Article

'Bitch I'm back, by popular demand': agency and structure in a study abroad setting

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Abstract

This paper explores the gender order and heteronormativity as salient ideological structures affecting identity construction and agency in a study abroad context. Drawing on a multi-layered case study of Hugo (a French university exchange student in New Zealand), I examine interactional and ethnographic data to shine light on processes involved in negotiating sexuality and gender identities in both the host and home contexts. Specifically, the analysis allows insights into the development of agency within changing structural environments during and after study abroad, and makes the case for a recognition of the force of ideological constraints. At the same time, I show that 'seeds of agency', sparked by a destabilisation of habitus, are planted in the study abroad context and argue that crossing borders can be the impetus for a liberating ontological excavation of what might be possible.

KEYWORDS: GENDER AND SEXUAL IDENTITIES; IDEOLOGY; AGENCY; STRUCTURE;
           STUDY ABROAD

Introduction

The reconciliation of agency and structure remains an ongoing issue within the field of language, gender and sexuality (see Cameron 2009). This paper harnesses this potential by exploring the identity experiences of Hugo, a French exchange student in New Zealand. I use interactional and ethnographic data to explore the vagaries of the structure and agency relation-

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ship, firstly engaging with the ontological aspects of structure and agency before exploring the ideological structures of the gender order and heteronormativity. I examine how Hugo reflects on and engages with these structures in negotiating his sexual and gender identities, and consider how his own sense of (and instantiation of) agency is bound up in this. Data explore his various discursive self-positionings primarily towards the end of his exchange in New Zealand and upon his return to Paris. I argue that for Hugo, 'seeds of agency' are planted in the New Zealand context through the study abroad experience, as his trajectory demonstrates an increasingly sophisticated understanding of structural impediment and possibilities for agency within this.

Data are drawn from a wider study which examines the identity experiences of a small group of French exchange students in New Zealand and New Zealand students in France. Gender and sexuality quickly arise as salient during the longitudinal data collection, which combines naturally occurring interactional data and interviews with an ethnographic collection made up of extensive field notes, time spent with participants and Facebook posts. The overall researcher stance I take can be characterised as a participant-focused, ethnographic approach with a critical lens, and I use an interactional sociolinguistics-informed discourse analysis to bridge the linguistic and ethnographic elements of the data collection, connecting micro linguistic features to wider macro considerations. In analysing how sexuality and gender emerged in interaction and became salient as identity categories, the relationship between structure and agency assumed immediate importance.

Study abroad is a context par excellence for investigating social constructs of identity, agency and structure. In crossing sociocultural borders, overarching normative gender ideologies remain similar, yet specific Discourses[1] around gender and sexuality may differ. For students who study abroad, this has direct repercussions for negotiating gender and sexual identities. Arriving in a new study abroad context, students bring with them as part of their habitus (Bourdieu 1977, 1984) their preferred ways of 'doing' gender and sexuality, as well as their own understandings of these constructs. In other words, established preferences (linguistic and otherwise) provide their 'go-to' tools for identity work in the new setting. It is well recognised, however, that the resources accessed to index social identities rarely flow seamlessly from one community to another (e.g. Blackledge and Pavlenko 2001), and that struggle is a central component of identity construction (e.g. Norton 2000, 2013; van de Mieroop and Schnurr 2017). Further, encountering different societal norms can sometimes force a level of reflection and potential reworking of one's habitus, which in turn affects one's

sense of and enactment of agency. In order to lay the theoretical groundwork for the analysis, the following sections explore and conceptualise structure and agency, with a specific focus on the gender order and heteronormativity as the most salient ideological structures guiding Hugo's identity work. Following this, the focus turns to the data where Hugo's experiences serve to illuminate the theoretical discussion, anchoring the exploration firmly in real experience.

Structure and agency

The relationship between agency and structure has been recognised as 'one of the most deep-seated problems in social sciences' (Bakewell 2010:1689), and, as previously mentioned, remains an ongoing issue in language, gender and sexuality research (see e.g. Cameron 2009). Block (2013a, 2013b) notes the paucity of discussions about the interrelationship between agency and structure in language and identity research. He also notes a tendency towards an 'over-agentive' tone in applied linguistics/SLA over the past twenty or so years (citing his own 2006 work as a case in point), adding that while many scholars acknowledge the role of structure, they do not explore it in any depth. While the words agency and structure are regularly used in identity-focused scholarship, there is often only superficial discussion of their meaning and how they work together to affect identity construction. At this point, then, it is useful to engage with ontological categories (of agency in the first instance then structure) in order to provide contextual cushioning for Hugo's data.

