MIDLANDS CONFERENCE IN CRITICAL THOUGHT 2025

University of Derby
April 24th to April 25th, 2025

Call for Presentations – deadline January 7th 2025

The Call for Presentation Proposals is now open for the 2nd annual *Midlands Conference in Critical Thought* (MCCT), which will be hosted and supported by the University of Derby on April 24th and April 25th 2025.

The MCCT is an annual interdisciplinary conference that provides a forum for emergent critical scholarship, broadly construed. The conference is free for all to attend and follows a non-hierarchical model that seeks to foster opportunities for intellectual critical exchanges where all are treated equally regardless of affiliation or seniority. There are no plenaries, and the conference is envisaged as a space for those who share intellectual approaches and interests but who may find themselves at the margins of their academic department or discipline. The MCCT is an offshoot of the London Conference in Critical Thought (LCCT) and shares its approach and ethos.

There is no pre-determined theme for the MCCT. The intellectual content and thematic foci of the conference has been determined by the streams outlined in this document. Please look through the streams to see where your presentation submission will best fit, we welcome presentation proposals via a 500 word abstract – **PLEASE SUBMIT VIA A WORD DOCUMENT to** midlandscritical@gmail.com**.** Past programmes of the LCCT, MCCT and examples of stream outlines can be found on the website: http://londoncritical.org.

The accepted presentations will configure the panels that constitute the streams outlined in this document. For more information about the ethos and structure of the conference please visit http://londoncritical.org, and if you have any questions please email us at midlandscritical@gmail.com.

The deadline for presentation submissions is **Wednesday January 7th 2025**. Abstracts to be submitted via word and should not exceed **500 words** and should be sent to: midlandscritical@gmail.com,

Contents – stream proposals

1. **Building and Healing Communities that are Researching on/from the Margins**
   Dr Hasret Cetinkaya, Manchester Metropolitan University
   Dr Zainab Naqvi, Manchester Metropolitan University

What are the implications of designating research from and with the margins as ideological rather than scientific or meaningful? How does such an epistemological dismissal erase, silence or render such marginal knowledges as unintelligible?

This stream invites presentations that address the challenges of scholarship situated in 'two worlds': 'the one where we were free to study and learn like everyone else and the one where we were continually made aware that we were not like everyone else' (hooks 2010, p. 2).

We are exhausted by the contradictory promise of the university which places marginalised researchers' identities and research under heightened scrutiny and accountability because they are located on the 'colour line'. It is laborious to demand that we generously expend our time and effort in educating 'others' by insisting that we make knowledge-claims against the dominant paradigm of thinking. This enforced and expected generosity is burdensome and draining, keeping the researcher solely accountable for the differential 'norms of recognizability' into which they are thrown (Butler 2016, 7). And it is an experience for many of us in academic spaces: at conferences; in meetings; during publication processes and so many other interactions. Through this lived academic reality, we are constantly forced to prove our humanity and the legitimacy of our knowledge production. Following Harvey and Moten (2013), our labour is more than the university can bear, but not quite enough for the institution or 'commons' to recognise. It is within this bind, this 'hold' of the university, that we find ourselves calling out in search of new forms of communion and complicity with other like-minded and abject souls.

In light of these issues within the university-world, we welcome presentations that address how scholars on the margin can best cultivate spaces within the University that are built upon solidarity, connection(s), and healing, without presuming 'a nexus of activities like recognition and acknowledgement' (Harney and Moten, 2013, p. 5). We want to develop a space where there is no pressure to apologise, or hedge, or defend the foundations of our work and the critical, radical marginal traditions that they sit upon. Our hope with putting forward this stream is to curate a holding space for scholars to come together and share ideas about how to work against university cultural norms and practices that place us at risk, on the run and out of place in the spaces we work and create in.

Presentations may address (but are not limited to) the following themes:

- Fugitive Knowledge(s) Production and Practice(s)
- Antiracist Engagement with Academic Spaces
- Coalition Building in the Academy
- Spatial and Temporal Dimensions of Marginal Thinking in the Academy
- Critical Engagements with 'Safe Spaces' in Academia
- Developing an Academic 'Undercommons'
- Driving Knowledge Production and Research Underground

2. Can the Arts Aid Health?

Professor Susan Hogan, University of Derby, University of Nottingham

How can the arts aid health and healthcare practices?

How can the arts help us to think more critically about healthcare practices? Critical questions might be to think about the systemic problems of healthcare and how the arts may help to elucidate these. For example, the power relations between medics and their patients have been explored (photographically by Jo Spence, for example). Iatrogenic illness is that caused by a physician or medical regime. Practices and procedures which can be counterproductive and illness-inducing form part of professional repertoires of behaviour.

