



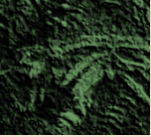
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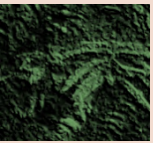
Cambridge  
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Programme

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# TRANS COSMO- LOGIES



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## The project

Trans Cosmologies is a collaborative research and art project seeking to challenge and counteract the religious denial of trans lives and trans religious heritage. By exploring rich and diverse trans sacred traditions, as well as new, radical, and alternative ethics, decolonised cosmologies and spiritual positionings, the project seeks to highlight the historical and contemporary contributions of trans individuals and communities to religious ideas, practices, and environments.

The project critically addresses the increasing role of religious institutions and religio-political rhetoric in transphobic violence globally, and aims to dismantle the legitimacy of trans expulsion ideologies rooted in falsified religious histories. The project firstly raises awareness about the diverse religiosities of trans and gender-nonconforming people

and communities by creating a new public platform for anthropological, theological, historical, and artistic explorations. In so doing, the project firmly challenges the ideological suggestion that trans lives lack religious and historical depth. Rather, it shows that no history of religion can be told without the representation of trans lives, which have not only inhabited, but profoundly shaped, cosmologies and rituals across the world.

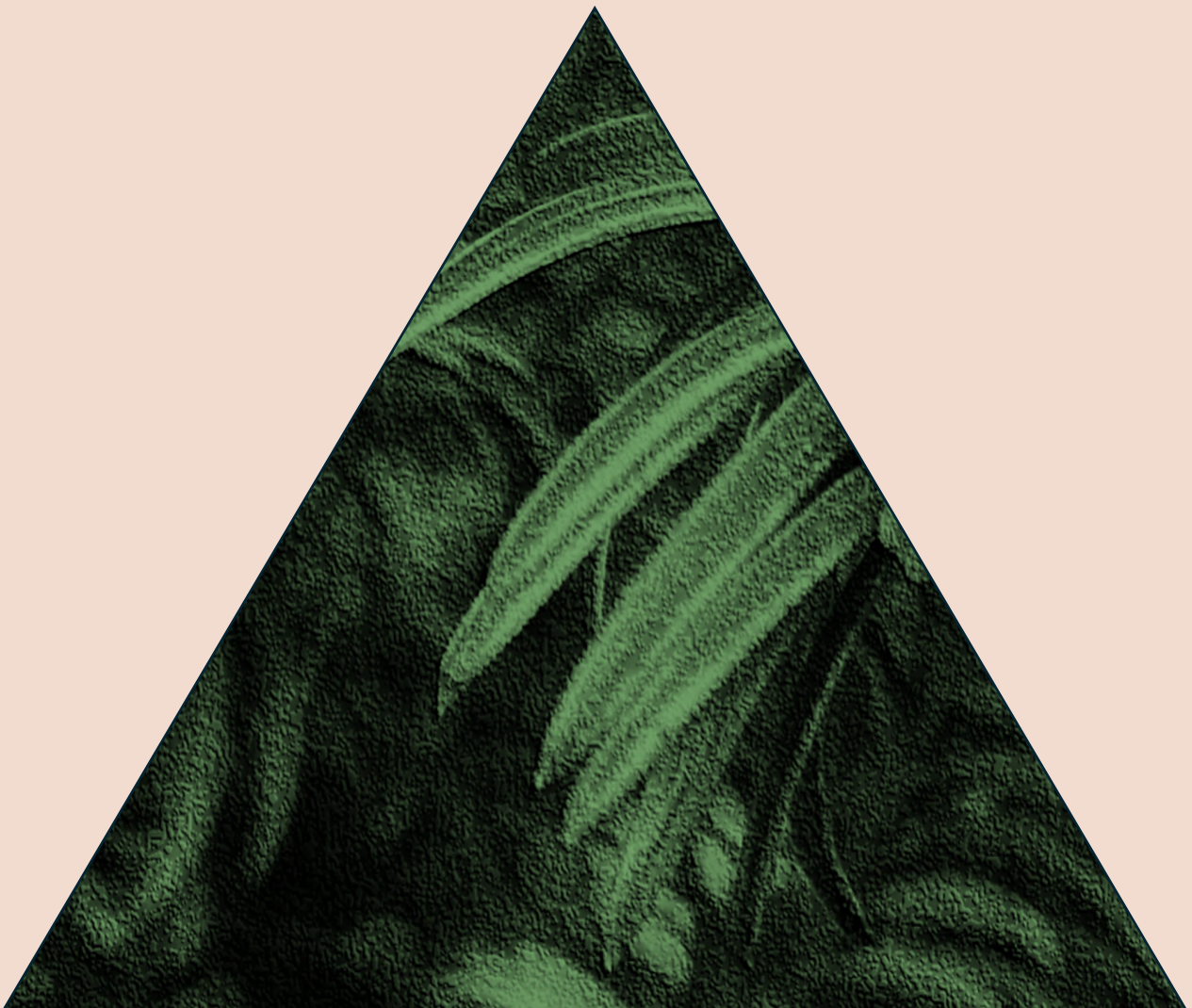
The implications of this prompt are far-reaching, as the project engages and seeks to redress the absence of trans lives in the religious studies curricula, as well as the exclusionary language and practices across religious, political, and educational institutions.