Definitions of agency such as that commonly cited by Ahearn (2001:112) – 'the socioculturally mediated capacity to act' are a usefully concise starting point yet leave room for exploration. Duff's (2012:414) definition expands on this: 'Agency … refers to people's ability to make choices, take control, self-regulate, and thereby pursue their goals as individuals leading, potentially, to personal or social transformation'. This leads to questions of what the precursors are for this capacity or ability to manifest. Without venturing too far into the psychological realm, it is necessary to emphasise the constructionist stance which underpins this discussion and analysis. This view runs counter to humanist notions of complete autonomy and free will of the subject, seeing subjectivity rather as being constituted through processes of socialisation. According to Butler (1993), it is this constituted character which forms the precondition of agency, an argument which echoes Pascale's (2011:18) point about 'every theory of subjectivity [being] tethered to a corresponding conception of agency'. For constitution to occur, and for subjectivity to be formed, individuals are, from birth, in

a constant process of socialisation into various ways of doing and being, a process which involves introduction to and interaction with structures (ideological or institutional).

These experiences contribute to the ongoing development of one's habitus, which Bourdieu (1977:72) defines as 'systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of generation and structuring of practices and representations'. While these dispositions may be durable, they are not static (cf. Blommaert 2005). Habitus can be conceptualised as the linking mechanism between the individual and society by emphasising the socially constituted nature of the individual in the first instance and the human capacity to reproduce social structures. It is therefore a central concept in breaking down false dichotomies of the individual and society, and of structure and agency; it involves ways of seeing things, ways of talking about them, ways of thinking, and it also involves gesture and movement – in other words, it is embodied and internalised through primary and secondary socialisation. This returns us to the 'sociocultural mediation' to which Ahearn (2001) refers in her definition of agency and brings to bear on the extent to which individuals are conscious of their social embeddedness. While Bourdieu sees a conscious reflection by agents on their socially formed habitus as a possibility, he affords more prominence to the unconscious adherence to the reproduction of social order through processes of normalisation and associated complicity. Hugo's data, as we will see, show a more conscious engagement with social structures and a recognition of his own place as a social actor within these.

This leads to a consideration of what counts analytically speaking as agency. Is agency only to be conceptualised as acting on one's environment in the sense of 'pushing back' (either through overt or covert practices) against hegemonic structures? Or might it be also seen as 'choosing' to adhere? Ahearn's and Duff's definitions above are broad enough to encompass both possibilities. As an example, a woman who chooses to prioritise a career and decides not to marry or have children, and a woman who decides to marry, have children, and not pursue a career outside the home may both see these choices as acts of agency in so far as the former may see herself as making a conscious choice despite the societal/familial pressure she feels and the latter may equally see her choice as completely self-governed and devoid of societal pressure. On the contrary, she may see her choice as pushing back against societal discourses which encourage women to pursue a career at the same time as raising children. This being said, conceptualisations of agency need not be fettered only to grand actions. In fact, I would argue that part of the value of a discursive approach to identity

is that it allows access to the germination of agency, as Hugo's data serve to instantiate.

Understandings can be strengthened if we engage with the connections between concepts, seeing them as a living 'whole' rather than separate entities. The fact that structures contribute to the constitution of the subject (and their habitus), which in turn shapes individual agency, means that structures are, in effect, inescapable in analysing identity construction. Schilling (2013:342) makes a similar point from a sociolinguistic vantage point in emphasising the ease with which researchers can 'get caught up in the interactional moment and forget that, as much as we want to celebrate speaker agentivity and creativity, we are all bound by structures and norms, and we cannot create meaningful style out of nothing'. Similarly, the 'rigid regulatory frame', an important aspect of Butler's (1990) performativity framework, has been given far less analytical attention than the agency which is seen to be at the forefront of identity construction. In referencing Butler, Ehrlich (2008) makes the point that more attention should be given to what this regulatory frame entails, to what actually constrains and enables the agency we deploy interactionally, if we are to advance our understandings of identity construction in all its social complexity. It seems pertinent then to 'transcend the impulse' (Pascale 2011:20) to see agency as purely personal and constraint as purely social, given the fact that the two concepts are inextricably related through their mutual (re)constitution.

