

# **“Alone it’s tough, TOGETHER IT’S EASY” Hedesthia, Aotearoa New Zealand’s First Transgender Organisation, 1972-1990**

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*Abstract: Founded in 1972, Hedesthia was a social, support, and advocacy group for transvestites and transsexuals - the first organisation of its kind in Aotearoa New Zealand. Hedesthia provided support to its members through monthly meetings, a bi-monthly newsletter, and various other services which included hot-line counselling and a lending library. For many members, Hedesthia and its off-shoot group, TransFormation, were lifelines in a world that could be intensely hostile to trans people. Pathbreaking in their trans activism, Hedesthia and TransFormation’s leaders diligently advocated for trans issues in their local communities. Yet Hedesthia also cultivated a transnormative politics of respectability. Largely middle-class and white, Hedesthia’s leaders worked hard to define their members as ‘normal’ and acceptable, and in the process denigrated Māori and Pasifika trans sex workers.*

## Introduction

On an ordinary Friday night in 1977, Karen found herself for the first time in the living room of Suzan Xtabay, and she was surrounded by “chattering women talking about the latest fashions and the price of cosmetics.”<sup>1</sup> Though Karen felt the scene appeared remarkably conventional, it was nonetheless “an evening out of a story book,” as it was her first time amongst other transvestites and transsexual women. Xtabay was the National Coordinator of Hedesthia, which was the first trans organisation on record in Aotearoa New Zealand. The living room gathering was one of the groups’ monthly meetings. When Karen reflected on the evening a year later, her subsequent personal changes overwhelmed her. In an article in Hedesthia’s newsletter, Karen underscored the damaging impact of isolation on a person’s mental health, and she urged others to connect to their nearest chapter via the organization’s hotline, newsletter, or – even better – through attendance of an in-person meeting. As Karen explained, “I can at last see laughter in my eyes, happiness in my life and a goal to reach out for,” and she was secure in the knowledge that should she ever feel low again that here existed a space in which she was, “welcome, loved, accepted and understood without explanation.”<sup>2</sup> Though the first step was daunting, Karen reassured readers that her life had become infinitely more meaningful: “all because I kicked open the door, tossed away the key and yelled – ‘Look out World, here comes Karen and I want to start LIVING.’”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Karen, “The First Time Ever,” *Trans-Scribe*, December 1978, 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

Founded in 1972, Hedesthia was a social, support, and advocacy group for transvestites and transsexuals. Though the organization never had more than 200 members, for those Hedesthia reached it provided a vital service. Chapters across the country cultivated local trans networks through monthly meetings, informal counselling, and from 1974 a bi-monthly newsletter *S-E-L-F* which was re-named *Trans-Scribe* in 1978. Hedesthia provided a lifeline in a world that often felt overwhelmingly hostile to members like Karen. As most Hedesthia members prioritised secrecy, their connection with the group was their one outlet for gender expression. But other members worked hard to educate the public about their views on trans lives, and in the process these advocates ushered in a new era of trans activism. These organizers obtained mainstream media coverage on Hedesthia, and through related workshops and the cultivation of relationships with various local organisations, they began a new trans activist epoch in New Zealand. Hedesthia's organizers broke from earlier modes of Aotearoan activism that were largely informal and grounded in a politics of claiming public space. Though it broke new ground, Hedesthia's activists promoted a trans politics rooted in notions of respectability. Hedesthia's membership and leaders were largely white and middle-class, and its activists worked hard to define their members – and trans people generally – as *normal*, hard-working, family-oriented, and law-abiding citizens. Those who did not fit this heterosexist mould were rejected by the group, and Hedesthia members further defined them as distinct from themselves: as not truly trans. This was a transnormative political strategy that reified hierarchies in which only those deemed suitably 'ordinary' deserved acceptance. The members of Hedesthia did not resist colonial gender ideologies, but they instead reconstructed them.

## Context and Methodology

Hedesthia established itself amidst a critical moment in Aotearoa’s queer history. The 1960s inaugurated increased challenges to, “older notions of sexual morality and rigid gender roles.” Working-class ‘kamp’ queer communities increasingly carved out public space for themselves while homophile reformers lobbied for the decriminalisation of sex between men.<sup>4</sup> But these challenges were the exceptions to the rule as ongoing colonisation reinforced Christian sexual values and social conformity. These factors left queer discourse, “largely beyond earshot of public consciousness,” and encouraged queer people to keep their identities ‘underground’ lest they face criminal charges, social ostracism, or other forms of violence.<sup>5</sup> Though the colonial state never explicitly criminalized transness, those caught ‘cross-dressing’ in public were often charged under vagrancy legislation. In addition, censors frequently suppressed trans publications under the 1963 Indecent Publications Act. Whether or not these works contained erotica, state agents typically justified censorship through the argument that trans publicans were, “injurious to the public good,” by the promotion of, “aberrant sexual practices.”<sup>6</sup> The courts, medical system, and Christian churches all offered competing pejorative definitions of

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<sup>4</sup> Chris Brickell, “Sex Education, Homosexuality, and Social Contestation in 1970s New Zealand,” *Sex Education* 7, no. 4 (2007): 388.

<sup>5</sup> Laurie D. Guy, *Worlds in Collision: The Gay Debate in New Zealand, 1960-1986* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2002), 25.

<sup>6</sup> *New Zealand Gazette* no. 39 (7 March 1985), New Zealand Legal Information Institute, 1104; Will Hansen, “‘Every Bloody Right To Be Here’: Trans Resistance in Aotearoa New Zealand, 1967-1989,” (Master of Arts, Victoria University of Wellington, 2020), 6.

queerness. Psychologists framed gender diversity as a “behaviour disorder” while journalists increasingly argued, “that a diagnosis of sickness was surely preferable to one of sinfulness,” when one was assessed for homosexuality.<sup>7</sup> By the early 1970s, many increasingly challenged these discourses. Historian Chris Brickell highlights 1972 –the year of Hedesthia’s formation – as a watershed moment for Aotearan social activism. The National Women’s Liberation Conference and various Gay Liberation Fronts began in 1972.<sup>8</sup> Sexual revolution was in the air, and other social justice movements focused on Indigenous rights, anti-racism, environmentalism, and anti-authoritarianism all gained new momentum in this period.<sup>9</sup>

Hedesthia occupied a unique role in this milieu. Whereas rebellious attitudes, youthful composition, university strong-holds, direct action strategies, and long-term revolutionary aims characterized many of these movements, Hedesthia was composed of middle-class suburbanites with the ultimate goals of education and assimilation. Moreover, while Hedesthia was the first *organisation* created by and for trans people, it was not the beginning of trans activism in Aotearoa. Trans people had long been leaders within kamp communities, and Māori and Pasifika trans sex

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<sup>7</sup> A.J.W. Taylor and D.G. McLachlan, “Further Observations and Comments on Transvestism,” *New Zealand Medical Journal* 62, no. 375 (1963): 527–29; A.J.W. Taylor and D.G. McLachlan, “Transvestism and Psychosexual Identification,” *New Zealand Medical Journal* 63, no. 382 (1964): 396–372; Brickell, “Sex Education, Homosexuality, and Social Contestation in 1970s New Zealand,” 388.

