

Queering Cyborg Chronotope: Humanness Unraveled in Chi Ta-wei's *The Membranes*

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the concepts of queer temporality, cyborg, and posthumanism with reference to queer inhumanism, this article examines a trans-cyborgized protagonist's non-linear life splices to unravel humanness within the queered narratives of Chi Ta-wei's dystopian novella *The Membranes*, a renowned science fiction produced in 1990s Taiwan that features anthrodecentrism. Unlike the common practice to cripple compulsory heteronormativity, *The Membranes* imagines a cyberpunk world underpinning cyborg chronology, such that the central figure *Momo*, a transgender synthesis of a "male human brain" and a fabricated "female cyborg body," embarks on a self-inquiry journey to situate her fluid, flexible, and unsettled identities, which are obfuscated somewhere between the human brain and a prothesized bodily container. Analyzed in this article is Chi's existentialist questioning of the hierarchies and default forms of humanhood. The locus of this article, accordingly, is to debunk the deferred, converged chronotope of a transgendered, anthropomorphized cyborg in the sense of Chi's transqueering posthuman conceptions.

KEYWORDS: anthrodecentrism, Chi Ta-wei, chronotope, cyborg, posthumanism, queer temporality, *The Membranes*

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Chi Ta-wei, author of *Tongzhi wenxueshi: Taiwan de faming (A Queer Invention in Taiwan: A History of Tongzhi Literature, 2017)*, is an esteemed queer-identified writer-scholar in Taiwanese academia who rose to prominence in the 1990s (Chiang, “Introduction” 7). His three short-story collections, *Gangguan shijie (Queer Senses: A Story Cycle of Sexualities, 1995)*, *Mo (The Membranes and Other Short Stories, 1996)* and *Lianwupi (Fetish: Stories, 1998)*, mark his fearless articulations and maverick ventures in extending non-adhering sexualities and politicizing gender-crossing identities championed in post-modern Taiwan’s literary landscape. As Yahia Zhengtang Ma rightly comments, Chi challenges “the normative binarism of sexuality and divides of sex” (par. 4) through fictional representations in a pungent narrative voice. This may account for why some of his best works have been rendered into multiple languages and obtained international recognition.

Reaching a wider readership, a selected few of Chi’s short stories have been made visible for Anglophone readers. To be more specific, Fran Martin translated *Xiangzao (The Scent of HIV, 1998)*, *Yinwei wo zhuang (I’m Not Stupid, 1998)*, *Yige moshengren de shenfen zhengming (A Stranger’s ID, 2003)*; Susan Wilf translated *Qi (Umbilicus, 2005)*; Dave Haysom translated *Mushen de wuhou (A Faun’s Afternoon, 2015)*; Yahia Zhengtang Ma translated *Haojiao (Howl, 2021)*. For Francophone readers, Gwennaël Gaffric’s recent translations of *Mo (Membrane, 2015)* and the short-story collection *Perles (Pearl 2020)* have made Chi’s rhapsodic genderqueer configurations accessible in French.¹ The Japanese scholar Noriko Shirouzu translated *Mo* into, *Tade yandi nide zhangxin jijiang zhanfang yiduo hongmeigui (赤い薔薇が咲くとき [When a red rose is about to bloom])*, *Yishi (儀式 [Ritual])*, and *Zaocan (朝食 [Breakfast])* in 2008. Last but not least, Anna Gustafsson Chen translated *Yachi (Tänder [Teeth] 2003)* and *Xiangzao (Tvål [Soap] 2009)* into Swedish. In particular, *The Membranes* has appeared in Japanese (trans. by Shirouzu Noriko in 2008), French (trans. by Gwennaël Gaffric in 2015), English (including Christopher Schifani’s 2014 MA thesis and Ari Larissa Heinrich’s 2021 translation), Korean (trans. by Heejung Moon in 2021), Italian (trans. by Alessandra Pezza in 2022), and Danish (trans. by Astrid Møller-Olsen, June

¹ This anthology consists of six fantasy stories, with Gaffric translating three of them and contributing an introductory foreword. The other three stories were translated by Olivier Bialais, Pierrick Rivet, and Coraline Jortay.

2023). Apparently, *The Membranes* has now attained a significant measure of international recognition, especially through Heinrich's seamless English translation.²

The Membranes, winner of the 1995 *United Daily News* Novella Prize, is a well-received speculative fiction among the works in the pantheon of queer-themed Taiwanese literature. It is "possibly the first novel in modern Chinese to feature a transfeminine protagonist" (Esposito). As Martin notes in her 2003 monograph *Situating Sexualities* and elsewhere, the 1990s is a watershed period characterized by the lifting of martial law in 1987 that witnessed emancipated intellectualism, activist pluralism, and flourishing literary experimentation in Taiwan.³ Heinrich resonates with Martin by recalling "fin-de-siècle" Taipei (prototype of the undersea "T City" in *The Membranes*) as a place "where youth culture seemed to combine a bottomless appetite for foreign popular culture with an unaccustomed freedom from supervision" ("Promiscuous Literary" 139). "Similar to a cyborg body," as Chi avers in a confessional tone, these "imported culture parts" (*Mo* 4) have constituted the flesh and blood of his fictional writings.⁴ His yearning for exotic elements is evinced by the encyclopedic allusions prevailing in *The Membranes*.⁵ What makes this queer-crafted sci-fi overshadow other Sinophone works of its genre in the 1990s is probably Chi's strategic questioning of the essence of gender (ab)normativity,