Taking childbirth as an example, historically, birthing stools have been used in labour to let gravity help, for example. Mobility hastens childbirth and movement can help ease the pain and an example of an iatrogenic practice is that of putting labouring women in beds, or not allowing women to walk around, because of foetal monitoring equipment. There are many iatrogenic practices embedded in hospital regimes, 'routine' induction of childbirth is another counter-productive but widespread practice. They are insidious and presented as normal or 'routine' and therefore reasonable. They are consequently hard for women to resist. Women's own intuitive feelings can be negated, but women in this state of vulnerability do not necessarily feel able to challenge the practices they encounter in hospital environments (McCourt 2009). Women can also become caught between different models of giving birth and trapped within power dynamics between obstetrics and midwifery with temporal pressures, caused by underfunding that force midwives to intervene, when non-intervention may be a better course. In practice, some women end up feeling violated by their birth experiences and are left in a state of profound shock.

Communities of interest have also taken up health issues, women campaigning for abortion rights via the arts, for example. Communities of interest have also included photographs explicitly exploring gay, lesbian or trans identities. A community harnessing the power of photography was the gay community on the issue of AIDS. AIDS threatened gayness as a positive social identity, especially when members of the gay male community started dying. In the 1980s AIDS was depicted in the mainstream press in profoundly negative ways, harnessing homophobic language around perversion and evil. As well as stimulating moral panic, homosexuals in general became ostracised or feared as sources of pollution and contagion. Indeed, at first there was some popular uncertainty about how the virus was transmitted, which caused understandable social anxiety; however, as it requires direct exchange of bodily fluids, it is not highly contagious (as compared with COVID-19). Yet, for some the mere presence of a known homosexual was seen as troubling. What can we learn from this successful artistic campaign to transform public perceptions via the arts?

Possible questions:

- How can the arts aid health and healthcare practices?
- Practices and procedures which can be counterproductive and illness-inducing form part of professional repertoires of behaviour. Can the arts make a difference in highlighting iatrogenic practices?
- How can the arts help to elucidate systemic problems of healthcare?
- How can the arts support public health endeavours - explore examples?
- A critical analysis of representations of health and illness across cultures is enlightening for health-care reform in what ways?
- Whilst health is a universal concern, the way that different populations relate to their health via the arts and humanities is less well-known – elucidate?
- We talk about 'creative health' but what does 'good' look like?
- How can arts engagement help health-care professionals to reflect productively in their practice?

3. **Critical spatial action for the place in crisis: experiences of rebellious citizenship**
   Dr Michele Grigo, Nottingham Trent University
   Dr Yesmean Khalil, Nottingham Trent University
   Dr Jenni Cauvain, Nottingham Trent University
   Dr Francesco Proto, Oxford Brookes University
   Dr Yahya Lavaf-Pour, University of the West of England

In urban and community studies, space is a multifaceted arena where the urban fabric intertwines with social dynamics, reflecting contestation and innovation. It influences people's lives through its use, planning, and construction, not only as a canvas for urban life but also as a critical site of resistance and experimentation, challenging distant and detached spatial organisation. Consequently, questions about space's purpose and governance become inherently political, fuelling movements like the "right to the city," which aims to construct a critical urban agenda spanning diverse social domains. Concepts like urban commons and Do-It-Yourself urbanism have emerged, adding complexity to dialogues on urban justice and intersecting issues like gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and disability. Simultaneously, the concept of crisis undergoes intricate theoretical exploration across various contexts, from philosophical underpinnings to critical theory. However, examining crisis states through the lens of public spaces and urban contexts reveals nuanced approaches that may decontextualise spatial narratives or uncritically accept the prevailing status quo. This misalignment between narrative and lived experience highlights missed opportunities to frame them as effective responses to crises. The question arises: Can the theoretical understandings of oppressed individuals effectively conceptualise and explicate crises through their lived experiences and acts of rebellion? In this quest, the synthesis of theoretical insights and experiential realities emerges as a pivotal avenue for advancing our comprehension of crises and their resolution, steering society toward more significant equity and justice.

Following up from the strand at last year's MCCT at NTU, and the rich, inter- and multi-disciplinary discussions we had around the material and social construction of space, for the 2025 conference in Derby we invite a more focused analysis and interpretation of individual and collective experiences of spatial action, production and contestation when crises emerge. The aim is to uncover what is behind the perception of spatial injustice (narratives) and materialisations (practices) and highlight their evolving core issues. The strand would aim to gather the crisis experience and support an emancipatory theorisation of spatial conditions, disentangling the emergence of crises within architectural places. Instead of being framed by a particular discipline, we are eager to hear about innovative methods to study place, its built and digital infrastructure, and people's experiences. The strand invites a plurality of approaches to collect spatial stories and urban and architectural manifestations that reveal circumstances of oppression. Contributions to this strand could approach, among other possible, the following issues:

Questioning the definition and interpretation of the city in ever-changing urban environments.

Citizens as performers of activism for sustainability, environmental defence and human rights.

Contested historical perception of conflict in times of culture wars.

Critical practices in contentious spaces in the right to the city.

Critical sustainability in architecture.

Housing and the right to a home.

Negative urban form as a social space.

Post-colonial re-colonisation experiences.

