

Queerlesque: Anticolonial and Anti-Heteropatriarchal Love and Abjection in (Rural) Queer Performance

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Abstract: This article theorizes *queerlesque*, a hybrid of queer performance and burlesque, as a feminist and queer rhetorical practice of visual culture that resists colonial, capitalist, and heteropatriarchal logics. Drawing on thirty years of drag and burlesque performance across the inland Northwest, including rural TabiKat Productions, the Queerly Arts Festival, the Fly Honey Show, and Tipi Confessions, we analyze queerlesque as a mode of worldmaking that fuses love and abjection to reclaim feminized aesthetics long dismissed as frivolous or excessive. Building on bell hooks's conception of love as a transformative political ethic and Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection as both horror and possibility, we argue that queerlesque reimagines the grotesque, erotic, and abject as generative rhetorical sites of feminist and queer resistance. Through costuming, bodily performance, and aesthetic excess, queerlesque performers transform social abjection into a visual rhetoric of survival, pleasure, and community. In contexts marked by rural conservatism and queer invisibility, these performances enact what Audre Lorde calls the erotic as power—transforming shame into spectacle and marginalization into futurity. Ultimately, queerlesque functions as an embodied archive of feminist and queer resistance, one that refuses erasure, embraces excess, and envisions rural queer futurity through affective, sequined acts of collective care and worldmaking.

Keywords: [Queerlesque](#), [Abjection](#), [Anti/Aesthetics](#), [Queer Visuality](#); [Queer Worldmaking](#)

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Figure 1 "Physically thicc and mentally sicc, the genderqueer showperson you'll wanna licc, Kxnni 'The Doll!'" (Source: Queerly Arts Festival, 2025, May 31).¹

¹ The images might not directly illustrate the accompanying texts but speak to the broader themes and context of the article. Due to limitations of time and space, we have not been able to fully honor the depth of the stories and individuals featured. However, Instagram handles and relevant links are included for further exploration.

“Love always wins!”: Contextulizing Queerlesque

During the Queerly Arts Festival in June 2025, a local conservative coalition decided to host a Hetero Awesome Festival outside the Idaho capital. According to a social media video promoting the event, “This festival is more than just an event... [but] a declaration that faith, [traditional heterosexual] family and freedom are worth protecting” (Old State Saloon, 2025a). Mark Fitzpatrick, the creator of Heterosexual Awesomeness Inc. and the owner of Old Street Saloon, said, “Our event is not about targeting any group but about raising awareness of practices we find troubling, such as the encouragement of ‘gender transitions’ among children or their exposure to inappropriate content” (cited in Yurcaba, 2025). For him, Pride Month exists so that “LGBTQ can march down the street doing disgusting and criminal activities while demanding to be celebrated” and that the community “encourages children to cut off their sex organs” (Old State Saloon, 2025b).

That weekend, the contrast between conservative exclusion/hatred and queering celebration/love became unmistakably clear. A local drag and burlesque performer, Aunt Tifa (Boise’s Bucket Shitter, International Menace, Hometown Hero) decided to push back by producing a show entitled “But, What About Straight Pride?” On a Friday night in Boise, Idaho, two queer performance shows outcompeted (one was sold out and the other close) a Hetero Awesome Festival, followed with two sold out Queerly Arts Festival shows on Saturday and Sunday, leading to weekend long cries of “Love always wins!” (potentially, frequently, with a few more expletives proudly and lovingly added at varying points). In a small pocket of an incredibly conservative state a community came together to support one another, united by being queer and a love for performance and their community, in a beautiful way, exemplifying the power of hooks’s (2012) “love ethic” and its power for collective care, reclamation, resistance, representation, and queer world building, which we call: queerlesque.



