

EQUALI-T

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Abstract

Equali-T is a song written in response to *For Women Scotland Ltd v The Scottish Ministers* (2025). In this accompanying text, I provide a background to the case and a reflection on the events, texts, pictures and thoughts that inspired them. You can listen to the song: [Equali-T by SJ Cooper-Knock](#).

Keywords: trans rights; queer legal judgment; equality; justice; solidarity.

[A] AUTHOR'S NOTE

Primarily, I am indebted to Surabhi Shukla, whose legal knowledge, analysis, and support have fundamentally shaped and catalysed everything that has followed in the wake of the judgment. I also want to thank the wonderful folk at the *Law in Context* podcast (Anna Ventouratou, Sotirios Lekkas and Kitty Turner) who provided Sandra Duffy, Surabhi Shukla and myself with the space to process this judgment together.

This piece was written following the encouragement of Katie Jukes, whose own artistic practice continues to be moving and generative in countless ways. Working with Katie Jukes and Surabhi Shukla on the Queer Parenting lecture by performance in 2024 led to my first songs about queer life, love, and law. This has since culminated in a Queer Musical Storytelling project (funded by the AHRC Hub for Public Engagement with Music Research), which also includes Fiona Moorcroft. Our project is a constant source of joy and hope in troubled times.

The harmonies on this piece were inspired by the gorgeous lines that Scoobz riffed with me in an earlier jamming session. The recording that you can hear above was hastily made on my iPad during travels between the UK and South Africa, and the recording is the poorer for missing her voice and her musicality. Hopefully, there are echoes in here of her inimitable style.

My thanks also to Radhika Govinda and Laura Hirst, for reading this draft and for their treasured friendships. Thanks also to the Editorial Team for their support and guidance. All mistakes are my own.

[B] NOTES ON THE SONG

“This doesn’t seem real,” is so common a phrase that one has to wonder – what sort of reality did everyone expect?— Ryka Aoki (2022)

I saw the picture first. In the foreground: microphones push aside a spray of flowers to inch closer to the action. In the centre: Susan Smith and Marion Calder beam at each other as they raise their champagne glasses for a toast. Beneath them, quotes from the judges who had decided that—in the name of clarity and coherence—the definition of “woman” in the Equality Act 2010 was determined by a person’s “biological sex”. Later, I saw the picture tweeted by JK Rowling: cigar in one hand, drink in the other. Rowling was reportedly toasting the news from her superyacht in the Bahamas with the caption, “I love it when a plan comes together. #SupremeCourt #WomensRights.”

The carnivalesque cruelty of these images—and the irony of women celebrating a verdict that would roll back feminist freedoms—could have been lifted from a Brechtian play. When politics insists on being a perverse theatrical production, the need to speak back through art is clear.

In the warm and rainy days that followed the judgment, I wrangled personally, politically and academically with the verdict, and its implications. This was not a solitary journey. I mourned with friends whose lives, identities, loves, and occupations were thrown into question. I connected with communities building support and understanding in a shifting legal landscape.

The judgment landed in the midst of termtime. As the Equality and Human Rights Commission (2025) issued its “interim update”, I frantically re-penned the lecture I was preparing for my undergraduate class on solidarity. In the evenings, Surabhi Shukla and I pored over legal judgments and political commentaries as we prepared for a podcast with *Law in Context*. At the same time, we were putting the final touches to a grant proposal to run queer musical storytelling workshops in Bradford and Sheffield with Katie Jukes (a poet and lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan University) and Fiona Moorcroft (from Sheffield’s LGBTQ+ charity for young people SAYiT). At a time when solidarity within and beyond queer communities was fracturing, we hoped that poetry, music, and song could create new spaces for understanding and action. With the discourse around trans folk sharpening to a knife’s edge, our proposal had never felt more relevant or more daunting.

This was the context in which I wrote *Equali-T*. When artists are asked for a personal reflection on their work there is often a sense of what

“personal” should sound like: a singular, poetic voice. The insides of my mind are far messier: fragments of images, legal judgments, poetry, scholarship and song are tangled together: a jumble of recitation and argumentation. Below I offer a brief background to the Supreme Court case, so that readers who are unfamiliar with the judgment can understand the broader context. Beneath that, my lyrics are accompanied by some of the texts, pictures, and ideas that influenced them. This queer knot of things, which veers at times between the obvious and the abstract, offers you an insight into my thoughts. Artists always relinquish control over the meaning of their art when they release it into the world. Do not feel you have to read these words to engage *Equali-T*: you are free to listen and to make the song your own.

