



The Lost Café

An anthology of original creative writing developed at Queer Britain, the UK's first LGBTQ+ museum

QUEER BRITAIN
THE NATIONAL LGBTQ+ MUSEUM



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The full "Developing Our Creative Practice" workshop series and its outcomes can be read here: <https://www.helenpatuck-cc.com/arts-council-england>



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Guest edited by David Clarke
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Introduction to our anthology

It was such a pleasure to meet everyone at Queer Britain in October 2025. This anthology shares original works of fiction developed in our workshop around the theme of The Lost Café. We set out to create a space where people could explore writing as a means through which they could connect with past and future selves, trusting the fictional space as one we can find utopia in. As one of the participants very wisely said: what people often misunderstand about utopia in queer experience is that the past holds answers too. So often a past self looks back to where we are, now, with wonder - even pride. And a future self might say, simply: it will be alright. To find in ourselves a cheerleader, friend and amazed witness to all we have survived is a gift we owe ourselves in a world that is far from accepting of LGBTQ+ lives.

In this anthology we invite you into shy forests, bold shipwrecks and discoveries made on the long road to self-knowledge.

Helen Patuck
October 2025

Helen Patuck is a writer, illustrator and teacher. She developed this anthology as part of a workshop series for newcomers to creative writing during her time as an Arts Council England "Developing Your Creative Practice" (DYCP) grantee in 2025-26. The full workshop series and its outcomes can be read here:

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FIRST OUT

— *Café Bar* —



Creative writing prompts: The Lost Café

Helen developed this creative writing prompt from a story she writes every four years for her sister. She first wrote the Lost Café for her sister when she was grieving a lost home and relationship. It is reframed in 2025 for this workshop, and interwoven with the legacy of "First Out" LGBTQ+ Café on Tottenham Court Road, one of the first of its kind in London: a safe space, where queer people could come together to enjoy time in the beautiful light of day. Lost now, but fondly treasured in memory. Thanks to the former co-owners, Maria Tejada and Malcolm Comley, for sharing this photograph.

In our workshop, one participant recalled the space and described it as one of the few queer spaces above ground level, and that really meant something. Participants responded to the following prompt. Feel free to try yourself.

"Imagine you are on a journey. You get stranded, somehow, and stray upon a café or special place. In the café, everything feels tailor-made for you. Everyone is kind, welcoming, offers you what you need. In a corner you encounter your younger self, and your older self, waiting at a table. How would they welcome you? Can you write about this encounter? What might you all have to say to each other?"

Tips for writing:

- *Set the scene. What journey are you on? Where are you stranded? What can you see, smell, hear or feel?*
- *Describe the café or location - the people, the atmosphere*
- *Start the dialogue between selves as a script, and see what comes*
- *When is it time for you to leave? How do you leave the meeting?*

Photograph: First Out Café Bar, Tottenham Court Road, London

Walking into the forest of yesterday

Adam Gooch-Smith

It is hard to imagine that there could be anywhere more perfect to find myself lost. The warmth of the forest enveloped me, and instead of concerns that I didn't quite know how I would leave, I was strangely unworried, and it almost felt like home. The sun was streaming through the trees onto pine needles scattered on the ground, releasing an aroma that at once reminded me of my childhood and walks with my father in warmer climes. There was a distant roar of a waterfall, yet I felt in no rush to discover it, rather choosing to enjoy the sanctuary of the trees and the dappled sunlight.

I walked forward slowly, savouring the freedom and fresh air. I felt so alive. Eventually, I came across two men, clearly related, almost like father and son, but something told me they were not.

It occurred to me that I might know them both and that the older of the two knew me. The younger man didn't seem to recognise me, yet I began to feel that I knew him well. Perhaps from a previous life, perhaps a childhood acquaintance. It conjured thoughts of how much I had changed since I was his age and how I might not recognise myself. So much had changed around me and so much within me.

The older man was the first to speak and offered, "It will all be okay, you know." I simply answered "thank you" and heard more than a hint of confusion in my own voice. How could he possibly know that my car was refusing to take me where I was supposed to go, stranding me in this idyll? Initially, it also felt strange that he saw no need to introduce himself before giving his assurance. At the same time, why the need to analyse this chance encounter?

"I think you are right," I continued, "and in any case, there is so much more to discover here."

I had never been to this beautiful place before, yet at the same time, it felt familiar. The warmth comforted me, and I felt an inner calmness. I was about to continue walking when the older man spoke again, "You will live longer than your father did. You will be happy, and you are loved. Honestly, all will be good."

I realised that this man was much like an older brother, only he was more like me than my brother Jeremy. Perhaps in some way, he was me, only older and I hoped wiser.

Despite my lack of clarity, I took reassurance from his words.

At this stage in my life, I was only two years younger than my father was when he died. His death haunted me at an early age, and with each advancing year, I became more convinced that I might not outlive him.

Despite this, I took this familiar stranger's words at face value. It just felt right, and I could not quite explain why.

My thoughts wandered to the younger man. He had yet to speak. He was a younger version of the man who had proffered such keen advice. He didn't seem to know me, yet somehow I knew him. Why didn't he know me? I felt that he should. After a moment or two, I realised why not. He was me. Only a younger, hopefully less jaded version of myself. He invoked thoughts of how I used to be, a very different person from the man I had become. An edition of me, true to myself, but in the years before I had come out. Me. Same, same, yet not my whole self.

I asked the younger man if he was happy. He paused and then replied, "I am happy. I am loved, but I would like to be happier." I felt a jolt of sadness - at once for me and my younger self. I wished he could be truly happy and wanted to make him feel better. "You will be very, very happy. I can assure you of that." I had no idea if what I said resonated when the younger man smiled. He thanked me, bid farewell and started to walk past me. My older self said goodbye and followed.

I felt content. I felt safe. And it was beautiful. I perceived that this chance encounter had been opportune for all three of me. I hoped that wisdom had been passed down and that futures were better informed. I took some deep breaths, and the warm air made me feel vital. A hint of citrus and the smell of pine resin surrounded me as I walked towards the rush of water. My thoughts returned to joyous walks through coastal pine forests in France with my father when I was a child.

