experiences of how traditionally white and heteronormative discourses regulate their respective creative spaces, the ways they conform to or transgress these norms, and the ways their interactions with their chosen creative spaces affect their creativity. These creatives have identities which are somehow 'marked', somehow 'different' from the 'norms' Wales and South-West England. Whether members of the LGBTQ+ community, migrants to Wales from European and Caribbean countries, or being a different race to many around them, the creatives all have complicated interactions with the norms of their creative spaces within Wales and South-West England. These creative's identities often clash with an entrenched lack of diversity and the broader expectations of British society. Despite, or perhaps, because of, these conflicts and tensions, each of the creatives discussed here found immense joy in the relationship between their identity/ies and their creative spaces and discovered how their own identity/ies are a central driving force for their creativity. Regardless of the differences of their mediums, each creative interviewed sought to centre their identity, to help them create art which can challenge dominant white and heteronormative discourses in wider British society.

KEYWORDS

Identity; Creativity; Performance; Poetry; Theatre; Curation; Ballet; Homophobia; Racism

Introduction

One's identity is at once a highly personal and private experience, yet also a public and socially driven construction. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines identity as 'Who or what a person or thing is; a distinct impression of a single person or thing presented to or perceived by others; a set of characteristics or a description that distinguishes a person or thing from others'.¹ The definition demonstrates that identity is built from both individual presentation of behaviours or features linked to identity and also public and social perception of those behaviours. A person's self-view, and the way they are viewed by society, can be influenced by their age, gender expression, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, social class, religion, and many other sub-factors, i.e. a person's clothing or accent. It is commonly understood that one's identity/ies are constituted by these factors as they 'play significant roles in determining how we understand and experience the world, as well as shaping the types of opportunities and challenges we face'.² Stereotyping, discrimination, privilege – all these experiences are influenced by our identities, and how the world sees us in response. The perception of others is dictated by sociocultural expectations or 'norms' which are societal constructions which determine what are acceptable or unacceptable expressions of both individual and collective identity. These norms seek to 'draw on and generate social hierarchies' to establish and rank certain behaviours as inferior if they do not fit what is acceptable.³ This ranking of socially acceptable behaviours can liberate or restrict the expression of selfhood and identity.

Creativity, the process of making art in any form, can be a way of understanding the societies around us, and can also be a vital site for the exploration, expression, and negotiation of identity within society. As Vlad Petre Glăveanu and Lene Tanggaard state, 'The creative person [...], far from existing as an isolated unit, is a social actor able to co-construct [their] own sense of creative value in communication with others and in relation to societal discourses about what creativity is'.⁴ The co-construction of these creative identities happens within often pre-established creative and

¹ 'Identity, n.', *Oxford English Dictionary Online* <https://www.oed.com/dictionary/identity_n?tab=meaning_and_use#904743> [Accessed 24 July 2023].

² 'Why Identity Matters', *Critical Media Project*, (2019) <<https://criticalmediaproject.org/why-identity-matters/>> [Accessed Friday 14th July 2023].

³ Ann E. Towns, 'Norms and Social Hierarchies: Understanding International Policy Diffusion "From Below"', *International Organization*, 66.2 (2012), 179–209 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818312000045>> (p. 180).

⁴ Vlad Petre Glăveanu and Lene Tanggaard, 'Creativity, Identity, and Representation: Towards a Socio-Cultural Theory of Creative Identity', *New Ideas in Psychology*, 34 (2014), 12–21 (p. 13). <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.newideapsych.2014.02.002>>

performative spaces, each of which have their own conventions and expectations that the creative individual must be in conversation with. Each creative produces their work for their own audience, each affected by the societal discourses and differences which shape their wider cultural context. The popularity of a piece of media is often defined by its ability to resonate with the lives of others: both the creatives who produce within the space and the audiences who interact with them. Conventions within performative spaces like theatre are vastly different from those within poetry; the skills and performances required in each space are different; for example, a poet's appearance may not matter as much when engaging with their written work than an actor's would upon the stage. The expectations of a curated gallery as a creative exhibition and performance space are unlike those of the world of ballet, and different again to those of literature. Much like how cultural context interacts in complex ways with one's identity/ies, a creative's identity/ies has a huge influence on how they interact with the traditional expectations of their chosen creative space.

For this article, four different creatives, from four very different creative/performative spaces were interviewed, with the aim of exploring the complicated relationships between identity and creativity, and how one's experience of a creative space is shaped by one's experience of personhood. These four different creatives are affected by the cultural contexts within which their creative spaces exist in Wales and South-West England. Between them, the creatives identified how their work interacts with the traditional dominance of able-bodied white, heteronormative, and British discourses embedded within their creative spaces. According to the 2021 census, 81.7% of England and Wales's total population was white and white British people made up the largest percentage of the population at 74.4% out of 19 ethnic groups.⁵ The *Office of National Statistics* reports that the 2021 Census also indicated that 89.42% of people in Wales and 89.51% of people in South-West England identified as Straight or Heterosexual.⁶ These statistics indicate the dominance of white, British and heterosexual discourses and interests within Welsh and South-West English culture. The four creatives interviewed — a poet and football player, a theatre producer and script writer, a photographer and gallery curator, and a ballet dancer who is also a writer and director — have all shared their

⁵ 'Population of England and Wales', *GOV.UK* (2022) <<https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/national-and-regional-populations/population-of-england-and-wales/latest/>> [accessed 15 May 2024].