² *The Membranes* is part of the "Modern Chinese Literature from Taiwan" series, a project launched by David Der-wei Wang in collaboration with Columbia University Press. The recent publication of the novel's Italian and Danish versions, obviously catalyzed by its 2021 English version, were subsidized by the MOC's GPT funding initiative (Grant for the Publication of Taiwanese Works in Translation) in 2021 and 2022, respectively. Its Spanish version (in progress) received the GPT grant in early 2023. As of May 8, 2023, *The Membranes* has received an averaged 4.3 star-rating and 85 global reviews at *Amazon*. It also garners an averaged 4.08 stars, with 1,585 ratings and 335 customer reviews at *Goodreads*.

³ Martin argues that this decade saw a wealth of emerging literary forms, styles and genres; including realism, surrealism, psychological literature, metafiction, feminist writing, fantasy, mystery and science fiction (21).

⁴ This is an abridged citation. All English translations herein are mine. The original Chinese text is: 新版《膜》收錄的多篇小說也類似生化人的軀體，也是由零件組合而成。這些零件主要是遍布文本表面以及內裡的指涉（references）與典故（allusions），多數是從國外進口的電影，文學，理論，畫面，音樂。少了這些外國零件，小說就要停擺。

⁵ *The Membranes* is suffused with references and allusions to classic texts, directors and thinkers. For example, it reproduces some biblical and Shakespearean scenes in a metaphorical fashion, and imitates tropes from Italo Calvino's novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. By mentioning films directed by Almodóvar, Truffaut, Bergman, and Visconti, and appropriating philosophies developed by Lacan, Nietzsche and Derrida, *The Membranes* often reads like a pastiche of European artistic traditions.

trans/queer (in)certitude, and (post)human centrality. Taiwanese authors during this laissez-faire decade were eager to duplicate an indigenized literary coliseum allowing for diverse transqueering attempts, seeking to expand beyond the Sinocentric parameters of “queer Sinophonicity” (Heinrich, “Volatile Alliance” 6-7) on the local grounds of Taiwanese queerness and its peculiar trans/post-human imagination.⁶ In the 1990s, Taiwanese queer fiction frequently featured a Freudian “phallic woman” (Liou 13) bearing a phantasmatic phallic attribute. The trans-cyborgized protagonist Momo in *The Membranes* may well exemplify such a figure. Momo is infected with the devastating LOGO virus (Chi uses it as a sardonic symbol of HIV, neoliberalism, and patriarchal animosity). And Momo’s self-refuting identification is deployed as a defiant irony to shame the paranoid “(phal)logocentrism” (Liou 19) and stigmatization of the AIDS plague in (homo-)transphobic Taiwan.

Chi’s writing style is oft-characterized as a mischievous refusal of transparent or unproblematic queer identifications. In this regard, *The Membranes* opts to generate an oblique deformation of Anglo-American valorizations of “transqueer,” aspiring to relate to Taiwanized queerness. Chi and his coetaneous writers’ transqueering expressions, such as those fabricated by Chen Xue, Lucifer Hung, Yang Zhao, and Chen Yin-shu, can be deemed as precursors accelerating the emerging concept of “queer Sinofuturism”⁷ co-proposed in 2020 by Ari Larissa Heinrich, Howard Chiang, and Chi Ta-wei, who envisioned alternative Taiwanese bodies “in relation to the corporeal future of humanity” (Heinrich et al. 38). Seen in this light, Momo’s volatile temporality, as masterfully woven into the textual fabric of the apocalyptic “New Taiwan” setting, has been weaponized in *The Membranes* to decenter the novel’s transcyborgian narrative off the Sino-Western notion of gender

⁶ Chi acknowledges in a 2021 journal interview that after getting his PhD degree in the U.S. and returning to Taiwan, he came to realize that “queer literature in Taiwan was really a local, creolized tradition of its own. . . . I wanted to portray an alternative world where both queer people and Taiwan could be left alone—left alone by the heterosexist world and by the shadow cast by China” (Littlewood). It can be surmised from this quote that Chi may hold a “Taiwanese literary nationalism” stance in his queering practice.