In those moments, life was perfect. This moment too was perfect. I was happy and knew that beyond this beautiful nirvana, all would be good.

Adam now shares a collage inspired by his story.

Collage
Adam Gooch-Smith



The almost café

Han Smith

Not lost but found, and walls without surface:
a beneath-touch of toes becomes the touch
of traced hands. Smooth tabletop, sudden-much
and we're a ghost-kiss café; we're perfects,

imperfects, remembers, retracked paths. When
we're present selves, held gaze and autumn storm,
we're hidden herbs, lemon, cream, and we form
past selves to meet our here-lips: meet again,

ago, as hay barns, bookshops, islands, grieved
cities, cold forests. Past trap-voice says: You
don't deserve; past fear-self says: Never true,
not real. But then: Just we can't quite believe

each other's beauty, you said, and bright-feel:
Yes, it's so real, all this whole, all this real.

October 2025

A boat in progress

Lucia Hariman

Who thought this was a good idea? What possessed me to go on one of the toughest long-distance trails by myself with no prior solo hiking experience? At least Lil isn't here to see this disaster unfold.

As I huff, working my way through the trail, I can feel the Corsican sun embroiling me in its warmth. *Did I say warmth? Sorry, I meant, scorching heat... The kind that makes you wonder if it's humanly possible to sweat more than you already have.*

The sound of the cicadas is magical and comforting. I'm grateful that their vibrations are keeping me from having distracting thoughts. *Although* one thing I do notice is that I stopped coming across other hikers, which is odd given how busy it is at this time in the season. Which is when I realise that isn't actually odd because I'm probably lost.

Well, at least I'm lost with a view. I turn around and steal a glance at the dramatic granite spires. I imagine them being carefully placed on a giant's desk who was just about to do his taxes (or whatever else giants do at their desks, *you tell me*). My contemplation of giant affairs is cut short when someone violently bumps into me:

"Oh, I'm so sorry. Didn't see you there", I hear emitted from a voice that sounded eerily familiar.

"That's alright", I respond. *"I'm actually relieved to bump into someone, as I think I'm possibly quite lost. Although, wait a minute -"* I take off my glasses, rub my eyes, rub my glasses, put them back on and look again. *"Are you...me?"*

"That's a hard one. I am you, and not you at the same time. I guess it depends how you look at it".

"Right", I said unconvinced. "I must say it's not terribly reassuring to have gotten lost, with the only person around being a version of myself, presumably also lost."

"We're not lost!", protests a younger 5-or-6 year old me I almost didn't see with a crisp and cutting certainty that commands everyone to agree. "We're just getting there another way."

"I see – and which way is this 'another way' if you're so convinced we're not lost?" I ask, fully aware that I am not about to get a helpful answer.

"The other way! Come on already!"

I look at older me, older me looks at me, we both look at younger me getting further away and dangerously close to a ridge overlooking the sea that feels like the greatest tripping hazard I could have possibly picked out of the rugged scenery.

"Whoa! An old ship!" exclaims younger me, pointing to a sailing ship that looks like it's seen better days.

"It makes you think, doesn't it?" asks older me, as if I was supposed to anticipate where this would lead.

"The ship?", I ask.

"Yes, the ship. What it's been through, how it got here, what lies ahead. The Ship of Theseus".

"The ship of whom?", asks younger me.

"The ship of Theseus", I say. *"A ship that goes through many battles, gets repaired, its crew also gets replaced along the way. At some point, the ship will have been repaired so much that no parts of the original ship remain and no one from the original crew is on it anymore. The question is: is it the same ship?"*

Younger me ponders a bit before answering abruptly:

"Well, it depends what you mean by 'the same'". She gesticulates air inverted commas as she says 'the same', seemingly annoyed at the lack of definitional clarity.

"If you want it to be exactly identical, then no, obviously not." She looks up at me as if I should be embarrassed that I could have even asked such a simple question.

“Although you probably could get parts that are more or less the same – for example, if you cut wood from the same forest from trees of the same age and have it crafted in the same way, you could say it’s more or less the same.”

“Same with the crew – if you replace a 20-year-old person with another 20-year-old person who grew up in the same place at the same time, has the same abilities, and is given the same orders and duties as the previous crew member, you could say that the function of that crew relative to the boat’s needs is the same. Anyway.” She stops, looks up at me again with challenging eyes, with her face starting to sketch a frown.

“It’s a rather stupid question: why does it matter if it’s the same or not as long as it functions well as a ship?” The frown is now fully apparent.

“Isn’t that what it’s supposed to do? To be a good ship?” The frown disappears, and shrugged shoulders take its place.

“You can ask Theseus if you’re not sure – after all he should know what his ship is supposed to do or be.” Now she seems frustrated at Theseus for putting in the world a boat without knowing precisely what it is meant to do to achieve its purpose. *Amateurs.*

Oh dear, I think to myself for a second. Was I always like this? How did my teachers put up with me? How is my old self putting up with me? I chuckle, bemused.

I turn my gaze from the ship back to the ridge to answer younger me, but she’s now quite far away, following a cicada nearby, being fascinated by its colours, its tiny vibrating abdomen and having lots of questions about it, I’m sure, at least until the next thing grabs her attention. *Older me can deal with that. I hope.*

I look back at the ship and I’m not sure if it’s the heat or this bizarre encounter, but it looks so much better now. Its veneer is back and is shining bright in the still-scorching Corsican sun.

‘I am the ship of Theseus. I’ve built and rebuilt myself. I’ve washed away the labels once I understood they weren’t written in permanent ink.’

'I wonder how many battles I can fight without sinking.'

'Unless I keep at it'.

'Building and rebuilding.'

'Washing and drawing.'

'Drawing and washing'

'Staying afloat.'