⁶ 'Sexual Orientation, England and Wales', *Office for National Statistics* (2023) <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/sexuality/bulletins/sexualorientationenglandandwales/census2021>> [accessed 15 May 2024].

experiences of how traditional majority discourses dominate their respective creative spaces. They identified how their creative work conforms to or transgresses these traditional norms, and the ways their interaction with their chosen creative spaces defines their creativity output. These creatives have identities which are in the minority in the British population as either their race, sexuality or gender defy the established norms within British culture. Whether members of the LGBTQ+ community, migrants to Wales from European and Caribbean countries, or being a different race to many around them, the creatives all have complicated interactions with both the dominant voices within their creative spaces, as well as within wider society. As we will see, for all these creatives, their identity is a driving factor of their creativity, as they seek to use their complicated identities to create art which challenges the conventions of their chosen medium in the context of Wales and South-West English culture.

Queerness, Poetry and Football in the Work of Sarah McCreadie

Sarah McCreadie (she/her) is a poet, performer, and youth worker from Cardiff, living and working in London since 2021. She has a decade of experience in writing, performing, and advancing the cause of poetry throughout the UK. A BBC Radio 6 'Class of '22' poet, she is a BBC Words First and Barbican Young Poets alumni, and has worked with the Football Association, BBC Television and Radio, ITV Wales, and Cardiff's own youth-led Radio Platform. McCreadie has contributed to and supported poetry venues, festivals, performances, and events throughout the country. She is a lesbian, chosen by the Welsh public in 2020 for the 'Pinc List' of Wales' most influential LGBT+ individuals.

Queerness surfaces throughout McCreadie's work. It appears also in the broader project of her career—sometimes subtly, as an approach to narrative or as an underlying countercultural streak, sometimes as a declaration of intent or call to action. Her poetry and interests are located at the intersection of multiple broad, complex, and sometimes conflicting categories; as a writer and queer person her work is defined by a deep rootedness in who she is, as a football fan and public figure she is cognisant of conflict, though fundamentally optimistic about the regenerative and creative force of sport in culture. As a youth worker and advocate, she feels a deep creative desire—and responsibility—to share the liberatory power of poetry and to provide, where possible, a balm to young people in need. *IPICS* interviewed Sarah McCreadie about her great passions: poetry, football, storytelling, performance and being Welsh.

‘It’s not something particularly I was conscious of,’ McCreadie says of the role identity has played in her creative process, ‘until I came out. Then I was like ‘Oh, I’m writing gay poetry because I’m gay’, right? So, I would say I identify... I’m a lesbian, gay, queer—all that stuff’.⁷ She has, through her workshopping and performance experience, become acutely aware of the idea of ‘gay poetry’ and the ways in which writing as a queer person can empower creativity or constrain it:

Something was brought up to me recently; I had a workshop at the Barbican and developed a poem about a boy boxing. A young lad in a macho, sweat-dripping environment—it’s called ‘On a Punch Bag’—and he’s looking at the boy’s bodies through a cloud of cigarette smoke and swinging bags. I was workshopping the poem and one of the poets there asked why didn’t you write this about a woman? Why didn’t you write this about a lesbian?’ Well, that wasn’t the story.

Instead, the story is a deeply cinematic one: ‘a little lad with big boxing gloves [...] a little Billy Elliot’. For McCreadie this is more relatable, discovered in shared shameful glances and flowering awareness. ‘I shouldn’t have to write about a girl,’ she opines, ‘they say we need more lesbian poems—do we?’ Other poets tell her that we need more writing from a queer woman’s perspective and that she has a responsibility to do it, and she replies simply ‘do I?’. The natural counterargument, it seems, is that any poetry she writes is—by definition—writing from a queer woman’s perspective and such a definition cannot be limited strictly to poems which themselves take that perspective. The queerness of gay poetry doesn’t have to be overt. Its artistry can be subtler: revolutionary in its aesthetic, queer in its DNA.

The rhythmic heart of McCreadie’s practice and its deep concern with aesthetics are exemplified in the aforementioned poem:

He is teenaged and weighed down by it all
By the rocks in his boxing gloves
And his heavy, shy eyes

⁷ All quotations from McCreadie in this text can be found in the interview transcript, published in the IPICS blog: Sarah McCreadie and John McLoughlin, ‘Lace Them Up: Sarah McCreadie’s Cinematic, Queer Poetics’, *Intersectional Perspectives: Identity, Culture and Society*, (2023) <<https://intersectionalperspectives21.wordpress.com/2023/03/05/lace-them-up-sarah-mccreadies-cinematic-queer-poetics/>> [Accessed Wednesday 9th August 2023].

‘He is permitted to see the other boy’s bodies
 When they swing and puncture the clouds of cigarette smoke
 Believes the song on the radio says to him
 A vision of love wearing boxing gloves, singing hearts and flowers.

The illicit glances and suppressed instincts of a closeted or otherwise repressed youth find salve in McCreadie’s poetry. Her words are part narrative reification of queer youth, part promise of a better future—or at least an assurance of community in an otherwise lonely one. It is a poetry also of the body, conscious of the literal and metaphorical weight in the same moment. The physical weight of a tired body comingles with heavy-lidded eyes and suppressed glances, cigarette smoke adding density and mass to the environment. It is music, and the possibility of love and singing, which dispel all this weight. Her brief stanzas are dense with sensory metaphor and the promise of queer liberation.

The feedback McCreadie receives from the queer public both affirms and guides her community-building approach. She says that during poetry performances ‘People come up to you and say, “that’s how I feel as well!”’ One of her most recent poems, ‘Conversion Camp Contraband’, deals explicitly with the relationship between queer poetry, broader society and the experience of queer youth. Whilst conscious of the demographics she is speaking directly to, she doesn’t allow this to become a limiting force beyond the hope that her poetry can liberate:

When you’re writing the poem you don’t know where it’s going to go and how people are going to perceive it, and you shouldn’t pay too much attention to that, I think. So, I don’t. But, if I could have any wish for it, it would be for it to be hidden under a bed in a conversion camp, if they have to exist—which I hope they don’t.