⁷ Inaugurated in 2020 by a special issue of the journal *Screen Bodies*, the “queer Sinofuturism” approach was utilized to critically undermine the clichéd techno-Orientalist perceptions in the West by exploring how contemporary Sinophone fiction and film have mobilized techno-futurist aesthetics and queering narratives to imagine humanity in its own right, and how that imagination “unfolds with respect to the body both corporeal and virtual” (Heinrich et al. 41), just as Momo’s artificial *mind* interacts with her prosthetic *body*.

transgression. In other words, Chi's queering Momo's fluctuating chronology may suffice to frame a conceptually "transtopian" continuum, as Howard Chiang contends in his 2021 volume *Transtopia in the Sinophone Pacific*, beyond the monolithic transgender presumptions with roots in dynastic China and the West (4-5). Indeed, twenty-six years after its initial publication in Chinese the novel continues to conjure up a convoluted awareness of "queerness" among its readers by offering a prescient insight into the posthuman politics of deviant gender shifts, unsettled (in)human subjectivities, and awkward assemblages of human consciousness and cyborgian identity.

As Chi admits in a 2020 interview, when composing *The Membranes* in his early twenties, he was inspired by then-popular gender theories of Julia Kristeva, Michel Foucault, and Judith Butler, positioning his fiction at the epicenter of the American queer theory fad. He ascribed crucial tropes, such as memory implant and cyborg transformation, to sci-fi classic movies like the *Terminator* series, *Total Recall*, and the Japanese anime *Ghost in the Shell* (Park 65-66). Meanwhile, he avows in a 2021 interview that his depiction of Momo's queer actuality was "wittingly or unwittingly" influenced by the raw style of the British gay painter Francis Bacon's violent, piercing portraits of brutality (Littlewood). In Chi's broader interpretation, "people are in nearly every aspect like cyborgs, outfitted internally and externally with artificial parts" (Chi, *Mo* 3),⁸ which oddly ensures the survival of post-apocalyptic humans. As Wu Nienjen grimly pointed out in his juror opinion, the novel "tells you that your body, your memories, and even the things you say to people. . . . None of them belongs to you anyway. They are all transplants, duplicates, to the point where they can be input or deleted at any time" (qtd. in Heinrich, "Promiscuous Literary" 152). The central issue of this "fake lesbian eroticism science fiction" (Chi, *Mo* 13)⁹ is to suspend the authenticity of "realities" perceived by Momo's "brain in a cyborg vat" in accord with Derridian *différance*—happenings in one's life *can* be belated, inserted, and purposefully fabricated. The locus of this article, accordingly, is to debunk the deferred, converged chronotope of a

⁸ The Chinese original text is: 幾乎每個人都是生化人，體內體外都裝設了人造零件。

⁹ The Chinese original text is: 虛擬女／女情慾的科幻作品。Chi deliberately preserves only one adult figure "with a penis" in *The Membranes*: a lothario gay lawn-care taker called Paolo Pasolini, who was raped and murdered by a tough juvenile—similar to the rumored death of the Italian gay director Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922-75). Like Momo, Paolo's flawless new body was harvested from his surrogate cyborg "Big Andy" modeled on young Paolo. According to Chi himself, he "consciously built a world mostly of women" in order "not to reproduce the male dominance" (Littlewood).

transgendered, anthropomorphized cyborg in the sense of Chi's transqueering posthuman conceptions.

The synopsis of *The Membranes* is summarized as follows: In the late twenty-first century humanity has abandoned the war-torn and nuclear-contaminated surface of the earth and retreated to a subaquatic "utopia" protected by layers of waterproof membranes to shun lethal radiation. In T city, Momo, a reticent female aesthetician in her twenties, runs a skincare salon called "Canary" (a metaphor of her hermitic and caged destiny). Her signature "M skin" treatment involves the application of a lotion layer of a sophisticated digital memory skin on her customers' bodies that facilitates the stealth extraction of their sensual experience through the gathering of their biometric data. Momo is elaborately and insidiously left uninformed by her mother and the "ISM Corporation" (a neurotech enterprise that keeps Momo's brain "normally" functioning) as to the cruel truth that she has never been the voyeur but has instead been the subject of observation. Following her childhood operation to merge with her organ donor "little Andy" (a "female" android prepared by ISM to supercede Momo's virus-defeated body), Momo does not realize that all her postsurgery "life experiences" are devised memories uploaded into her isolated brain—the only unaffected part of her original body—until she eventually learns of her fabricated reality by accessing the confidential video diaries scripted by her mother. The novel tells of Momo's uncanny encounters with several "patrons" and her estranged mother in quest of her true identity—a journey that subtly questions the rigid confines of gender binary and human centrality, while sharply problematizing the ontological validity of the conscious self.

Available literature regarding Chi's queer (science) fiction contains five MA theses produced in post-millennial Taiwan.¹⁰ Among them, Li Ju-en's 2012 research contributes a significant chapter to the discussion of Momo's queer/posthuman "disembodiment" agency, which she claims not only proactively shatters the internalized boundaries between "body" and "identity,"

¹⁰ They are Lin Yuhan's "*Textualized Desire and Queer Performance: Chi Ta-wei's Writing and Practices (1995-2000)*" (2005), Zhang Qiaoyu's "*A Study on the Erotic Narratives of Gay and Queer Novels in Taiwan (1960-2007)*" (2009), Li Ju-en's "*The Posthuman Politics of Queer Science Fiction in 1990s Taiwan—A Study on Works by Lucifer Hung and Chi Ta-wei*" (2012), Zha Yuqi's "*The Interspace of Taiwanese Science Fiction since the 1990s—A Study on Works by Lucifer Hung and Chi Ta-wei*" (2013), and Christopher Schifani's "*An English Translation and Study of Chi Ta-wei's Membranes and Four Other Stories*" (2014). It should be noted that the first four studies are conducted in Chinese, and the quoting from Li's paper provided here is my translation.