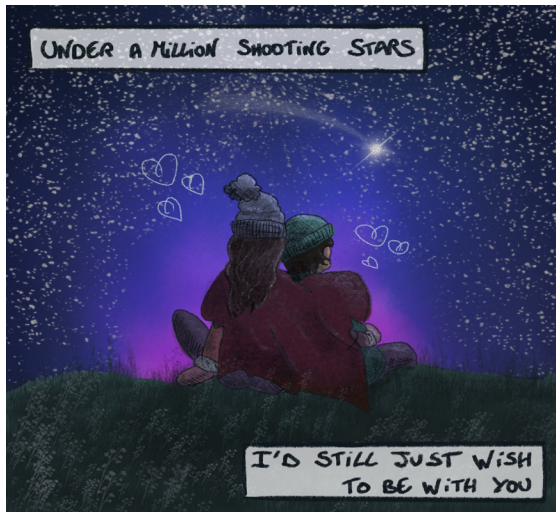
'Functioning.'

'Maybe even seeking a purpose.'

'I am a boat in progress.'

Aren't we all?

Artwork by Lucia's partner, Lil
@lilzdoodles



My safe space

Nihar Banday

We lay down, under the starlit sky of the aurora.

I glance to my side and hold their hands.

A heat rushes through my entire body.

I feel their lips move as I hear their voice making me desperate for a kiss but I settle for listening.

They tell me about their day: how they loved the colours of the painting, the sunset, the new faces during the day... the little things I always forget.

Some part of me wants to hope to the green and purple aliens in the sky, "I want my eyes to feel, my mind to wander without a leash, and my heart to roar again and again like you keep coming back with your imperfections every year. So, show me how to make it happen one more time..."

So, I hold their hands tighter, to feel closer.

Through the side of my eye, I notice their chest move up and down, getting heavier by the second. Their voice quiets and my feelings get stronger, deeper.

My face, my legs, and my breath melt yet I feel like the part inside me I thought no thing or being could reach ignite and growing. It's something indescribable.

My body and my mind; my successes and failures; my ugliness and my beauty; and my traumas and my scars start to lift as if they no longer matter anymore...giving rise to a deeper, more sinister fear that one day I, them, and this experience, and beyond can no longer be something I can reach.

I start to tense up momentarily until my hand is gripped closer.

I look for them so they turn to me. Their eyes ordering my fear to surrender until my lips start moving, and my desire to share came back.

I tell them about my flatmates, the sport I tried today, among other things until the masks I put on everyday come off: the smiles I don't want to put on, the clothes to get what I need, the lies to protect myself, and the pretending to know what I'm doing.

Sometimes I just want to make a fuss instead of being silent, cry in the arms of someone instead of doing a poker face, or feel good enough!

So, I let go!

My words lose hesitation, my fears come to be healed, my demonic side seeks forgiveness, and I start to feel through parts of myself beyond my senses.

It lasts until I realise the parts of me that I want to let go are what allow me to experience this moment and allow me to feel despite any other thing or people.

Still, time eventually takes its toll and I notice my eyes blinking, getting heavier, and start to miss other things, places, and people or lack of them. So I look to my side to tell them and see them: sleeping.

So, aside from my face being red, I thanked time as I took one last look at their smile and a beautiful drawing of a crab on their forehead as my eyelids dropped and I slipped away from consciousness.

The Lost Café

Helen Patuck

You arrive in a town late one summer evening, when the fireflies are coming out. The people, too, begin to stir. It is a transit town, you think, walking out of the train station. People dress strangely here. They let their sun-kissed skin speak for itself, slinging old jeans and faded colours around their hips.

You look at your own clothes in the reflection of a window. You look better, you think. Much better than before.

You had packed up your home a while back, leaving the tools of your former life in a box. You can't afford your own place and might never be able to. You have left it all - the work, the guitar, the books - next to the boxes of bruised apples from trees in the garden. You have left the computer you worked solidly on for years, the camera covered in dents. The lens is still full of sand from months spent lying next to someone you thought you loved, on a beach in a country far away.

You have left it all behind and look better, you think. Much better than before.

You are looking into the window of The Lost Café, though you do not yet know its name. A face appears in your face, looming from within, smiling at you. You do not smile back, because you do not smile like that anymore. But you would like to, so you look for the café door.

Inside, there is a woman. Hers is not the face, but it is soft and friendly all the same. She looks timeless, you think. She wears the same slouchy clothes as everyone else in that town: purple dungarees with a flower poking out of the top pocket. Her bar is decorated with candles kept in hourglasses.

'Hey,' she says, smiling. 'Are you staying?'

She has noticed your suitcase. Her eyes, blue and clear, suggest you put it down. Over there, they seem to say, over by the palm trees planted in old street dustbins.

'My train is in half an hour,' you say.

She shrugs, indicating that, still, you should put down your bag.

'You've got time,' she says.

Her eyes search for others. A handsome young man behind the bar. He takes lemon after lemon from the café's enormous lemon tree and begins to squeeze them fresh.

You would normally feel a bit awkward sitting alone in a café without a book or a laptop, but the bar staff are so at ease with themselves, so happy in their lemon café, you feel safe. You wonder what makes them so. You wonder why you are not so.

You look around and see you are not alone. Others sit around, drinking their lemonade. Some, like you, are weary from carrying their bags. They have put them by the palm tree, by the pyramid of mangoes, by the sculpture made of forgotten umbrellas.

Some are laughing because a tall, rather unruly looking man with a curly black beard is charming them into having their photo taken. He takes instant photos with a polaroid and gives them to people straight away. You listen to their delight as they see themselves as they are, there, against the brightly painted walls. You listen to what he tells them:

'Your smile is something I will never forget. Thank you.'

You wonder if he is some hack, doing his rounds from the street. But a moment later, he serves someone a glass of the lemonade. He is wearing an apron. He must work there, too.

'Have you just arrived?' comes a familiar voice from behind you. It sounds familiar - like your sister or your mother. You turn, and nearly falling out of your chair, see yourself. But younger.

Hers was the face you saw in the window, smiling at you. You stare at her, speechless.