<sup>8</sup> Brickell, 388.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*; Aroha Harris and Melissa Matutina Williams, “Rights and Revitalisation, 1970-1990,” in *Tangata Whenua: A History*, eds. Atholl Anderson, Judith Binney, and Aroha Harris (Wellington, New Zealand: Bridget Williams Books, 2015), 358; Stephanie Gibson, Matariki Williams, and Puawai Cairns, *Protest Tautohetohe: Objects of Resistance, Persistence and Defiance* (Wellington: Te Papa Press, 2019).

workers were particularly prominent in informal queer activism.<sup>10</sup> In 1967, two whakawāhine (Māori trans women), Carmen Rupe and Chrissy Witoko, had each established coffee lounges in Wellington, and they were among the first trans women to do so in Aotearoa.<sup>11</sup> These businesses created spaces for trans people to exist, and they provided employment opportunities to otherwise economically marginalized peoples.<sup>12</sup> Though these informal strategies fostered community, they were not consciously political. But they were powerful methods to resist oppression and make life more liveable for trans sex workers, and they laid the foundation for subsequent activist groups such as the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective’s 1998

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<sup>10</sup> Dana de Milo, Dana de Milo on Carmen Rupe, interview by Gareth Watkins, 11 December 2012, [https://www.pridenz.com/dana\\_de\\_milo\\_on\\_carmen.html](https://www.pridenz.com/dana_de_milo_on_carmen.html); John Jakeman, John Jakeman, interview by Gareth Watkins, 13 May 2017, PrideNZ.com; Chris Brickell, *Mates and Lovers: A History of Gay New Zealand* (Auckland: Random House, 2008), 301.

<sup>11</sup> For more information about whakawāhine and whakawāhine history, see Elizabeth Kerekere, ‘Part of The Whānau: The Emergence of Takatāpui Identity - He Whāriki Takatāpui’ (Ph.D., Victoria University of Wellington, 2017); Ashleigh McFall (Feu’u), ‘A comparative study of the fa’afafine of Samoa and the whakawāhine of Aotearoa/New Zealand’ (Master of Arts, Victoria University of Wellington, 2013); Caren Wilton, *My body, my business: New Zealand sex workers in an era of change* (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2018); Hansen, ‘Every Bloody Right To Be Here’. Other significant sources include the various interviews conducted by Gareth Watkins with whakawāhine on PrideNZ.com – not all audio featuring Māori trans women have been tagged with “whakawāhine,” but a collection which have can be accessed here:

<https://www.pridenz.com/tags/4888.html>. Lastly, there are two key biographies by whakawāhine: Paul Martin, *Carmen: My Life as told to Paul Martin* (Auckland: Benton Ross Publishers, 1988); and Cathy Casey, *Change for the Better: the story of Georgina Beyer* (Auckland: Random House, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> Hansen, ‘Every Bloody Right To Be Here,’ 35–39.

Ongoing Network Transgender Outreach Project.<sup>13</sup> As scholar Elizabeth Kerekere writes, prior to colonisation Māori of diverse genders had simply been, “part of the whānau (family),” and their activism in the latter half of the twentieth-century acted as a decolonial reclamation of Indigenous gender.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, while Hedesthia’s efforts were not the *start* of trans activism in Aotearoa, they did inaugurate a new form of trans activism. This new mode was formally organised, politically conscious, and focused on notions of respectability and human rights.

The concept of ‘transnormativity’ is key to understand both Hedesthia’s respectability politics, and to complexify a single-axis view of trans oppression in New Zealand. Transnormativity is modelled off queer theorist Lisa Duggan’s concept of “homonormativity,” and the former names the norms that determine which trans people live, for how long, and under what conditions.<sup>15</sup> Transnormativity is informed by racism, classism, heterosexism, and other intersecting power structures that create an uneven distribution of “vulnerability and security.” Those trans people who are, “highly assimilable - gender normative, heterosexual, middle-class, well educated, racialized as white,” and non-Indigenous are distributed greater life chances than others.<sup>16</sup> For Black feminist scholar Marquis Bey normativity is “necessarily

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>14</sup> Kerekere, 128; Fiona Lam Sheung et al., *E Oho! Mana Takatāpui* (Wellington, New Zealand, 2022), PrideNZ.com, [https://www.pridenz.com/e\\_oho\\_manatakatapui.html](https://www.pridenz.com/e_oho_manatakatapui.html); Hansen, 67–68.

<sup>15</sup> Dean Spade, *Normal Life Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 6–7.

<sup>16</sup> Spade, 4–5; Hil Malatino, “Gone, Missing: Queering and Racializing Absence in Trans and Intersex Archives,” in *Queer Embodiment: Monstrosity, Medical Violence, and Intersex Experience* (University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 110.

violent.” As they explain, the normative is not neutral or numerically descriptive, for it grants only those who count as, “valid, ideal, normal, and representable,” to a liveable life.<sup>17</sup> Transnormativity feeds respectability politics among trans communities as privileged members conform to dominant norms to gain greater security. Susan Stryker identified this impulse amongst twentieth-century American trans communities as white middle-class trans people organized, “around the one thing that interferes with or complicates their privilege”: being trans. These early groups emphasized their assimilable qualities, and they distinguished themselves from those who would thwart their claims of respectability.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, many Hedesthia members highlighted their adherence to norms of white middle-class womanhood. Oftentimes they did so through an acerbic bifurcation between themselves and trans sex workers, and many of the latter were Māori and Pasifika.

It is important to understand the coloniality of gender to recognize how Hedesthia’s respectability politics functioned as a colonial tool. Feminist theorist Marie Draz expands on the pioneering work of decolonial feminist Maria Lugones as she explains how, “the modern gender system,” that includes the idea of gender as binary, cannot be understood, “apart from its inception in colonial ways of knowing and being,” and Draz emphasizes that part of the colonising project encompasses the dehumanization and ultimate elimination of Indigenous peoples and knowledges.<sup>19</sup> Scholars who are takatāpui – Māori of diverse sexualities, genders,

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<sup>17</sup> Marquis Bey, *Black Trans Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 38.

<sup>18</sup> Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008), 55.

<sup>19</sup> Marie Draz, “Retro-Sex, Anti-Trans Legislation, and the Colonial/Modern Gender System,” *PhiloSOPHIA* 11, no. 1–2 (2021): 31.



and sex characteristics – have likewise established that heterosexism, cissexism, and interphobia (discrimination against intersex people) are tools of colonisation, and traditional Māori society embraced takatāpui.<sup>20</sup> Leonie Pihama makes it clear that, “Western reductionist approaches to gender identities,” that are rooted in bioessentialism, “reproduce systems of marginalisation and oppression,” and these modes deny the “range of gender identities,” that Māori claim.<sup>21</sup> Pihama explains that to decolonize gender in Aotearoa requires one to centre, “tino rangatiratanga (Māori sovereignty, self-determination).”<sup>22</sup>

Gender self-determination stands in opposition to the self-disciplining nature of transnormativity. Although all trans people suffer under the hegemonic power of transnormativity, the structure of colonialism means that trans colonisers are afforded more power as part of what Dean Spade names the unequal, “distribution of vulnerability.”<sup>23</sup> If one analyses Hedesthia through the lens of transnormativity, it foregrounds the positionality of members who were both trans subjects within a cisgender hegemony, but also their position(s) as white, Pākehā (foreign, not Māori), middle-class subjects in a settler-colonial, capitalist state. This work is important. Pākehā trans people living in Aotearoa

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<sup>20</sup> Leonie Pihama, “Mana Wahine: Decolonising Gender in Aotearoa,” *Australian Feminist Studies* 35, no. 106 (2020): 357, 359; Kerekere, ‘Part of The Whānau: The Emergence of Takatāpui Identity - He Whāriki Takatāpui’, 21; Clive Aspin and Jessica Hutchings, “Reclaiming the Past to Inform the Future: Contemporary Views of Maori Sexuality,” *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 9, no. 4 (2007): 415.

<sup>21</sup> Pihama, 356–59.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 359.

<sup>23</sup> Spade, 193.

must examine their own histories to build a trans politics that is anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and decolonial.

