

## Special Issue

# Queer in Aotearoa/New Zealand: Research, Theory, and Practice

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In a recent appearance on *The Joe Rogan Experience* podcast, Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Meta, bemoaned the state of corporate America. Workplace culture has supposedly been neutered by “feminine” dysfunction, and much-desired “masculine energy” has been suppressed (Zuckerberg in Rogan, 2025).

In the days following, Meta took to their company’s internal communications forum to announce it would cease to offer its diversity, equity and inclusion programmes, otherwise known as DEI initiatives (Gibson & Lyons, 2025). The term DEI, the company argued, has become charged, in the sense that others feel that certain groups receive preferential treatment. The move followed similar rollbacks from McDonald’s, Amazon, Target and Walmart—corporate heavyweights taking their cue from a 2023 United States Supreme Court ruling that struck down affirmative action efforts in university admission processes (Gibson & Lyons, 2025). More recently, on his first day in office, President Donald Trump signed an executive order to put an end to the “radical and wasteful” federal government DEI programmes. According to *The Washington Post*, as of 5 p.m. Wednesday 22 January 2025, all employees of diversity, equity and inclusion programmes were placed on administrative leave, to be laid off or reassigned (Vinall & Zakrzewski, 2025).

Another executive order, relating to trans rights, has caused extreme alarm among LGBTQIA+ communities worldwide. Speaking at the US Capitol, President Trump announced that, henceforth, his administration’s official policy is that “there are only two genders: male and female” (Luhby, 2025). What does this look like in practice? Trans women will be moved to men’s prisons. Funding for gender-affirming healthcare will be scrapped. Education and health guidelines will be rewritten. Secretary of State Marco Rubio has directed his department to suspend processing passports applications with ‘X’, a gender-neutral marker. It is unclear how the new policy will affect current holders, passport renewals and Global Entry travellers.

Aotearoa/New Zealand is not immune to the rising tide of right-wing politics internationally. Indeed, the healthy relationships and sexuality education guidelines for schools, announced in 2020 by then-Associate Education Minister Tracey Martin, were designed to curb our high rates of intimate partner violence and child abuse. The guidelines recognised a need to educate our rangatahi on diverse genders and sexualities, including Māori and Pasifika understandings of sexuality, issues around consent, the use of digital technologies, and the harmful effects of exposing youth to sexually explicit and harmful online media, such as pornography (Martin, 2020). However, as part of New Zealand First’s Coalition Agreement with the National Party following the 2023 general election, these guidelines were scrapped, with leader Winston Peters recently celebrating their demise on X (formerly Twitter): “We campaigned to get these woke out-of-touch guidelines removed from our schools and to stop indoctrinating our kids” (Peters, 2024). The

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Government, furthermore, announced greater possible restrictions on gender-affirming healthcare for trans young people (Carroll, 2024), as well as encouraging creating barriers to trans people playing sport (RNZ News, 2024a).

There have also been a series of recent high-profile attacks on public queer symbols. In June 2022, Gloria of Greymouth, a former Church transformed into a pink art project by artist Sam Duckor-Jones, was defaced with homophobic slurs (Naish, 2022); the following week saw an arson attack on RainbowYouth and Gender Dynamix's offices in Tauranga (Haupt, 2022); and throughout 2024, multiple rainbow street crossings were vandalised across the country (Green & McCaull, 2024). At the 2025 Auckland Pride Festival, Destiny Church groups Man Up and Legacy Sisterhood stormed Te Atatū Library to protest against a drag king's storytime for children, "punching, pushing and shoving their way inside" and assaulting a 16-year-old bystander in the process (Franks, 2025). Not willing to be intimidated back into the closet, Rainbow communities have also been pushing back against these attacks. The following weekend, hundreds of members of the Rainbow community and their supporters gathered in Auckland's Albert Park to stand in solidarity against Destiny Church's violent actions at Pride (Blackwell, 2025), and more than 100,000 people have signed a petition calling for the revocation of Destiny Church's charitable status (Concerned Citizen, 2025).

All this has occurred within a contradictory context of a rising far-right trans- and homophobia, as well as a legislative environment in which queer and trans people in Aotearoa/New Zealand have experienced decriminalisation for nearly 40 years and marriage equality for 12. As several of the contributors to this special issue note, the material conditions of Rainbow people have, overall, improved in the last 40 years, but there remain significant issues that we face, including a global far-right movement seeking to undo our gains.