'If you think this is weird,' she says, 'wait a second'

Wondering what could possibly be weirder than seeing yourself in a café, you feel a hand on your shoulder and look up. A woman who is much older than you, in her forties perhaps, is beaming down at you. She has your hair, but white.

'How?' you ask. They are both smiling at you now.

The Older sits down next to the Younger.

'Magic?' suggests the Older you. She is beautiful, you think. She looks like your mother. Her mother. You are so glad she - you - still believes in magic. She laughs at your gawping face.

'I'm so glad you're here,' she says, and compliments you on how you're looking.

Well. Much better. Much better than before.

She has learnt that a compliment composed in the head can do a lot of good when spoken out loud.

The Younger you watches her and you know what she's thinking. Why do I find it so hard to tell people nice things about themselves? Your Older self smiles at the Younger. She knows the Younger is still just a bit afraid of the world and her own thoughts.

The Older is so pleased to have you both there. Her smile alone makes you feel welcome. You cannot take your eyes away from either of them. Suddenly, in the middle of an unknown café, an unknown city, an unknown country: you (plural) are in the strangest company.

The Younger is beaming at you. She is excited by how beautiful you and the Older look. She didn't expect it somehow. You are all looking for your mother, your father, your sisters in you, and see all, and then: something new. You see yourself and you like it.

The Younger blushes under scrutiny, and wonders what you think of her.

She needn't worry, you and the Older think, already knowing what is going through her mind. You remember her well. You know how desperately naïve she is, a hopeless romantic: a tanned, messy, privileged person. You know she's bursting to tell you where she's just travelled to, what songs she's writing, what stories she's planning. She wants to impress you. She wants you to like her. She still blushes when people look too closely at her, and people are looking at her, though her eyes do not see them yet.

You all start laughing nervously. What a strange meeting, you think, there in The Lost Café. You begin to laugh so hard you wonder why people don't turn and stare. But no one in the café looks at you. Being outrageously happy is not of note to them here. 'How?' you ask, wiping the tears from your eyes. 'How did we all get here?'

'By train?' says the Older.

The Younger, who has yet to learn patience, goes first. She talks about starting university. She has no idea what's going to happen next and she's still hung up on that boy.

'Him?' You and the Older laugh in shared disdain.

'You don't know what's coming,' you say.

The Younger looks embarrassed and relieved. She knows exactly what she wants to ask you, and has no qualms in asking it.

'Did you ever get that tattoo?'

You look blankly at her before turning to the Older, who smiles and shows you.

So! You think. You were brave after all. But the Older knows what you're thinking.

'Trust me, this was nothing.'

The photographer-waiter comes over and asks if you'd like cocktails. Your Younger and Older selves laugh at you for sticking to the lemonade. They are having cocktails, they say. They are celebrating that you are all there together. (And the Younger knows the Older is paying).

But they understand.

'You'll get past it,' smiles the Older you. She looks at you with your mother's eyes, and you know she's not talking about ordering lemonade. She keeps looking at you, and adds: 'Everything is going to be okay. Don't worry, about anything.'

The Younger is more curious about the Older than you, and you can understand that. In fact, you're glad. You're not sure what you want to say to her yet. Besides, you are interested in this older figure too. She seems calm, wise, and kind. She is relaxed in a way you feel you can never be. Her hair is full of snaking silver and her weathered skin tells a thousand stories.

She laughs at both of you looking up at her, waiting to tell you why she is there. 'No reason,' she says. 'I just like to pop in sometimes. You may have noticed already,' and then she looks meaningfully at you. 'Life doesn't always go the way you planned. You'll get lost along the way.'

'Profound,' laughs the Younger, rolling her eyes. She still thinks it's funny to mock everything. She hasn't learnt that life is hard yet. But you and the Older both know what it feels like to be young and the look you exchange says as much. You were there once. You want more than anything for her to feel confident in herself. She is full of smiles and enthusiasm and you feel strangely protective of her, but before you can decide what it is you want to say to her, you feel a hand on your shoulder. You look up. There is the young woman with the flower in her pocket.

'Sorry to intrude,' she says, 'but didn't you say your train was in half an hour?'

You look for the time, but there are no clocks in this café.

'You have five minutes,' smiles the girl. You look up at the two women sitting at your table and know you all want to ask the same question.

Do I have to get that train?

But you were going somewhere before you visited The Lost Café. You remember that now.

'I should go,' you say, and suddenly it feels very sad.

'Go,' smiles the Older you. The Younger neither wants you to leave nor knows how to hide it.

'And?' you take her hand gently. 'Are you staying or are you going?'

She looks uncertain and is suddenly shy. The Older puts an arm around her.

'You should go,' the Older says, with a meaningful look. 'Trust me. Besides, we've ordered cocktails, haven't we?'

You catch her eye in thanks. The black-bearded photographer brings you your bag and smiles at you.

'We've been watching,' he says, nodding towards the counter where the girl in dungarees and the barman play with candles in hourglasses. 'We're wondering what has made you all so happy. Do you think I could take a picture of you three?'

'I can't stay,' you tell him. You have a train to catch, and you know now there is not a second to lose.

Ghost Beer

David Clarke

At the ghost-bar, I raise my glass to spectres -
one busy making my regrets, the other
watching me make his. The first is shaped
from smoke of long-lost dry-ice dance floors,
the other is a mist above cold land.

Then further patrons trail in from the ghost-rain,
dressed in ghost-clothes of my every age.
They fill the place with talk of heart's desire,
take their turns to karaoke ghost-songs.
I check my ghost-watch for the last bus home.

Untitled

Kieran Hayde

We stepped into a small wooden boat and set off to find the sunset. A soft pink was seeping into the edges of the clouds, telling me I had to move quickly. Howie stood uncertainly on his hind legs, his front paws resting carefully on the bow of the boat. He looked out impatiently and then back at me—it was his way of telling me he still hated boats but couldn't say no to an adventure.