Throughout this article I use ‘trans’ in a similar manner to Stryker as a means to broadly gesture towards individuals who moved away from their gender assigned at birth.<sup>24</sup> Hedesthia members did not describe themselves as ‘trans.’ Most referred to themselves as cross-dressers, transvestites, or transsexuals, and from at least 1976 members used the word ‘transpeople’ when they collectively referred to themselves. By 1978 many began to use the term ‘transgenderist.’<sup>25</sup> They likely began to do this in order to acknowledge their transmasculine members as many previously referred to themselves collectively as ‘sisters.’<sup>26</sup> Their use of collective terms reveals that Hedesthia members thought of themselves as belonging to a shared community of gender diversity. Though in my use of the term ‘trans,’ I do not wish to gloss over the internal and individual differences amongst group members. My focus is not on how individual Hedesthia members understood themselves, but instead it is on the collective politics that they developed. When I refer to the land Hedesthia members lived on, I follow the scholarship of fa’afafine researcher Patrick Thomsen, who uses ‘New Zealand’ to name the settler-colonial context, and he deploys ‘Aotearoa’ in other contexts to honour Māori.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Stryker, 1.

<sup>25</sup> Gillian Laundon, “Friends,” *S-E-L-F*, November 1976, 3; Suzan Xtabay, “Observations on the Phenomenon of Trans-Genderism,” *Trans-Scribe*, December 1978, 2.

<sup>26</sup> Christine Young, “Greetings, trans-people!” *S-E-L-F*, January 1977, 1.

<sup>27</sup> Patrick Thomsen, “Research ‘Side-Spaces’ and the Criticality of Auckland, New Zealand, as a Site for Developing a Queer Pacific Scholarly Agenda,” *New Zealand Sociology* 37, no. 1 (January 2022): 120.

## Hedesthia

Christine Young was a transvestite who lived in the small city of Lower Hutt. After fifteen years feeling isolated, she established Hedesthia in 1972. It was only when she happened across the novel *A Year Among the Girls* by author Darrell G. Raynor that she realised she was not “alone” nor “too abnormal.”<sup>28</sup> After further research she discovered *Transvestia*, an American magazine for heterosexual cross-dressers reestablished by well-known transvestite Virginia Prince in 1960. Each issue featured information about trans groups around the world.<sup>29</sup> The magazine inspired Young, and she quickly gathered a dozen like-minded friends and acquaintances together.<sup>30</sup> Steadily Hedesthia expanded, and by 1986 they had chapters in Wellington, Auckland, Christchurch, Dunedin, “Rotorua/Hamilton,” New Plymouth, Hawkes Bay, Gisborne, and Northland.<sup>31</sup> Most members were transfeminine individuals, and most were heterosexual transvestites and transsexual women. In May 1976 Hedesthia welcomed their first (unnamed) transmasculine member, or as *S-E-L-F* put it, “F/M [female to male] T/S [transsexual] Full Member.”<sup>32</sup> The author’s description of him as their first “Full Member” likely means that other transmasculine people were involved in Hedesthia prior to

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<sup>28</sup> Young, “Hello, Girls!!” *Hedesthia Newsletter*, June 1974, 1.

<sup>29</sup> Joanne J. Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 179–80.

<sup>30</sup> Young, “HELLO, Girls! Christine Calling Again,” *S-E-L-F*, August 1975, 2.

<sup>31</sup> Note that members from Rotorua and Hamilton formed one chapter together, despite the geographical distance. *Trans-Scribe*, February 1980, 1; *Trans-Scribe*, April/May 1986, 1.

<sup>32</sup> Young, “GREETINGS, Sisters, Everywhere !!” *S-E-L-F*, May 1976, 1.

this, but they had not been active enough to be considered *full* members. Young remained Hedesthia’s President until she fell ill and transferred leadership to Xtabay in 1977 after which the group’s headquarters moved from Lower Hutt to Auckland. In addition to the Presidency, were the positions of Public Relations and Liaison Controller, and each chapter also had Meetings and Social Organisers.<sup>33</sup> Hedesthia also provided various services such as in-person counselling, a library-lending service, confidential photographic service, sale of homemade bra-fillers, and from 1989 a hotline named Trans-Help-Line. These were the first recorded services of their kind made by and for trans people in Aotearoa.

Hedesthia’s newsletter and monthly meetings were the organisation’s cornerstones. Gatherings typically lasted until late on Friday evenings. After members discussed club business, they became purely social gatherings, and meetings often featured dinner, drinks, and the occasional film screening.<sup>34</sup> These gatherings allowed members the opportunity to dress and speak freely, and conversation topics frequently ranged from clothing, coming out, sexuality, legal barriers, and more.<sup>35</sup>

If someone lived too far from the nearest chapter, Hedesthia’s newsletter was likely their only way to keep in touch with other trans people.<sup>36</sup> *Trans-Scribe* was a comprehensive publication that featured editorials, reports from various chapters, group notices, letters to the editor, pieces about members’ personal journeys, reprinted articles from international trans magazines,

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<sup>33</sup> Young, “GREETINGS, Sisters, wherever you are !!” *S-E-L-F*, August 1976, 1.

<sup>34</sup> Laundon, “Friends,” 3; Xtabay, “The First Time Ever,” *S-E-L-F*, March 1977, 10.

<sup>35</sup> Xtabay, “The First Time Ever,” 10.

<sup>36</sup> Xtabay, “Central’s Report,” *Trans-Scribe*, December 1980, 2; CJ and Jan Simpson, interview by Will Hansen, 3 April 2019.

relevant clippings from local newspapers, poems, obituaries, a biting “Aunty Aggie’s Agonies” gossip column, cartoons, and ads for trans-friendly businesses. A former Hedesthia member pseudonymously known as CJ exclaimed that people, “lived for the magazine,” as it provided their sole connection to trans community.<sup>37</sup> Though *Trans-Scribe* was certainly not short of debate nor of shared commiseration, one of the magazine’s most important functions was to reinforce members’ sense of self-worth and pride. Even the campily bitter “Aunty Aggie” made a point to cheer and reassure others as she wrote that: “You have a right to be here and whether or not it is clear to you, this is where you belong. Therefore, be at peace with Aphrodite for she too was femme, and whatever your labours, let them give birth to a beauty.”<sup>38</sup> *Trans-Scribe* consolidated feelings of community as members shared stories, received validation, read the stories of others, and thereby felt less alienated.

Though the terms ‘transphobia’ and ‘transmisogyny’ had not yet been coined, Hedesthia members were well aware of their effects. Gillian Laundon, who used the pseudonym Gillian Cox when she wrote to *Trans-Scribe*, explained that the internalisation of the “common attitude” that transness was “disgusting” not only diminished self-worth, but it also drove trans people to avoid other trans people for fear that it would confirm their own “disgusting” nature.<sup>39</sup> Wendy Maclaine described this “isolation syndrome” and

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<sup>37</sup> CJ, interview.

<sup>38</sup> Aunty Aggie, “Trans-Desperata or Aunty Aggie’s Lament,” *Trans-Scribe*, Summer 1984, 19-20.

<sup>39</sup> Laundon, “Friends,” 3; In her Hedesthia work, Gillian used her wife’s surname, Cox, while under her legal surname Laundon she was a noted mycologist. She announced her transition to the scientific community in a notice published in

stressed that had she not, “had understanding friends in Hedesthia,” the “mental agony” would have been impossible to cope with. As Maclaine asked herself, “Where would I be today, if I had never joined Hedesthia??” She answered her own question, “probably in a mental hospital, in a cemetery, or at best perhaps an alcoholic.”<sup>40</sup> Former Hedesthia members CJ and Jan Simpson, who I interviewed together in 2019, emphasised the presence of the trans mental health crisis. Suicide was a recurring theme throughout our interview.<sup>41</sup>

In the face of transphobia and transmisogyny, Hedesthia encouraged communal caretaking. From the very first newsletter Young emphasised the positive benefits that came from trans community even if this was, “just to know that one is NOT ALONE.” Young further argued that it was members’ “duty” to help Hedesthia grow through word-of-mouth.<sup>42</sup> Likewise, Laundon underscored, “the value of trans-friendships,” as the development of friendships with other trans people by definition involved the recognition of trans humanity and worth.<sup>43</sup> “Simply to meet others and see just how normal and decent they really are, and to see what they have achieved in bringing out their real selves,” Laundon argued could, “help towards self-acceptance.”<sup>44</sup> CJ explained that meeting others who had already transitioned and continued to enjoy life was incredibly encouraging, and this opened members up to a

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*Taxon*, the leading journal of plant taxonomy, in 1977. See ‘News and Notes: Personalia,’ *Taxon* 26 no. 2/3 (May 1977): 308.