Conceptualisations of structure

In order to be transparent about my conceptualisation of structure, and to surpass the (useful) function of metonymic device (Bakewell 2010:1695), I draw on Bourdieu (1977, 1984), who classifies structures as both *objective* and *subjective*. Examples of objective structures may be institutional, for example the established ways of doing things at a New Zealand or French university; or political, for example women not having the right to vote or the illegality of homosexuality in many countries still today. Bourdieu sees these divisions, which exist as concrete, as law even, as being subsumed by social actors as *principles of division*, in other words, as natural and common sense. They then become subjective or mental structures which inform our habitus as we, as social actors, move about the different fields in which we interact. In this sense, ideologies which inform identity categories such as gender, sexual orientation, race, or class are all examples of this type of constituted mental structure, which through social sedimentation take on appearances of fixity. As a result, they are experienced as real, despite being dynamic and constantly yet imperceptibly changing. For Hugo (and

many other participants), the structure with the most salience in terms of identity work was the ideological structure of gender.

The gender order

Gender ideology can be defined as a 'set of beliefs that governs people's participation in the gender order, and by which they explain and justify that participation' (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003:32). The gender order (Connell 1987; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003:32) refers to ways of doing or being *feminine* or *masculine* in a given society and acts as an overarching societal level constraint to which members of a particular society orient in their interactions (see also Holmes 2007). This often takes the form of hegemonic power relations which rely on a strictly enforced set of dichotomies (woman versus man, heterosexual versus homosexual) and associated normative understandings. Gender ideology intertwines with various Discourses and it is these Discourses which give the ideology expression (cf. Menard-Warwick 2014). These Discourses take many forms, all of which may be drawn on, contributed to and contested in interaction. Traditionally, in many Western societies including New Zealand, for example, little boys are praised for physical risk-taking and not expressing emotion from an early age (cf. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2013:24), nurturing the existing Discourse around what it 'means' to be masculine. Little boys then learn that part of enacting a socially acceptable masculinity is through physicality and the suppression of emotional responses, which in turn contributes to sustaining the existing ideological structure of gender (differences).

Heteronormativity

The ideological structure of heteronormativity is a close ally to the overarching structure of gender, and both have colonised the social world with force, traversing geographic spaces with impunity. It is the highly regulatory ideological structure of heteronormativity (Warner 1991), which acts as an overarching umbrella to many Discourses embedded in the gender order, linking gender to sexuality through the assumption of heterosexuality as the norm (Mills and Mullany 2011:172). Cameron and Kulick (2003:7) put this astutely:

> Hence, if you are not heterosexual you cannot be a real man or a true woman; and if you are not a real man or a true woman you cannot be heterosexual. What this means is that sexuality and gender have a 'special relationship', a particular kind of mutual dependence which no analysis of either can overlook.

From a linguistic angle, Cameron and Kulick (2006:51) also note the 'crucial role played by compulsory heterosexuality in the construction of gender identity and gender relations' in that linguistic features can simultaneously index femininity and masculinity as well as heterosexuality. Coates (2013a) maintains that the lexicalisation of the term heteronormativity is one of the most important insights of queer theory: 'that sexuality is organised and regulated in accordance with certain societal beliefs about what is normal, natural and desirable' (Cameron and Kulick 2006:165). In this sense, the heterosexual couple has come to assume 'the privileged example of sexual culture' (Berlant and Warner 1998:548). In other words, and in connection with the gender order, dominant forms of 'appropriate' femininity or masculinity are anchored in heteronormative understandings of the world, a point made very clearly in Coates's work (e.g. 1996, 2003, 2013a, 2013b). These works contain compelling empirical evidence of women and men (in separate groups) performing dominant forms of femininity and masculinity in which relations with the 'opposite sex' take discursive precedence, revealing an unproblematic orientation to a shared knowledge and acceptance of heteronormative values, of which hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987) is widely recognised as being part. I provide examples of heteronormativity in action in the upcoming analysis of Hugo's data.

In terms of gender and sexual identities, I therefore align with the growing body of scholars who see these as being connected by the ideology of heteronormativity (e.g. Cameron and Kulick 2003, 2006; Ehrlich, Meyerhoff and Holmes 2014; Kiesling 2013; Mills and Mullany 2011; Sauntson 2008). Hugo's exploration and instantiation of these identities offer an intriguing portal into the workings of the gender order and heteronormativity, and connections to agency. Cameron and Kulick (2003:78) make the cogent point that sexuality is so much more than a social identity, referring as it does to 'fantasies, fears, repressions or desires'. In examining Hugo's data, I acknowledge these elements where they emerge as part of his discursive construction of identities. In other words, while the construction of sexual and gender identities remains the focus, I analyse the elements of fear and desire as pertinent affective domains as they arise. I turn now to a brief introduction of Hugo before moving to the analysis which examines Hugo's identity construction while on exchange in New Zealand, foregrounding the role of agency and ideological structure as key components.