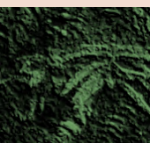
The project thus explicitly addresses the barriers faced by trans individuals within religious and secular spaces influenced by transphobic misinterpretations of religious values and

histories. It also addresses the epistemic hurdles faced by staff and students in academic contexts.

The project features contributions of trans, gender nonbinary, and queer academics and students. The positive impact of the project is

measured through the outlined public events (workshops, exhibition, conference, open-access winter school) and widely disseminated reports, a new research network and major publications, staff-student collaboration, as well as through curriculum reform guidelines.





## The first workshop

10 May 2024, Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge

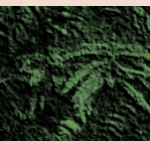
The first Trans Cosmologies workshop is supported by Cambridge Interfaith Programme and LGBTQ+@Cam.

To register, please visit either <https://www.interfaith.cam.ac.uk> or <https://www.lgbtq.sociology.cam.ac.uk>.

This workshop brings together a diverse group of professionals – anthropologists, historians, theologians, philosophers, artists, and activists – for a day-long series of talks and art interventions, which think trans cosmologies through specific spatiotemporal contexts, in relation to politics and ideological programmes, cosmological belongings and exiles, crossings and forms of religious syncretism, as well as other dynamics of spiritual practices, political debates, and forms of resistance.

The scope goes beyond 'habitual religiosities', to probe new, radical, and alternative ethics, decolonised cosmologies and senses of selfhood, and possible temporalities of repair, whether found in interruptions, reformulations, or resistant continuities.

The workshop provides attendees with an opportunity to explore practical approaches to building more inclusive religious spaces. It also queries the implications of trans cosmologies for our relationships to the environment and the more-than-human condition, the religious afterlives of racial and gender violence, and colonial extraction, as well as the directions of personal trans spiritualities.



## Workshop timetable

Runcie Room & Room 4, Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge

11:00 | *coffee & welcome*

Safet HadžiMuhamedović: "Trans heritage against nationalism"

11:30 | *unpacking binaries*

Abeera Khan: "The horseshoe theory of essentialisms: Gender and Islam across the political spectrum"

Alex Clare-Young: "Water from water: Challenging transmedicalism with body theology"

Vanja Hamzić: "Jeliya: The art of resistance to the nascent colonial gender binary in eighteenth-century Greater Senegambia"

13:00 | *light lunch & coffee*

14:00 | *solidarities & encounters*

Sabah Choudrey: "What can Islam teach us about solidarity?"

Mijke van der Drift: "Complicity without identity: Ensouled connections in frictional worlds"

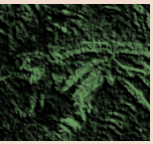
Omar Kasmani: "Queer companions in *suhbet*", book chat

15:30 | *art-magic-theatre*

Lucian Summerisle: after the durational act of ritual magic (chat with the artist)

Raphaël Khouri: "No other cure for sorrow" (lecture/performance)

18:00 | *dinner (workshop speakers only)*



## **Workshop abstracts**

in order of appearance

### **Abeera Khan**

#### **The horseshoe theory of essentialisms: Gender and Islam across the political spectrum**

This intervention analyses two encounters with the evocation of 'gender and Islam' across the political spectrum. The first is one of secular feminist panic, the second with conservative Muslim baiting of the author. Both encounters stem from seemingly disparate political positions but share uncannily common political assumptions regarding the relationship between 'gender' and 'Islam'. Indeed, they share the biologically essentialist treatment of gender and culturally essentialist treatment of Islam. Appropriating horseshoe theory, a milquetoast centre-liberal allegation of the commonalities of left and right politics, this intervention will unpack how these two encounters exemplify what I call a horseshoe theory of essentialisms. Demystifying the shared presuppositions of cultural and biological essentialisms across seemingly antagonistic political positions, I argue, are valuable in edifying our own struggles against these hostilities.