but also voids all limits on a cyborgized body that “does not possess a linear temporality” (22). Li opposes posthuman discourses that emphasize the importance of an ultimate “embodiment unity of mind and body” (19). Instead, she argues that Momo’s transgressive queer agency seeks to draw infinite boundaries that refuse to be anchored. I find this chapter exceptionally valuable because she discerningly points out the queered temporal dimension of Momo’s liquid chronology—a liquidity comparable to the invisible/impenetrable membranes that “filtered Momo’s every impression of the world” (Chi, *Membranes* 1). Given that the expiry of Momo’s physical body no longer marks the end of her conscious life, her “timeline” could be arbitrarily performed through the multi-extension of her prosthetized body.

In the field of academic discourses, there exist four journal articles and three book chapters worth extra noting. The former includes Liu Jen-peng’s “Alongside ‘Classic’ and ‘Human’: The Brave New World of Queer Science Fiction—the 1994 Youth Sci-Fi Literary Awards” (*Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2002, pp. 167-202), Liou Liang-ya’s “Queer Sexchanges: The Representations of the Male-to-Female Transsexual in Fictions by Yang Chao, Chi Tai-wei, Cheng Ying-Shu and Lucifer Hung” (*Chung-Wai Literary Monthly*, vol. 26, no. 12, 1998, pp. 11-30), Chang Chih-wei’s “Textual and Corporeal Appropriations in Chi Ta-wei’s Queer Science Fiction Stories” (*Chung-Wai Literary Monthly*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2003, pp. 106-24), and Yahia Zhengtang Ma’s “Gay Jouissance: Queering the Representation of Same-sex Desire in 1990s Taiwan Literature” (*Taiwan Insight*, 11 May 2021). Book chapters include Fran Martin’s “The Closet, the Mask and ‘*The Membranes*’” (2003), Gwennaël Gaffric’s “Indigenizing Queer Fiction and Queer Theories: A Study on Chi Ta-wei’s Sci-fi Novels,” and Ari Larissa Heinrich’s “Promiscuous Literacy: Taipei Punk and the Queer Future of *The Membranes*” (2021). Liu’s paper critically expounds Chi’s post-gender politics in light of posthumanism; Liou’s article proposes the possibility of a “translesbian continuum” that solely relies on the corporal intimacy between two “female” subjects deprived of their reproductive capacity; Chang’s essay appropriates the *jiǎjiè* (假借 [phonetic mimicry]) approach in the Chinese character formation system to ironize humanity’s “occupying” cyborg bodies with dystopian reflections on the governments’ domineering modes of technological, cultural and political controls in *The Membranes* (117). Ma’s account concisely elaborates on the relation of the Lacanian notion “jouissance”

to same-sex male fetishism prevalent in Chi's oeuvre published in the 1990s. Martin's chapter probes into the "textual masking" inscribed in *The Membranes* by shaming the exposure of the multilayered membranes of Momo's hybrid body, which, "text-like, refuses to yield a final, singular meaning" (212). Gaffric's essay identifies Chi's queer articulation that "male and female bodies have no original genesis but are wrapped in different 'epidermic' layers" (87) engaging medical technology, religious doctrines, social institutions, and gender bonds. To be more precise, *The Membranes* poignantly asks: What makes a subject *human*—one's sexual identity? An autonomous brain latched to one's physical body? Authentic memories governed by one's free will? To these questions neither Chi's text nor Gaffric's analysis has provided exact answers. On the other hand, Heinrich's article sheds unique light on the "queerness" issue that penetrates the novel—namely, the (dis)embodied sexuality and gender of Momo's transplanted brain. As Heinrich argues, bodies in *The Membranes* "are not hard-wired for gender, regardless of sex" ("Promiscuous Literary" 148), leading to Momo's sex and gender being flexible and "ultimately fully decoupled from corporeal presence" (149).

In summary, previous scholarship on *The Membranes* primarily focuses on issues regarding transgenderism, gender fluidity and the supra-human notions of identity ambivalence in reference to a half-human, half-android subject whose sex and gender are indeterminate. Following in that vein whilst extending the scope of discussion, this article examines the text's queer coding of Momo's non-normative, dehumanized cyborg chronotope over the course of her maturity—a theme that remains underexplored in existing scholarship. To this end, it would be useful to briefly overview the alternative logics and hermeneutics of queer time-space proper to the LGBTQ communities and the interpretative definitions of cyborg, before proceeding to analyze Momo's "becoming cyborgian"—a paradigm propounded by Aaron Parkhurst to suggest posthuman engagement with technological modifications in "the quest for transcendence" to achieve "spiritual and physical exaltation" (73). A pivotal premise of this paradigm is a rather unbounded elasticity of the human subject within the domain of artificial transformation that downplays the inseparability of "human" and "nature." In this optimistic logic, a cyborgian identity could perhaps be achieved through transformational practices of human autonomy. The question arises: is this possible?