The music for this piece developed as a counterpoint to my words: a reflection of jarring juxtaposition we have seen throughout this case where talk of “equality”, “clarity” and “safety” is used to justify discrimination, uncertainty, and harm.

[C] BACKGROUND

In *For Women Scotland Ltd v The Scottish Ministers* (2025), the Supreme Court was asked to determine the meaning of “woman”, “man”, “male”, “female”, and “sex” in the Equality Act 2010. This case had evolved in response to a seemingly innocuous piece of legislation: in 2018, the Scottish Parliament passed the Gender Representation on Public Boards (Scotland) Act 2018. It gave public authorities a “gender representation objective”: 50% of the non-executive members on their public boards should be women. It stated that “women” included cis women and trans women. The latter were defined as those “living as a woman and proposing to undergo, is undergoing, or has undergone a process (or part of a process) for the purpose of becoming female” (Gender Representation on Public Boards (Scotland) Act 2018, asp 4). In other words, trans women who were protected under the category of “gender reassignment” within the Equality Act 2010.

In a different context, this Act may have gone unnoticed or unopposed. But this was 2018. The previous year, the Scottish Government had held public consultations around its proposed reforms to the Gender Recognition Act 2004 (Scottish Government 2020). That Act, responding to the *Goodwin* (2002) judgment in the European Court of Human Rights, enabled trans men and women to have their gender legally recognised “for all purposes” through a Gender Recognition Certificate (GRC) (Gender Recognition Act 2004). This legal recognition had material consequences.

Prior to this Act, for example, a person's birth certificate permanently stated the sex they were assigned at birth. This paperwork could cast a long and inescapable shadow over trans people's lives, potentially outing them at every bureaucratic turn. It also impacted the rights and recognition they could access, from protection against discrimination to pensions and marriage (Goodwin 2002).

The shift was significant but limited (Renz 2020).¹ As UK documentation only uses the categories "male" and "female", the change did not accommodate non-binary and gender queer folk. The process of obtaining a certificate could also be emotionally and materially taxing (ibid; TransActual nd). As of March 2025, 9633 of the 96,000 trans men and women in the UK had obtained a GRC (Jones 2025).

In light of these difficulties, the Scottish Government announced its intention to make the process for obtaining GRCs more accessible and "less bureaucratic and intrusive" (Scottish Government 2017). One proposal it explored was to enable recognition through self-declaration rather than medical assessment (Government Equalities Office 2018):² an approach successfully taken by many other countries, starting with Argentina in 2012 (Nathanson & Outright Team 2024).

While their proposals received majority support (Scottish Government 2018), they also sparked resistance, from the halls of Holyrood to the discussion threads of Mumsnet. It was in the latter that Trina Budge, Marion Calder, and Susan Smith met, forming "For Women Scotland" in June 2018 (Rhodes 2024). For Women Scotland argued that "woman" was defined by biological sex, that there are only two sexes, and that biological sex is immutable. Recognising this, they argued, was key to protecting (cis) women's rights. For Women Scotland are opposed to what they termed "gender ideology". This means that they oppose people determining their own gender identity and they also deprioritize the importance of gender in contrast to biological sex (Rhodes 2024).

¹ See also (Whittle 2006). Whittle focuses on the question of marriage in the context of the Act, but this is an excellent article for highlighting the compromises made in the act—including around the language of sex and gender.

² The demand for medical testimony has been criticized for pulling an intimate, personal truth into the realm of psychiatry in a way that introduces medical "gatekeeping"; casting trans lives as a psychological problem; and reinforcing rigid, binary sex/gender distinctions (Cowan 2025). That said, it is critical that clinicians and clinical processes are seen as the diverse and complex processes that they are, remembering that "clinicians" and "trans people" are not two mutually exclusive groups and that many clinicians have provided important advocacy for trans rights (Richards & Ors 2014).

Those who argue for self-identification, however, argue that medicalization cannot shed its long associations with transphobic and homophobic stigma nor its tendency to assume power, rather than to cede or enable it in others (Cowan 2009).