Hugo

At the time of his exchange (2016–17), Hugo was 19 years old and had completed his first year at a prestigious Parisian university. We had established

contact 4 months prior to his arrival in New Zealand thanks to his fast and enthusiastic response to my request for participants. From a small town in northern France, Hugo had adapted quickly to his Parisian setting and was very much looking forward to his upcoming exchange in New Zealand, as the following extract shows from an email on 10 May 2016:

> J'ai vraiment hâte d'arriver à Wellington ! Un peu stressé aussi, car je ne connais personne et que tout va changer pour moi, mais je pense que ce sera une expérience incroyable!

> I can't wait to arrive in Wellington! A little bit stressed too, because I don't know anybody and everything is going to change for me, but I think it's going to be an incredible experience!

Hugo presents as an outgoing, confident and sporty person who enjoys new adventures. He is tactile and exuberant, using gesture to embellish his stories. He is proud of his athleticism, and would often tell me about the challenges he took on at his CrossFit sessions and the commitment to early mornings that this entailed. During his time in Wellington, he was always busy – working in restaurants, studying, attending CrossFit classes and socialising. He was also extremely proud of the fact that he had *built a new life* for himself in New Zealand, and regularly described his housemates as family. The flat (shared house) which Hugo lived in during the second half of his exchange was a welcoming space; there is no doubt that this environment (within his perception of the overall liberal scaffolding of Wellington, the New Zealand city in which he lived) contributed to his developing status as *woke* around LGBTQ issues, as we will see in the data. He acknowledged that carving his own space had come at the expense perhaps of becoming a core member of the group of French students from his university on exchange in Wellington. While Hugo was still friends with the group, he was definitely peripheral by choice, preferring to invest in the friendships and support offered by his immediate context.

Hugo and I became close very quickly. In Wellington, we spent long periods together over coffee, on campus and in town, and we would share stories about our lives. We both attended Persephone's 21st birthday party (a New Zealand participant who had been on exchange in Paris, and had quickly become friends with Hugo in the New Zealand context). Persephone and I also attended Hugo's farewell party (detailed further in the analysis), and spent the morning before his departure with him at his flat. Hugo and I bonded over our interest in each other's languages, our interest in the social world and feminist issues in particular, and travel.

He shared many personal stories from his past, from his exchange, and his hopes for the future. Hugo's gender and sexual identities fast assumed prominence in our discussions, allowing him to explore his experiences through reflection. These reflections and identity instantiations simultaneously illuminated the structure and agency relationship, and were strengthened by the longitudinal data collection (Hugo's exchange was for one year and some of the data for analysis are from his return to France).

Analysis

I begin the analysis by providing an example which clarifies the force of heteronormativity as an entrenched ideological structure. Data contain several episodes in which Hugo comes into contact with circulating normative Discourses of sexuality, making his identity as a gay man salient. For instance, when Hugo was in the process of looking for a WWOOF-ing (Willing Workers on Organic Farms) position in the summer holidays (halfway through his year-long exchange), all he could find was a place in the home of an ordained minister. The outdoor, physical work appealed but the religious aspect provided alarm bells, and not just because of the clash with his own atheist ideals. Hugo worried, rather, that *she doesn't like my style or personality if you know what I mean*. He continued to elaborate on this concern during our conversation, stating that despite his Catholic upbringing, he was *done* with religion *after the church rejected me*. This was a powerful reminder of the inescapability for many of pervasive structures such as religion which, as Foucault (1978) shows, have had a powerful effect on constructions of 'acceptable' forms of sexuality. Hugo's habitus has therefore been primed to anticipate the rumblings (and potential eruption) of discursive faultlines (Menard-Warwick 2014) between normative understandings of gender and sexuality and his non-normative sexual identity and version of masculinity (which is fluid and falls outside traditional norms).

Assuming a non-heterosexual identity involves being confronted with many more discursive stumbling blocks than those who navigate the path deemed normative will ever meet. It involves an ongoing 'practical social reflection' (Warner 1991:6) of the social institutions and norms in which heterosexuality is taken for granted. The above example provides a clear instance of such reflection in that through Hugo's discursive exploration we see how ideologies of heteronormativity affect his interactional space. I turn now to a more detailed analysis, building on the concept of heteronormativity as a structure which guides Hugo's identity work.