A small island covered in pine trees rose out of an indigo lake, the patch of sky behind it already a deep pink. Guided by the changing colours, we directed the boat towards the island and as the oars broke the glassy water, distorted reflections of ancient pine forests swirled on the surface.

Approaching the shore of the island, Howie spotted dry ground and made a jump for it. He took a stick in his mouth and disappeared down a shadowy path. The warm colours of the evening were quickly swallowed up by a canopy of trees, and I felt the familiar pinch of regret in my stomach.

In the distance, there was a small clearing in the forest. A campfire burned half-heartedly and two figures slouched in camp chairs on opposite sides of the flames. There was an empty chair in the middle—it must belong to the old guy's wife, I thought. Eager to give them a wide berth, I scanned the forest for a path that would lead me to shore. If I was quick enough, I might still catch the sun before it dropped behind the horizon. That's when I spotted Howie, crouched down in front of the child, staring at him intently. Unsure of what to do, the child looked at me for guidance.

"He wants you to throw the stick," I called out, maintaining a polite distance and quietly cursing my dog's social nature.

The boy rocked forward on the legs of his chair to retrieve the stick. He sheepishly threw it in my direction, and it landed on the other side of the fire. I knew I had to go and pick it up if I wanted any chance of getting Howie to come with me. As I moved closer to the fire, the flames flickered gently on the child's face. He looks just like me as a kid, I thought. He must have been about six, with deep-set blue eyes and tightly cropped hair. He even had the same little line shaved into it that we all begged our mums for in the '90s.

"Are you going to throw it for him?" asked the child.

I knew that high-pitched little voice—it was the same one that made people ask if I was a boy or a girl. That kid was me.

This is a bit fucked up, I thought, and I looked over to the old man, hoping he might be able to provide some sort of explanation. That's when I saw it—he was an older me. It was like I'd been through one of those AI filters that age you, only this one had been fed the cruellest of prompts.

"So, I do lose my hair," I said to him drily, resisting the urge to acknowledge how bizarre this was.

"And a couple of teeth," he smirked, revealing an unfamiliar crown that stood proudly, like a pair of wedding crashers. "Be careful going up and down stairs," he said ominously.

As I jibed with my older self, exchanging witty insults and knowing glances, the child stood back and took it all in. He was always such an observant kid.

"You're both older versions of me, aren't you?" he piped up.

"We are," I replied, as the old man nodded.

"How old are you?" he asked, pointing at me.

I felt my face flush. I'd recently had a big birthday and still wasn't comfortable saying it out loud.

"Forty," I said it like a confession waiting for him to confirm my fears that I was indeed really old.

"You look younger," he replied coolly, and a sheepish smile spread across my face. A newfound appreciation for my body started to blossom inside me as I looked across at the weathered old man.

"Are you married to Aisling?" the child asked. "How many kids have you got? Where do you live?"

I smiled at him gently—the kind of half-smile you use to disarm a person before delivering bad news. As I considered my answer, it was hard not to feel like I was disappointing him: single, childless, and living in a one-bedroom flat. He thought he was going to marry his best friend and have loads of children.

"I'm not married, but Aisling is," I started, "and she has three kids."

His eyes widened as he took it all in, patiently waiting for more insights into his future.

"I was living with someone I really love but we didn't get married. And last year we

decided to go separate ways." I paused for a moment, searching for the right words. Coming out to my younger self felt a bit like coming out to my mum—that guilty feeling of robbing someone of the future they'd envisaged for me.

"His name was Davey, and we didn't have any kids, but we did adopt a dog. That's Howie."

"That's so cool," he smiled. "Dogs are way more fun anyway," he added, seemingly unaffected by the words I was so nervous to share.

I looked over to the old guy, and we exchanged a smile.

"Young children are surprisingly open, aren't they?" he said. "The prejudice is all learnt."

We held each other's gaze in silence for a few moments while the child played fetch with Howie. He blinked softly, and the corners of his mouth lifted, sending deep smile lines across his face. I knew this was an invitation to ask questions, but I wasn't sure if I wanted the answers.

We stood like this for a while and when the child returned to the old man's side, I felt such a deep sense of love and respect for both of them. It was something that transcended words. It hung in the pine trees, it danced in the flames, and it nestled into the fog that was rising over the lake.

The old man took the boy's hand in his and they turned and walked into the darkness. As Howie returned to my side with a stick in his mouth, the old guy turned and smiled at me.

"It's all going to be ok," he said. "Trust me. Just be careful on those stairs."

Places to Be

Matt Melo

The first drop of rain lands on my watch as I check the time. 12.47pm. Shit, I'm late. I panic, as the water thickens and I feel it start to soak through my shirt. I look around for shelter, the last thing I need is for him to see me in a state like this. A wet, emotional mess. Across the street I spot a cafe. 'Hit Me Caffeine One More Time'. I chuckle. Without a second thought I run over and step inside.

I walk in, and the rain outside suddenly stops, the sun beaming through the big shopfront window. How odd. But I'm here now, and a coffee seems like a good distraction from my task today.

'Grab a seat love, I'll bring the menu over in a sec.' A beautiful blonde with a dazzling smile says from behind the counter. I peek over, and she is wearing a red, leather catsuit.

The cafe is empty, except for an old man and a young boy. The child waves, smiling widely at me. The old man sizes me up and down and rolls his eyes. I nod at them both, hoping that's the end of it, but the boy runs over.

'Look! Look!' He says, holding out both his hands. I look at what he's holding. They appear to be action figures. My stomach drops. A memory of my own childhood unlocked.

'This is Kimberley, and this is Tommy. They're my favourites.'

Without hesitating I take them out of his hands, and bring them to my face for a closer inspection. I can't believe it. They're just like the ones I used to have.

'Hey! Give me back my Power Rangers!' The child complains, bringing me back into the moment.

'Oh, sorry!' I reply. 'I used to have toys just like these.'

The boy is still sizing me up, concerned I'm not going to return his toys. I look at them one more time. The green Power Ranger and the pink Power Ranger. The green one even has the same missing chip of paint in the back of his head from where I dropped him in the playground.