Figure 2 DRYAD, 2025



Figure 3 Queerly Arts Festival, May 29 2025

Queerlesque, a praxical theory developed after many months of our conversations and a disruptive fusion of queer performance and burlesque, functions as a feminist visual rhetoric that dismantles the visual codes of heteropatriarchal-colonial-capitalist systems. Emerging from the erotic, grotesque, and excessive, queerlesque refuses containment, respectability, palatability, and aesthetic discipline/ing. It revels in glittered mess, distorted beauty, and embodied ambiguity, mobilizing what the dominant culture deems “too much” as a resource for survival and worldmaking. As a visual and affective practice, queerlesque foregrounds the power of the feminized and the abjected, not as sites of shame or subdued marginalization but as wellsprings

of radical political-rhetorical possibilities. The costuming, glitter, and embodied excess of queerlesque radiate beyond the stage, seeding futures of recognition and inclusion that persist long after the performance ends. In this article, we propose that queerlesque is a feminist and queer rhetorical strategy that thrives on the generative interplay of *love*, *joy*, *monstrosity*, and *abjection*.

This article reclaims forbidden feminized (anti)aesthetic practices, makeup, costuming, bodily performance, body modifications, stylized surplus, not as frivolous indulgences but as powerful rhetorical interventions in both heteropatriarchy and binarized drag culture. Costuming, makeup, mannerism, and performance, often dismissed as superficial, trite, vain, loud, or ugly under capitalist-patriarchal logic, instead emerge as feminist and queer visual strategies of survival, reclaiming, visibility, defiance and futurity. As bell hooks (2012) writes, “the function of art is to do more than tell it like it is—it’s to imagine what is possible” (p. 281). Queerlesque enacts this possibility by reclaiming abjected-aesthetic labor as a radical act, one that queers visual-rhetorical culture by centering the affective and the embodied. In this article, queerlesque offers a lens for envisioning queer futures through four performance collectives that model resistance, creativity, and care across diverse contexts. This article is not a manifesto but one node in ongoing queerlesque work, a practice concerned not only with gender and sexuality, but with challenging systemic binaries imposed by capitalism, heteronormativity, racism, colonialism, and beyond.

Flirting with Monstrosity and Abjection

Bearded femmes, pregnant drag kings, grotesque glamazons in smeared lipstick and torn fishnets: deliberately cultivating the aesthetic of the non/unhuman, the excessive, the obscene! These queerlesque performances are not about appealing to the gaze of respectability; they are about refusing it. In “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” Jeffrey Cohen (1996) writes, “The monster’s body is a cultural body... [it] quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy... giving them life and an uncanny independence” (p. 4). Monsters, as Cohen reminds us, always emerge in moments of cultural crisis and they mark what is unspeakable, uncontainable, or in excess of binary logic. “The monster,” he writes, “is the harbinger of category crisis,” a being that problematizes the binary oppositions and “introduces a crisis” (p. 6) by refusing neat resolution.

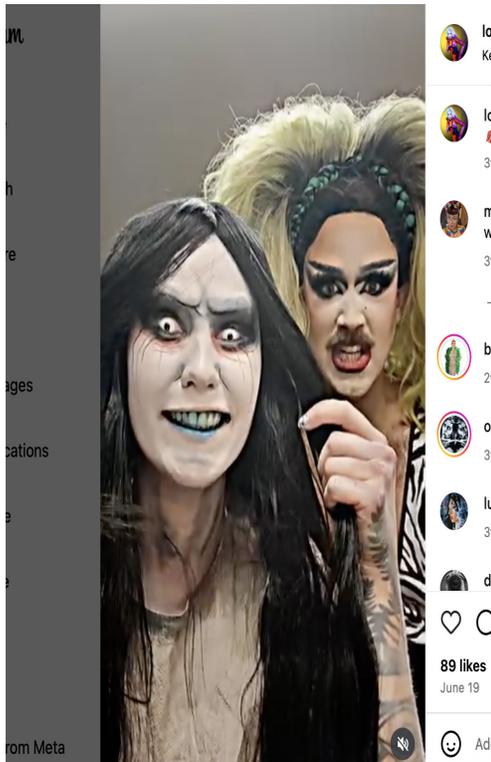


Figure 4 Roxy Albig / LobotAmie, 2025a



Figure 5 Roxy Albig / LobotAmie, 2025b

Night one of Boise, Idaho's first annual Queerly Arts Festival, Where the Wild Things Slay, opens with a pole and a stone well. A hand reaches out, followed by what is immediately recognizable as the antagonist from the 2002 horror film, "The Ring." In a dirty white dress and with long, stringy black hair covering her face, Lobot Amie ("the best source of brain rot entertainment in Boizee!") climbs out of the well and moves toward the pole, where she proceeds with her pole dance, eventually stripping out of her white dress, but never breaking character from her sunken-eyed, stringy-haired persona.