Though her delivery and words often achieve a universalist appeal—as crowd-pleasers and rabble-rousers at spoken-word performances—at their heart is the young, closeted girl she once was and the somewhat buccaneering queer woman she has now become. Her poetry oscillates between the knowing and the yet-to-be-discovered. ‘Girls are gods’, one of her most popular pieces, declares:

Who will lend hair ties?
 Who will sink ships?
 With sighs from ChapStick lips
 Who will hold your hair back
 When you’re neck deep

In toilet porcelain?

McCreadie, who moved to America at the age of 19 to study under poet Wayne Miller, recalls the parallel trajectory of her poetic abilities and lesbian identity:

Everyone has that one person—I'm sure you had them—who tells them 'You're quite good at this', and then that was huge to me to hear that. It was this beautiful cocktail of things. I went there, and completely came out of myself in who I was as a poet, and started realising 'fucking hell, I'm falling in love with girls.' All of it completely tangled together when I was there, and it's definitely linked.

Whether her words come from the mouth of a young boy at a boxing gym or a—much more autobiographical—twenty-something lesbian, their force is that of renewal and self-actualisation.

This dynamic approach to the feminine in McCreadie's work draws from her own experience as a bona-fide, Bluebirds-for-life football enthusiast. McCreadie's engagement with sport has brought her into the national and supranational media, and throughout her career she has worked to tie together her queerness and the path of the sport. She is not, however, unaware of the participatory patterns of football as she states that when playing with other women she finds herself 'surprised when they have boyfriends! It's such a safe space because it's dominated by queer women—for whatever fucking reason, I'm not sure why—the girl gays love football.' Though women's football offers a safe—and growing—space for queer and straight women alike to develop and communicate their abilities and passions, the broader sport still battles against archaic ideas and bigotries. McCreadie relays having to report homophobic behaviour at big matches, though observes that such behaviour is in decline. Football, more generally, is just as central to her identity as her sexuality, hometown or creative expression. Each is tied to the other inextricably:

So many people across the UK and the world identify as a West Ham fan or a Cardiff fan; you inherit it and you carry it around with you [...] it's a great way to express identity, it's clear. I can wear a Cardiff shirt or a Wales shirt and I think there are so many things you can link it to—religion is so easy to link to football and sport, including hymns and emotional things. As a writer it goes hand-in-hand; football is so easy to write about, it's so poetic in itself that I don't need to do anything to it—just pull up a match report and its poetry.

McCreadie makes an important distinction here, that her poetry doesn't necessarily make art *from* football, it instead draws out the artistic and emotive quality of the sporting experience, all of it, from playing to viewing to singing. McCreadie takes a holistic, unifying approach to her identity: her self-actualisation is cumulative rather than separational. She is poet *and* lesbian, football fan *and* performer, Welsh *and* Cardiffian.

Such coalescence, however, also produces conflict. The advent of the 2022 World Cup in Qatar has highlighted the mutual exclusivity between the values of Western progressives and those of the host venue, and fans find themselves having to make difficult choices. McCreadie herself, speaking to ITV, says that she 'never thought as a Wales fan, if we got to a World Cup I wouldn't be going,' but the illegality of homosexuality in Qatar means that she won't be.⁸ A new poem, 'I Can't Hold Her Hand There, So I Won't Go', expresses this neatly. McCreadie feels obliged to keep the conversation going: 'I was on Radio Wales talking about stickers and I tried really quickly to fit into the end—they cut me off—but I got in that we have to keep talking about how it's illegal to be gay there! There's a real duty to being a football fan in this country as opposed to there as perhaps they can't say anything, so let's fucking talk about it!' This fits neatly with the desire for her poetry to be 'conversion camp contraband', a voice to pour affirmation and companionship into spaces where it may otherwise be lacking.

McCreadie's work is public facing in a number of ways: as performance, as advocacy and activism, and as published literature. As with the elements of her identity, the aspects of her practice are coeval. She explains how 'I don't consider "spoken word" a thing, to me it's just poetry. I think even writers in the past, like a Langston Hughes poem, you can hear the rhythm and musicality to it, but I really doubt that he was getting up on stage in front of a bunch of people and thinking about that.' She compares this kind of musicality to Sylvia Plath: 'Nobody would have booked her!' McCreadie doesn't intend to disparage Plath—merely to point out that she isn't unaware of the important role performance has played in her career. She isn't under any illusions. Many of her earlier gigs she admits were a product of her ability as a performer, which shows itself even now when she

⁸ Ciara Cohen-Ennis, 'I can't hold her hand there' Poet Sarah McCreadie shares why she won't be at the World Cup in Qatar', *ITV News*, 21 November 2022 <<https://www.itv.com/news/wales/2022-11-19/poet-sarah-mccreadie-shares-why-she-wont-join-fans-at-the-world-cup-in-qatar>> [Accessed 10th November 2023] (para 13 of 17).

gets booked for music venues, podcasts and television or radio appearances: ‘I constantly feel like a performer, trying to make things sound beautiful, and trying to make beautiful art, and I think I can do that with musicality in the reading of my poetry or the reciting of my poetry.’ For McCreadie, the performance starts on the page; the activity there always has its intended audience in mind, whether crowded into a local venue or sat in a bedroom. Her poetry queers whichever space it enters, offering powerful and cinematic visions of love, camaraderie, and self-actualisation.