I. Queer Temporality, Cyborg, and the Bodiless Brain

According to Judith Butler, one’s “phantasmatic identification” (97) takes shape through incessant delineation and re-delineation of identificatory boundaries that are sexually, socially and culturally conferred. Queer subjects’ resistance against (or negotiation with) the heteronormative mechanism indicates a type of agency or capability to shape the temporal-spatial subjectivity specific to non-conforming sexual dissidents. Meanwhile, uncertainties concerning “what it means to be human” and the corollary “what it takes to be human” have vexed, fascinated, and haunted posthumanist writers, scholars, and scientists.¹¹ In this section, I will sketch out the connotations and implications of queer time in dynamic association with posthumanness, as the backdrop for discussion of Momo’s cyborg chronotope unraveled in *The Membranes*.

The primal concept of queer time has appeared in a few landmark monographs, such as Lee Edleman’s 2004 book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, which urges an uncompromisingly polemic ethics of queer action to accede to the efficacy of queer subjects’ future-negating “death drive.” By interrupting the order stemming from one’s social and biological status through a forcible death—such as Momo’s masculinity demise brought forth by her enforced sex reassignment, a trans subject may be enabled to break away from his/her imposed gender linearity. In the insightful book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, José Esteban Muñoz writes that queer time is associated with defying the tyranny of sequence and sexual determinism. In his view, queerness’s fluid temporality becomes possible by “stepping out of the linearity of straight time” (25). Queer temporality, as Elizabeth Freeman advances in *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, is envisaged when the “established temporal order gets interrupted and new encounters consequently take place” (xxii). Thus, queer time can be understood as a multi-directional, recursive, and non-dimorphic departure from heteronormative developments—an “ongoing metamorphosal temporality without beginning or

¹¹ Dr. Peter Scott-Morgan, a British gay robotics scientist, is probably the most cyborg-like human being. Diagnosed with a fatal “motor neurone disease” in 2016, Dr. Scott-Morgan decided to combat his doomed mortality by merging with an AI-based life-supporting system. In April 2021, he and “Peter 2.0” (his computerized cyborg avatar) “co-authored” a thrilling autobiography entitled *Peter 2.0: The Human Cyborg*, a fascinating true-story account that explores the very essence of what makes us human and what it means to be human. Sadly, Dr. Scott-Morgan passed away on June 15, 2022, putting an end to his legendary cyborg chronotope.

end” (Biswas 55), as vividly exemplified by Momo’s anomalous life course. Not only is her cybernetic body made unproductive (= no future), but her memories “as a human” are falsified, rearranged, and separated. Thus, the three-tiered approach of the novel may be understood as an unraveling—a radical process of disentangling and clarifying, while destroying, the transmogrified Momo’s paradoxical humanness.

The term “cyborg” was initially proposed in 1960 by Manfred Clynes and Nathan Kline to denote a hybrid, crafted creature with robotic properties leading a life between science fiction and social reality. In her monumental essay “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Donna Haraway profoundly explores the multifarious denotations of cyborgs and their ramifications in the posthuman context. She conceives of the cyborg as “a creature in a post-gender world” in possession of “no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labour, or other seductions to organic wholeness” (150). Put differently, the Harawayian cyborg exceeds the definitional ambit for a bionic android that resembles a human. She opines that modern *Homo sapiens* are *already* cyborgs—an artificial creation which becomes “our ontology” that “gives us our politics” (150). Thus, the transness and fluidity of human subjectivity in cyborgian form shall be justifiable. The synthesis of alien components with a human body may generate a posthuman subject whose gender identity lingers in a state of flux, giving rise to a divergent temporality that sabotages the typical linearity of humanity’s (hetero-)normative momentum.

The Membranes, widely recognized as a dystopian cyberpunk text, is constantly compared with the 1982 movie *Blade Runner* and *Ghost in the Shell* (Heinrich, “Promiscuous Literary” 142; Martin 206), because they agreeably thematize the foreseeable agony over the dilution of organic humanhood within flawless, replicable cyborg bodies. The cyborg agenda of *The Membranes* also has identifiable roots in Martin Caidin’s 1972 novel *Cyborg* and William Gibson’s 1984 science fiction *Neuromancer* by showcasing alternative forms of technologically augmented humans. It is vital to note that Momo’s biological sex was “a huge mistake” (Chi, *Membranes* 133). Mommy and her lesbian lover