The night continued with performances that pushed against the confines of all things binary, patriarchal, king, queen—embracing abjection and monstrosity, reclaiming their power, their agency, their joy, their love, their bodies, and their lives. Night one was hosted by Cookie Pusss, a drag queen with a chest full of hair, a deep baritone voice, an impeccable mustache, a bright green wig, and a sexy, tasseled silver dress.

It was a four-day festival of all things queer. There were "The Whores," a trio of vampiric, burlesque chair dancers. The Dryad ("the mother of fucking shit and witch of the wyrd anti-colonial burlesque clown") and her three Hell Hounds, dressed in leather and giving dom-and-their-three-subbs vibes, stripped down to pasties as one of the Hell Hounds had their heart eaten out on stage.

There was Irish Lashes, emerging on stage looking very much like Buttons with Karl (the seagull) on his head, as audio from Our Flag Means Death played, and an anti-colonial love story unfolded as Karl was killed in the shootout and Buttons stripped down through their grief, transforming into a seagull themselves.

There was Bone Daddy ("The Beast in the Night, Boise's Gothic Drag King, bringing you some of that BD energy!"), an AMAB drag king disrupting the homonormative notion that drag means AFAB folks must be kings and AMAB folks must be queens—and affirming that drag is not binary or prescribed.

Gloriously messy, leaky, excessive, and unstable bodies, identities, and subjectivities. Glitter clings to sweat and shimmers in unapologetically existing all types of bodies; gender dissolves, hijacks, and reforms; and performances walk the blurring line between celebration and grotesquerie. Julia Kristeva (1982) has previously defined abjection as the process through which the self maintains its boundaries by expelling what is deemed impure, improper, or unclassifiable. She wrote that abjection “draws me toward the place where meaning collapses” (p. 2), a site of profound horror for normative systems that rely on clear distinctions between clean and dirty, masculine and feminine, subject and object. In this liminal space, queerlesque is born and thriving.



Figure 6 Kxnni The Doll, 2025

In the previous work (2025) I have theorized abjection as “completely disturb[ing] signified-posing center-seeking metanarratives of identity, subjectivities, structure, system, and order” that “disclose[s] the vulnerability of the borders and boundaries between semiotic and symbolic, self and other, private and public, internal and external, feminine and masculine, passive and active, woman and man created by phallogocratic signifiers” (Poudyal, p. 101). Borrowing her theorizing of menstrual leakage as that abjection, we say, queerlesque “is an abjection that not only makes these borders vulnerable but exposes that these borders are already vulnerable” (p. 101). The abject queer body and queerlesque is therefore not only rejected by the social order but also charged with potential—as something that “does not respect borders, positions, rules” and lies in the realm of “the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). For instance, trans and gender-nonconforming performers (or even otherwise cis-gendered heterosexual folks in the “outside world” performing at queerlesque, for that matter), often become lightning rods for this kind of abjection, as their embodiments defy the binary logics that systematize sex and gender. This ambiguity, while socially punished,

can also be reclaimed as an anti/aesthetic and rhetorical force.

Queerlesque performers often inhabit this abject position deliberately, using visual excess to claim agency within frameworks that would otherwise render them marginal, invisible, or obscene. This practice resonates with Juana María Rodríguez's (2011) extension of Kristeva's (1982) formulation, in which abjection becomes a resource for racialized and feminized queer subjects. In her writing on Latinx queer sexuality, Rodríguez reconceptualized abjection as a resource, particularly for racialized and feminized queer subjects, "for subaltern performers, regardless of the categories of Otherness they inhabit or explore" (Amend, 2024, p. 157; see also Alvarado, 2018). Rodríguez (2011) wrote, "For certain subjects, dwelling in the abject space of bottomhood and femininity can be a mode of critical resistance" (p. 337). Their performances do not aim to escape objectification or fetishization; instead, they stage it, manipulate it, and subvert it. Abjection, then, is not just a state imposed by systems of power; it is also a mode of rhetorical and visual agency. In queerlesque, performers don't just survive abjection—they stage it, glorify it, and turn it outward, forcing spectators to reckon with what the dominant order cannot assimilate. Through this practice, they dismantle the visual architecture of normativity, insisting that what disgusts the system may also be what transforms it.