What, then, does it mean to be queer and trans in Aotearoa/New Zealand? How do we resist the global turn against our Rainbow communities, to ensure our rights, our histories and our lives are protected as well as supported? In equal measure, how do we confront increased efforts to marginalise our community while recognising the unique insights queer experiences afford within the leviathan of our institutions: education, government, healthcare, justice, the arts and beyond—spaces, hierarchies and hegemonies that traditionally preserve exclusion, omission and segregation?

## **Queer in Aotearoa/New Zealand: Research, theory, and practice**

In this special issue of *New Zealand Sociology*, we spotlight research initially presented at Rainbow Studies NOW: Legacies of Community, a symposium held at Te Herenga Waka | Victoria University of Wellington in November 2023.

Organised by the Rainbow Research Network at Te Herenga Waka, Rainbow Studies NOW brought together researchers from Te Herenga Waka, Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka | Otago University, Te Whare Wānanga o Waitaha | Canterbury University, Waipapa Taumata Rau | University of Auckland, Te Wānanga Aronui o Tāmaki Makau Rau | Auckland University of Technology, and Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa | Massey University, as well as national organisations such as Kawe Mahara: Queer Archives Aotearoa, PrideNZ, UnitetoTranzform Aotearoa and more. Today, the Rainbow Research Network continues to grow and flourish, providing a much-needed space for collaboration, connection and community within the university and beyond. Now a biennial event, the symposium will be hosted in 2025 by Te Wānanga Aronui o Tāmaki Makau Rau | Auckland University of Technology, with a view towards its exciting return to Te Whanganui-a-Tara in 2027.

This special issue examines Rainbow experiences and analysis of institutions, embodiment, marginalisation and resistance. The contributions provide a reckoning with historical and contemporary queer and trans interactions with, oppression by and resistance to Aotearoa/New Zealand institutions. This

special issue covers growing queer research inside universities, the ongoing challenges faced by the Rainbow community in our judicial system, insights into the current climate of social homonegativity arising from our Hansard records, the contested grounds of gender in te ao Māori and its relation to Western conceptualisations of gender, the move towards health equity for our Rainbow whānau, how we can conceptualise and action trans liberation in Aotearoa/New Zealand, the impact of language as means of breaking down binary thinking within our sporting institutions, and how we nourish and develop our emerging trans cultures in the creative and performing arts sector. It tells the stories of where queer and trans communities have been, where we are now and where we are going. These stories provide queer insight into Aotearoa/New Zealand's settler colonial, cisheteronormative capitalism, as well as resistance to it. In a moment of an escalating culture war, with Māori and trans people as key targets, there is a pertinent need for the queer and trans analysis laid out in this special issue.

## **For Rainbow Studies NOW**

Each article in this special issue demonstrates the social, cultural and political impact of queer research in contemporary Aotearoa/New Zealand. Navigating institutional contexts from the criminal justice system to our creative industries, within our universities and health sector to government legislation and national sports organisations, these articles challenge the existing parameters of queerness in Aotearoa/New Zealand and contribute to a growing scholarship of queer and trans sociological perspectives.

In “Ensuring the family home”, Welby Ings considers the responsibilities of queer scholarship within our universities. Synthesising his opening keynote address at Rainbow Studies NOW, Ings's essay reflects on the long shadow of self-selective silencing within Aotearoa/New Zealand's queer histories, and the landmark design and development of Ia~, the online queer research portal launched in 2023 at Te Wānanga Aronui o Tāmaki Makau Rau | Auckland University of Technology. Likewise, Scott Pilkington and Tof Eklund consider the strengths and limitations of queerness within universities: What does it mean, precisely, for an academic institution to be ‘queer’? What affordances can we draw from markers such as the Rainbow Tick? And how are queer scholars responding to issues around pay equity, lack of career progression, low representation in senior leadership, and job precarity?

It seems ironic, then, that contemporary queer theory, as a body of knowledge, emerged from theorists within universities in the United States: Judith Butler (University of California, Berkeley), Michael Warner (Yale University), Lauren Berlant (University of Chicago), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Duke University) and Lee Edelman (Tufts University). But it is an undeniably White, Western lens that dominates much of queer theory, and Maia Berryman-Kamp's essay deftly challenges Butler's Western notions of gender performativity, expertly proposing a Māori theory of gender that advocates for Indigenous-led theories. Berryman-Kamp's examination of Indigenous selfhood, as it relates to performativity, is grounded in Māori ontologies, noting that self-determination cannot merely reiterate Western ways of being, but must embrace research from Indigenous gender theorists to develop Indigenous-led theories, frameworks and narratives around gender.