When the Scottish Government issued its statutory guidance in 2020, For Women Scotland mobilised. In 2022, they filed a petition for a judicial review, stating that the definition of “woman” in this guidance did not match that found in the Equality Act 2010. They concluded that the Scottish Government had gone “outwith the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament” by including trans women (*For Women Scotland Ltd v The Lord Advocate & Ors* 2022: paragraph 1). This was initially dismissed on the basis that the definition of “woman” had not been changed. Instead, trans women were included. This was supported by European Union law on the basis that “in discrimination matters, trans people are to be included as being of the sex to which they have reassigned” (ibid: paragraph 16). On appeal, however, For Women Scotland were successful. Lady Dorrian concluded that the statutory guidance “conflates and confuses two separate and distinct protected characteristics” and, in doing so, the Scottish Parliament had gone beyond its legislative competence (ibid: paragraphs 39, 40).

In response, the Scottish Government narrowed its inclusion of trans women in its statutory guidance, including only those who held a GRC. For Women Scotland subsequently filed another petition for judicial review, arguing that the Scottish ministers had made an “error in law” by including trans women with a GRC in their definition of women. Their petition was dismissed and their appeal was also dismissed, after which they took the matter to the Supreme Court.

This, then, was what the Supreme Court was asked to decide: what were the meanings of “woman”, “female”, “man”, “male”, and “sex” within the Equality Act 2010 (*For Women Scotland Ltd vs The Scottish Ministers* 2025: paragraphs 8, 25)? And, more specifically, should a trans woman with a GRC be included as a “woman” within the Act (ibid)?.

The Court decided that, within the Act, the terms “man” and “woman” referred to “biological sex” (*For Women Scotland Ltd v The Scottish Ministers* 2025). Three findings were at the heart of the judgment: Firstly, the judges stated that protection against sex discrimination was originally introduced in the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 in which “man” and “woman” were defined by biological sex (ibid: paragraphs 51, 265). Neither the subsequent amendment to this Act (1999) nor the amendment and consolidation that occurred with the introduction of the Equality Act 2010, they stated, had changed the meanings of these terms (ibid: paragraphs 62, 167, 265). Secondly, they found that the Gender Recognition Act 2004 meant that the GRC applied in all cases unless there was a stated exception in that Act or in “any other enactment or any

subordinate legislation” (ibid: paragraph 75). They found that while the Equality Act did not explicitly state that the Gender Recognition Act 2004 should not apply, it was “incoherent and unworkable” if it was applied (ibid: paras 197, 210, 264). Therefore, it could be seen as an exception to the Gender Recognition Act 2004. Finally, they stated that trans people were still protected from direct and indirect discrimination through the Equality Act, so that this ruling would not “disadvantage” trans people or weaken the protections they received (ibid: paragraph 264). As this case dealt with an interpretation within the Equality Act 2010 its full impact upon other laws, policy and practice still need to be determined.

This judgment was followed by “interim guidance” by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) (2025) stating that trans women should not be admitted to single-sex spaces for women and trans men should not be admitted to single-sex spaces for men. Likewise, associations of gay men should exclude trans men and associations of lesbians should exclude trans women. Furthermore, there could be instances in which trans women can be excluded from spaces for men and trans men could be excluded from spaces for women. Decisions should be made on the basis of whether they are a “proportionate means for achieving a legitimate aim”—the basis upon which discrimination is defensible in the Equality Act (2010). However, “trans people should not be put in a position where there are no facilities for them to use” (ibid). The Good Law Project and others have asked for a judicial review arguing that this is either “unlawful” or constitutes a “breach” of the Human Rights Act 1998 (*The Good Law and Ors v the EHRC* 2025: paragraphs 1-3). This was the situation as of August 2025, when this article was finalised: it is likely that the legal and policy landscape will continue to shift.

You said you wanted clarity, so let me make it clear
 You won't get equality through persecution, dear
 They asked for definitions, here's what you should have said:
 Trans women are women, trans men are men

As Lord Hodge reads his handing-down speech in slow, deliberate tones, images of other courts reel through my mind.

The court is well aware of the strength of feeling on all sides.

How many people have been forced to listen to officials patiently explain the reasonableness of injustice in carefully articulated syllables?

On the one hand, women ... On the other hand ... the trans community ...

How many people have forced themselves to stay in place for long enough to learn about *their place* in society? How many have willed their wilfulness³ away so that they could witness how the cutting edge of the law would be sharpened to *keep* them in place?

The E[quality] A[ct] must be interpreted in a clear and consistent way ...

How many people have watched as technicalities are deftly used to shave away the substance of law and justice?

In the wake of the judgment, commentators have highlighted the interpretations that could have paved the way towards a trans inclusive judgment (eg Wigley 2025). Instead, the judgment wielded words within the Equality Act against the purpose of the Act itself.⁴ It did so in the name of clarity and coherence, but the Court's arguments created empirical and legal contradictions of their own (Good Law Project nd). The result is an Equality Act that undermines equality.