<sup>40</sup> Wendy Maclaine, “Why do we need Hedesthia?” *S-E-L-F*, March 1977, 3-4.

<sup>41</sup> CJ and Simpson, interview.

<sup>42</sup> Young, “Hello, Girls!!” 2; Young, “We have made great strides as a club...” *S-E-L-F*, January 1977, 9.

<sup>43</sup> Laundon, “Friends,” 3.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

world of possibilities.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, members consistently wrote into the newsletter to thank Hedesthia for the joy and confidence that it had brought them. Often, they mentioned the close friendships they had developed that lasted into the present day: the friendship between CJ and Simpson is a prime example of this.<sup>46</sup>

Despite the confidence members gained through community-building, most Hedesthia members were steadfastly committed to secrecy. Though both CJ and Simpson emphasized that while neither cross-dressing nor being trans was illegal, they were so stigmatised that to many they were, “*considered illegal*,” as they explained that, “anything which was out of the ordinary, which was bizarre, interpreted as queer, was absolutely ruled out.”<sup>47</sup> Members feared that if they were outed they would lose their jobs, their families, and their friends. Hedesthia’s leaders respected these valid fears. Hedesthia sent out newsletters in plain envelopes, members’ “Twin Brother” names and contact information were kept “under extremely tight security,” and in 1978 the organization assigned members identification numbers for extra anonymity.<sup>48</sup> For in-person meetings Hedesthia strictly vetted potential members.<sup>49</sup> Prospective attendees required an existing member to vouch for them to ensure that only those from certain circles had access to the group. This is reminiscent of the, “highly secretive affairs,” that were the meetings of Prince’s group the Foundation for Personality

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<sup>45</sup> CJ, interview.

<sup>46</sup> CJ and Simpson, interview.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Laundon, “Friends,” 3; Xtabay, “Membership Numbers,” *Trans-Scribe*, February 1978, 3.

<sup>49</sup> Young, “Hello, Girls!!” 2.

Expression (FPE).<sup>50</sup> Like the FPE, Hedesthia was geared towards white, married, and middle-class individuals – many of whom only ‘cross-dressed’ in private or at meetings. These members were often able to use their wealth along with access to private property and transport to, “create a space in which they could express a stigmatized aspect of themselves in a way that didn’t jeopardise their jobs or social standing.”<sup>51</sup> Stryker argues that it is unsurprising that FPE was among the first trans organisations in the United States – it was founded in 1961 – as it was those within trans communities who had both race and class privileges that had the resources to facilitate their ability to organise first. Certainly, one could say the same about Hedesthia.<sup>52</sup> Though CJ and Simpson did not recall any non-white members nor sex workers, there were many “strange people” who were “peripheral” to the group, and the interviewees acknowledged that some members had spent time incarcerated, and others were involved in non-conventional sexual practices that included BDSM and various fetishes. Yet as their moralising language indicates, such members were not readily embraced and remained in the minority.<sup>53</sup>

In addition to Hedesthia’s cultivation of national links, individual members eagerly joined networks of international trans correspondence. Alongside *Transvestia*, Hedesthia’s leadership communicated, exchanged newsletters with, and reprinted articles from the Chameleon Society of Western Australia, Sydney’s Seahorse Club, and England’s Beaumont Society.<sup>54</sup> By the late 1980s,

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<sup>50</sup> Stryker, 55.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> CJ and Simpson, interview.

<sup>54</sup> Xtabay, “Central’s Report,” *Trans-Scribe*, December 1979, 1.



Hedesthia was also featured in listings of international organisations in publications like *Tapestry* (America), *Fanfare* (South Africa), *Our Sorority* (America) and as trans men became more involved in the group, *Metamorphosis* (Canada).<sup>55</sup> When members travelled overseas, they often visited with or were hosted by members of local organisations. Travel to Sydney was popular with many New Zealanders at the time, and Hedesthia members were no exception; several attended Seahorse Club meetings, and in 1976 Young attended Seahorse's first Trans-Seminar transvestite conference.<sup>56</sup> My recognition of Hedesthia's Australasian and international connections builds upon the work that has been done in analysis of international trans networks. This includes those plotted across Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States in *Others of My Kind: Transatlantic Transgender Histories*.<sup>57</sup>

### Political Advocacy

Though confidentiality was the priority of most Hedesthia members, not all fit this mould. Pathbreaking individuals within Hedesthia became leaders through their willingness to advocate openly for specific trans communities, and this fulfilled Hedesthia's secondary aim: "to work for the breaking-down of prejudice and

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<sup>55</sup> Nicholas Ghosh and Rupert Raj, *Metamorphosis Magazine*, May-June 1987, Periodicals - m326m182n, Digital Transgender Archive; The Phoenix Society, *Fanfare Magazine*, September 1985, Periodical - gm80hv39h, Digital Transgender Archive; Merissa Sherrill Lynn, *Tapestry* no.46, 1985, Periodical - 6682x4006, Digital Transgender Archive; The Outreach Institute, *Our Sorority* no.22, April 1990, Newsletter - tx31qh812, Digital Transgender Archive.

<sup>56</sup> Young, "Seven Days (plus three)," *S-E-L-F*, May 1976, 2-3.

<sup>57</sup> Alex Bakker et al., *Others of My Kind: Transatlantic Transgender Histories* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2020).

ignorance that exist in the public’s mind.”<sup>58</sup> Young, Xtabay, Laundon, CJ, and others frequently liaised with a large range of organisations that included counselling groups, the police and probation services, religious groups, hospitals and medical services, along with university faculties that specialized in social work, psychology, and nursing. For those who spoke with and to these external groups about trans issues, they recalled these experiences boosted their “confidence and experience,” and members were thankful that they had been met with “well disposed” and “open-minded” audiences.<sup>59</sup> Yearly talks with nurses at Carrington Hospital, which was an institution infamous for its use of aversion therapy techniques, were “enjoyed by all” who took part. Xtabay and fellow Hedesthia activist Deanne Mead built up such a rapport with the workers there that they were even able to successfully lobby for the release of a trans woman incarcerated at the psychiatric institute.<sup>60</sup> In 1978 Xtabay hosted Hedesthia’s first “Open Night” meeting where members of the public were welcomed to an open forum that was so well-attended Xtabay, “feared her lounge floor would collapse.”<sup>61</sup> Media coverage was initially more difficult to come by which Launby believed was due to both a lack of money and, “the general attitude of most editors, who have in the past vetoed almost every attempt to reach the public.”<sup>62</sup> Yet by the late 1970s their publicity campaign had achieved some success, and larger news outlets such as the *NZ Herald*, *Sunday News*, *Metro*

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<sup>58</sup> “About Hedesthia” (Hedesthia Bulletins, n.d.), Agender New Zealand: Records, MS-Papers-11170-073, Alexander Turnbull Library.

<sup>59</sup> Young, “We have made great strides as a club,” 9.

<sup>60</sup> Xtabay, “National Report and Round and About,” *Trans-Scribe*, April 1983, 3.

<sup>61</sup> Xtabay, “Open Night,” *Trans-Scribe*, October 1978, 3.