Greedy Pig Theatre Company and the Centring of Identity in Performance

From performance poetry to the theatre, sexuality and gender expression continue to be explored across many creative spaces in ways which challenge traditional heteronormative attitudes. *IPICS* interviewed Douglas Murdoch (he/him), a founder, producer, and sometimes-writer for Greedy Pig Theatre Company, discussing how his identity as a queer, cisgender man, impacts creative process in the theatrical space and the projects that Greedy Pig create.⁹

Greedy Pig is a Bath-based theatre company, run by Douglas Murdoch (he/him), Lex Kaby (she/her) and Holly Jefferies (she/her). The company is ‘passionate about [...] telling LGBTQIA+ and feminist stories’, and aims to explore ‘feminism, masculinity, identity, and other, often queer, themes’.¹⁰ Their most recent show *Be.*, which toured around the Bath-Bristol area in July 2022, was a radical and joyful exploration of how masculinity and femininity are constructed in contemporary British society, and how the positive and negative connotations attached to each affect individuals. This play exemplifies both Greedy Pig’s drive to interrogate gender and identity in their work, and their collaborative and communal approach to creating theatre. The creative team at Greedy Pig centre their identities, and those of their cast and crew, to create theatre which challenges traditionally white, heteronormative expectations of the theatre space of Southwest England.

For Murdoch, the creative space of theatre is one full of contradictions and possibilities. On the one hand, he notes that ‘one half of theatre’ is very traditional, staging ‘well-constructed works,

⁹ All quotations from Murdoch in this text can be found in the interview transcript, published in the *IPICS* blog: Douglas Murdoch and Pip Fincher, ‘Greedy Pig: The Theatre Company Taking a Wonderfully Generous Approach to Creating Feminist Theatre About Identity’, *Intersectional Perspectives: Identity, Culture and Society*, (2023) <<https://intersectionalperspectives21.wordpress.com/2023/02/06/greedy-pig-the-theatre-company-taking-a-wonderfully-generous-approach-to-creating-feminist-theatre-about-identity/>> [Accessed Wednesday 9th August 2023].

¹⁰ ‘Greedy Pig Theatre Company Home’ <<https://www.greedypigtheatrecompany.com/>> [Accessed Wednesday 9th August 2023].

with good writing, good acting, good directing' which simply uphold 'the status quo' both of theatre and society. This is particularly true in Bath, which usually caters for an 'older, white, straight, middle class audience'. On the other hand, Murdoch notes that the 'other half of theatre is incredibly radical and really bold', for niche, socially aware audiences. Greedy Pig Theatre Company aims to 'bridge the gap'. They strive to tell the kinds of radical, 'queer stories' that are not currently being created in their theatre space, but doing so in a way that is accessible, not 'wild fringe stuff, very niche'. Murdoch feels that the theatre space is one with huge potential for both entertainment and 'education', and, as such, their aim is to create theatre which brings the ideas and issues around gender, identity and sexuality, to audiences which 'could benefit from those conversations and explorations'. Murdoch was drawn to the creative space of theatre because of the communal nature of it. The theatre which Greedy Pig creates has experimentation and collaboration at its heart. Their creative process is driven by the writer, cast and crew getting together to share ideas and experiences, and then 'playing and exploring' the issues and emotions raised. This allows for nuanced and layered works, which present complicated stories in an authentic and engaging way.

Greedy Pig's 2022 show *Be.* perfectly demonstrates this communal creative process, and also exemplifies how the identities of their cast, crew, and creative team become a central pillar of their creations. *Be.* was a rich and complex exploration of several narratives and themes including the complicated ways that toxic messages about masculinity can affect men; the difficulties some women with complex health issues face when trying to navigate both the healthcare system and society at large; and experience of transitioning and living as a transman in contemporary British society. This play, while focusing on some dark and distressing ideas, was radical through the joyful and celebratory way it approached the stories told.

The show underwent an extensive process of research and development. Work on *Be.* began in 2020, and it was 'initially developed using input from a team of eleven, including actors, technicians, the writer, director and producer'. Murdoch, Kaby and Jeffries held Zoom meetings in which every team member was invited to share 'their own experiences of gender, identity, sexuality'. The writer of *Be.*, Gabrielle Finnegan, developed the original script using the ideas, experiences and feelings discussed in these meetings as her guide. Within these meetings, the trio felt the need to 'lead by example', opening up and sharing their own personal experiences and feelings, to enable the rest of the cast and crew to do the same. Murdoch emphasises that these meetings were safe, 'judgement-

free spaces', and that both himself and other members of the group found the experience very valuable.

Murdoch celebrates that the original *Be.* was 'underpinned [...] by all our personal experiences, [and therefore] felt very authentic', and that the diversity within the team meant that the script included 'a mix of gender identities and sexualities, and trans individuals' which addressed many overlapping themes and experiences. Due to various reasons, this version of *Be.* was never seen by audiences. The team returned to the project in 2021, where they realised that they 'wanted, and needed, to tell stories that were larger than just [their] small team'. Given this need to tell more stories, Greedy Pig sought to gather more ideas and experiences, so they continued research and development in two key ways. Firstly, they created an anonymous questionnaire, investigating 'individuals' relationship with their identity', which was promoted on social media. Secondly, they held workshops open to the public for free. In these sessions, people were able to both participate in theatre-based workshop activities, 'allowing them to explore their identities and experience some creativity on the stage', working to engage with their feelings and the experiences connected to them. In total, sixty people contributed to the *Be.* project, demonstrating the company's commitment to the centring of experience and identity in their work. Their upcoming project, *Peacock*, is a show which explores the 'concept of the taboo that surrounds men wearing cosmetics, how that ties to masculinity, how it ties to sexuality, how it ties to identity'. This play is being written by Murdoch and is driven by his own experiences, as a queer, cis-gendered man who often wears make-up. With this project he is seeking to explore and unpack the feelings of discomfort which sometimes accompany his experimentations with make-up. Therefore, the play will constitute a centring of his identity and experience within the theatre space.