Socio-spatial manifestations of the energy crisis

4. Critical Whiteness Studies

Dr Andrew Fergus Wilson, University of Derby

Dr Teodora Todorova, University of Warwick

The proposed stream calls for presentations from scholars, students, activists and practitioners which critically exploring the variety of experiences and understandings of white British and European identities and their relationship to established and emerging minority and migrant communities. Working in the tradition of Critical Whiteness Studies (see Shona Hunter and Christi van der Westhuizen, eds., 2021; and Rikke Andreassen, Catrin Lundström, Suvi Keskinen, Shirley Anne Tate, eds, 2023) the stream seeks to unpick notions of 'whiteness' and British and European 'indigeneity' that can be used to counter narrow, exclusive versions that are associated with racist and neo-fascist ideologies. We want to create a space where open conversations about the risks, limitations, and possibilities of rethinking whiteness are welcomed and from which concrete and ongoing interventions in culture and policy can be developed.

We are particularly interested in proposals which address but are not limited to the following themes:

- Theorizing European 'indigeneity' and 'whiteness' in the context of centuries of European Transatlantic Imperialism, Colonialism, and Settler Colonialism.
- European Indigenous Community responses to the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and its implications for national self-determination and sovereignty.
- Critical reflections on what we can learn from critical indigenous studies across Europe, North and South America, Australia, New Zealand, the Middle East and North Africa.
- Critical indigenous cultural studies with a focus on the UK and Europe.
- A critical interrogation of the relationship between European indigeneity, nationalism, xenophobia, and resistance to neo-fascist resurgence.
- Whiteness and anti-Muslim racism.
- Whiteness, misogyny and anti-feminist activism.
- Whiteness and neo-fascism.
- Trans-nationalist white supremacist movements beyond Europe.
- Indigenous host cultures, anti-racist and pro-migrant solidarity organizing.
- Community organizing against anti-Gypsyism and anti-traveler racisms.

5. Digital Nomadic Commons: Reimagining Virtual Space and Digital Pedagogy

Sahjan Kooner, Independent Artist

In an era defined by digital interconnectivity and remote work cultures, the concept of a "digital nomadic commons" emerges as a critical framework for understanding new forms of virtual community, knowledge production, and resource sharing. This stream examines how digital technologies are reshaping our understanding of space, community, and collective practice, while questioning traditional institutional boundaries and hierarchies.

Building on Deleuze and Guattari's concept of nomad thought, we explore how digital spaces create new possibilities for commons-based practices while simultaneously raising questions about access, ownership, and power. The stream particularly investigates how virtual environments can foster genuine community and collective resource-sharing beyond traditional institutional frameworks.

Key Areas of Inquiry:

1. Digital Commons and Virtual Community Formation

- How do digital platforms enable new forms of commoning practices?

- What constitutes authentic community in virtual spaces?

- How can we create sustainable models for digital resource sharing?

2. Virtual Fugitive Pedagogy

- Drawing on Moten and Harney's concept of "study," how can digital spaces enable learning outside

traditional academic structures?

- What role do informal online communities play in knowledge production?

- How can virtual environments support collective intellectual practices?

3. Digital Aesthetics and Creative Practice

- How do digital tools and platforms shape contemporary artistic production?

- What new forms of collaborative creation emerge in virtual spaces?

- How can digital art practices embody and illuminate nomadic commons?

4. Critical Digital Infrastructure

- How can we design virtual spaces that resist corporate capture and surveillance?

- What alternative models exist for digital platform governance?

- How might decentralized technologies support nomadic commons?

Format and Contributions

Welcoming contributions that engage critically with digital nomadic commons through various formats:

- Theoretical presentations examining digital commons and virtual community

- Case studies of existing digital commoning practices

- Artistic works that explore digital nomadism

- Interactive workshops utilizing virtual platforms

- Presentations on alternative digital infrastructures

6. **Embodied Realities: The Body in Contemporary Thought and Culture**
   Michele Rees, Nottingham Trent University

The body is ever-present in contemporary thought. Everyday we are bombarded with messages about the latest diet, keep-fit programme, or cosmetic regime. Influencers tell us what products we should use, or what the latest fashion to cloth ourselves in is. The bodies of women, non-white, and trans-individuals are debated in the media and among politicians as seen in culture war arguments over bathroom spaces and the teaching (or not) of critical race theory. Trans-humanists point out that the body is becoming increasingly obsolete and claim that we are close to achieving immortality (by 2030 if futurist Ray Kurzweil is to be believed). It is clear that the body – its image, representation, health, and performance – has become a battleground of meaning, control, and identity where it is simultaneously a site of power and resistance (e.g. Foucault).

As a result, scholars and activists are calling for a re-examination of how societal norms around bodies create exclusion or reinforce oppressive structures. Marginalised bodies – queer, trans, disabled, racial – are at the forefront of these critical conversations, questioning the limits of representation, acceptance, and inclusion. This stream seeks to foster dialogue around the ways bodies are constructed, regulated, and perceived in society. It will interrogate how contemporary concerns such as body image, health, (dis)ability, race, gender, and technology impact the lived experience of the body.