<sup>62</sup> Laundon, “TransFormation: Report 1976,” *S-E-L-F*, January 1977, 3-4.

magazine, *Auckland Star* and the *8 O'Clock News* reported on the group, and this resulted in numerous inquiries.<sup>63</sup> Although Young and others told Hedesthia members that it was their “collective responsibility” to work together to achieve change, few were prepared to be the public face of Hedesthia’s educational efforts.<sup>64</sup> Simpson described Xtabay as the, “guiding genius behind Hedesthia,” who was “determined” to advocate for Hedesthia’s members.<sup>65</sup>

In January 1976, Laundon and her cisgender wife Margaret Cox set up TransFormation as an off-shoot of Hedesthia, “a sympathetic, confidential, and free information service on Transsexualism, transvestism, etc.”<sup>66</sup> TransFormation’s main work was the production of free information leaflets – distributed widely to public libraries, universities, gay groups, and various community organisations such as the Citizens Advice Bureau, Marriage Guidance Council and YouthLine. In addition, the organization provided a “personal service” that fielded questions by letter and, though more rarely, in person.<sup>67</sup> These twelve leaflets covered a wide range of topics, and these included: “the differences between intersexuals [sic], transsexuals, and transvestites”; gender affirmation surgery (known as “sex-change” surgery), hormone replacement therapy, and electrolysis; how to come out and, “gain understanding

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<sup>63</sup> Xtabay, “Advertising,” *Trans-Scribe*, February 1978, 3; Xtabay, “Dear Members,” *Trans-Scribe* July 1978, 1; Patricia Prime, “All Dressed Up and No Place To Go,” *Metro* reprinted in *Trans-Scribe* June 1987, 9-10; “Sex Changes “Don’t Work”” *Auckland Star* 26 July 1984, reprinted *Trans-Scribe* July 1985, 22; “Trans Sexuals’ Twilight World,” reprinted in *Trans-Scribe* April/May 1979, 2.

<sup>64</sup> Young, “How Many of Us Are There?” *S-E-L-F*, March 1976, 3.

<sup>65</sup> Jan Simpson, interview by Will Hansen, 3 April 2019.

<sup>66</sup> Laundon, “TransFormation,” *S-E-L-F*, January 1977, 11.

<sup>67</sup> Laundon, “Transformation: Report 1976,” *S-E-L-F*, January 1977, 3-4.

and acceptance”; legal and religious views on trans issues; “the benefits of friendship with other transpeople”; and how to join Hedesthia.<sup>68</sup> TransFormation received a steady stream of inquiries to their PO Box, and after four years they had received 340 letters. Inquirers largely sought guidance on medical transition and how to meet other trans people, and until 1977 – when they began correspondence with three transmasculine individuals – these inquiries came entirely from transfeminine people.<sup>69</sup>

TransFormation’s communications were less well-received outside of trans communities. Public libraries in Auckland and Christchurch refused to display their leaflets, editors from local newspapers snubbed their advertisements, and even certain local doctors who they believed would be supportive declined to reply to TransFormation’s requests for information. Nonetheless, Laundon and Cox persisted, and the two often met with various community organisations. These groups were primarily those they sent leaflets to, and those who had previously established contact with Hedesthia. The couple also conducted joint appearances with Hedesthia.<sup>70</sup> Although Laundon and Cox continued working on TransFormation after their divorce in 1978, they began to struggle financially and passed their duties onto Hedesthia in 1980. Subsequently, the two groups became essentially indistinct.<sup>71</sup> When Laundon passed away in 1984, her obituary in *Trans-Scribe* noted that Hedesthia had continued to receive many letters from those

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<sup>68</sup> Laundon, “TransFormation,” 11-12.

<sup>69</sup> Laundon, “TransFormation Report 1977,” *Trans-Scribe*, February 1978, 2.

<sup>70</sup> Xtabay, “Membership Report,” *Trans-Scribe*, February 1979, 2.

<sup>71</sup> Xtabay, “Central’s Report,” *Trans-Scribe*, December 1980, 2.

who she, “offered comfort and advice through her leaflets and correspondence.”<sup>72</sup>

The content of Hedesthia and TransFormation’s talks with organisations, the media, and at their Open Night events generally included the legal issues that faced trans people, such as difficulties when updating passports and other identification files; the “misunderstanding and ridicule” trans people faced socially; experiences with coming out; what medical transition entailed; and above all, how Hedesthia defined the differences between “Transvestites, Transsexuals, and Drag Queens.”<sup>73</sup> Robert Hill’s work on *Transvestia* is helpful in situating Hedesthia as a late-comer in the “taxonomic revolution” that occurred in the mid-twentieth century where, “doctors, sexologists, and psychologists, along with persons who identified as transsexuals, transvestites, and homosexuals began to map and sort out the overlapping subcultures of gender and sexual variance and make ontological distinctions among the categories of ‘sex,’ ‘gender,’ and ‘sexuality.’”<sup>74</sup> Like the writers in *Transvestia*, members of Hedesthia debated and dissected definitions of drag queen, transvestite, transsexual, androgynist, hermaphrodite and homosexual. These definitions were, in the words of one member “painstakingly drawn” and “clung to,” and they were frequently (re)communicated in Hedesthia and TransFormation’s bulletins and leaflets, and to the mainstream media.<sup>75</sup> One undated Hedesthia bulletin stated that a transvestite was, “not the same as a

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<sup>72</sup> “Obituary, Gillian Cox,” *Trans-Scribe*, Autumn 1984, 8.

<sup>73</sup> “Talkback or Backchat,” *Trans-Scribe*, February 1983, 4.

<sup>74</sup> Robert Hill, “Before Transgender: Transvestia’s Spectrum of Gender Variance, 1960-1980,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, eds. Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura (New York: Routledge, 2013), 366.

<sup>75</sup> “Letter to the Editor,” *Trans-Scribe*, May/June 1983, 16.

trans-sexual,” neither were “usually homosexual,” and that homosexuals “rarely” cross-dressed.<sup>76</sup> In June 1978, Xtabay gave a paper that detailed her thoughts on the differences between each group. She felt drag queens cross-dressed to sexually attract others while transvestites did so to, “express the feelings of the opposite sex,” and transsexuals to express their, “belonging to the opposite sex.”<sup>77</sup>

But opinions within Hedesthia were frequently contradictory, and they were certainly not monolithic. While Xtabay made it clear that transvestites and transsexuals were distinct categories, she also underlined that Hedesthia was inclusive of, “transvestites, trans-sexuals, androgynists and hermaphrodites both male and female,” and she often used the phrase “transpeople or transgenderists” to refer to them collectively.<sup>78</sup> In 1980 an anonymous author used the term “transvestite” to refer to transvestites, transsexuals, and drag queens indiscriminately as she wrote with tongue firmly in cheek that she felt they were, “all sisters under the psychosis! Psychosisters?”<sup>79</sup> This author directly referenced Prince as the, “archguerette of US transvestism,” before the writer noted that she disagreed with several of Prince’s ideas. *Tranvestia* influenced Hedesthia, but members did not absorb its ideologies uncritically. Prince and others in FPE and *Tranvestia* worked hard to, “disassociate heterosexual transvestism from forms of deviant sexuality that doctors and the public associated with

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<sup>76</sup> Hedesthia, “Correcting Some Misconceptions: Did You Know That,” (Bulletin, New Zealand, n.d.), MS-Papers-11170-073, Alexander Turnbull Library.

<sup>77</sup> Xtabay, “Observations on the Phenomenon of Trans-Genderism,” *Trans-Scribe*, December 1978, 2.

<sup>78</sup> Xtabay, 2.