As with *Be.*, *Peacock* has had a lengthy process of research and development, public engagement questionnaires, workshops, and street performances. Greedy Pig retains its commitment to a methodology which centres identity, intersectionality and community in the theatre space. As noted above, the general theatre space is one that can be understood as divided, where a conservative, traditional group functions separately from a radical, bold group. This is particularly true of the space in which Greedy Pig operates: the South-West of England, and Bath more specifically. The kinds of theatre commonly staged in this context tend to be socially conservative, focusing on white, heterosexual stories. Greedy Pig Theatre Company operates in this space in a way which invites conflict with these dominant narratives, determinedly telling 'queer stories, that are not

currently being told in our theatre space' and showing 'representations of masculinity and femininity in ways they're not usually seen in this context'. Murdoch emphasises that Greedy Pig's team is 'in control of the spaces [they] occupy' and celebrates the hard work they do to 'create spaces that people feel comfortable in'. They are seeking to create a theatre space "catered" to cast, crew and audiences which are "open" to and accepting of the kinds of stories that they tell. The company collected extensive audience feedback after every performance of *Be.*, and this feedback shows that their commitment to creating a safe, intersectional theatre space is working. Murdoch notes that many people expressed 'joy about finally seeing themselves represented on stage', and he feels confident that the piece had 'done something more than just been a nice, enjoyable piece of theatre'. Thus, Greedy Pig aims to create not just theatre which facilitates conversations and explorations of gender, identity, and sexuality, but a new, safe, welcoming theatre space in which to explore these themes, is being achieved. Greedy Pig Theatre Company is a company which places identity at the heart of their theatrical methodology. They work with their identities to create theatre which is accessible, intersectional, broad, and authentic, and so challenges both societal norms, and the conservative norms of the theatre space of South-West England.

Identity, Fluctuating Socio-Political Systems, and Curating Opportunities for Others

Sexuality is not the only identity factor with complex relationships to creativity and performative space. One's nationality, upbringing in turbulent periods of history, and experience of emigrating from one country to another, can all shape identity and creativity in profound ways. Given the dominance of British and heteronormative identities in the UK, *IPICS* interviewed curator Robert Oros (he/him) to explore how his personal history and identity as a queer man shapes his creative curations.

Robert Oros is an artist and curator based in Cardiff. His art and interests are largely involved in exploring how identities are shaped and challenged by changing socio-political systems. He was inspired by his own childhood 'Growing up in Romania [during] the switch between Communism and Capitalism', and his Romanian upbringing is one of the common themes explored through his art.¹¹ Oros' interest in visual arts was piqued by his introduction to film and cinema, and in 2012 he

¹¹ All quotations from Oros in this text can be found in the interview transcript, published in the *IPICS* blog: Robert Oros and Morgan Lee, 'Exhibiting the Curated Identity', *Intersectional Perspectives: Identity, Culture and Society*, (2023) <<https://intersectionalperspectives21.wordpress.com/2023/02/15/exhibiting-the-curated-identity/>> [Accessed Wednesday 9th August 2023].

emigrated to Wales to pursue his creative interests by studying photography at university, before going on to receive a Masters degree in Fine Art Practice. Whilst studying and creating he found himself often looking back home first for inspiration, fascinated by what he describes as his 'autobiographical self'. This urge to explore his own identity and his autobiographical self within his art and photography later transferred into his curating practices.

Oros discovered his interest in curation during the COVID-19 pandemic, latching onto it in spite of (or in some ways because of) the lack of curation in Wales at the time. From there, his connections to the LGBTQ+ artist collectives in Cardiff, particularly *Cardiff Umbrella*, have allowed him to explore his own queer identity and share that within his curative practices. On the subject of his queer identity, Oros stated that '[b]eing queer and studying queer theory and trying to put queer art into the world is a way of expressing myself'. When summing up what parts of his identity influences his practice most, Oros replied that his Romanian heritage and history, his emigration to Wales and his sexual orientation were the parts of himself that emerged repeatedly in both his curative and creative work.

Oros' work and artistic interests revolve closely around themes of identity, and his creative spaces are consumed with the intersections between those spaces and his own conceptions of self. His focus on these subjects is not only for personal reasons, but also for their socio-political impact. Oros remarks that his work can be used to protest and embolden underprivileged and minority voices to enact change, as well as (especially in his capacity as a curator) 'making a safe space for other people or giving them an opportunity to exhibit or to exist in a space based on their identity'. Many of Oros' creative projects reflect his own experiences in Romania, including *IDLE* and *1989*. *IDLE* explores the interactions of identity and technology in a post-Soviet Union context. Given his own Romanian, post-Soviet identity, this is a personal subject for Oros to explore. Similarly, *1989* focuses on the experience of growing up in 1990s Romania, exploring how the fall of Communism affected the identities of those born between 1989 and 1995. These projects, and others, are intimately linked to Oros' own identity and exploring 'that feel[ing] that [he] had growing up in the 90s' and the 'shock of going from one thing to something so different, that changes [...] social life, [...] economic life, [...] changes your freedom and [...] all aspects of life'.

In his curating practices, Oros often works with *Cardiff Umbrella* as a queer-run collective which promotes the exhibition of queer subjects or queer artists, as he feels a connection to that community as a queer man. He aims to create creative safe spaces for queer people to exhibit at

festivals like *Fringe Art Bath (FaB)* and Pride events. Oros observed from his personal experience that ‘identity is largely influencing [in] your [artistic] practice’ and that if artists do not take influence from their own personal history, they will relate it to the work of someone who they feel close to and share similarities in their identities. The intersections between identity and creative spaces, is something he feels is undeniably linked into the process of creating an exhibition as a space in which others can experience the sharing of identity.