This proposal calls for interdisciplinary engagement, bringing together fields such as sociology, philosophy, media studies, psychology, gender studies, and more. It invites submissions that which challenge conventional boundaries and push the discourse of embodiment into new territories. Applicants shouldn't limit themselves to presentations (though these are very welcome), but in particular consider demonstrations, performances or experimental workshops from across disciplines (practitioners, academics, artists etc.). Note that the conference takes place on a university campus and streams will likely be in classrooms so applicants should take space into consideration in their applications.

Topics could include, but are not limited to:

· Body image and identity

· Political bodies

· The body and technology

· Health, wellbeing, and (dis)ability

· The performative body

· Trauma and memory

· Gender, sexuality, and the body

· The body and artificial intelligence

This proposal has been written making use of generative AI for the development of ideas and text. The following prompt was used:

Provide some ideas for a proposal for a conference stream at a critical thought conference. The stream should be focused on the body. The conference is multi-disciplinary so encourages a range of abstracts. The proposal should include some details about the ubiquity of the body/body image in contemporary society

7. **Expanding the Boundaries of Creative Research Through Inter/Transdisciplinary Collaboration and Conversation**
   Dr Alice Bell, University of Lincoln
   Martyn Thayne, University of Lincoln

This stream, proposed by the Practice Research Arts Cluster (PRAC), University of Lincoln, seeks to explore the transformative potential of creative arts and digital media in its broadest forms, in shaping cultural, social, and technological discourse. PRAC is an interdisciplinary hub dedicated to advancing knowledge through innovative practice-research approaches. Our stream will focus on the role of arts-based and media-driven research in pushing the boundaries of traditional academia while addressing critical societal and environmental challenges.

By fostering transdisciplinary thinking, this stream invites contributions from diverse fields, highlighting how creative methodologies enhance research and knowledge exchange across disciplines. Central to our stream proposal is the concept of "thinking through doing," which positions creative practice as an active agent in research. We aim to explore how embodied, technological, and affective resources in creative research can address critical issues.

Proposals could be around:

• The role of arts, digital and media-based practices in addressing urgent global challenges

• Innovative, affective and unconventional methodologies in creative research

• The contribution of arts-based research to the United Nations Sustainable Development

Goals (UN SDGs)

• The ethical dimensions of creative research, epistemologies, ontologies and pedagogies

• Challenges and opportunities: the value and recognition of arts-based research funding and

assessment

• Practice research approaches to environmental, social, technological, cultural and

educational justice

• AI, generative media, and creativity: powerful catalysts for cultural and societal change

• The value of transdisciplinary dialogues that utilise arts and media-based methodologies to

broaden collaborative horizons

We welcome inter/transdisciplinary contributions that address (but are not limited to) these topics, especially those that explore how collaborative working models can enhance both academic, industry and community-driven research initiatives. We aim to create a space for critical dialogue on the intersection of art, media, practice research, and social change, encouraging a diverse range of perspectives to enrich the conversations.

This stream offers a dynamic, non-hierarchical forum for critical thought, embracing MCCT's ethos of inclusivity and intellectual exchange. It invites participants who are at the margins of their academic departments or disciplines, and those more established scholars, researchers, practitioners, offering a platform to engage with cutting-edge ideas and foster new, meaningful connections across the creative and academic sectors.

8. **Experiences of Inner Life: Does Interiority Matter?**

Professor Susan Hogan, University of Derby, University of Nottingham

With an emphasis on visual culture and theories about imagery and interiority, the topic of interiority will be explored in three potential ways. Firstly, in relation to Interiority and Bodily Signs, this theme will investigate some of the implications of an entrenched enduring link between ideas about interiority and outward bodily signs, and the oft-unfortunate consequences of misinterpretation of such outward signs. Tracing the idea of stigma from its ancient Greek origins, the theme moves on to discuss more recent events, namely witch- hunting and the pivotal nature of bodily signs in the practice of witch detection and determining imagined guilt. Other topics of note could include the doctrine of physiognomy, which was also interested in external bodily signs as denoting internal temperament. Reflections on the reverberations in the present from such ideas, particularly constraints placed upon the behaviour certain sets of citizens due to bodily signs is another area of potential critical thought.

A further aspect of this theme is Experiences of Inner Life Revealed, thinking about such topics as apophenia, a general generic tendency of the human mind to find meaningful patterns in random information, and pareidolia as the visual aspect of this general tendency. The section could also critique ideas about psychiatric projective visualisations as a way of harnessing interiority. Another aspect of this theme might be to think about interior states and explore how making art, and using techniques from art therapy, can help to make interior worlds visual in a practice of Depicting Experiences of Inner Life. The implications of employing arts-based research methods for anthropologists, sociologists and others can be explored, including highlighting potential pitfalls of such applications, such as theory-driven reductive interpretation.