<sup>79</sup> “Is There Transvestism after Death?” *Trans-Scribe*, February 1980, 5.

cross-dressing,” and they particularly disarticulated this form from homosexuality and transsexuality. By contrast, this anonymous author was clear that gender did not determine sexual orientation, and she wrote that many saw themselves as heterosexual, gay, or lesbian.<sup>80</sup> In FPE gays and transsexuals were excluded from membership.

Hedesthia’s inclusiveness of various sexual and gender orientations distinguished them from similar groups overseas, and this was a point of pride for Xtabay. She argued in a 1980 interview with *Key Contact* magazine that Hedesthia was “more understanding” than other clubs, and she wanted to make it clear that trans people were simply people, “and like people we can be all things, including gay.”<sup>81</sup> The differing timelines between Hedesthia and FPE are important to note. While FPE began operating well before the gay liberation movement emerged, by the time Hedesthia formed in 1972 gay liberation activism was well-established in places such as the United States, England, and Australia, and the first Gay Liberation Fronts in Aotearoa were founded that same year. Indeed, Young acknowledged that alongside the, “dozen ordinary square citizens,” who were Hedesthia’s first members, so too were acquaintances from “Gay Lib.”<sup>82</sup> Many Hedesthia members had been members of gay political and social groups prior to their membership in Hedesthia, and they maintained friendships with individuals from these groups. These enduring connections likely influenced Hedesthia’s open position. New Zealand’s comparatively smaller population probably also accounted for Hedesthia’s inclusive stance as Mead contended that a “harmonious relationship” between

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<sup>80</sup> “Is There Transvestism after Death?” 6; Hill, 367; Meyerowitz, 181.

<sup>81</sup> “Transgenderism,” *Key Contact*, 1980, 6.

<sup>82</sup> Young, “HELLO, Girls! Christine Calling Again,” 3.

Hedesthia and the gay movement was “sorely needed” if Hedesthia’s voice was “going to be heard.”<sup>83</sup>

In 1977, Young declared it was “policy” that Hedesthia allied with gay liberation, “in the fight for right of self-expression.”<sup>84</sup> Xtabay confirmed this policy as she argued that members had:

a responsibility to all gay people to support them, because any advantages that are finally won, wrested from the establishment WILL benefit all of us...it’s our cause, YOUR cause, and don’t any of you forget it. Hedesthia HAS a place in the Gay movement, and so have ALL of its members.<sup>85</sup>

Hedesthia often attended gay liberation conferences, and it became an associate member of the National Gay Rights Coalition (NGRC) when it was founded in 1977. Hedesthia frequently co-hosted educational workshops with gay activists to advocate for their shared issues. For example, in 1977 Young “gladly” accepted an invitation from gay liberationists to participate in a forum at Porirua Hospital alongside five gay men and three lesbians.<sup>86</sup> At the 1976 Gay Liberation Conference, Young and Joanna F. Gall were invited to conduct a, “workshop on Transvestism and Transsexuality,” and an open forum. The two received the “best ovation” of the conference. At the conference ball, Gall described a, “feeling of love, warmth and friendship,” that was “beyond words” between themselves and their cisgender lesbian, gay, and bisexual

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<sup>83</sup> Deanne Mead, “Hedesthia NGRC Alliance,” *Trans-Scribe*, August 1979, 3.

<sup>84</sup> Young, *S-E-L-F*, March 1977, 10.

<sup>85</sup> Xtabay, “The First Time Ever,” 10.

<sup>86</sup> Young, March 1977, 10.



counterparts.<sup>87</sup> Yet, cis-dominated gay and lesbian activist groups did not always welcome their trans comrades. By the late 1970s, American lesbian-separatist currents began to shape New Zealand feminist discourse. At the 1978 National Gay Rights Coalition conference, some of its lesbian-feminist organizers ejected CJ from participation in a woman's workshop.<sup>88</sup> But it is important to note that bio-essentialism never dominated New Zealander lesbian-feminist ideology. At the conference, other lesbian-feminists defended CJ's womanhood and participation at the workshop, and these allies joined a lineage of lesbian-feminists who acted in solidarity with trans activists in Aotearoa.<sup>89</sup>

Despite leadership's commitment to support the gay movement when one reads between the lines, it becomes clear that not all among the membership wanted to associate with lesbian and

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<sup>87</sup> Joanna F. Gall, "Gay Liberation Conference," *S-E-L-F*, November 1976, 2.

<sup>88</sup> CJ, interview; Deborah Jones, "Gay Rights Conference: What's a dyke to do?" *Circle: a lesbian-feminist publication*, Autumn 1978, 16-18; Jacqui, "Two different caucuses," *Circle: a lesbian-feminist publication*, Autumn 1978, 18-20. Local lesbian-feminists were particularly influenced by the harassment campaign targeting trans artist Sandy Stone, a member of women's recording company Olivia Records. Led by Janice Raymond, the campaign resulted in the publication of Raymond's 1979 thesis as *The transsexual empire: the making of the she-male* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1994). See Valda, "Women's recording company?" *Circle: a lesbian-feminist publication*, Autumn 1978, 31-33.

<sup>89</sup> Jacqui, 19. For example, a similar discussion occurred at the 1974 Gay Liberation Conference in Wellington, where those who, "felt that people who identified as lesbians are lesbians regardless of the sex they were born with," argued against those who saw trans women as "biologically men," as reported by Allie Eagle, "In Reply to Gender Identity?" *Circle: a lesbian-feminist publication*, May 1974, 12. For more information, see Will Hansen, 'The Long History of Trans Activism in Aotearoa New Zealand,' *bad apple*, 3 May 2023, <https://badapple.gay/2023/05/03/trans-history/>.

gay groups, and not always because of the anti-trans attitudes that they faced. Mead, who was particularly active in the cultivation of the relationship between the group and the NGRC, wrote in 1979 that they understood members would have “mixed feelings” about associating with, “what is basically a homosexual group,” as members tended to consider themselves “basically heterosexual.” However, Mead reminded readers that they were natural allies that faced a shared oppression, and like cisgender gays they too were targeted as, “Queer, Poofs, Queens,” and felt forced to keep their identities secret.<sup>90</sup> Yet even Xtabay, so strident in her support of the gay movement, indulged in subtle homophobia. In the same interview with *Key Contact* where she asserted Hedesthia’s inclusiveness, Xtabay also argued that, “by far the biggest proportion of transvestites,” were, “heterosexual, married, with children,” and that, “only a small minority,” fit the “drag queen” stereotype of the, “limp wrist, the affected speech and camp-mannerism.”<sup>91</sup> Xtabay displayed the contradictions that could arise even within an individual’s politics. Despite her public support for the gay movement and to gay Hedesthia members, Xtabay consistently clarified that most Hedesthia members conformed to hegemonic sexual norms. In this way, Xtabay’s stance feels reminiscent of writers in *Transvestia*, who Hill contends tried to contain the, “most abnormal elements,” of transvestism in order to normalise it, and to, “make it fit comfortably within the cultural narratives of gender, home, and national belonging that circulated with ferocity in the postwar era.”<sup>92</sup> While *Transvestia* writers and FPE members did this through the open denigration and exclusion of homosexuals and

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<sup>90</sup> Mead, 3.

<sup>91</sup>“Transgenderism,” *Key Contact*, 1980, 6–7.

<sup>92</sup> Hill, 370.

transsexuals, Hedesthia members' attempts to emphasise their own respectability and divest themselves from more "abnormal elements" was far more understated.

