

Editorial

## “Be better than what’s out there.”

Craig Murdoch

Tucked down an alleyway in central-ish Auckland is the place where I get my hair done. If you don’t know it’s there, you’re not very likely to find it. The big open space with the deliberate lack of signage is run in the manner of a collective, and peopled by tattoo artists, pop-up vendors, the occasional market which spills into the alleyway, and my hairdresser. It’s a welcoming and safe space for those blessed by neurodiversity and for members of the Rainbow community. It is one of my favourite places.

The quote at the top of this piece came from my hairdresser. I asked them to describe what they and their colleagues are trying to do for the communities they’re serving. They thought for quite a while and then said “We need to be better, better than what’s out there” while waving in the general direction of everything beyond the door. A little while later they followed up with “We just want to be accepted. We just want love and compassion.”

In Aotearoa, and just in the time that I have been writing this piece:

- A high school teacher has been de-registered for refusing to use a transgender student’s name and preferred pronouns (‘Disgraceful’ actions of teacher in dealing with student’s request to use preferred name and pronouns, 2023).
- The Guardian noted figures that show 561 reported hate crimes targeting gay and lesbian people, and 95 reported hate crimes targeting transgender people in the 15 months to April 2023 (Graham-McLay, 2023).
- A report was released outlining “the significant challenges that takatāpui and rainbow rangatahi in care experience” including “physical, sexual and emotional abuse” and “abusive incidents related to their sexuality and gender identities” (Clunie et al, 2023).
- The leader of one of the loudest churches (and a fracturing political alliance) announced his intention to “legislate against the whole gay pride movement” and stop the “transgender agenda” (Nightingale, 2023).

I cannot comprehend how difficult it is for people like my hairdresser and their colleagues to constantly be attacked for being who they are, for having the need to “just want to be accepted”. Is it ironic that those who want to be better than what’s out there, already are? No, it’s just plain offensive.

I’m not a member of the Rainbow community. But I am affected by the particular brand of hatred, homophobia and transphobia which is on the rise in Aotearoa. I’m the parent of a transgender child and I’m an ally. I’m also a librarian and (as of very recently) a guest editor of an academic journal. What does it mean for me, in this space, to “be better than what’s out there”? It means amplifying the voices of the researchers in this special issue, uplifting and celebrating them. Making their work available to as wide an audience as possible with as few barriers as possible. In a broader sense it means being better than the big publishers, who tie research up behind pay-to-publish agreements and exorbitant article and subscription charges. As noted recently by Punctum Books - “Open access is ... an essential tool in the fight for LGBTQIA+ rights and minority rights in general” (van Gerven Oei & Joy, 2023).

All of this is, in a way, the backstory of the Rangahau Aranga: AUT Graduate Review - Rainbow Special Issue. As a parent, I experience the anxiety and fear in which the Rainbow community must live every day. It makes me angry. As a librarian I’m frustrated that research

which celebrates, informs and potentially benefits the Rainbow community is withheld from those very communities in the name of egregious corporate profits. Why not stand up to both with what I have at my disposal?

The response to the special issue from our Auckland University of Technology postgraduate students has been inspiring. Through creativity, courage and persistence, the content in this journal stands proudly and defiantly against hatred and ignorance.

Janette Howe presents research of vital importance to the Rainbow community in Aotearoa and beyond. Howe's work is of supreme relevance to the many parents like myself, struggling to find a path through the education system for some of our most vulnerable young people. Her research utilises an accessible and understandable framework of rights perspectives to highlight gaps in school support for transgender students. She notes the inconsistent approach across our schools and the importance of parental advocacy and its potential to create change.

Tangaroa Paora describes the way his personal journey as takatāpui tāne is given voice through performance rooted in a Māori research framework. Tangaroa's work brings a cultural richness to the discourse of gender identity and sexual orientation, enhancing it through kaupapa Māori methodologies. Employing a synthesis of artistic and creative expression, Tangaroa grants us insight into the uniqueness and multiplicity of the Māori Queer experience and serves a reminder of the pluralistic possibilities which te ao Māori offers us as partners in te Tiriti.

Tony Guo uses his evocative painting to reflect on the idea of "coming out of the closet" as an externally imposed concept. He describes typical binary thinking as restrictive, and of little use in describing the Queer experience. Guo's exploration of a "middle-space" of fluidity and spectrum, though not specifically focused on transgender, resonates strongly with my own experience as the parent of a non-binary child.

Elizabeth Jennens addresses an area almost completely lacking in existing research. Her investigation into the experience of cisgender women of transgender partners is a continuation of her earlier work<sup>1</sup> and founded on a robust and wide-ranging methodology. This research will be of great interest to professionals working with such women. Cisgender women themselves will find succour during their own experiences with a transitioning partner.

Ezra Baldwin reflects on externally imposed restrictions, in this case the journey of a non-binary person in a world where the gender binary is thoroughly dominant. Baldwin's collage blends the ancient and the modern - the resulting pieces feel natural, comfortable and intimate. Through this medium they explore their personal story while creating a more positive and nuanced portrait of the transgender person than that presented by outsiders.

Each piece of research presented in this special issue is the result of hard work, intense reflection and an understanding of complex literature and research methodologies. Yet it is all accessible, I think because it is all written from a place of passion and from a need to communicate important messages. The specific subject matter and themes are diverse (as one would expect). But for me the over-riding theme is that of hope: hope for our transgender children and their schools, hope for better understanding of rainbow people and issues, hope in the possibilities offered by the varied ways of expressing identity and questioning the status quo. Hope, above all, for our Rainbow communities, and perhaps, given the overwhelming generosity of those communities, for ourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://hdl.handle.net/10179/15084>

Hope in the face of bigotry, racism, ignorance, systemic injustices. Hope in opposition to fear and hate. Hope because we need to “be better than what’s out there”.

It would be nice if that was the end of the story but it’s not that easy. Because hope doesn’t exist in a void. Hope takes hard work – it takes defiance in the face of ugliness. When it’s defiant just to be who you are – let alone to do excellent scholarship – hope can be exhausting. Rangahau Aranga celebrates our authors – their confidence and courage, the resistance in their scholarship and the creative disobedience in their leadership. And we stand with you, and with the Rainbow community.

The Rangahau Aranga Rainbow Special Issue is part of a broader initiative by AUT to distribute our Rainbow research more widely and in ways that are accessible, usable and safe for the Rainbow community. The next exciting development is the imminent launch of “Ia – the Rainbow Collection”, a dedicated portal to all of AUT’s Rainbow research.

Thank you to everyone who has made this special issue possible. To our reviewers, for embracing the kaupapa of Rangahau Aranga; to Welby Ings for his leadership and drive; to Donna Coventry for her expertise and generosity with her time; to Tony Guo for the cover art; to the student editorial board for their ongoing contributions and allowing me to guest edit. Special thanks and kia kaha to our five wonderful contributors to this issue.

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