No-one's equal until we're all equal

No-one's free till we're all free

You can't ignore the T in equality

Later that night

I held an atlas in my lap

ran my fingers across the whole world

and whispered

where does it hurt?

it answered

everywhere

everywhere

Everywhere. (Warsan Shire nd)

Struggles for justice in our world are not just ubiquitous, they are interconnected. Intersecting forms of oppression weave their way from our intimate lives to the overarching political institutions within and around which we live (Mohanty 2005; Crenshaw 2013). Concepts such as equality are either expansive or they are empty. If we are striving for an

³ On wilfulness, see Ahmed (2017).

⁴ For more on this and the purposive interpretation of the Equality Act that was possible, listen to Surabhi Shukla's contributions to Ventouratou and Lekkas' *Law in Context* podcast (2025).

equality that excludes other people or rests upon their subjugation, what we are actually striving for is not equality at all: it is power and privilege.

What is true of equality is also true of freedom. The lyrics in my refrain echo the words of Fannie Lou Hamer, “nobody’s free until everybody’s free” (Hamer in Brooks & Houck 2011). Like many Black activists across the globe, she knew the urgency of resisting forms of subjugation made in the name of other people’s freedom (Kelley 2022).

As I write the lyrics, an image of the iconic “Pits and Perverts” poster flashes through my mind: a testament to beautiful, challenging, messy, and powerful solidarity offered by Lesbian and Gays Support the Miners (LGSM) in the midst of the miners’ strike of 1984-1985. Alongside other groups, like the Black Delegation to the Mining Communities and Women Against Pit Closures, LGSM recognized the transformational potential of different communities coming together, highlighting the interests they shared in the distinct struggles they faced (Kelliher 2021).

What was true then, is true now. The struggle for trans recognition cannot be separated from the struggles of the wider LGBTQ+ community, just as the struggles for trans women’s liberation cannot be separated from the struggles of women’s liberation more broadly. Both of these struggles also deeply intersect with struggles such as those against racism, class oppression, and ableism.

To believe that equality is a zero sum game—that you have more when someone else has less—is not just to miss an opportunity for collaboration. It is to misunderstand the very nature of the concept itself.

You said biology defines a woman and a man
Sex is complex these ain’t boxes that we all fit in
You trash intersex rights; ignore how things shift
What matters is the lives we lead, not some box a doctor ticks
But if certification, dear, is your grounds for legal fact
Why ignore the gender recognition act?

Not a boy Not a girl

You are my precious honey-drop.

Grow beyond the checkered boxes

Fill yourself as much with yourself

And be the reflection of truth—Vijayarajamallika (2020: translation of Aanalla Pennalla Kanmani—Neither a Boy Nor a Girl—a lullaby for an intersex baby)

The Supreme Court implies that relying on biological sex makes matters simple and scientific: we come into the world with a clear status as “male” or “female”. They reinforce this idea by referring to those with a GRC as having a “certificated sex” (*For Women Scotland Ltd v The Scottish Ministers* 2025: paragraph 6). In practice, cis people also have a “certificated sex”: the one recorded on their birth certificate.

Biological sex is not a simple, unassailable truth that exists beyond the ideologies and whims of society. Science is a social process: what it pays attention to, the categories it creates, and the biological markers it uses to signify those categories have always been “tangled with our ideas about gender” (Fausto-Sterling 2000: 4; Butler 2003). We have decided as a society to divide people into “male” and “female” and we have decided “what counts” in that definition. We have done this in the same way we have decided “what counts” when we label an object as a lamp, a bed, or a chair. That is why the categories we use to describe biological sex are called a “social construct”.

In reality, all of the elements included in our definition of biological sex—including gametes, genital appearance, chromosomes and hormones—vary across the population. By some estimates, 1.7% of the population—nearly two in every hundred people—do not neatly fit with society’s categorization of sex (Sax 2002).⁵ This was not considered in the judgment. Intersex people were not mentioned in its 88 pages, despite the consequences its words will hold.

Just as biological sex is complex, it is also mutable. From hysterectomies to genital reconstruction and hormonal treatment, people can remove or change most of the biological sex characteristics they have at birth. This happens for a whole range of reasons, for both trans and cis folk. In some cases, interventions may help people to feel more aligned with their gender identity: breast surgery for cis women and trans women alike can be seen as “gender-affirming care”. In other cases, people’s gender identity may remain stable *despite* shifts in their body that represent unwanted loss or change.