Possible questions:

- How are ideas about interiority and outward bodily signs linked
- historically and/or today?
- How can bodily signs result in limitation of freedoms?
- The doctrine of physiognomy was interested in external bodily signs as
- denoting internal temperament. What is the cultural heritage of such
- schemas?
- What should we say about psychiatric projective visualisations as a way
- of harnessing interiority?
- Can the arts help reveal our inner world?
- What ontological status should be afforded to inner dialogue, imaginative
- worlds and emotional reverie 'without turning them into reified states or
- static properties'? 1
- How can sociologists and anthropologist best capture our sense of
- 'insideness'? What is the value in so doing?

9. Exploring the new class politics

Phill Burton-Cartledge, University of Derby

The exacerbation of persistent of socio-economic inequalities has been the defining feature of capitalism in post-industrial neoliberal societies. This has led to a proliferation of approaches that have attempted to grasp the continuities and changes, up to and including a concerted effort by some schools of political analysis to displace ideas around materiality, common experience, and interest with a focus on value change and attitudes as independent drivers of behaviour. The death of class is not a new debate in social theory, but the recognition of its importance solely in terms of values is a recent innovation, and one that has become the commanding currency in mainstream politics and the academic analysis of it.

This stream invites presentations that challenge this new orthodoxy and dare to dream of a better future. To this end the panel welcomes submissions by scholars and activists on the following:

· Cognitive capitalism and its critique

· Immaterial labour

· Machinic enslavement

· Reworkings of "traditional" class politics

· Postmaterialism and its critique

· Contemporary class identities

· Theorising collective/class interests

· Neoliberalism and governance

· The lived experience of class and its political potentials

10. **From Oblivion to Re-Enchantment: Exploring and Actualising Diverse Knowledges via Faiths and Ontologies**

Dr Romain Chenet, University of Warwick
Dr Edward Loveman, University of Warwick

This interdisciplinary stream "From Oblivion to Re-Enchantment: Exploring and Actualising Diverse Knowledges via Faiths and Ontologies" aims to uncover and actualize the rich, diverse knowledges inherent in various faith traditions and ontological perspectives. The stream will critically engage with how these marginalized forms of knowledge can re-enchant our understanding of the world, offering new possibilities for critical thought and praxis.

Rationale and Objectives

Hegemonic epistemologies often overshadow alternative forms of knowledge. This stream seeks to highlight and value the insights from different faith traditions and ontological frameworks, moving beyond the oblivion imposed by dominant knowledge systems towards a re-enchanted understanding of the world. The key objectives are:

Exploration of Diverse Ontologies: Investigate contributions from non-Western, indigenous, and faith-based worldviews to a broader understanding of reality.

Epistemological Pluralism: Promote the recognition and valuation of knowledge systems embedded in diverse faith traditions.

Re-Enchantment and Praxis: Inspire new forms of praxis through alternative knowledges, leading to transformative social and environmental outcomes.

Critical Engagement: Challenge mainstream academic paradigms by considering how we might incorporate insights from faith and ontology.

Structure and Themes

The stream will encourage cross-disciplinary dialogue through discussions of key themes include:

Re-enchanting Modernity: Exploring how faith-based and ontological perspectives can re-enchant contemporary understandings of the world.

Knowledge at the Margins: Investigating marginalized knowledges and their potential to inform and transform mainstream discourses.

Ontologies of Place and Environment: Examining how indigenous and faith-based ontologies offer unique insights into environmental stewardship.

Faith, Healing, and Well-being: Exploring the role of faith traditions in promoting holistic well-being and their contributions to contemporary health discourses.

Epistemological Justice: Discussing the importance of creating academic spaces that are inclusive of diverse knowledge systems.

Contribution to MCCT

This stream aims to enrich the MCCT's intellectual landscape by fostering an inclusive space where diverse knowledges are recognized and celebrated. It aligns with the conference's ethos of non-hierarchical and open intellectual exchange, offering a platform for voices and perspectives often marginalized in academic discourse.

11. Gendered experiences of austerity in Britain

Robyn Fawcett, University of Derby

The welfare reforms during austerity in Britain have led to a reduction in formal support and financial assistance from the state. This has resulted in gaps being filled by food banks, credit cards, payday loans, and loan sharks (O'Hara 2015; Reeves and Loopstra 2020). The introduction of Universal Credit has further exacerbated the need for debt to manage these gaps, with loans being built into the system as standard. These issues have a gendered impact, as mothers are more likely to rely on public services and welfare support. The most vulnerable groups, including lone parents, people with mental health difficulties, and disabled individuals, are the hardest hit by these changes (Klärner et al 2022; Richardson and Butler 2020). Austerity promotes individual responsibility, which avoids state accountability and reinforces inequality and divisions between the wealthy and the poor (Hall 2023). The stream aims to explore radical approaches to understanding the impact of austerity to challenge dominant discourse.

This steam invites presentations related to the following topics:

- Autoethnographic/biographical accounts
- Social media approaches
- Social harm perspectives
- Universal Credit
- Social reproduction
- Intersectional feminist accounts
- Zines
- Craftivism
- Poetry

Suggestions for other topics are also most welcome.