Tomie Ito¹² originally requested a female test tube baby, but were wrongly given an unexpected boy by the hospital. In other words, Momo was created artificially in the first place by unspecified parents and was re-created for the second time by another human intervention (the transplant surgery). Due to her embryo infection with the deadly LOGO virus, Momo had to spend a prison-like childhood in a sterilized ward until she underwent multiple procedures to get her brain—the only remaining sound organ that truly belonged to her—united with little Andy’s infertile body, albeit without success. Little Andy was modeled as a young girl to be Momo’s “very clean playmate” (Chi, *Membranes* 42), which would minimize transplant rejection. Her calculated company not only soothed Momo’s hospitalized solitude but, according to Lacan’s mirror stage theory, somehow facilitated Momo’s developing awareness of her own existence, empowering her reassurance of *self* in contrast to an imaginary *other*. Momo was at this point not purely human, but a cyborg with a walled-off brain that perceived the world in illusory disguise. The surgical procedure was metaphorically portrayed as the biblical “Last Supper” to bewitch Momo’s enigmatic composition:

She never imagined that this would be the final, great rite of passage. . . . Momo’s body was the Last Supper, laid out like a carcass on the operating table. Although she couldn’t witness the massacre that was her body in that moment, she could see something nobody else could. . . . Andy pressed Momo’s body against her skull so hard that she was injected into Andy’s skull like a needle into a vein. Once inside Andy’s skull, Momo could hear Andy whisper softly:

You are a canary in a cage. (Chi, *Membranes* 46-47)

In Momo’s wild imagination, it was little Andy’s brain that eerily occupied her body and caged her soul. In reality, however, it was her “dynamic brain activity” that misled her to believe she was a “complete” and “ordinary” person

¹² The name “Tomie Ito” combines the Japanese horror mangaka “Junji Ito” and the demonic character “Tomie Kawakami” he created. Tomie is presented as a “succubus” seducer who can manipulate people’s jealous rage to kill her. The severed limbs of her dismembered body can regenerate into countless other Tomies, making her gruesomely immortal. In short, the name Tomie Ito itself implies “unnatural” immortality, similar to that of a human whose lifespan is artificially extended by cyborg parts replacement.

(Chi, *Membranes* 128). As a reader, one may not help but wonder: Who owns the ultimate dominion over whom? The Last Supper allegory may foreshadow the doctors' betrayal in re-formulating Momo's sexual sovereignty. Their removal of little Momo's "disdained" male genital during the surgery ushered Momo's transformation into a dyad identity—a *transfeminine cyborg*. Momo's self-identity was no longer authentic thereafter because the prosthetic body had "corrupted" her corporeal integrity. One kernel question arising here is how to mark the divide between Momo's "natural" mastery and her fused *Dasein* (present being). The fact that *his* unharmed human brain was "trapped" in *her* perfect artificial body could be analogous to the "closeted" queer experience pushing her out of the normative trajectory into a *mise-en-abyme* life pattern—a repetitive Nietzschean "abyss gaze" at her alter ego, such that her live-work unit "Salon Canary" is connotatively shaped as the infinite symbol ∞ to deconstruct the linear scaffoldings of human normality.

The trope of Momo's "mind uploading" features the infamous "brain in a vat" (henceforth BIV) figure,¹³ by which her isolated brain is used as a device to "reverse-engineer scenarios that can explain the mind/body divide and the difference between subjective experience and the external world" (Heinrich, "Promiscuous Literary" 146-47). This BIV approach has been archetypally applied in thought experiments stipulating that a sentient being could be a *disembodied* brain hooked up to a powerful computer capable of simulating perfect realities identical to those an embodied brain can normally discern—that is, our mental perceptions about the world could be presumably *false*. The BIV postulate has philosophical roots in Cartesian skepticism (doubting the truth of one's beliefs), subjective idealism (nothing exists except through a perceiving mind), and metaphysical solipsism (thought = reality). A salient issue raised by the BIV thought experiment concerns the examination of possible conditions or methods that could provide sufficient validation of one's *constituted* knowledge and mental phenomena, such as memories, emotions, beliefs and doubts. It should be noted that the BIV hypothesis was negated by the American philosopher Hilary Putnam in his *Reason, Truth and History*. He argues that the assertion "we are brains in a vat" (7) cannot possibly be true,

¹³ The futuristic "mind uploading" practice is a theoretical processing of information that may accurately transfer, copy, or emulate the mental state, thoughts, or memories of one's whole brain in digital form. With this technology, the simulated mind could remotely control a robotic or cybernetic body. In a similar fashion, Momo's encased brain has been programmed with virtual memories in order to act through her new body.

because the statement per se is self-refuting—if we are brains in a vat, how can we be sure whether we are vatted or unenvatted in the actual world? That said, the BIV scenario has become the premise of some science fiction texts, such as Robert Heinlein’s 1970 novel *I Will Fear No Evil*, and the Hollywood cyberpunk movie *The Matrix*, in which all human minds (brains) are incarcerated amid the cyberspace and fed the simulated reality “Matrix” created by intelligent Leviathan machine governors. These malicious machines may have derived from Descartes’s formidable “evil demon” in his 1641 *Meditations on First Philosophy* that employs utmost power and cunning to deceive people.