To decide what someone else’s body means—and to categorize their life accordingly—is reductive, inaccurate, and harmful. Feminists have been struggling for centuries to be free from the idea that biology encompasses women’s identity, destiny, and worth.⁶ To root the struggle for women’s liberation in a biologically bounded notion of “a woman” is to reconstruct

⁵ Sax (2002) argues that “intersex” covers a smaller number of people: approximately 0.02% people who have chromosomes associated with a different sex to their visible sex characteristics or visible sex characteristics that do not easily fall into the category of “male” or “female”.

the frames that feminists have fought to dismantle. I disagree with Catherine McKinnon on several issues,⁷ but a clip from her interview with Cristan Williams stays with me: “male dominant society has defined women as a discrete biological group forever. If this was going to produce liberation, we would be free” (McKinnon 2015).

This body is my last address (Ocean Vuong 2021).

Our bodies are far from unimportant. We live an embodied existence. But this is what matters: the meanings that people find in their own bodies; the lives they live through (or despite) them; and the way that society facilitates, frustrates, or curtails them in doing so. The European Convention on Human Rights supports this focus on lived experiences and identities (Wigley 2025).

Trans people are a problem for those who are committed to ordering society by “biological sex”. Social structures are at their most powerful when they appear natural and, therefore, unquestionable. Some have read the Supreme Court judgment as an attempt to forcibly assimilate trans folk into the sex they were assigned at birth. They focus on the exclusion of trans women from spaces and services designated for women. But the judgment goes further: it also legitimizes the exclusion of trans men from women’s services on the basis of their “masculine appearance” (*For Women Scotland Ltd v The Scottish Ministers* 2025: paragraph 221). This means trans women may be excluded from a service for women on the basis that they were not assigned female at birth. Meanwhile, trans men may be excluded from that same space because they look “too masculine” (ibid). This is more than forcible assimilation, it is forcible exclusion: a punishment of trans people for their refusal to conform.

The question is how we all thrive, not if some of us exist
There were answers, there was evidence, why did you resist?
No trans voices in your court room, while trans folk die on the street
from the hate and fear you’re fostering, let me repeat ...

Robert Jones Jr (2015) once said: “We can disagree and still love each other unless your disagreement is rooted in my oppression and denial of my humanity and right to exist.”

⁶ This line of argument can be drawn through a diverse array of writers, including Wollstonecraft (1792); de Beauvoir (1997 [1949]); Oyewumi (1997); Menon (2012).

⁷ For example, on sex work, my views align with Smith and Mac (2018).

That is why talk of the “trans debate” is damaging: it suggests that it is acceptable to debate the legitimacy and existence of trans people.

Questioning the legitimacy of trans existence is both harmful and futile. The disbelief of gender-critical thinkers is not going to change the identity of trans people. The reality of another person’s gender is not dependent upon our delight or disgust. The same is true for their sexual orientation. Our emotions and actions cannot create or destroy these identities and desires. All they can do is help, hamper, or destroy the lives of the people who hold them.

The stakes for trans people in this case were clear: transphobia is on the rise in the United Kingdom (UK). It is fed by a moral panic that suggests that trans identities are not real and that trans people represent a threat to the rights and safety of others. In reality, trans people have always existed and they frequently do so in the face of disproportionate rates of violence. Between 2018 and 2023, transphobic hate crime statistics increased 186% (Stonewall 2023). Perhaps the most marked indicators of harm, however, are the disproportionately high rates of suicidality amongst trans people, in contrast to their cis counterparts (Bassetti 2024).

And yet, the judges did not hear from any trans voices in their courtroom. Instead, they took written submissions from Sex Matters, “the lesbian interveners” (the LGB Alliance, The Lesbian Project, and Scottish Lesbians), the EHRC, and Amnesty International. They allowed oral submissions from Sex Matters and the EHRC. Both Sex Matters and the Lesbian Intervenors took an unambiguously gender-critical approach to the case. The Lesbian Intervenors argued that their capacity to gather—and their identity as lesbians—was threatened by the recognition of trans women as women (Lesbian Intervenors 2025). The neutrality of the EHRC on trans rights has also been brought into question.

The judgment took for granted that the gender-critical perspectives it heard were representative of women and lesbians more broadly. It also overlooked the trans-inclusive stances of practitioners and service users in key spaces, such as domestic violence shelters (Pain 2021; Stonewall & nfpSynergy 2023).