LOVE, The Ultimate Driving Force, and Erotic, Excess, Joy

In the world of queerlesque, love is not merely sentimental—it is structural, embodied, and insurgent. Following bell hooks, we understand love as a political practice that actively works against the alienation imposed by patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism. hooks insists that "to commit to love is to commit to a life beyond dualism" (hooks & Tworkov, 1992) and that "love is profoundly political" (hooks, 2001, p. 56). This notion resonates deeply with queerlesque's refusal of binary gender systems and its challenge to the visual aesthetics of conformity. Whether through bodily exaggeration, grotesque humor, or raw sensuality, queerlesque performers create spaces where love is neither neat nor respectable to power systems, but defiant and communal. In rural queer performance, where the visibility of queerness is often met with social hostility or institutional neglect, the act of showing up is a radical form of love: bodily, extravagantly, joyfully. It is, paraphrasing hooks (2000), a love ethic that transforms silence into speech and resistance into resilience (pp. 93–94).

Queerlesque is a love of life made visual. It is love on stage. It is a love of refusal, the joy of making a space for oneself. Love for the innate and immeasurable messiness of life, of building a life, of being queer. How is this visually represented on stage? The visual rhetoric of love and joy via queerlesque?

A hole in fishnets right before a performer takes the stage leads to a swarm of other performers surrounding them to tear more holes in their fishnets. An emergency call for a pair of suspenders is responded to en masse. In such moments, the act of dressing becomes more than preparation; it becomes an affective and communal practice of love and queer worldmaking.

At the Queerly Arts Festival, local drag king Tucker Wright and partner Kxnni The Doll (Ken-nee-the-dawl, "physically thicc and mentally sicc") performed a chair-dancing burlesque duet. Kxnni is a well-known genderqueer performer in the Boise area, winner of Boise's Showperson Competition in 2023, and walks with a cane. It was not a performance highlighting Kxnni's disability, but rather queer love, the erotic, capable bodies, and joy. There was Calypso Pearl, performing with a video on

the projector screen behind her chronicling the U.S. Women's National Soccer Team (USWNT) fight for equal pay, highlighting AFAB athletes who have used their positions to fight to leave both their sport and the world a better place. There was Frank Siracha, also using the video projector during their performance to bring attention to the recent ICE raids and protests, and to highlight the beauty of their Latine heritage and America's Latine community.

Love of community and of performance as resistance and reclamation is often on display.



Figure 7 Calypso Pearl, 2025

The queer performer's theatrically extravagant makeup and bodily gestures, smeared and overdrawn lipstick, eye makeup, rhinestones, props and costuming are not just ornamental spectacle—though that is immensely joyous, too—but deeply communicative, shattering any forms of gender conformism. These expressions recall what Lorde (1984) described as the erotic—a “well of replenishing and provocative force” (p. 54). They invite us to trust once again “the power which rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge,” a power the male world has taught us to distrust throughout our lives (p. 53). In queerlesque, the erotic is not confined to sex or the private sphere—it permeates performance, embodiment, and worldmaking. It provides “the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person” (p. 56)—and in the case of queerlesque, with the community that gathers to witness and co-create its possibilities. And “the erotic connection functions [as] the open and fearless underlining of [the] capacity for joy” (p. 56). The Fly Honey show exemplifies this joy that comes from embracing bodies and the erotic and the queerness of it all, claiming space as a “femme-led, party-starting, ass-shaking, glitter-bombing, sex-positive queer punk performance group... a high-velocity spectacle that pulses with radical joy and self-love” (Thalia Hall, n.d.). In response to the question of who they are, they respond with:

Born in a sweaty DIY loft space in 2010, we're a dance-forward performance project that's indebted to the dance forms and cultures created by and for women, strippers, showgirls, burlesque artists, radicalized queer spaces, Black and Brown creative expressions and activist frameworks.

We honor every shaking thigh, every whispered 'yes,' every revolution born in a dark room pulsing with bass and bodies.