I look at the old man, he appears to be holding back a laugh.

'Here you go.' I say to the boy, handing back his toys. Only now do I realise how

familiar he looks. Actually, not just familiar. Familial. He has the same brown curly locks I used to have as a boy, which I now keep cropped and tidy. He has the same missing front tooth I had when I was nine. God, that took ages to grow in.

I go to sit at the furthest table away from them, but the old man points to the one right next to theirs and says, 'Here.'

I don't know why, but I obey.

The blonde waitress comes over handing me a menu. I'm shocked by the options. I'm about to question them, but this day has already been weirder than expected, so I decide to just go with it and order.

'Can I have a... "Stronger Than Yesterday Espresso" please?'

'You should've gone for a "Toxic Tea".' The old man says. 'It's sharp and tangy. You need that today.'

The waitress looks at me, but I decide to double down. "'Stronger than yesterday. Espresso. Extra bitter.'

'That sounds disgusting. I hate coffee.' The boy grumbles.

'I can't drink coffee anymore. It keeps me up at night.' The old man complains.

'Well, I want coffee. I need it.' I demand.

The waitress walks away.

'Big day today?' The old man asks, in a way that implies he knows the answer.

'In a way.' I reply, straightening my shirt and dabbing the damp on my shoulders with tissues. This does little to help.

'Oooooo are you getting married?' The boy asks.

'What? No. Why would you ask that?' I reply, more aggressively than I intended.

'Because you are dressed really nicely. That's a very white shirt.' The boy replies innocently, while playing with his toys.

'Thank you.' I soften, admiring how carefully he is playing with them. I learned my lesson after the playground incident. 'I'm actually about to do the opposite.' I sigh.

'Good for you.' The old man interjects. 'It's very brave to choose yourself. You'll come to see that.'

'What are you talking about?' The boy asks, confused.

'I'm actually getting divorced today. I'm going to sign the final papers.'

'What does that mean?' he asks.

'You ask a lot of questions.' The old man chimes in. 'I like that about you, kid.'

'It means... I was married, but I'm not going to be anymore.' I spell it out.

'Why not? Don't you love your wife?'

The old man laughs, and I join in.

'I loved my partner very much. My husband.' I correct, then continue, 'But... we didn't work out. So I decided to leave.'

'Wow you have a husband?' The boy asks, intrigued. 'Is that allowed?'

'Of course it's allowed. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise.' The old man says.

The boy looks at his Power Ranger toys. I know what he's thinking.

'I want to marry Tommy.' He whispers.

'Don't we all?' I say in unison with the old man. I look into his eyes for the first time properly. I see it in him too. The familiarity. Brown, sunken eyes, with a world of stories floating in the irises. Plus, he's kind of a silver fox. Good for him.

'Maybe don't tell anyone that, though.' I whisper to the boy. I'm certain the old man couldn't hear it, but he nods in agreement.

'You look great by the way.' The old man says in a reassuring way as he eyes me up and down. 'He'd never admit it to you, but he'll be thinking it. He'll spend the rest of his life wishing he'd made more of an effort to make you stay.'

'Oh, thanks.' That's all I can manage.

'I mean it.' The old man is firm, 'I know it. And you will come to know it too, eventually. Maybe he'll tell you himself, maybe he won't, but in time, you'll learn it to be true.'

The waitress comes over with my tiny espresso. It's in a take away cup.

'Oh, I was going to drink that here.'

'No! Don't go. Play with me. I love making up stories for my Power Rangers. I haven't even shown you the blue and the yellow and the red ranger yet!' I remember the hours I used to waste away, fighting my own imaginary monsters with my Power Rangers. Except, they weren't really wasted were they? I learnt so much about myself, my creativity, my strength.

As if reading my mind, the old man says, 'None of it was ever a waste. Not back then,' he looks to the boy, 'And not now.'

Where the fuck am I? What is going on? And... Why does this make sense to me, in some peculiar and wonderful way?

'But yes, you must take that to go.' The old man's words snap me back to reality. 'You've got papers to sign.'

I stand up, take the coffee and walk out of the cafe. The sun is shining, my shirt is fully dry, and I have places to be.

We need to debunk harmful gender norms in school

Laura Stocker

I was thrilled to join the Visualising Queer Spaces and Utopias workshop and share a bit about a project I'm working on. Many thanks to Helen for kindly inviting me along to say a few words!