Lesbians feature heavily in the judgment, being referenced 23 times in total. This is not the visibility that most lesbians are fighting for. I think of my friend sauntering into our local Pride with her “butches against transphobia” T-shirt. She is emblematic of the fact that cis lesbian and cis bisexual women have the most positive view of trans people in the

country (Just Like Us 2023; YouGov 2023).

Following the judgment, spaces designated for lesbians exclude trans women. The “lesbian interveners” entered the case with the aim of defending the capacity for lesbians to identify and associate on their own terms. Their testimonies are responsible for one of the most significant legal limits on lesbian gatherings in the country’s history.

Rather than questioning the existence of trans people, we need to ask: How can we build a world in which everything “we value and have reason to value” is recognized and allowed to thrive (Sen 1999)?

For those with 70k to spare, I've got ideas for that
Tackle violence, poverty, healthcare, and the gender pay gap
Build solidarity with all the struggles going on
'Cause cis women they have problems, but trans women ain't one

Black leather tie, black leather gloves. Laverne Cox is on a talk show making points as sharp and resplendent as her crisp suit jacket and her blunt-cut bob.

At the end of the day, trans people are less than one percent, trans people are not the reason you can't afford eggs ... I think they are focused on the wrong 1%.

In a world where everyone is equal and everyone is free, there would be no billionaires. Diversifying the demographic of those at the top is no substitute for eliminating the inequality they represent. Unfortunately, this is not the world in which we live.

And so, in 2019, J K Rowling could give £70,000 to fund For Women Scotland’s legal appeal (Baska 2024). She has since established the JK Rowling Women’s Fund to support similar cases. Now, when I open Instagram, I see post after post making appeals: trans folk are having to take the money that could have been used to build community spaces or pay the rent, and pour it into fighting funds to defend their basic freedoms.

There are many threats to women and girls in the UK today. Misogyny is on the rise (Victims’ Commissioner 2025), violence against women and children affects one in 12 women in England and Wales (National Police Chiefs’ Council 2025), the successful prosecution of rape has dropped from 25% in 1981 to 2% (UK Parliament 2025), and women are disproportionately affected by our housing crisis (Foster 2017).

Meanwhile, the funding for organizations run for and by women and girls is in crisis (Rosa Fund 2024).

Excluding trans women is not going to help us tackle these issues. Instead, it is going to ratchet up the harms that trans people face and close down their access to safe spaces and services. It is also going to have a negative impact on cis women. This judgment—and the interim guidance that followed—encourages people to socially police who looks “like a woman” and who looks “like a man”. Cis women who are tall, hairy, muscular, or masc-presenting are particularly at risk. Already, we are seeing people being questioned, intimidated or rejected from the spaces they use in their everyday lives (*The Independent* 2025).

Cis women and cis girls are justified in feeling unsafe and unequal. Cis lesbians are justified in feeling that they lack the recognition, visibility, and spaces for community that they deserve. Trans people are not the source of these injustices and persecuting them is not the solution.

The roots of injustice they are tangled, they are deep
And scapegoats ain't no shortcut to the work of love and peace
But we can do this work together and the ending will be sweet
Where everyone is recognised, where everyone is free

*not back, let's not come back, let's go by the speed of
queer zest & stay up
there & get ourselves a little*

moon cottage (so pretty), then start a moon garden ...—Chen Chen (2020)

... There's a dream I have in which I love the world. I run from end to end like fingers through her hair. There are no borders, only wind. Like you, I was born. Like you, I was raised in the institution of dreaming. Hand on my heart. Hand on my stupid heart ...—Cameron Awkward-Rich (2019)

Hope can be a hard thing to hold in a hostile world. As Lalitha Kamath argues, we “need to be inspired by the messiness—indeed the muddiness—of being caught between estrangement and reclaiming, hope and hopelessness.”⁸

⁸ Written on the climate crisis, but applicable to this case (which is, of course, also in the context of that same crisis) (Kumar & Ors 2025).

Writing at the end of the 1970s, Stuart Hall (1979) encouraged activists to think about the specifics of the struggle they were facing and build the political imagination that they would need to fight them. These words remain relevant today. What he asks of us is challenging, transformative work. It requires us each to confront the scapegoats and spectres that we have held onto and the harms in which we have been complicit. We cannot, as Audre Lorde (1984) reminds us, “sett[l]e for anything less than the hard work of excavating honesty”. This is true within and between communities of struggle. Then, and only then, can we play our part in creating “Freedom Dreams” that are worthy of their name (Kelley 2022).

About the author

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