This Hive? It's made up of everything: dancers, doctors, dykes, teachers, mothers, enbys, artists, babysitters, bartenders, and best friends. We're a kaleidoscope of care, heat, and unapologetic joy. (The Fly Honeys, 2025)



Figure 8 The Fly Honeys, 2023

What we want to emphasize is that it would be easy to be trite, to fall into cliché, to exaggerate queer tropes of visibility—to indulge in a kind of queer triumphalism. Queer has won, queer has overcome, we are here, we are queer. But that's not what this is. That's not it! Queer is the joy of ongoing resistance. The joy and love found in community, in presence. It is joy grounded in radical sovereignty, in Laura Harjo's (2019) *este-carte* sovereignty, of queer as politics.



Figure 9 Aiden Antares, 2025

Aiden's performance at Queerly Arts, a joy and love for community. It is the joy and love of moments that are about oneself and the shared freedom and liberation from the male—capitalist, colonial, neoliberal, heteropatriarchal—gaze.

*Queerlesque is a celebration of
bubble guns (The Fly Honeyes),
the shaking of all the asses in all the colors, shapes and sizes,
of the more than human love between a man and a seagull (Irish Lashes Queerly Arts performance),
no asses as much as asses,
queer as politic,
the love of craft that goes into the embodiment of the visual.*

*Queerlesque is a celebration of how costuming, make-up, music, and movement become storytelling.
Become griots. Become the moment.*

*It is a celebration of how the taboo becomes freedom.
The Dryad's dom-sub culture and cannibalism
Irish Lashes' more than human love of a seagull and man
Helen Dee Bed, dressed as a cow, audience members drinking from her teats, eating a burger for the
final moment of the performance
Frankie Ficticious's dancing queerlesque with her mom.*

*It is a celebration of the love of inciting queer panic
It is the love the audience feels.
The joy. The discomfort. The liberation.*

*This is not joy or love in the commodified or neoliberal sense
This is not the sanitized joy of capital. Not the love of brand-sponsored pride.
This is not the happiness that comes from a "politics of recognition" (Coulthard, 2014),
that asks for permission, that asks for recognition, from outside.
This is the love and joy of labor and storytelling and sharing for us.*

Queerlesque is a reminder that as queer folx we are more than just our trauma and damage, but also our resistance, our reclamation, our presence, our joy and our love. In embracing love not as an escape from conflict but as a tool for social transformation, queerlesque performers make visible a politics of care and possibility. They love publicly, fiercely, and queerly, offering affective blueprints for worlds not yet realized.

A Wrap-up: Rural Queer Futurity



Figure 10 Calypso Pearl, 2025



Figure 11 COOKIE PUSSS, 2025

Cheyenne Browne:

*In March of 2024, the Idaho Legislature passed a resolution (Corbin, 2024) designating the month between Mother's Day and Father's Day "Traditional Family Values Month," which celebrates "the natural female mother and male father." This period deliberately overlaps with the first two weeks of Pride Month, signaling an effort to eclipse and erase queer visibility. In many rural areas, particularly in traditionally conservative states, these are the imaginaries we are immersed in and exposed to daily, these are the futures that are being built for us. Queer performance art and productions in our communities and seeing things like *The Fly Honey Show* and *Tipi Confessions* on social media helps expand the representation of what queerness is, what we can be, and the worlds we can make and inhabit. Especially in rural areas where our main exposure to supposed representation is things like *Rupaul's Drag Race* or *The Ultimatum Queer Love* that often perpetuate and highlight the drama and homonormative narratives and relationships in really patriarchal ways.²*

So much of the queer culture we are exposed to are stories focused on hardship, tragedy, and overcoming, especially in rural areas. And they are usually centered in urban areas, and often with queerness portrayed in very specific ways, often hetero and homonormative ways. To be able to see ourselves just loving and joyful and being in community is everything. My partner teared up the

² Brand-sponsored pride festivals and mainstream queer media often promote a sanitized image of queer identity aligned with consumer culture, corporate friendliness, and visual respectability. By contrast, queerlesque foregrounds mess, abjection, and non-normative embodiment as counter-visual rhetoric. Margot Weiss (2018) shows how queer subjects become valorized when they align with marketability and respectability, while corporate pride aesthetics delimit what forms of queer visibility are "safe" (refer to Lisa Duggan, 2002).

other day when they saw a gay couple holding hands in our rural community. Queerlesque and other queer performance art is about people expressing, embodying, and sharing their queerness. But it's more than that, more than just representation. It's also building futures and imaginaries for the rest of us. Not just to be like them but actively expanding our imaginaries, actively building a world, where we get to figure out what it is to be like ourselves, to embrace our queerness, in the bell hooks sense of "queer" as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and that has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live" (qtd. in Brownworth, 2022).