Hugo and Shelley: interview data

Wellington (3 days before departure)

This final interview took place in a café on campus and lasted for 32 minutes. The following extracts centre on Hugo's exploration of his feelings of becoming *woke*[2] regarding LGBTQ issues in the New Zealand context and the accompanying repercussions for his return to Paris. In Extract 1, Hugo explains why this feels like a paradox given his exchange setting of New Zealand, engaging with what he sees as differing discursive climates and sparking the beginnings of his structural reflections.

Extract 1

```
1   Hugo:     which is which is kinda weird because we're like //lost\
2   Shelley:  /i-\\ in a bubble yeah
3   Hugo:     we're lost //in\ an island at the end of the world
4   Shelley:  /yeah\\
5   Shelley:  yeah that's interesting
6   Hugo:     [gentle sarcasm]: like nothing happens here /we're\\
7   Shelley:  /yeah\\ yeah
8   Hugo:     we're in such a safe bubble
9   Shelley:  mm mm
10  Hugo:     with because you're so far away you can look
11            at the outside
12  Shelley:  oh my god that's really interesting + yeah
13  Hugo:     nothing //happ\ens here we don't have anything to +
14            really + work upon here
15  Shelley:  /yeah\\
16  Shelley:  yeah
17  Hugo:     so we look at what's happening outside
```

Hugo likens New Zealand's geographic isolation to being *lost in an island at the end of the world* (line 3), and builds on my proffered addition of being in a bubble by clarifying that he sees the bubble as *safe* (line 8), simultaneously adding meaning to his previous statement that *nothing happens here* (line 6). The epistemic stance taken by Hugo reflects that of Hanna (another participant from France), suggesting a cultural grounding (Jaffe 2009). Other data indicate the likelihood of the French terror attacks (e.g. in Paris in 2015 and Nice in 2016) playing an important role in this epistemic construction. New Zealand, in comparison, was often constructed as a safe and calm exchange destination, a perception reiterated in a meeting I had in Paris at my participants' university. During this discussion with the international affairs manager for Oceania, I was told that this perception was augmented by the perceived 'exotic' nature of the country, which is linked to geographic

distance. Taken together, these perceptions would have had an effect on the above epistemic stance taken by both Hugo and Hanna. Of particular interest is that for Hugo this perception of being in a *safe bubble* was positively assessed in terms of the affordances he saw it providing for reflection on the world – *because you're so far away you can <u>look</u> at the outside* (lines 10–11). In this sense, Hugo's habitus may be seen to be called into question as he experiences ideological growth (becoming *woke*).

At this point in our conversation, I reiterate Hugo's idea of holding hands for same-sex couples as a concrete example of this 'safe' environment. Hugo had elaborated on this during our previous (unrecorded) chat in a Wellington café in which he had also mentioned being in a *safe bubble* (hence my reuse of the term in this conversation). He orients seamlessly to this idea, describing the impact on his sexual identity within the parameters of what he saw as empowering LGBTQ Discourses and accompanying norms in Wellington (Extract 2).

Extract 2

```
1    Shelley:  mm: okay and yeah and another time when we met in
2              [café] that time you were telling me how + you'll miss
3              + Wellington like kind of for that community //because
4              like\ you can walk down the street holding hands
5              for example
6    Hugo:     /oh I know\\
7    Hugo:     oh yeah I'm gonna miss so much
8    Shelley:  mm
9    Hugo:     + yeah + yeah Wellington really [drawls]: redefined
10             my: ideas and conceptions + of + what social limits
11             social norms could be
12   Shelley:  yeah
13   Hugo:     that's also what I'm a bit afraid like when I come
14             b//ack\ that I don't have the right social codes
15   Shelley:  /okay\\
16   Shelley:  mm
17   Hugo:     because they've been redefined here
```

Hugo's description allows an intriguing insight into his own process of 'ideologically becoming' (Bakhtin 1992; Menard-Warwick 2014), comparing his interpretations of prevalent Discourses around what 'acceptable' sexual identities look like in Paris and Wellington. The example of holding hands is usefully illustrative of this difference in its indexical ties to these wider Discourses. It echoes Berlant and Warner's (1998) important Foucauldian point of the societal delegitimisation of certain behaviours, and Cameron and Kulick's (2003:115) example of homosexual couples kissing and holding

hands as being constructed as 'indecent behaviour' and policed as such. As Hugo laments, he will miss being able to this *so much* (line 7)*.* His repetition of the concept of *redefinition* (see lines 9 and 17) aptly captures the extent of this change as he experiences it, as does his affective stance expressed in his expression of fear of not having *the right social codes* (line 14) upon his return to Paris. He continues to deepen his level of reflection as our interaction unfolds (Extract 3).