### **Alex Clare-Young**

#### **Water from water: Challenging transmedicalism with body theology**

The theological/anthropological themes of creation, birth, incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection resist medicalisation, instead highlighting the fluidity of the body. In this paper, I compare this fluidity with the

rigidity of transmedicalism to argue that there is a theological imperative to counter the latter. As I do so, I weave together my own story, textile art, scripture, and theological reasoning to demonstrate methods of scholarly challenge and practical protest which flow around, between, through and beyond the binaries that are used to control conversation.

**Vanja Hamzić**

***Jeliya*: The art of resistance to the nascent colonial gender binary in eighteenth-century Greater Senegambia**

Against the rising tide of European enslavers' investment in, and violence of, the colonial gender binary in eighteenth-century Greater Senegambia, this paper presents several insurrectionary snippets of gender-diverse Mande griots' (*jeliw*) specific artistry, known as *jeliya*. Rooted in the Mande non-binary cosmology and the perceived bodily, gender, and oral difference of griots and other casted artisanal groups in West Africa, *jeliya* extended wide and deep—from music, dance, companionship to warriors, and advice to nobles and local leaders, to the art of oral history with its many mystical properties. It also inspired and sustained open rebellions against European enslavers, including their attempts to impose a starkly hierarchical, enslavement-based, racialised gender-binary social and economic system in Greater Senegambia as a prelude and prerequisite to full-fledged colonisation.



## **Sabah Choudrey**

### **What can Islam teach us about solidarity?**

Sabah reflects on their Ramadan, and their own personal journey of discovering their trans/gender identity and reclaiming Islam, having found comfort in the fluidity in both gender and faith. They share what a holy month of reflection and generosity looks like when trans communities are suffering and injustices in Palestine continue. They invite you to bring your questions and open minds to reframe your beliefs no matter what they are to hopefully arrive at a new understanding of solidarity.

## **Mijke van der Drift**

### **Complicity without identity: Ensouled connections in frictional worlds**

The problematisation of tropes of 'innocence' question the operation of critical theory's primary tools: the indication of limits and limiting conditions, which hides tropes of frictionlessness and fault-free activity. Instead of trying to salvage these tools I'll explore turning this around by claiming complicity in atmospheres of activity, including friction and immersion in less desirable patterns (Drift and Raha, 2024). Such an embrace of complicity supports viewing embedded activity without collapsing in questions of identity, and also supports a nuanced view on structural pressures, without falling into the problem of 'elite capture' (Táiwò, 2020). Looking at activity through the lens of ensoulment, suggests friction as negotiation of forms of life (Kohn, 2018), rather than primarily indicators of (structural) oppression, misrecognition, or lack of knowledge, as critical theory would have it.

Ensouled connections rely on friction, without demanding perfection, universal knowledge, or institutional alignment.

## **Omar Kasmani**

### **Queer companions: In *subbet***

In this session, Omar and Safet chat about Omar's recent book *Queer Companions: Religion, Public Intimacy, and Saintly Affects in Pakistan* (Duke University Press, 2022).

In the book, Omar theorizes saintly intimacy and the construction of queer social relations at Pakistan's most important site of Sufi pilgrimage. Conjoining queer theory and the anthropology of Islam, Omar outlines the felt and enfolded ways in which saintly affections bind individuals, society, and the state in Pakistan through a public architecture of intimacy. Islamic saints become lovers and queer companions just as a religious universe is made valuable to critical and queer forms of thinking. Focusing on the lives of ascetics known as fakirs in Pakistan, Omar shows how the affective bonds with the place's patron saint, a thirteenth-century antinomian mystic, foster unstraight modes of living in the present. In a national context where religious shrines are entangled in the state's infrastructures of governance, coming close to saints further entails a drawing near to more-than-official histories and public forms of affect. Through various fakir life stories, Omar contends that this intimacy offers a form of queer world making with saints.

Journeying through the book together, Omar and Safet will try to flesh out questions of trans\* relations to shrines, saints, and ideas of divinity...