Whilst Oros’ work constantly engages with the intersections between his own identity and creative space, there have been challenges and conflicts that have restricted his artistic expression. Oros explained that exhibition spaces ‘are intertwined into lots of traditional conventions and foundations’. These traditions often severely limit and hinder artistic expression as they dictate how work is exhibited, who is allowed to exhibit, and who is allowed into the space. He expressed how there is a pressure to conform in order to obtain funding, and to portray less challenging and more normalised subjects which will grant you access to exhibition spaces. When discussing which of these traditions affected his performative and creative spaces most, Oros conveyed that he faces the most challenges in relation to his exhibition and expression of his queer identity. He states that ‘sometimes your work gets rejected because it’s too queer, or it’s too liberating, or too “sexual”’. Oros referred to the work of a transgender artist at an exhibition space whose work protesting transphobia was deemed ‘too challenging’ to societal norms and the organisation supporting the exhibition space had asked for the art to be censored and taken down.

However, Oros has also faced challenges where his work is deemed ‘not queer enough’ for exhibition. The dramatic oscillation between these extremes often makes displaying and exploring queer identity within the curative space complex and highly contextualised by the exhibition space. Oros also expressed that the traditional norms of curative spaces are in themselves often restrictive to minority identities. The commercialism of galleries pushes artists away from subjects that may be deemed a sensitive or challenging topic. Galleries and museums also face several challenges surrounding accessibility; as paid tickets financially exclude audiences, as well as a generally Westernised portrayal of art and experience which ostracises minority artists whose voices feel unwelcome. The traditions of exhibitiv spaces are often restrictive to identities which challenge what is deemed normative, both as a space to create an expression of identity as well as to view it.

Despite these challenges, Oros did express a positive outlook on how exhibition spaces are in the process of embracing representation of a wider variety of artists and their identities. Many

organisations, museums and galleries seek to make their exhibitions accessible to a wider audience and attempt to network with a more diverse range of artists according to their own ethos. Oros believes that 'it's very important for queer individuals and queer artists to know that a space is dedicated for them'. Queer art, and to a larger degree queer identity, is censored in many parts of the world, and globally queer artists are still required to disguise and code their work because of this lack of freedom. Oros' own experience of homophobia growing up in Romania has driven him towards his curative practices and the curation of these dedicated queer spaces, since 'it's something that [he] wished [he] had when [he] was back home'. To Oros, the creation of these accessible creative and performative spaces gives artists autonomy and 'a sense of power' over their own identities and work, and Oros' desire to create them is fuelled by his disappointment at the censorship he has encountered in the past.

Oros' partnership and work with *Cardiff Umbrella* is dedicated to ensuring that queer artists have 'the liberty to express themselves freely without the question of discrimination, or censorship, or even aggression' in a way that was not accessible to him during his own childhood journey of self-discovery. In Oros' words, 'nonconformism maybe goes just closely, if not hand in hand, with being part of the LGBTQ+ community, because everybody told you to conform, and growing up you had struggles with that conforming, and you try to conform, but then you realise you can't'. The creation of queer creative and performative spaces is the first step in non-conformation, and, ultimately, the deconstruction of traditional restrictive exhibition formats.

Oros believes that exhibitions as a creative and performative space are essential to the expression of identity, especially for queer and other marginalised voices. Oros has been able to explore his own 'autobiographical self' through his own creative work, exploring the socio-political impact of events upon his own construction of identity and broadening it to experiences of those like himself. However, it is his curative practices within exhibition spaces which allow him to fully explore the influence of society and personal history upon identities other than his own. His work with art collectives creating spaces dedicated to the sharing of queer art, create a shared physical space in which artists can embrace their own identities in performative and creative ways, whilst also connecting them to one another so that they may learn more about their own identities. Oros states that *Umbrella* is 'a space where you as a [...] queer person, artist, person interested in art, can go there, and you can belong there [...] You can learn [...], you can contribute, you can help'. Exhibition

and curated spaces mark a physical space wherein multiple identities can intersect to explore themes of identity for both individuals and communities.

Oros' experience emphasises how his identity as a queer and Romanian man influences both his photography and his exhibition spaces. He addresses how identity can be limited within financially controlled creative spaces like museums and galleries to exclude minority identities and how that empowered him to create spaces in which creatives could express their marginalised voices. However, Oros also reveals that recent years have seen a shift to showcase these voices, but only in a certain way in which art can be seen as not non-conformative enough which becomes its own limitations. Oros' experiences indicate how the expression of identity within photography and curation is constantly seeking a balance between conforming to the spaces which limit marginalised voices, but also challenging these expectations to fulfil new performative spaces and expectations.