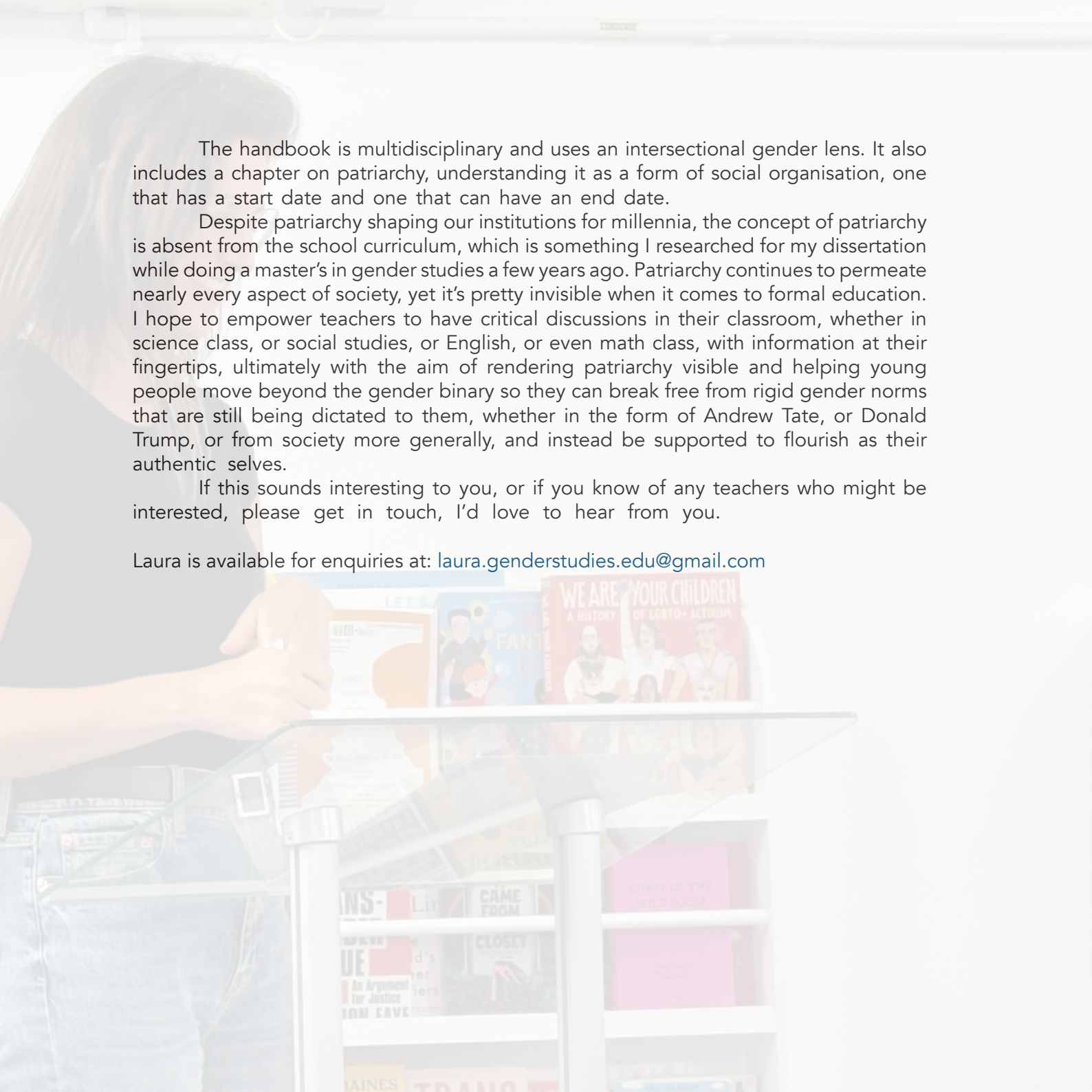
It's perhaps not so creative in the 'creative writing sense', but it is certainly a writing project with utopian visions. Last year, I wrote an article for Voice Male magazine calling for the need to debunk harmful, binary gender norms through school education, and now I'm writing a handbook for teachers with information and strategies on how to go about doing that.

In the face of rising misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia, including among youth, and a retrenchment of the sex binary (which is scientifically inaccurate!), the education system needs to do better in tackling this, and equipping students with tools to think critically about the gender binary and about how the world is set up under patriarchy and other power structures—and encourage them to think about how the world could look differently.

The teacher handbook centres on debunking several myths about men, women, sex, and gender that still tend to circulate as truth in society today. They are also stereotypes that children continue to be socialised under.

Ideas like men are naturally more aggressive than women because of testosterone, or that men are rational while women are emotional. Or that there are only two sexes and two genders, which continues to erase and deny the existence of intersex, transgender, and nonbinary or genderqueer people.

A lot of work has been done in academia, in science and social science, to debunk many biological misconceptions about men and women and also to recover women's history and queer history, but this information hasn't really filtered into the mainstream, nor the education system. With this handbook, I'm hoping to help bridge this gap between academia and K12.



The handbook is multidisciplinary and uses an intersectional gender lens. It also includes a chapter on patriarchy, understanding it as a form of social organisation, one that has a start date and one that can have an end date.

Despite patriarchy shaping our institutions for millennia, the concept of patriarchy is absent from the school curriculum, which is something I researched for my dissertation while doing a master's in gender studies a few years ago. Patriarchy continues to permeate nearly every aspect of society, yet it's pretty invisible when it comes to formal education. I hope to empower teachers to have critical discussions in their classroom, whether in science class, or social studies, or English, or even math class, with information at their fingertips, ultimately with the aim of rendering patriarchy visible and helping young people move beyond the gender binary so they can break free from rigid gender norms that are still being dictated to them, whether in the form of Andrew Tate, or Donald Trump, or from society more generally, and instead be supported to flourish as their authentic selves.

If this sounds interesting to you, or if you know of any teachers who might be interested, please get in touch, I'd love to hear from you.

Laura is available for enquiries at: laura.genderstudies.edu@gmail.com

Neuroqueer

Frankie Pittwright

My name is Frankie, I'm a dyslexic, queer woman, partner, parent and psychotherapist. I use the term neuroqueer as it embraces the intertwined relationship between my queer identity and my neurodivergent one. For me, it is an expansive term, as it is not something I am but something I am doing in the world, having a relationship with our culture as both a knowledgeable insider and a critical outsider, questioning and creating and dreaming up something better for all of us. As a therapist, all my work revolves around issues of identity, from those with neurodivergent individuals, the LGBTQ+ community and those who have experienced foster care or adoption. I also provide training and workshops to schools and community groups on how to support LGBTQ+ young people and families, believing that understanding and connection pave the way to acceptance. I am passionate about the power of community and run a little queer book group in rural Somerset and have recently set up a CIC, *This is Where*, to try and create more safe spaces where they are so desperately needed.

If I trace the path my life has taken, the turning points have often been other people's stories—generally, stories of hardship, suffering, and resilience. Each time someone has been generous enough to share their story with me, they have allowed me to enter their reality and connect with their humanity, revealing that they are not different from me; they have just been dealt a different hand in life.

The stories I have heard over 20 years of working with some of the strongest and most vulnerable people in our society have changed me, shaping me into an activist passionate about social change. Recently, I have been researching how therapists with minority identities, who have experienced marginalisation and oppression, work with clients from minorities who share similar experiences.

As a therapist, the essence of my work revolves around stories and change. I have the privilege to experience the dedication my clients show to themselves and their journeys toward healing. Hearing their stories and witnessing their pain has repeatedly led me to question why the people around them often continue to contribute to their

suffering. Why do families, communities, and colleagues seem unable to change their behaviours and beliefs to alleviate the pain of those they love and live alongside?