## Lucian Summerisle

### Durational act of ritual magic

Lucian's work as an artist records an ongoing multi-voiced conversation between himself, spirit guides, deities, and primordial chaos. Each piece, sometimes through intent and focus, other times through ritual and trance state, depicts a snippet of this intensely personal, frequently confusing personal religious experience. As a devotee of divine, henotheistic chaos, bound into its servitude with magickal fetters that transcend time and material, Lucian is tasked with amalgamating a "new" entry into its personal pantheon: the deceased emperor and sun-god, Elagabalus. Revealed in their full divinity to Lucian and its partner Celestine last Winter, Elagabalus poses a cataclysmic threat to imperial and colonial rule, tyrannical hierarchies of prescribed gender and sexuality. Their body, a symbol in flux, elicits disgust, hatred, worship, and awe from all who have described them. While Elagabalus syncretises perfectly with the rest of Lucian's pantheon in theory through their aspects of outsider-ship, sacred sexuality, transsexual chaos magic, gleeful iconoclasm, and playful monstrosity, both the artist and the deity must grapple with this induction in practice.

This intervention is a durational act of ritual magic, culminating in what might generously be deemed "a painting" on "canvas". Witnesses can sit in on the rite as desired throughout the conference. Please note: this intervention will use a soundtrack, and atmospheric modifications.



## **Raphaël Khouri**

### **No other cure for sorrow**

Can theatre change the world? Did it once?

Several times a year, the entire Hellenistic world and beyond, from Penzance to Pakistan, worshipped Dionysos, a queer, transgender God as part of what was likely the most politically radical intervention into society the Western World has ever known. And everyone had to worship. At its very core was theatre, but also plants.

Talking us down a hallucinogenic rabbit hole, Khouri pieces together a fascinating puzzle that offers magic and hope in power of the collective to shift our consciousness.





## Workshop biographies

in order of appearance

**Dr Abeera Khan** is Lecturer in Gender and Sexuality at the SOAS Centre for Gender Studies. Her work provides critical interventions in queer of color critique, particularly regarding the category of “queer Muslim.” She has published in *The Contrapuntal*, *Feminist Review*, *Feminist Formations*, *lambda nordica* and *Religion and Gender*. She is co-editor of 'Abolitions: Writing Against Abandonment,' a special issue of *Wasafiri Magazine*, forthcoming this summer.

**Revd Dr Alex Clare-Young** is a pioneer minister in the United Reformed Church, currently working with Downing Place Church in Cambridge City Centre. Revd Alex earned a PhD in the Department of Theology and Religion at the University of Birmingham. Their thesis, 'Trans-formations: A grounded theology, rooted in the identities, experiences and understandings of trans and non-binary Christians', filled a key gap in Christian theology by exploring the understandings of humanity and of God held by trans and non-binary Christians. Alex is the author of *Transgender. Christian. Human* (2019). For more information, check out their website: <https://alexclareyoung.co.uk/>.

**Dr Vanja Hamzić** is Reader in Law, History, and Anthropology at SOAS University of London. The bulk of Dr Hamzić's anthropological and historical research addresses issues in selfhood formation—especially those related to gender, sexual, class, racial, linguistic, and religious difference—with the principal archival and fieldwork sites in Pakistan, Indonesia, Senegal, and Louisiana. Dr Hamzić's work has particularly

sought to shed new light on how gender-nonconforming individuals and communities—such as *khwajasara* in Pakistan, *waria* and others in Indonesia, as well as numerous historical identity formations across West Africa—have braved the turbulent tides of racial capitalism, colonialism, and enslavement and how, in turn, they have developed and abided by multiple formations of insurrectionary vernacular knowledge about themselves and the world at large. Dr Hamzić is the author of *Sexual and Gender Diversity in the Muslim World: History, Law, and Vernacular Knowledge* (2016, 2019) and is currently writing a book on cosmological and gender nonconformity in eighteenth-century Greater Senegambia and Colonial Louisiana.

**Sabah Choudrey** | Reluctant activist on most things trans, brown, and hairy. Sabah co-founded Trans Pride Brighton in 2013 and made The Rainbow List in 2015, celebrating 101 of the most influential LGBT people in Britain. Sabah has built a presence across UK and Europe, speaking at TEDx Brixton 2015, ILGA Europe 2016, IDAHOT Brussels 2017, Malmö Pride 2017/18/20 about intersectionality, identity, and inclusion. A proud trans youth worker for 10 years, currently Senior Youth Work Practitioner at Gendered Intelligence and Director of Colours Youth Network supporting LGBTQ POC young people in UK and Middlesex Pride. They are the Vice Chair of Trustees for Inclusive Mosque Initiative. Sabah is an experienced Psychotherapist and Artist Wellbeing and Care Practitioner supporting LGBTQ theatre and has experience with Milk Presents and Krishna Isha. Sabah is the winner of the Gay Times Future Fighters Honour 2021 and the National Advisor for LGBT Health Award 2022. Based in West London, their passions also include fostering cats and talking to houseplants. Their latest



book *Supporting Trans People of Colour: How to Make Your Practice Inclusive* with Jessica Kingsley Publishers is out now. Facebook Sabah Choudrey | Twitter @SabahChoudrey | Instagram @sabah.c | LinkedIn Sabah Choudrey | <https://sabahchoudrey.com>