This stream is open to the public, activists, practitioners, and academics including postgraduate researchers, and early-career academics. This stream will be of interest to various disciplines, including but not limited to, sociology, criminology, social policy, politics, economics, critical theory, gender studies, feminist political economy, and human geography.

12. **Mapping the world: How art and creativity can cross borders, break barriers and connect communities**
    Oliver Cloke (Questioner) and Patrick Loan (Instructor) VCAS - Vienna Contemporary Art Space

    'In recent years, after globalization, I think the political structure and the economic structure has been dramatically shifting and adjusting itself. At the same time, the adjustment of our thinking, or our understanding of the world, has still stayed in old times. It's stuck there. We never really had a moral and philosophical improvement, or adjustment.'

    Ai Wei Wei

Artists (encompassing all art forms, visual art, musicians, theatre, writers etc) have long had the ability to transcend borders, circumvent boundaries and overcome barriers. But, as Ai Wei Wei states, the borders and boundaries we create, physical or invisible, can become entrenched in our lives, our thinking and our psyche. From a geo-political aspect, this is a topic that is very prominent in today's discourse due to the movement of people across borders, and the general trend toward globalization. Digital technology has also blurred our concept of borders, as virtual spaces practically eliminate geographical boundaries, while creating different types of barriers between groups of people. Many artists have created challenging work questioning our understanding of borders, often with thought-provoking outcomes. At the same time, borders have also impacted the work of artists, as many art forms that emerge from within specific cultural contexts are pushed onto the global stage.

This stream would explore the interaction between the arts and borders, and would encourage submissions from artists, writers, academics, and researchers to investigate how these lines of demarcation often act as both barriers and bridges, as well as the role of technology in shifting this dynamic. We aim to foster a dynamic space for transformative debate and innovative thinking through a combination of (participatory) presentations subverting typical conference presentation formats, as well as traditional theoretical presentations.

Potential submission topics:

Cultural and Geopolitical:

What is the impact of political activism in the arts, as artists address how borders shape culture, politics and the experiences of individuals and communities. Can art function as a bridge to bring people together?

How have artists addressed the impact of borders on the lives of migrants, immigrants, and diasporic communities?

How have artists responded to an increasingly globalised world, and what are the positive and negative impacts of globalisation on art? When does this result in diluting of cultural identity or cultural appropriation?

Activism and Resistance:

How can art be used as a tool for interrogating borders and advocating for social change? How do artists engage with issues of power, privilege, and resistance through their work?

How do artists use visual storytelling and the metaphorical and literal framing of their subjects to convey meaning and evoke emotion? What symbolic significance do frames hold in different cultural contexts, and how can they be subverted or redefined?

The Virtual Space and Technology:

What role do digital platforms play in challenging conventional notions of borders?

13. Re-imagining the social and the political in mental health

Sharon Hutchings, Bangor University,

Rowan Windsor, Tavistock Hospital

In January 2024 the Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology Journal published a special issue on *the social* in mental health. The editors Doerte Bemme and Dominique Béhague set out a compelling case 'for more inclusive theorisations of the social in mental health' (2024:403.) They reason that much research, practice and action whilst strong on analysis/explanation is fragmented, sits in disciplinary silos and excludes certain groups/knowledge and therefore fails to bring about real-world change. This is some challenge and therefore it is important to be clear from the outset, this stream is not about being antipsychiatry but rather being actively critical in our thinking across the many mental health contexts - to do what the editors asked for, a re-imagining of the social in mental health to bring about real-world change.

It is difficult to offer a singular definition of the social in mental health and possibly unhelpful as may inhibit innovation or reinforce disciplinary entrenchment (Birk and Manning 2024.) But we do suggest reading the special issue for the fullness of debate. In the meantime, we might say the social in mental health acknowledges the wider social and political structures that may impact negatively or otherwise on our mental health. This can include an unfair distribution of resources such as low pay, precarious work practices, a lack of recognition in relation to aspects of identity such as racism, misogyny which may cause or exacerbate existing mental ill health. Many will see this as falling under the now widely accepted social determinants of health but as Bemme and Béhague (2024) argue this view still locates the 'deficiency' within the individual, e.g. lack of a good income, education, rather than a focus on power and change. This being the case we need a political dimension to partner the social in mental health.

Arguably there is nothing new in the debates above. Theorising the social has a long and well-established legacy across multiple disciplines, health and care, research, practice and activism. Wider critical debates regarding psychiatry, antipsychiatry the place of the state and politics, social justice have been debated for some time. See the work of professors Huxley, Ikkos and Poole for the depth of these debates. Bemme and Béhague however call for a renewed focus on how the social is theorised and suggest two things need to happen to bring a more robust challenge to mental health: firstly, '*greater inclusivity and more epistemic diversity'* and secondly, better '*understanding of how social theories influence change*' (Bemme and Behauge 2024:403.)