When my clients start working with me, I am a stranger, and in some ways, as a therapist, I remain one. My clients don't know the details of my personal life; I don't share things that happened on the weekend, my spiritual beliefs, or what my family looks like. However, when clients find the power and strength to share their stories with me, they change me and shape how I show up in the world. I wonder why this doesn't happen for those closest to them and what I can do about it.


During my research, I came across the idea of courtesy stigma, which emerged in the 1960s to explain how people close to someone who experiences societal stigma also experience stigma themselves. More recently, this concept has been examined in relation to professionals who support sex workers, revealing that even professionals can face courtesy stigma.

I feel this in my own life. When people ask me what I do, I mention working with minority and marginalised clients, sharing my passion for supporting neurodivergent and queer individuals. I notice the awkward pause, the rise of discomfort in my listener as they avert their eyes, how the space between us thickens and becomes heavier and the way our conversation changes. It reminds me of the many responses I have received when I have come out over and over again over the last 20 years.

This got me thinking about how the people whose support we need the most are often scared of the reception they will get in society as a result of their connection to us. They're scared of rejection, of being ostracised, just like we are. It feels important to recognise this because it blurs the line between them and us. In some way, it makes me feel closer to the struggle of those who reject or revile us.

It also makes me consider how stories shape our understanding of right and wrong. From before we can speak, we absorb the cultural narratives around us—stories about how to be good and valuable and about the consequences of transgressing social norms. Examples range from Icarus flying too close to the sun to pre-2010 Disney films, to the fate of female pop stars in the 90s. These stories saturate our culture, illustrating how women who defy the virgin/Madonna narrative are harshly punished. And how anyone who steps outside social norms is mad, bad or dangerous to know.

In the research, these narratives are referred to as Master Narratives, which shape our perceptions of one another and our worth. They often dictate the path of our lives. In



my journey to embrace my queerness, I had to rewrite some of these stories, changing my understanding of my femininity to realise that it could exist outside a heterosexual relationship. More recently, I have been rewriting the narratives I told to and about myself as a neurodivergent person, about not being clever or academic enough, about being too sensitive and emotional.

As a therapist, I often observe master narratives dictating how we perceive our failures as humans, particularly in the roles we've been assigned, such as 'good' daughter, wife, mother, or woman, or 'good' man, son, husband, or father. These narratives can be complicated by our neurotype, gender, sexuality, race, or relationship style. Recently, I've also seen the emergence of narratives about being 'good' queers, autists, or minorities, even as we transgress these traditional stories. For example, you can be non-binary only if you look androgynous, or a trans woman only if you conform to certain ideas of femininity and pass. Similarly, the narrative of a 'good' autistic person might hinge on being a maths genius tapped by GCHQ, and a 'good' disabled person may feel pressured to perform stoicism and gratitude for public consumption.

Even within marginalised communities, rather than dismantling these master narratives, we often merely adjust them to include a select few. The passing trans woman often conforms to traditional ideas of womanhood, while the autistic math genius aligns with white, patriarchal standards of success. These restrictive narratives ultimately don't serve any of us.

So, how can we rewrite these stories to serve and celebrate everyone, allowing us to express our full humanity? In this rewriting, we could eliminate the stigma that keeps us trapped in ill-fitting roles we long to escape.

Master narratives can be seen as cultural voices steeped in colonial, patriarchal, queer-phobic, ableist, and neurotypical ideology. Recognising this allows us to reframe our understanding of the ableist, racist, homophobic, or otherwise bigoted thoughts we experience—thoughts that do not originate within us but are shaped by external narratives we've been exposed to since birth. Those narratives define our understanding of goodness, worthiness, and value.

When these thoughts arise, instead of suppressing them or feeling ashamed, we can acknowledge their presence. We can challenge these ideas compassionately by asserting, "Hey, voice of the culture, I don't agree with you. I don't think that person is worth less. Perhaps I wish I could be more like them. Maybe I want to feel freer or louder. I'd like to give myself permission to be more authentically me."

Embracing our freedom allows us to dream our true selves into being. The grip of master narratives often leads us to police one another, keeping ourselves small and disconnected. It's vital to note that the most marginalised and oppressed individuals in our society embody dissent that challenges these cultural narratives, which is a beautiful aspiration for all of us.

Despite living in a world rife with racism, transphobia, ableism, patriarchy, colonialism, and misogyny, we have the power to choose how much these ideas shape us. We can write a different story for ourselves—though it's a lifelong journey, it is certainly worthwhile. By listening to each other's stories and acknowledging the impact of cultural narratives on our beliefs, we open opportunities for personal and cultural growth, pushing the boundaries of what it means to be an acceptable, worthy, and valuable human being.

My clients often ask me, "Where is the space for me? Where can I feel safe, seen, valued, and heard?" I strive to create that space in therapy with them, even as I recognise that it's not enough. I also understand that these spaces will never be perfect, as we ourselves are imperfect. As marginalised individuals—often with intersectional identities—we experience microaggressions even in our safe spaces. A troubling comment, an inappropriate look, or a boundary-crossing touch can make us feel unwelcome or unsafe.

Yet, we must keep trying to show up in search of safety while also striving to provide it for others. This responsibility must disproportionately fall on those of us who benefit from privileges associated with whiteness, able-bodiedness, cisgender identity, class, or economic status. Understanding our privileges, embracing our boundaries and recognising our limitations allows us to connect across divides created by fear or stigma. We need to rewrite our personal and cultural narratives and connect by sharing our stories in ways that eliminate shame and create space for freedom. The truest, safest, and most beautiful place to belong is within ourselves. When we rewrite our own stories, we give ourselves permission to show up, to explore, to play and to be. Once we achieve that, no one can take it away from us, as we have cultivated that most sacred safety and belonging, that which we can find within ourselves.

In 2026, Frankie launched her CIC, This is Where: <https://this-is-where.co.uk>

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