A Welsh Ballerina's Story of Race, Gender and Disability

Emigration and race are two factors of identity which can impact one's creative output, particularly in the performative spaces of theatre, choreography, music and other forms of expressive storytelling, steeped in tradition, shaped by rigid norms and expectations which privilege able-bodied, white and British voices. From the traditional sphere of curation to the conservative space of ballet, *IPICS* interviewed Krystal Lowe (she/her), a neurodivergent, black female ballet dancer and writer.¹²

Krystal Lowe is a 'dancer, choreographer, writer and director' who is exploring 'intersectional identity, mental health and wellbeing, and empowerment'.¹³ Born and raised in Bermuda, she is known for her work as a Welsh-based ballerina and a dance theatre creator. Lowe identifies as a neurodivergent black female, and as such, she has an intersectional identity in which several factors overlap, including race, gender, and disability. In 2012, a ballet apprenticeship brought her to Wales, after which she worked with Ballet Cymru.¹⁴ One of her many projects, *Whimsey*, explores the intersections of deaf culture, race, and gender, made by, and dedicated to Welsh youth.¹⁵

¹² All quotations from Lowe in this text can be found in the interview transcript, published in the *IPICS* blog: Krystal Lowe and Gifty Andoh Appiah, "That's not how we do things here": A Welsh Ballerina's Story of Race, Gender, and Disability', *Intersectional Perspectives: Identity, Culture and Society*, (2023) <<https://intersectionalperspectives21.wordpress.com/2023/03/14/thats-not-how-we-do-things-here-a-welsh-ballerinas-story-of-race-gender-and-disability/>> [Accessed Wednesday 9th August 2023].

¹³ Krystal Lowe, 'About Me', *Krystal S. Lowe* <<https://krystal Lowe.com/about-me>> [Accessed 16th August 2023]

¹⁴ Ballet Cymru. [n.d.]. 'Ballet Cymru', *Ballet.cymru* <<https://ballet.cymru/>>

¹⁵ Krystal Lowe, 'Whimsey', *Krystal S. Lowe* <<https://krystal Lowe.com/whimsey>> [Accessed 16th August 2023]

Lowe's identity begins its complex interaction with her performative space with her black heritage. Having moved from Bermuda to Wales, she observes that there is imbalanced racial representation in both ballet and society. Growing up in Bermuda, Lowe was used to seeing and interacting with people like her, black, female and in positions of power, making her feel secure in her identity. However, in Wales, where she currently resides and works, her experiences as a black woman are different, a departure from her familiar sense of identity security in Bermuda. Transitioning between two countries, these new experiences and the need to fit-in, have presented "struggles" bordering around representation and "true inclusion" which is either missing or tokenistic on many occasions.

Simply defined, representation is the 'depiction or portrayal of a person or thing, typically one produced in an artistic medium'.¹⁶ All too often, such portrayals conform to biased prejudices or assumptions about the given subject. For Lowe, Wales is a country which takes pride in its diversity and inclusion policies aimed at equal representation of various identities, but which fails to give full, accurate representation of those in minority groups. She feels that these inclusion policies seem more skewed towards checking boxes than on creating spaces in which people can present their truest selves.

Lowe's perspective on inclusion is shaped by her lived experience, both as a black woman in Wales, and as a black performer in the predominantly white art form of ballet. It has made her question 'if things were for me', something she never did in Bermuda where 'I saw other people who looked like me'. Krystal says, representation goes beyond 'just allowing people into the space'. It is about 'ensuring that they [the people] are safe and comfortable and able to thrive in the space'.

'It wasn't until I moved here that I realized just how bad the situation was in regard to representation and diversity and true inclusion... I've seen spaces that talk about access and inclusion, but any kind of difference wasn't allowed... you come in, and you think you're welcome, and then you start to present as yourself, and then you're quickly kind of told, no that's not how we do things here. So okay, cool, this is my identity, but okay...we want you in the space. Just don't be you in the space.'

¹⁶ 'Representation, n', *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (2009)

<https://www.oed.com/dictionary/representation_n1?tab=meaning_and_use#151488053> [Accessed 10th November 2023].

The traditional and conservative nature of ballet remains a persistent source of conflict for Lowe's intersectional identity.¹⁷ While the dance form has been transformed by creatives in the field, Lowe argues that the modifications have not been inclusive of black cultures. Lowe persuasively argues that, although Ballet was created in France, a Western country, there is no evidence to suggest that it was meant to represent whiteness/Westernisation and that ballet is not necessarily a part of a binary culture that cannot be modified to promote inclusion. She says:

[L]et's say [ballet] was meant to represent French culture, but we're okay to move it away from that as long as it doesn't represent black cultures, and I think that's where I find that it falters... they [whiter people] are not required to be less white to dance in any of the styles that were created by black cultures... [it's like being in] the skin of a black person but they [black ballet dancers] must act and be like a white person.

This conflict of presenting as other identities just to fit in, sums up Lowe's perspective about what inclusion *should* look like: thriving in unfamiliar spaces by presenting as yourself. It is difficult to address conflicts like these because they are not explicit. The compulsion to fit in or risk rejection is 'never overtly stated, which is why it's so difficult to deal with [or to confront]'. The covert suppression of one's identity in so-called inclusive spaces is familiar to people like Krystal who love ballet. It is hardly expressed verbally but, according to Lowe, all responses and body language convey a microaggression that says, 'no, that's not how we do things here'. In the end, inclusion is reduced to checking legal boxes rather than empowering people to live out their identities, taking away their agency, power and freedom to be who they truly believe themselves to be. This only festers a pervasive cycle of tokenism, superficially satisfying diversity requirements but failing to address the deeper need for genuine acceptance and representation.

Whimsey is one of Lowe's projects aimed at creating a more inclusive performance art. The project is based on a story she wrote in 2014 about a little black girl who sees so much beauty in nature and wonders if she is that beautiful. She does not feel as beautiful and hence, desires to

¹⁷ A typical example of such conflicts can be found when examining the history of ballet costuming, which has changed little since the 20th century: Author Unknown, 'A Brief History of Ballet' *Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre* (2016) <<https://www.pbt.org/learn-and-engage/resources-audience-members/ballet-101/brief-history-ballet/>> [Accessed 10th November 2023].

become like the animals she sees through nature so that she can feel beautiful. She embarks on an adventure until she encounters a moment of introspection as:

[S]he realizes her own beauty, her own grace, and that it looks different to the existing dominances around her, and for me that is a story, about a black little girl who sees that she's different in this culture, and in this country, and so questions, what's beautiful if it doesn't look like what is beautiful on the outside, that she already sees.