To that end we would like this stream to respond to the call asking us to 're-imagine social theory. Ideally, we would like contributions from people with lived experience, clinical, health and social care practitioners, activists and academics. We hope the panel will be a place to hear a range of voices, ideas, challenges. We would encourage you to read the special issue if not already read, Theorising the Social but contributions might include:

- Prioritising expertise by experience in order to be more inclusive and widen the knowledge base.
- Theory, research, practice and activism that highlights the fullness of the social and the political in mental health.
- An exploration of how mental health policy reflects social theories and change, or not.
- How we might work across the many cultures, disciplines, theories, practices in mental health arenas

14. **Standing on the edge: critical perspectives on margins and limits**
    Dr Anna Migliorini, University of Florence

In the current global context, marked by ecological, social, and (geo)political crises, the concept of limits emerges as a pressing and relevant theme. However, its significance goes beyond merely analysing problems and finding solutions. This stream investigates limits not only as obstacles to overcome or thresholds to cross, nor margins as merely peripheral and subordinate positions to which dignity might be reattributed through intentional and asymmetrical actions and concepts. Instead, it considers the margin as a space for renewed (self)understanding, interpretation, and interaction, leading to a critical epistemological and political advantage. The concepts of margin and limit are intrinsically tied to an interdisciplinary context, and the conference's approach is naturally critical. The focus of this stream is philosophical, drawing significant contributions from other disciplines and methods.

Walter Benjamin provides a foundational impetus for research and critique, establishing the limit of negative irreversibility as both a technical and political boundary, beyond which lie destruction and conformity. In epistemological and political terms, Benjamin also considers how positive elements emerge through the progressive filtering of the negative, attributing a value not only to crisis, danger, and catastrophe but also seeing them as opportunities for renewed understanding and radical transformations. The aesthetic and critical perspective of bell hooks, which is more situated, discusses, among other things, the task of finding home in a space of radical openness that is the margin, the edge, where depth is absolute. Chantal Jaquet reinterprets the sociological concept of transfuge as transclasse, highlighting the non-unidirectional dynamics of permeability between social classes and the significance of inhabiting those hybrid, threshold spaces rather than crossing them to archive them. To illustrate a broader concept of trans, which echoes that of Paul B. Preciado, which suggests that identities and experiences challenging traditional categorizations can enrich and complicate our understanding of limits and margins without the need of "resolving" into a completed transition. Moreover, one can also return to Karl Marx, to the idea of the epistemic superiority of the subaltern class, from which discussions and interpretations that are more than relevant today arise. These and other examples call for plurality, intersectionality, and interdisciplinarity, offering valuable tools to rethink margins as spaces of innovation and both theoretical and practical reconfiguration.

We invite proposals that explore how margins and limits can be re-signified and valued in critical

thought, reflecting the complexity and richness of diverse standpoints. Topics include:

- Absolute trans/queer: relationships and differences between limits and margins, inhabiting
- and crossing.
- Epistemic (in)justice and advantage (of ignorance/of subaltern classes, etc.).
- Infinitesimal calculus as a critical tool or metaphor: spatialisation, immersive infinity,
- reflectivity/mirroring, structure/superstructure, and monad.
- Speaking from the margins and non-hegemonic perspectives: minority and alterity studies,
- philosophy of difference, and intersectionality.
- Democracy and threats through the reduction of margins and the play with limits:
- authoritarianism, (meta)politics, ambiguity, interpretation, and security.
- Spatio-temporal architectures: (in)visibility, threshold geographies, physicality, interactions,
- (re)appropriations, occupations, (de)colonization, and de/reterritorialisation.
- Critical models of thresholds and limits: environment, threshold effect, (ir)reversibility of
- quantitative/qualitative and (un)sustainability.
- Temporal margins: history, memory, actualization, suspension, waiting, interregnum.
- Economic margin, performative value, and ethical-psychological dimension: profit, poverty,
- scarcity, mindset, culture, production, and reproduction.
- Configurations: the relationship between margin and centre, (in)dependence, possibility,
- resistance, (counter)hegemony, inclusion, exclusion, and alterity.

15. The Sublime Object of Delulu

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The concept of "delulu" – a colloquial expression derived from "delusional" – has emerged in online spaces as a way to describe individuals or groups whose beliefs starkly contrast with prevailing social realities. Although originally used in a humorous or derogatory manner, the term provides fertile ground for exploration within the framework of critical legal studies. This stream seeks to unpack the epistemological, ideological, and legal dimensions of the term "delulu" and its applicability in understanding contemporary cultural, political, and legal phenomena.

The rise of populism, post-truth politics, and misinformation has led to heightened scrutiny of how certain beliefs or perceptions of reality are deemed irrational or dangerous. These developments invite critical engagement with the legal apparatus, which often serves as a means of policing what is considered reasonable or rational. The law, as both a reflection and enforcer of dominant ideologies, plays an undeniable role in delineating the boundaries between acceptable belief systems and those deemed "delusional." From court cases on sovereign citizen movements to legal debates over religious exemptions, "delulu" becomes a lens through which to examine how law adjudicates and legitimizes particular versions of reality.