**Dr Mijke van der Drift** is a philosopher and educator working on ethics, trans studies, and anti-colonial philosophy. Mijke is a tutor at the Royal College of Art, London. Mijke's work has appeared in the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, the *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, in various independent publications as well as chapters in *The Emergence of Trans* (Routledge 2020), and *The New Feminist Literary Studies Reader* (Cambridge UP 2020). Van der Drift is founding member of the art collective Red Forest. They have made work for the Milano Triennale (2022), the Helsinki Biennale (2023) as part of their research into Extractivism, Fossil Fascism, and cultures of resistance. Mijke and Nat Raha's co-authored book *Trans Femme Futures* is forthcoming with Pluto Press (2024).

**Dr Omar Kasmani** is a cultural anthropologist currently working as Guest-Lecturer at Freie Universität, Berlin. Omar's broader work pursues critical notions of public intimacy, post-migrant be/longing and queer temporalities – a research practice that is best situated across the study of Islamic life-worlds, queer and affect theory. Omar is the author of *Queer Companions: Religion, Public Intimacy and Saintly Affects in Pakistan* (Duke UP 2022, winner of the 2023 Ruth Benedict Prize) and the editor of *Pakistan Desires: Queer Futures Elsewhere* (Duke UP 2023). Omar teaches on religion, migration, and

love, with expertise in queer theory and contemporary South Asia. For more information see the website <https://omarkasmani.com>.

**Lucian Summerisle** is a wizard-artist and the lgbtQ+@cam co-ordinator. His artistic practice explores themes of alternative spirituality, psychogeography, and sacred gender non-compliance through a wide variety of methods selected in accordance with divine guidance. These range from fine art and traditional crafts to chaos magic, performance, and daily embodiment. Lucian has published three things: an illustrated edition of the *Ars Goetia* (2014); an illustrated edition of Oscar Wilde's one-act play, *Salome* (2015); and an exploratory journal of spirits and figures from an inner world, *An Ode to Divine and Dirt* (2018). He also created the *Threshold Tarot* (2020), a new personal interpretation of the tarot following Crowley's method in the *Book of Thoth*, which explores the energetic cycle of the major arcana through figures introduced in *An Ode to Divine and Dirt*. For more information, see the website: <http://www.mrlucian.com>.

**Raphaël Khouri** is a Jordanian documentary playwright and theatremaker living between Berlin and Cairo. Khouri is the author of several plays, including the first transgender Arab play, *She He Me* (staged at Kosmos Theatre, Vienna 2019 and also performed online as part of NYC's Criminal Queerness Festival 2020), and *No Matter Where I Go*, a play about the lives of queer women and non-binary Lebanese people staged in Beirut 2014. His translation of Nawal Al Ali's poetry recently won the Columbia Journal Print Contest. Khouri is part of the Climate Change Theater Action and his play *Oh, How We Loved Our Tuna!* was read internationally as part of that initiative. He

was commissioned to write new work for Outburst Queer Arts Festival in Belfast, featuring there in 2019 and 2020. Khouri was a selected playwright at the Arcola Global Queer Plays (London 2018) and the Lark hotINK international play reading series (NYC, 2015), and a member of the Lincoln Center Director's Lab (NYC, 2013). His work has been published in several US journals, as well as in the *Methuen Anthology of Trans Plays* (2021), the *International Queer Drama Anthology* (Neofelis Verlag, 2020), *Global Queer Plays* (Oberon Books 2018), *Skrivena Ljubav* (Samizdat 2018), and *International Perspectives on Where Performance Leads Queer* anthology (Palgrave, 2016).

**Dr Safet HadžiMuhamedović** is an anthropologist of religion, politics, and landscape. He is a researcher affiliated with Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge Interfaith Programme and the Faculty of Divinity in Cambridge. He has taught anthropology at the universities of Cambridge, SOAS, Bristol, Goethe Frankfurt, and Goldsmiths. Safet's ethnographic research in the south Bosnian Dinaric highlands considers the restoration of rituals in religiously plural communities after conflict. He is the author of *Waiting for Elijah: Time and Encounter in a Bosnian Landscape* (2018), co-editor of *Post-home: Dwelling on Loss, Belonging and Movement* (2019, with M. Grujić), and is currently writing a book on nationalism, more-than-human underworlds, and a sinking Bosnian river.