In *The Membranes*, the major sources of Momo’s knowledge about the world comprised old-fashioned e-mails, discbooks, and data collected by the spying M skin. With M skin, Momo had seamless access to the readouts downloaded from her patrons’ peeled-off membranes (including her mother’s), thus allowing her to enjoy in private the “feminine libido” they had experienced. This detail unveils Momo’s lesbian sexuality in the wake of her transition—an unharnessed queer practice that could even happen under the control, if any, of her “male” brain (Could the human brain be gendered?). All that remained in Momo’s residual memories (happenings prior to her surgery) sometimes conflicted with those artificially inserted, leading to her frequent confusion about her true identity. If Momo’s disembodied brain could not process the embodied experiences, what it sensed through the cyborg body could be simply an “optical illusion” (Haraway 149). The world envisioned in Momo’s brain was like a mirage refracted through a trans-sexed, inhuman lens, engendering a queered cyborg chronotope that transcends the boundaries of sexualized embodiment and humanness.

II. Cyborg Chronotope *vis-à-vis* Posthumanism

Chronotope, a term of literary theory that literally translates as “time-space,” was famously developed by Mikhail Bakhtin in his 1937 essay “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel” to suggest the temporal-spatial configurations in literary narratives. Drawing on Bakhtin’s vantage point, Pooja Mittal Biswas analyzes the time-space alteration of a transgender character’s non-binary, non-heteronormative chronology in Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*. She critically investigates Orlando’s psychological “gender lag” (51) after his

reassignment into a woman, disrupting this figure's discretely linear straight time. By a similar token, I argue that Momo's chronology is queered by Chi's discontinuous, recursive narrative. Momo's demihuman, androgynous, and transhomosexual existence, incorporating a male human brain, a female cyborg body, and miscellaneous memories, avidly subverts the established cisgender human construct by creating a chimerical chronotope far beyond transgenderism and transhumanism.

The term "posthumanism" made its debut in Ihab Hassan's 1977 article "Prometheus as Performer: Towards a Posthumanist Culture?" as a deviant form of transhumanism. The core value of transhumanism is to intensify human capacities through reason, science, and technological innovations beyond biological limitations (Ranisch and Sorgner 17). In Nick Bostrom's parlance, transhuman refers to "transitional beings, or moderately enhanced humans, whose capacities would be somewhere between those of unaugmented humans and full-blown posthumans" (5). The task of posthumanism, as argued by Francesca Ferrando, is to "cope with an urgency for the integral redefinition of the notion of the human" (26). Displacing human centrality, contemporary posthumanism has evolved to assume an anthrocentric stance in privileging the brain's conscious awareness over the body's corporeal senses.

This defiant sub-human and even anti-human queer perspective was extensively explored in the 2015 special issue "Theorizing Queer Inhumanism" of the journal *GLQ*. In the "Introduction: Has the Queer Ever Been Human?," Dana Luciano and Mel Y. Chen suggest the "queer transversal" (192) of the human category by asserting that the queer "[run] across or athwart the humans" (189). In this logic, a cyborgian, queer/trans subject (as the case of Momo) could be enabled to exceed the regulatory frame of any possible representation of a human figure in line with the emerging "nonhuman turn" that "emphasizes the possibilities of anthro-decentric generativity" (192). Simply put, the inhumanist idea critiques the cyborgian "human" subject's proximity to personhood by undermining the anthropocentric grounds in the transmuted posthumanism. As N. Katherine Hayles notes in her outstanding book *How We Became Posthuman*, "the erasure of embodiment is a feature common to both the liberal humanist subject and the cybernetic posthuman" (7), presuming that the mind (the brain) prescribes humanity, and is hence detachable from the finitude of the alterable/replaceable body—a space ready to receive new meanings yielded by technology, just like the unnaturally saved Momo.

Since World War II, authors of science fiction have “privileged speculative discourses haunted by the ghosts of humans, nonhumans, and posthumans” (Clarke and Rossini xv) and explored the “mutability and multiplicity” of the “reengineered” human body as a medium for “posthuman species” (Yaszek and Ellis 71), accelerating the proliferation of posthuman/cyborg figurations in the cyberpunk subgenre. One noticeable example is Philip K. Dick’s 1968 dystopian novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Evoked in Dick’s story is the complex debate over the categorizing norms segregating “artificial” from “natural.” In the posthuman framework, the demise of a “natural” subject often occurs simultaneously at the birth of a “synthetic” one—that is, a cyborgian subject, such as Momo in *The Membranes*. Technologies tend to serve as an intermediary agent through which Momo may experience, replicate, transform, and even develop feelings and thoughts to exert autonomy “as a human,” albeit in a completely unnatural manner.

To summarize, the mainstream posthumanist paradigm stipulates our actual being inseparable from our autonomous sentience on the condition that our bodily existence becomes regenerable as a transgressive cybernetic organism unlimited to natural boundaries. If the accumulated memories, experiences, knowledge and affections “stored” in a disembodied human brain can be freely accessed, rewritten, deleted, and even transferred between different cyborg bodies, the posthuman entity shall no longer rely on what is physically captured. This is probably the keynote theme *The Membranes* attempts to investigate—the trans/posthuman Momo’s futile quest for her cyborgian alter-ego.