### **Transnormativity**

Hedesthia's legacy is more complicated than one of straightforward inclusiveness. Like the writers in *Transvestia*, Hedesthia members feared stigmatization, "as sexually deviant," and this significantly structured their, "ideology, practices, and aesthetics."<sup>93</sup> But unlike *Transvestia's* members those in Hedesthia were less concerned with homosexuality, and they were certainly not against transsexuals. Instead, it was those they labelled "drag queens" or "street queens" – trans sex workers, and this was a largely Māori and Pasifika working-class community. This group bore the brunt of Hedesthia members' scorn. Although officially the group sought to create a space for all "transgenderists," CJ and Simpson explained that Hedesthia members generally saw trans sex workers as "gay men" who "*parodied* women," and this was in contrast to themselves who they saw as "true" transvestites or transsexuals.<sup>94</sup> CJ recalled her frustration with "street queens" who she felt would "cause a scene" when out in public. She distinguished herself from trans sex workers: "that was the difference, as far as I was concerned. *I* was presenting myself as perfectly *ordinary*, heterosexual woman." This concept of what made an "ordinary" (trans) woman was utilised by Hedesthia members like CJ to create distinctions between themselves and those less able to approximate

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<sup>93</sup> Hill, 369.

<sup>94</sup> CJ and Simpson, interview.

hegemonic norms. Tellingly, the phrase CJ used – “true transvestite” – was coined by Prince to distinguish transvestites who conformed to heterosexist, racist, and classist norms from those non-conforming others, and for Prince the latter’s “transvestic activities” stemmed from sexual deviance or psychiatric disturbance.<sup>95</sup>

Hedesthia members cast themselves as “ordinary” and trans sex workers as an “other” in generally implicit but consistent ways. Writers in *Trans-Scribe* frequently positioned themselves as non-threatening citizens who should be accepted, and they contrasted themselves with trans sex workers who they depicted as social disturbances. Pauline D reflected such middle-class ideas of propriety in a 1976 poem where she wrote that those, “rocking their boats,” and living, “without a goal or higher ideals,” would, “never experience the comfort,” that Pauline felt.<sup>96</sup> An anonymous Hedesthia writer provides one of the more transparent writings that displayed this politics as she provided this callous summary of the “problem” of trans sex workers in 1987:

The TS [transsexual] ‘drag queen’ of the streets presents a problem: how to reconcile the declared reticence of the usual TV [transvestite]/TS with the DQs [drag queen’s] exhibitionism, which in part seems to hold an element of social protest and a desire to excite disapprobation. Possibly she has come full force to her “oddity” at an early age, suffered familial/peer group rejection, and has

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<sup>95</sup> Virginia Bruce (Prince), “The Expression of Femininity in the Male,” *The Journal of Sex Research* 3, no. 2 (1967), 129-139.

<sup>96</sup> Pauline D, “Just a Reflection,” *S-E-L-F*, November 1976, 2.

thereafter found herself consistently in conflict with society - low self-esteem, a high incidence of criminality and drug-dependency, parasitism, undependability and lack of loyalty, even to their own kind.<sup>97</sup>

For this author the most pressing problem was the public space that trans sex workers occupied, and their disinterest in cooperating with social norms – being “reticent” or discreet about their gender difference. Instead, they purportedly flaunted their ‘deviant’ sexuality in public as if in an act of ‘protest.’ Although the author did not explicitly name trans sex workers as a largely Māori and Pasifika group, her evocation of their unreliability, criminality, and “parasitism,” all evoked powerful racist and classist stereotypes that had long been used to provide justification for ongoing colonisation in New Zealand.<sup>98</sup> This author’s writing also reflected the growing influence of neoliberalism in New Zealand that followed the election of the 1984 Labour Government as their ascendancy reinforced an individualist and victim-blaming approach to social inequality that was ignorant of the structural power of colonialism.<sup>99</sup> In reflection, CJ openly acknowledged

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<sup>97</sup> “The Only Operation You Want Is On Your Brain!” *Trans-Scribe* June 1987, 17-22.

<sup>98</sup> Darrin Hodgetts, Bridgette Masters, and Neville Robertson, “Media Coverage of ‘decades of Disparity’ in Ethnic Mortality in Aotearoa,” *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 14, no. 6 (2004): 456; Evan Te Ahu Poata-Smith, “Inequality and Māori,” in *Inequality: A New Zealand Crisis*, ed. Max Rashbrooke (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2013), 151.

<sup>99</sup> Eileen Oak, “‘Rumours of Neoliberalism’s Death Have Been Greatly Exaggerated’: Re-Moralisation of the Poor in Aotearoa New Zealand,” *Sites: A*

Hedesthia’s derision of trans sex workers as racist: “those of us who were white, middle-class, and able to find employment – yes, we did see ourselves above them.”<sup>100</sup> For its promotion of white, Western conceptions of transness, and simultaneous denigration of Māori trans communities, Hedesthia’s respectability politics should be read as part of the ongoing process of colonisation,

While racism generally surfaced covertly throughout Hedesthia’s newsletters, members more openly discussed class. A 1987 letter written by Hedesthia member Marcia provides an interesting example of this. She detailed her caution in first approaching Hedesthia as she was fond of “glamorous clothes,” and she felt she would not fit in with other members, “believing that, like similar groups overseas, it catered exclusively for the sort of TV [transvestite] who dresses conservatively in a middle-class image and dedicated to the expression of one’s ‘feminine self’ in a socially acceptable manner.” However, after Marcia visited an Open Night she decided to get vetted by Xtabay and attend a closed meeting. At the gathering she chose to dress “more appropriately,” and she was accepted as a member. As an example of self-policing, the more meetings Marcia attended the more she decided to embrace the “middle-class” culture of Hedesthia, “since the desire to be accepted by others in the group outweighed the pleasure of wearing glamorous clothes...now what I wanted to do was conform!”<sup>101</sup> Another member named Rachel Anthony explicitly distinguished between sex workers and Hedesthia members as she argued that trans sex workers had less to lose and therefore were more able to,

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*Journal of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies* 12, no. 1 (2015): 12–13;  
Poata-Smith, “Inequality and Māori,” 151.

<sup>100</sup> CJ, interview.

<sup>101</sup> Marcia, “A Letter from Marcia,” *Trans-Scribe*, June 1987, 5–8.

“take the plunge,” by cross-dressing full time, but others with, “family, possessions, career/income and social stability,” were “sensible and laudable” for controlling their desires, “to avoid upsetting an ordered and socially valuable life.”<sup>102</sup> Anthony’s emphasis on a, “socially valuable life,” points to the role of dominant exploitative class relations in Hedesthia’s politics. Dan Irving argues that part of trans assimilationist politics is the production of the trans person as, “capable of participating in capitalist production processes,” and this is something that sex workers were deemed incapable of.<sup>103</sup> Age reinforced class divides as most Hedesthia members were middle-aged or older while many trans sex workers left home in their teens and early twenties.<sup>104</sup>

At the core of Hedesthia’s politics was the idea that trans sex workers had damaged the public image of trans people, and therefore Hedesthia members needed to emphasise that about them which was most ‘ordinary’ to be accepted by society. Joanne Meyerowitz noted that this was likewise central to the politics of many queer communities in the United States in the 1960s:

Those who identified as homosexual, transvestite, or transsexual sometimes attempted to lift their own group’s social standing by foisting the stigma of transgression onto others. They lived in a social order in which status derived in part from upholding norms of propriety. Asserting one’s upstanding

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<sup>102</sup> Rachel Anthony, “For what it’s worth: my opinion,” *Trans-Scribe*, Autumn 1984, 7-9.

<sup>103</sup> Dan Irving, “Normalized Transgressions: Legitimizing the Transsexual Body as Productive,” *Radical History Review* 100 (2008): 40.