Extract 3

```
1    Hugo:      it's taught me it's ++ it always seemed normal to me
2    Shelley:   mm
3    Hugo:      that it was right to hold hands but still I wouldn't do it
4               in Paris and I was like //you\ can't do it and you know
5               why and stuff but here I'm like [exhales] of course
6               I do it and I don't see why I couldn't
7    Shelley:   /yeah\\
8    Shelley:   yes
9    Hugo:      and I'm just a bit afraid that I would go back
10              and feel + oppressed
11   Shelley:   mm
12   Hugo:      by those social norms that + I've been + beyond
13   Shelley:   mm hm y//eah\
14   Hugo:      /did\\ that make sense
15   Shelley:   that really does make sense //yeah\
16   Hugo:      /it\\ feels like can I go + back
17   Shelley:   yeah + yeah stepping back
18   Hugo:      yeah
```

Hugo returns to the emotion of worry and fear yet tempers this affective stance with an emphasis on the 'growth' involved in going beyond the restrictions he feels in Paris. He begins by painting his Wellington experience as one of learning (line 1), yet segues after a brief pause into a more agentive stance which emphasises perhaps his underlying epistemic 'wokeness' – *it always seemed normal to me* – (line 1)*, that it was right to hold hands* – (line 3) despite the restrictive structures he was working within. We therefore gain a picture of Hugo's habitus as dormant yet primed for change in Paris, and triggered in the Wellington setting through his interactions with liberating LGBTQ Discourses. The idea of liberation captures Hugo's feelings and experiences extremely well and is revelatory in terms of his own movement within the structure/agency relationship – *social norms that I've been beyond* – (line 12). Clearly, it is not as simple an equation as Paris equals these Discourses and these norms, and Wellington equals these (different) Discourses and these norms (as Hugo himself acknowl-

edges several times), but for Hugo at this point his identity construction and accompanying self-positioning is greatly aided by this discursive division. For him, the difference is entirely meaningful; it is the difference between feeling *oppressed* (line 10) and feeling liberated – allowing what he always knew was *normal* (line 1) and *right* (line 3) to be enacted freely and without restraint.

At this point in our discussion, I engage with this division by bringing my analytical interest in structure and agency in line with Hugo's experience (Extract 4).

Extract 4

```
1    Shelley:   so you don't + you wouldn't feel comfortable at all +
2               pushing back against those norms in Paris because it's
3               too [upward intonation]: dangerous to do that: or +
4               I mean obviously it would depend on the place
5               //that you were\
6    Hugo:      /yeah it would depend\\ on the place //it would\
7               depend on the context
8    Shelley:   /yeah\\
9    Shelley:   yeah
10   Hugo:      and I'd love to push
11   Shelley:   m//m\
12   Hugo:      /the\\ norms + [drawls]: but: I don't wi- I don't want
13               ah I don't really want to put myself at risk
14   Shelley:   no exactly + //that's\ the whole kind of
15               structure agency³ //thing\ isn't it like
16   Hugo:      /but\\
17   Hugo:      /yeah\\
18   Hugo:      it's just me I can't do much alone
```

After orienting smoothly to my point about context (through cooperative overlaps and repetition – see lines 5–7), Hugo enters directly into the structure/agency dilemma. The modal verb element of his phrase *I'd love to push* (line 10) presupposes an idea of non-reality, 'in an ideal world' type of Discourse. While he would like to, in an ideal world, move freely about his social spaces enacting identities important to him, the threat of being harmed or being unsafe (line 13) meant that the pendulum swung more towards the structure end of the continuum. Hugo's self-positioning as not being able to *do much alone* (line 18) underscores his sense of isolation in what he often described to me as highly heteronormatively influenced Parisian gay spaces. Hugo emphasised the cultural capital associated with heterosexual hegemonic masculinity in gay spaces, an occasioning which supports much of the literature on the preference of stereotypically mas-

culine qualities in gay contexts (e.g. Baker 2008; Barrett 2017; Connell 1987).