This stream will approach the concept of "delulu" through the lens of critical theory, particularly the works of thinkers like Slavoj Žižek, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida, whose theories of power, ideology, and subjectivity provide key insights into how legal systems shape and are shaped by conceptions of reality a normalcy. Foucault's analysis of power/knowledge frameworks offers a particularly salient foundation for interrogating the mechanisms through which legal discourse labels certain belief systems as rational or delusional. Derrida's deconstruction of legal texts, alongside his critique of metaphysical certainties, opens up avenues for exploring how law constructs and maintains a normative reality. Žižek's analysis of ideology and the Real further deepens the inquiry, particularly concerning how legal systems manage ideological contradictions through the concept of delusion.

This stream seeks to bring together practitioners, activists, and scholars from fields such as critical legal studies, philosophy, political theory, and sociology to provide multifaceted perspectives on the intersection of "delulu" and law. By engaging with this concept through the lens of critical theory, participants will explore how law, as a locus of power, is implicated in the ongoing struggle to define the boundaries of reality. This inquiry is particularly pressing in an era marked by increasing polarization and the erosion of a shared epistemological foundation, raising questions about the future role of law in mediating contested realities.

We welcome contributions from academics, practitioners, and activists interested in this topic.

16. Work and career in Neoliberal Academia: Systemic Pressures and Inequities

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Dr Ricky Gee, Nottingham Trent University, Dr Ylva Gustafsson, Åbo Akademi University

Amidst the drastic changes in working conditions brought about by COVID-19, many workers have re-evaluated their relationship with work. Academic workers were not insulated from this, with many realising that the problems in and with their work stem not from the pandemic, but from an ethos that had long been present. Fleming (2021) provides a detailed analysis of how the influence of neoliberalism has had a negative impact upon the academy pushing forward a commercialisation and managerialist agenda at the expense of student and academic 'well-being'. Recent developments within the sector provide further empirical evidence of this negative impact. Such developments have seen the closure of many courses, redundancies of staff, students having to work longer hours to afford to live, and many managers asked to become 'slash-cutters' to address budget shortfalls.

With the proliferation of audit culture, uncritical reliance on quantifiable metrics, and encouragement of hyper-productivity, new and even more pernicious forms of control define the 'pulse of modern academia' (Vostal, 2016; Readings, 1996). Passion, once regarded as an intrinsic motivator for intellectual pursuits, has now become commodified, leaving many academics feeling exploited, overworked, and alienated. Despite this, academic labour is often viewed as a 'labour of love' (Hall 2021), leading to a tendency to embrace, or even valorise, overwork and exhaustion as a demonstration of one's commitment to their vocation. Staff are held responsible 'for their own emotional and intellectual well-being' (Poutanen 2023), with increasing levels of stress and anxiety seen as individual failings rather than symptoms of structural problems. Frequently, proposed solutions to worsening mental health among academic staff—instead of acknowledging structural issues—are also individual in nature, with universities paying lip service to mental health awareness through, for example, the organising of workshops for staff on 'managing stress' and 'developing resilience'.

The impression of universities as beacons of knowledge, understanding and justice is reflected in claims that working life at universities, as well as career advancement, is strictly based on academic merits. Policies for publishing articles, seeking funding for research, and employing staff are often described as being highly rigorous and based on strict evaluation criteria. Often, however, there are deeply ingrained structural patterns of inequality that are kept up by the illusion of rigorous meritocratic processes. The meritocratic system becomes part of how inequality is accepted and covered up at universities. While the myth of hard work and the rhetoric of meritocracy are used to entice academics, they often serve to keep individuals 'playing the game', striving for success that remains ever elusive, while the system itself fails to address the systemic racialised, gendered, and class-based inequalities that shape avenues towards equitable career advancement as well as personal and professional fulfilment. Those who fall by the wayside, are either forced to quit (Flanagan and Wright, eds., 2022), if not be content with quick fixes that reflect nothing but the privatisation of stress and the outsourcing of its management to individuals (Fisher, 2009; Purser, 2019).

This stream seeks to explore theoretically informed staff and student experiences of work and career in this shrinking sector, exploring how neoliberal policies create a suffocating and individualist environment based on metric outcomes and over emphasis on financial savings. We thus invite proposals that seek to address these and other related issues. Considering these challenges, we likewise intend to question what critiques of work can reveal about the effectiveness of critiques of academia itself. Can a critical examination of academia truly offer meaningful change when it grapples with the very structures it aims to reform?

How do we conceptualise 'work' and 'career' within and beyond the neoliberal university?

How can we address the structural injustices allowing for uncompensated work within the academy (e.g., reproductive labour)? What are the different intersectional (race, class, gender, disability, etc.,) issues that affect working conditions and create just or unjust working environments?

What are the arguments for and against the refusal and resistance of work and working practices?

Reorganisation or abolition of work and traditional notions of academic career?

How can various forms of resignations and work-related protests and resistance be operative within the academy?

How might AI impact upon conceptions, experiences and enactment of work and career?