The language we choose to use plays an enormous role in our shaping of society: it is a means of both inclusion as well as exclusion. Stephanie Foxton's article considers the impact of language on perceptions of gender and sexuality in a local sports organisation, arguing that the interaction between language and society broadly indicates how and why discourses of homophobia, transphobia and sexism prevail. In an institution that makes a public commitment to Rainbow inclusion, by developing policies, guidelines and investment in DEI initiatives, daily activities still default to binary assumption around gender, sex and sexualities, leading to recurrent discourses of exclusion and marginalisation. Moreover, the continued presumptions of cisgendered norms are entrenched in our healthcare system, where Rainbow people experience unique and distressing challenges to accessing equitable care and its associated outcomes.

George Parker and Chelsea D’Cruz’s article addresses two recent research projects in Aotearoa/New Zealand investigating the impact and effects of cisheteronormative assumptions in perinatal healthcare and abortion care, highlighting the power relations and oppressive social structures that shape and determine people’s control of their reproductive destinies.

In developing a framework to address these systemic issues of oppression, Charles Henry suggests that three key pillars are required for acceptance of transgender and non-binary people within wider society: protection, access and recognition. Henry presents a roadmap for the Tranz Liberation Framework, allowing activists, policy analysts and academics alike to assess what interventions are still required to reduce ongoing inequalities. Similarly, Robert Sewell, Ti Lamusse and Fiona Hutton consider the value of a queer criminology, examining the experiences of access to justice for Rainbow peoples in the Aotearoa/New Zealand criminal justice system. There is limited research on LGBTQIA+, takatāpui and queer people’s experiences within the criminal justice system. Despite nearly 40 years since homosexual law reform, this study underscores the unique fears and challenges facing Rainbow communities engaging with the justice system, including the impact of diverse gender and sexualities on court cases, and the limited support available to queer people accessing justice. Homonegative attitudes within our institutions take many forms, and Quentin Allan’s article re-evaluates the Hansard transcripts around three parliamentary Bills: the Crimes Amendment Bill of 1974/1975, the Homosexual Law Reform Bill of 1985/1986, and the Human Rights Amendment Bill of 1992/1993. How far has our collective thinking shifted in the last 50 years? What insights do these debates present around homophobic beliefs in Aotearoa/New Zealand? As Allan’s article concludes, we are witnessing the same homonegative language re-emerge as trans-negative discourse, proving we still have a long way to go to dispel negative stereotypes and fearmongering within our institutions.

For now, trans scholarship is moving beyond the perennial question of good versus bad (or realistic) representation, and Paige Macintosh’s article considers this flourishing new territory, as an opportunity for researchers to attend to trans creatives’ lived experiences in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Addressing the ways trans people negotiate different media landscapes, Macintosh’s article asks how trans and genderqueer identities challenge transnormative media and creative practices and, critically, what their experiences reveal about a nascent trans culture in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

In the process of editing this special issue, we noted an alarming increase in reported instances of violence from the far-right against the LGBTQIA+ community, both locally and internationally. In Aotearoa/New Zealand, Destiny Church positioned themselves at the forefront of this fascist movement, targeting queer and trans community events as well as defacing and vandalising public displays of support for the Rainbow community (RNZ News 2024b). In a recent interview, Massey University’s Emeritus Professor in history Peter Lineham observed a “disturbing connection” in Destiny Church’s tactics, spearheaded by leader Brian Tamaki, arguing that the group had “reached a point where the intimidation bears quite a striking resemblance to right-wing groups in European history going back a long way” (Burr, 2025). Tamaki’s particular focus on the LGBTQIA+ community, according to Lineham, mirrors Adolf Hitler’s dehumanisation and antisemitic scapegoating of Jews for the world’s problems: “It’s very clear now that LGBT+ people have become a kind of demonic force in [Tamaki’s] mind and he does not see them as genuine people with feelings” (Burr, 2025).

The question then becomes: How do we fight back against fascism? How do we collectively (and effectively) come together against a false prophet stirring hatred? In “Combat safetyism”, Ti Lamusse, Emmy Rākete and Will Hansen propose a theory of anti-fascism, and share the lessons learnt from ‘Defying Destiny’, a mass gathering in Albert Park organised in response to Destiny Church’s violent actions at Auckland Pride 2025.

As we face the threats of an ascendant global far right, putting our communities in the firing line, now, more than ever, Rainbow communities and our allies and co-conspirators need to stand together in

solidarity. Our current context demands a greater scholarly and activist attention to the experiences and liberatory aspirations of Rainbow people. This special issue is the start of that much broader interdisciplinary effort to draw together Rainbow knowledge and resistance, responding to contemporary threats to queer and trans people and imagining liberation. While scholarship will never be enough to achieve liberation, the insights of this special issue offer a deeper understanding of where we are and what is to be done.

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