Hugo's almost fatalistic narrative stance on this issue gains complexity, however, when his agentive acts in Wellington and on Facebook are taken into account, allowing a more nuanced view of the structure and agency relationship and accompanying movement within discursive spaces. Around ten days before our final interview, Hugo had hosted a joint farewell party at his flat in Wellington, to which Persephone and I were invited, as well as my other French participants Pierre and Félix. Hugo consistently spoke of the importance of the friends he had made in this flat (a mix of cultures, ages and sexualities) and there is no doubt that the growth in his LGBTQ awareness can be attributed in great part to this accepting environment in which he felt comfortable, validated and a real sense of belonging. On the night of the farewell party Hugo dressed in drag for the second time in his life. The following observations are from my field notes:

> **Friday 16 June 2017, Hugo's farewell party, his apartment, Wellington CBD**
>
> When I arrived, Hugo was seated on one of the high seats at the big table in the middle of the kitchen. His make-up was being expertly applied by a friend of the head tenant and he was perfectly at ease chatting with me while this was being done. He looked amazing at the end, complete with long blonde wig, above-the-knee boots, breast padding and long, thick eyelashes. Persephone and I had a few photos taken with him and he told us that it was only his second time dressing in drag. He commented a few times during the evening that dressing in drag 'desensitised' him, or made him 'not give a fuck'. He perhaps made this point the most strongly when he found out that his ex wasn't going to come to the party. When we last spoke, he had been certain that his ex was going to come and he had told me how he had invited 'all the people that were special in some way' to him.
>
> Both Pierre and Félix did not seem surprised at all by seeing Hugo in full drag. It is clear that Hugo hasn't been a core member of the French group, and that this was his choice. While he gets on with them and is pleased to have them as friends, he has preferred to find his own friends and 'build' everything on his terms. At the end of the evening, Hugo and some of his flatmates/friends were heading into town but Pierre, Félix, Persephone and myself decided against joining them. Hugo was in his element and I hoped he would make some more wonderful memories to take away with him.

From these recollections, what stands out the most is how at ease Hugo was the whole evening. The particular space of his flat and flatmates fed into his experience of what he perceived as an open and liberal Wellington, akin to Canagarajah's (2004) notion of a safe house – a space outside of

institutional surveillance in which counter Discourses to oppression can be nourished. Leaving to continue the party in town while dressed in drag can thus be seen as a challenge to the restrictions of heteronormativity, most keenly felt for Hugo in Paris. Here, in Wellington, Hugo was able to try out this identity in what he saw as a safer and more accepting environment. Through drag, and the appropriation of femininity, he was able to disrupt and challenge the 'normative alignment of sex assignment, gender identity and sexual identity' (Bucholtz 2014:37), gaining confidence and commitment in the process.

In this sense, this element of his exchange experience can be seen to have planted seeds of agency and to have contributed to the development of an agentive pushing back. While Hugo's self-positioning in the interview data above supports the idea of the absolute stronghold of structures in Paris, and his perceived inability to push back against these ingrained heteronorms, this is not necessarily set in stone as subsequent Facebook data from his return to Paris demonstrate. On the day Hugo returned to Paris (after having spent a couple of months with family in his own region of France), he posted on Facebook the message in Extract 5, along with a map of Paris.

Extract 5

`Bitch I'm back, by popular demand.`

This pithy statement belies its depth in terms of the identity work it is doing. For Hugo, it seems likely the most salience lies in the indexical ties to the drag subculture. RuPaul's *Drag Race Dictionary* defines the noun 'bitch' as such: 'A fierce woman. A friend. Used as a term of endearment among drag queens' (Rupaul undated). Hugo's self-positioning may therefore be seen as assertive, or 'fierce', as a precursor perhaps to how he intends to confront heteronormative structures in Paris. Before this Facebook post, I had heard Hugo on occasion use the word 'bitch' to negatively evaluate the behaviour of gay men he did not like, as well as to refer to himself in an ironic way (see Barrett 1997, 2017). Context is clearly crucial. The quote in its entirety also references a line taken from Beyoncé's 2016 song 'Formation', an anthem of Black empowerment speaking directly to the Black Lives Matter movement. The indexical field is therefore wide. As well as indexing notions of overcoming the oppressor, and the cultural capital globally associated with Beyoncé, this phrase links indexically to a diva-esque, fierce and unapologetic instantiation of his gender identity.

Facebook, too, appears to function as a type of safe house in that it provides for Hugo an empowering, non-threatening platform to enact this

bold confidence and lay a direct challenge to what he sees as the existing heteronormative social order in Paris. The seeds of agency planted in Wellington appear to be growing well at this point. The final evidence from Facebook, which shows Hugo's continued exploration of agency within ideological structures, is his post after his Bachelor's Ball at his Paris university (accompanied by two photos of Hugo dressed in immaculate drag as Daisy), reproduced in Extract 6.