<sup>104</sup> Hansen, 67, 103.

middle-class status meant rejecting other behaviours tainted as vulgar, lower class, or deviant.<sup>105</sup>

Hedesthia members were not the only trans people who wanted to be ‘ordinary’ as many trans sex workers too longed for the safety and recognition that came with being ‘ordinary.’ Moreover, it is important to acknowledge the powerful role of medical institutions as practitioners held great authority over trans healthcare, and they prioritised patients they felt were, in the words of New Zealand clinical psychologist Anthony Taylor, “not out to capitalise...not extravagant...not exhibitionistic,” but instead were, “moving very peacefully, and satisfactorily working and living like ordinary members of the community.”<sup>106</sup> Yet there is a vital difference between *desiring* normality and *defining* normality; the latter is inherently violent as the creation and circulation of norms, “creates an idea that undergirds conditions of violence, exploitation, and poverty.”<sup>107</sup> Hedesthia’s definition of ‘ordinary’ or ‘normal’ mirrored those presented by psychologists like Taylor. “True” trans women upheld white middle-class standards of acceptable behaviour, that included heterosexuality, dressing conservatively feminine, keeping their gender difference private, and working legal jobs. Hedesthia’s politics are an example of how transnormativity always intersected with other power structures such as classism, racism, and whorephobia which create standards of

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<sup>105</sup> Meyerowitz, 177.

<sup>106</sup> A. J. W. Taylor in Dairne Shanahan and Des Monaghan, *Transvestites* (Gallery NZBC, 1971), Television Collection – TZP49891, Ngā Taonga: Sound and Vision.

<sup>107</sup> Spade, 5.



who is considered ‘normal’ and therefore acceptable. Those who are deemed abnormal are more vulnerable to systemic violence.<sup>108</sup>

What consequences did Hedesthia’s transnormativity have for those who existed outside Hedesthia members’ definitions of accepted transness? Some are easier to understand than others. We do know that exclusion of trans sex workers occurred very literally. De’Anne Jackson was a trans woman and sex worker of Māori and Cook Islands heritage who was a proud queen. She was turned away when she tried to join Hedesthia, and group organizers told Jackson that they did not accept transsexuals.<sup>109</sup> Clearly, Hedesthia did accept transsexuals: their issue with Jackson lay in her race and class. Furthermore, unlike trans sex workers, Hedesthia’s members had the opportunity to promote their ideas about transness to the various community groups, organisations and media outlets they connected with – as exemplified by Xtabay’s interview with *Key Contact* – and, from the mid-1980s, Hedesthia was in dialogue with government representatives.

From 1985, Hedesthia member Helen France lobbied both the Human Rights Commission and Minister of Justice Geoffrey Palmer on the legal rights of transsexuals and transvestites.<sup>110</sup> Xtabay celebrated France’s work, and she noted that it was a, “very up-hill task.”<sup>111</sup> This marked the beginning of trans activism’s pivot towards a rights-focused approach. National political trends guided this new approach as it followed the establishment of the Human Rights Commission in 1977, and the increased influence of neoliberalism from 1984, wherein the, “deservedness of rights and access to social

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> De’Anne Jackson, interview by Will Hansen, 25 June 2018.

<sup>110</sup> Helen France, “TransFormation,” *Trans-Scribe*, February/March 1989, 8.

<sup>111</sup> Xtabay, “Central’s Report,” *Trans-Scribe*, February/March 1989, 4.

services,” was, “determined through one’s ability to assume personal responsibility for all dimensions of well-being.”<sup>112</sup> By 1989, France had sustained correspondence with Palmer, and she had also begun to write to fellow Members of Parliament David Caygill and Helen Clark. In addition, France and Xtabay began to make joint submissions officially on Hedesthia’s behalf, and the duo visited the Human Rights Commission multiple times to attempt to educate them about trans issues.<sup>113</sup> While the contents of their communications are unknown, it is likely that Hedesthia’s adoption of a rights-focused approach only exacerbated the organization’s adherence to respectability politics and transnormativity. In Dan Irving’s analysis of Canadian trans activism, he argues that since it is through the symbolic recognition rights afforded that, “life becomes increasingly livable for those accepted as citizen-subjects,” and subsequently that, “vulnerable populations must render themselves intelligible through cultivating normative identities.”<sup>114</sup> Hedesthia members would have had increased motivation to emphasise their whiteness, their middle-class propriety, and to further distance themselves from trans sex workers.

The history of Hedesthia demonstrates that trans people are not, as Irving writes, “entirely victims of external authority.” Instead, trans people too can, “participate actively in disciplinary techniques that lend meaning to the transsexual body as productive,” and that this reproduces the privilege that their transness complicates.<sup>115</sup> Hedesthia members’ advocacy was

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<sup>112</sup> Irving, “Against the grain: Teaching Transgender Human Rights,” *Sexualities* 16, no. 3-4 (2013): 328.

<sup>113</sup> France, 8; Xtabay, “Central’s Report,” *Trans-Scribe*, June/July 1989, 4.

<sup>114</sup> Irving, “Against the grain,” 320.

<sup>115</sup> Irving, “Normalised Transgressions,” 40; Stryker, 55.

pioneering, but ultimately it did not serve to weaken the system which oppressed trans communities. Instead, they were invested in this system, and many Hedesthia members castigated trans sex workers in order to make a bid for their inclusion in systems of sexual normativity, capitalism, and white supremacy. However, in Emily Skidmore's study of transnormativity in the United States, she makes the important point that this should be seen less as a personal failure on the part of these trans people, and instead it is evidence of the overwhelming power of normative race, class, gender and sexual ideologies. The white trans women in Skidmore's study and Hedesthia alike were, "motivated to articulate transsexuality in exclusionary ways in order to protect their respectability," because white womanhood's ideological power maintains itself through, "the exclusive nature of its construction."<sup>116</sup>

## Conclusion

By the late 1980s, Xtabay had become, "the heart and soul of Hedesthia."<sup>117</sup> With her eventual passing Hedesthia ceased to exist sometime in the early 1990s. In July 1989 the organization released its last newsletter. Despite the many who felt the organization made life liveable for them, Hedesthia's leadership often felt unsupported, and they often referenced members' unwillingness to put more of themselves into the organisation for fear of being outed: "it would still seem that when Patrick is not Patricia, he forgets all about the

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<sup>116</sup> Emily Skidmore, "Constructing the 'Good Transsexual': Christine Jorgensen, Whiteness, and Heteronormativity in the Mid-Twentieth-Century Press," *Feminist Studies* 37, no. 2 (2011): 294.

<sup>117</sup> CJ and Simpson, interview.

club.”<sup>118</sup> It was also not uncommon for members to cease all association with the group after they obtained gender affirmation surgery, or after they were being interpreted unproblematically as women or men.<sup>119</sup> For Simpson, Hedesthia was once her entire social life, but after she received vaginoplasty she “moved on” to live, “life as an ordinary everyday woman.”<sup>120</sup> The significance which Hedesthia placed on ordinariness eventually resulted in its demise.

For almost two decades, Hedesthia crucially connected white, middle-class trans people to each other across the country. It fostered trans friendships in an era where trans people were pathologized and marginalised. Hedesthia’s leadership were determined to instigate positive change for trans people, and their work marked a turning point for trans activism in New Zealand that was formalised and rooted in respectability politics. However, in the organization’s desire to advance change for *respectable* trans people through combatting the stereotype that all trans people were “street queens,” Hedesthia engaged in a project of transnormativity. Hedesthia was a contradictory organisation. While on the one hand it was more inclusive than similar groups like the FPE, this inclusivity makes their racist, classist, and whorephobic exclusions all the more transparent. To neutralise the transgressiveness of their gender, they emphasised the normative aspects of their shared identity – class, race and sexuality in particular – through the denigration of non-normative trans others, and the organization ultimately prioritized assimilation. In the end, Hedesthia’s political strategy was less a *resistance* to cis hegemony, and more of a

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<sup>118</sup> Xtabay, “Central Report,” *Trans-Scribe* October 1986, 3.

<sup>119</sup> Laundon, “TransFormation,” *Trans-Scribe*, December 1979, 3; CJ and Simpson, interview.

<sup>120</sup> Simpson, interview.

reconstruction of it, and it ushered in a new era of trans respectability politics.

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