For example: my cousin, neurodivergent, on the spectrum, a musical theater nerd, and often struggling to find belonging in rural Idaho, experienced firsthand how queerlesque generates spaces of recognition and futurity. Because of their cleft palate, pursuing a career in musical theater was not an option. I don't know their sexuality but to me they are one of the queerest people I have ever met. They often struggle to find community, to find connection, to find and experience love, to find meaningful work and ways to embrace their passions in the areas of rural Idaho where they live. One of the communities where they have found some semblance of belonging is in the queer performance community. They joined us for the last day of the Queerly Arts Festival. Drag king Tucker Wright hosted that performance and my cousin found him afterwards and Tucker took the time to talk to them for almost an hour post show. Watching the joy, watching their appreciation, the way it affirmed their place, their belonging, in the world; the way it lit them up and had them imagining their place in the world...that's the worldmaking of queerlesque and queer performance art, that is the visual rhetoric.

Queerlesque helps us imagine and invent and create together. It makes us feel less at odds with the world, makes us feel like we belong, or can build a place where we belong. The whole world is so fucking queer and beautiful and weird and monstrous and full of joy and love and queerlesque reminds me of this. It reminds me of how much love there is in this world, how many kinds of love, it shows me examples of how people are embodying and sharing love and their own kind of queerness, and how all these other queers embrace them, even when no one is queer in the same ways. It reminds me that queer is one of the most natural and beautiful things in the entire world. It actively builds better worlds, actively refuses to accept a smaller and narrower world while embodying resistance and queer worldmaking. Every time a performer steps on stage, they're changing someone's life for the better. What could be more loving and joyful than that? Visual representation of how things can be, of courage and excess and reclamation and...

In rural spaces often marked by erasure, invisibility or hostile visibility, or lack of resources, queerlesque emerges as a radical site where erotic meets abjection and monstrosity to resist the binary logics that relegate queer joy and love to shame. Rather than reproducing the pornographic gaze that commodifies or punishes non-normativity, queerlesque embodies what Lorde (1984) called the "deep and irreplaceable knowledge of our capacity for joy" (p. 57), a joy that is disruptive, erotic, and unapologetically communal. By inhabiting and amplifying the feminized, grotesque, and monstrous, performers refuse resignation and instead activate what Lorde named "the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling" (p. 53), turning abjection into visibility, monstrosity into resistance, and love into a public, aesthetic act of reclamation. In this way, queerlesque does more than perform; it builds worlds—sequined, sweaty, defiant worlds where queer bodies are not just seen but celebrated, and where the erotic, joyful, and unruly become blueprints for queer futurity.

Biographies

Cheyenne Brown is a sixth-generation settler on the Palouse. Their work is focused on Indigenous geographies, particularly water geographies, political ecology, environmental justice, and forms of embodied resistance. They spent many years working in outdoor leadership and field-based environmental science on occupied Indigenous Lands throughout the Western United States. They have recently returned home to the Palouse to pursue their PhD through the Individual Interdisciplinary Doctoral Program at WSU with a focus on participatory action research, environmental justice, and ecocultural rematriation in the Columbia River Basin.

Bibhushana Poudyal is a Nepali assistant professor of English at Washington State University, awarded with the Buchanan Distinguished Assistant Professorship in 2024 and 2025. Her scholarship centers on comparative antiracism, anticolonial praxes, intersectional and internationalist feminisms, and multimodal-digital humanities. Grounded in Global South solidarities and internationalist philosophies, her research and teaching advance decolonial feminist knowledge systems and solidarities across academia and communities. She seeks to amplify voices of the global majority and plurality as transformative and dignified forces within academia and beyond. Her monograph *Gendering South Asia: Rhetorical Non-Phallic Bodies in the Global Capital* was published by Routledge in 2025.

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