This narrative highlights the inner conflicts surrounding identity and the impact on young and disabled people too. It reflects the broader issues of societal, cultural and racial difference, underscoring the power of representation, inclusion and diversity particularly on young audiences; a target group for whom Lowe is hopeful, such narratives will contribute to self-actualisation and self-affirmation. She explains that:

In the summer of 2022, the project toured the Grange Pavilion, the National Eisteddfod, Chapter Art Centre, Greenman Festival and Bute town Carnival. [A sense of] Fulfilment reverberates through her voice as she reflected on the projects multilingual approach inclusivity and representation using British Sign Language, Welsh and English. For her it was a production that went beyond the usual cultural consumers to intentionally explore the intersections of young black Welsh speakers, black Welsh speaking families and deaf/deaf and black individuals. She calls it a “sincere and genuine” [intersectional] performance encapsulated in what they called *Whimsey*.

Whimsey also represents how she is tapping into existing state structures and funding in Wales to address the challenges she has observed in her performative space that goes beyond gender representation and inclusion. With an Arts Council of Wales funding, her team expanded access to *Whimsey* to make it deaf inclusive because according to her, deaf audiences have typically been excluded from cultural participation. Instead of just hiring an interpretation service, Lowe tapped into the Connect and Flourish Fund and brought in the deaf community through Deaf Hub Wales to ensure that they were involved in the project as a measure for inclusivity and accuracy in expressing deaf experience.¹⁸

¹⁸ *Connect & Flourish: A National Lottery Arts Funding Programme (2022)*,
<<https://arts.wales/sites/default/files/202206/H22028%20Connect%20and%20Flourish%202022%20English%20fin>

Through this effort, Deaf Hub Wales together with their partners, embarked on an 18-month project dubbed *Intersectional Identities* (ended December 2022), where *Whimsey* was used ‘as a way to explore how we ensure that our working practices are just as inclusive, and intersectional as the end product’. *Whimsey* was directed towards the Deaf community, Welsh speaking audiences as well as black families, highlighting the intersections of Deaf culture, disability, race and gender. Its focus on young people is aimed at ensuring a safe future for people who fall within these brackets and are traditionally excluded. The project shows that there is success and impact in moving beyond complaints and taking steps to create the change we desire.

Whilst *Whimsey* addresses gender bias, the other conflicts that Lowe and people like her in dance encounter are intertwined. From identity conflicts, gender imbalances, other power dynamics to personal freedoms and expression of same. For many people like Krystal, the performative space where all these issues are manifested is also the space where the power can be reclaimed. This is something she does constantly. She reflects:

I use my art as a way to explore my own identity... and so everything that I make is about sharing with the world something that I'm going through and learning for myself that I want to take others with me on that journey.

Consistently, she has ensured that as a woman the stories she creates are performed by women and represent women in leadership positions. As a black person, she creates opportunities for others like her. In her role as a creative director, she further adjusts rehearsal and other work-related timings not only for the benefit of people with neurodiversity like herself, but to generally promote wellbeing. Krystal acknowledges the difficulties of her position, sometimes it is overwhelming, as she fights to make the performative space of ballet safer and more inclusive irrespective of race, gender, and disability. She has created an avenue within ballet where she takes back the power to manifest what she believes to be her truest identity. That safe space is on the stage where she feels empowered:

[al.pdf](#)> [accessed 21 May 2024]; ‘Deaf Hub (Wales)’, *Cardiff Deaf Centre* (2022), <<https://www.deafhub.wales/>> [accessed 21 May 2024].

They can't do anything once the performance starts. They can't stop me, they have no control over what I'm about to say...I have that space, and I hold that space...without being a black woman, without being a neuro-divergent woman, just as a woman.

The performative space symbolizes performer autonomy and personal freedom, allowing artists/performers to reclaim repressed power and shed societal labels. For performers like Krystal, the stage offers them a connection to universal humanity, providing a sense of safety, self-worth and affirmation, even if temporarily, as society plays “catch-up”.

Conclusion

The creative spaces explored here are complex, with conflicting and complex elements and attitudes underpinning the able-bodied, white, heteronormative British society in which they perform. Each of the creators uses their identities to shape their creative outputs and challenge the established expectations and norms of their performative and creative spaces. Their identities provide direction for their artistic and creative work which highlights and deconstruct entrenched social hierarchies surrounding race, class, sexuality and gender. The homophobia of the football sphere in conflict with the safety many LGBTQ+ women feel within the sport, mirrors the conflict that progressive theatre makers find with the conservative, white, middle-class norms of the theatre scene of South-West England. These conflicts mirror those found in ballet and curatorship, as both seek to modernise and diversify from traditional social conventions which promote wider inaccessibility. Despite, or perhaps, because of, these conflicts and tensions, the creatives interviewed in this special feature found immense joy in the relationship between their intersectional identities and their creative spaces. All the creatives included in this discussion find their own intersectional identities to be a central, driving force for their creativity. Even when their creative outputs and space demonstrate significant differences, there are links between how they use their identities to create a matching intersectional space. McCreadie uses her poetry and drama to promise a better world for the queer community. Lowe uses their ballet to showcase the beauty to be found in those who look different to the white, able-bodied beauty norms of Wales. Murdoch and Oros both seek to create safe performative and artistic spaces for people to explore, express and celebrate their identities. Each creative places their identity at the heart of their creative and performative space to represent and showcase their marginalised voices and identities and interact with their various intersectional communities with Wales and Southwest England.

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