Extract 6

```
Last night was the [name of university] bachelor graduation ceremony. I
didn't go … but Daisy did!
   I was asked if it was for fun or a political statement: obviously
both. I feel special as a (baby) drag queen, but it was even more
special to be a drag queen around my classmates in such a prestigious
and standardised environment. Break the rules, be true to yourself and
have fun. That's my statement. 💋▬4
   Some people also 'thanked' me 'for doing it': it was my honor and
pleasure. It's now my turn to thank everyone for all the compliments
and all the kindness y'all gave me. I knew well that you were brilliant
minds, but now I'm sure you're also beautiful souls. Daisy will come
back! 💃
```

The use of English, here as in the previous post, may well be intended to capture Hugo's intended audience (i.e. the choice of using English ensures the majority of his friends can understand the message whereas French would limit his readership significantly). This has direct ties to his friends in Wellington, particularly in the LGBTQ community, whose investment in this aspect of Hugo's identity would have been strengthened during his exchange period. It is of note too that Hugo employs creative linguistic features within this, as in the use of *y'all*, a form regularly used by RuPaul. As well as indexing drag directly, it may also index notions of friendliness and linguistic dexterity (given that it is more commonly associated with the Southern states of the USA rather than New Zealand English).

The agentive positioning is striking, both in the discursive construction and in the event itself. It is worth reiterating Hugo's statement about the prestigious nature of his Parisian institution, heavily anchored as it is in tradition, and definitely not known as a bastion of rainbow liberalism. This may well have been the first time a student had 'flouted' these institutional and societal norms by disregarding gender expectations in such an explicit way. Socially and linguistically (as evidenced in the above Facebook post), Hugo is crossing from an unmarked to a marked position, which Cameron

and Kulick (2003:97) make clear is 'more noticeable than the reverse'. They give the example of a man wearing a dress as opposed to a woman wearing pants, noting that the man's 'gender deviance' in this instance 'will be more visible' than the woman's (Cameron and Kulick 2003:97), with the clear implication that everything gendered as male has come to assume superior status.

The positivity with which Hugo constructs people's reactions is therefore heartwarming and not without a sense of relief. In a separate post he also thanked all the people who gave him the finger on his way to the ball because, as he put it, at least they had noticed him. Acknowledging his junior status as a *(baby) drag queen*, Hugo hints at his desire to attain a more senior drag queen status. This, in turn, links to a corresponding development of agency in the movement towards a desired imagined community. Hugo's advice to *break the rules, be true to yourself and have fun* displays a much more agentive stance than indicated in his final interview, epitomised by the fearless *Daisy*. To this end, Hugo's dressing in drag may function as protection, simultaneously shielding him from potential negativity (recall his comment above on not *giving a fuck*) while at the same time pushing back in a highly visible way.

Conclusion

Hugo's experiences and discursive positioning allow insights into gender and sexual identity trajectories and corresponding insights into agency within changing structural environments during and after study abroad. While Hugo's developing sense and enactment of agency is to be celebrated, structure does not fall by the wayside, but is parallel and intertwined. Rather than paint an overly agentive picture, I argue for a recognition of the force of ideological structures and for an acknowledgement of how crossing borders can be the impetus for a liberating 'ontological excavation'. In this sense, Hugo's habitus appeared to be unlocked and examined during his exchange in New Zealand through the activation of discursive faultlines around 'appropriate' ways to 'do' sexuality and gender. His understanding of heteronorms was put under a microscope and evaluated from new vantage points, and upon return to Paris, the past, present and future can be seen to 'encounter and transform each other' (Papastergiadis, cited in Block 2007:864), leading to new possibilities for constructing his gender and sexual identities. While Hugo is indeed *only one person* (to return to our interview data), his recognition of the emancipatory potential of pushing back is a celebratory first step in overcoming oppressive social norms.

About the author

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Notes

1   In this article, I follow the orthographic distinction conceptualised by James Paul Gee (1990, 2015), where Discourses with a capital 'D' are sociocultural, institutionalised, ways of doing things and interacting (e.g. political Discourse or third wave feminist Discourse) and discourses with a small 'd' are instantiated through everyday (often mundane) talk.
2   'Woke' as an adjective has its origins in Erykah Badu's 2008 song 'Master Teacher'. It has since been used in the hashtag #staywoke, particularly in the 2013 Black Lives Matter movement. It has indexical ties to racism, sexism and classism, and involves 'seeing past' the grand narratives that have come to structure our environment, thus indexing an awareness of the workings of social power and inequalities.
3   Hugo had already been introduced to the concepts of structure and agency in his sociology class, as well as to Butler's concept of performativity. These ideas were regular inclusions in our conversations.
4   The second emoji here is a rainbow flag.

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