Definitionwise, an “android” refers to a robot designed to look and act like human, whereas a “cyborg” is a humanoid organism with biomechatronic body parts. Despite Chi’s blended use of “android” and “cyborg” in the Chinese original (both are termed *Shenghuaren* 生化人 [cyborg, or literally “biochemical human”]), Heinrich’s translation distinguishes their difference by referring to Big Andy,¹⁴ little Andy, and puppy Andy with the signifier

¹⁴ In a strange encounter with post-surgery Momo, Big Andy disclosed the reason of “his” being purposely built: “After a full-body transplant, my owner will have a much nicer figure, so he’ll finally have something to show off in the spas!” (*Membranes* 81). Not only did he show no regret over his being objectified, he was excited to become his owner’s “heart, liver, flesh, and blood” (83). Big Andy’s confession may suggest how awkward it could be to mark the divide, to define the temporality, and to detect the suspicious homoeroticism, between a human and a cyborg.

“cyborg” more often than with “android” throughout the novel to avoid unnecessary confusion. In Chi’s nomenclature, the Chinese appellation *An-Di* 安笛 serves as both a convenient homophonic equivalent to the English name “Andy” and a unified moniker to address all factory-made androids. In the following abridged bilingual example, Big Andy explained to Momo why he was dubbed “Andy” right after he left the assembly line, which may instantiate the complex undertones of *An-Di* in Chi’s prankish usage:

其實，我是個「生化人」，android。我是酷似真人的機器人。可是我不是男人。

A—N—D—R—O—I—D。生化人。

人們通常叫我安笛，ANDY，也就是 android 的暱稱。
(Chi, *Mo* 88-89)

I’m actually a “cyborg,” an android. I am a robot designed to resemble a real person, but I’m not a man.

A—N—D—R—O—I—D. Cyborg.

People usually call me An-Di, ANDY, the byname of an android. (My translation)

I’m actually a cyborg. I’m a kind of robot that’s been designed to look like a real person, but I’m not a man.

CYBORG.

People usually call me “Andy,” which is short for “Android,” which is similar to a cyborg. (Chi, *Membranes* 76)

Fluent and sense-making it may read, Heinrich’s rephrasing could be problematic in the hermeneutics of Chi’s playful word game. The Chinese name 安笛 is gender-neutral, while “Andy” (usually transliterated as 安迪, a male name in Chinese) comes across as a male name in English. In *The Membranes*, there are three cyborg characters (the female little *An-Di*, the genderless Big *An-Di*, and the male puppy *An-Di*) dubbed “Andy.” I would argue that it is Chi’s naming strategy that has queered their chronology from the very moment they were manufactured. Chi uses 安笛 in lieu of 安迪 probably due to his gender dysphoria—an ideological and glyphic nuance inevitably lost in English translation. In *The Membranes*, there are three major types of cyborgs: Cyborgs

built to replace human laborers; Cyborgs tailor-made as ideal organ donors; Cyborgs (known as “M units”) deployed to combat in international warfare. In contrast, Momo’s temporal presence exceeds the above scope, whose transparent hybridity stands for an idiosyncratic synthesis “living” in a simulated *metaverse* that partially eclipsed the actual world in parallel reality.¹⁵ Simply put, the time-space characterizing Momo’s being was a convergence of augmented, virtualized, and shared dimensions—a chronotope governed by different forces in an anthrocentric paradigm.

In the narratives referring to her unsettled composition, the BIV Momo conceived of her presence in a dual mode. First, as a *pseudo*-aesthetician, Momo unwittingly constructed and probably “confirmed” her subjectivity through the simulated senses, scripted memories and concocted experiences prepared by her mother. Composed of brain-generated consciousness, she was vaguely aware of an impassable barrier separating her from the world as she knew it. The third-person narrator describes her doubts in the opening paragraph:

Had she perceived the yellow paper through direct exposure to her subcutaneous neural network? Was it her taste buds that detected peach sweetness? She would never know. *An impenetrable barrier existed between her body and the material world.* Membranes filtered Momo’s every impression of the world. At thirty, she felt there was at least one layer of membrane between her and the world. (Chi, *Membranes* 1; emphasis added)

In the Chinese original, the italicized sentence is uttered as a *question*, which literally translates into: “Is it true that an impenetrable barrier always exists between objects and the human body?” (物體與人體之間，是不是總有無法跨越的界線？ [Chi, *Mo* 21]) Momo naively questions the genuineness of her senses—an essentialist query suggestive of her inability to make sure whether her feelings about the world she would never fit in, and her relations with other people, are real or not. Rephrasing the Chinese question, the English translation provides an explicit statement—in Momo’s understanding, there

¹⁵ Coined by Neal Stephenson in his 1992 science fiction *Snow Crash*, the term “metaverse” typically describes a futuristic, interconnected world composed of persistent, digitalized, shared spaces linked to a super-scale virtual universe. This concept has regained momentum in 2021 when CEOs of high-tech giants, such as Jensen Huang of Nvidia and Mark Zuckerberg of Meta (formerly known as Facebook), promised that the world would soon enter an AI-governed age of metaverse.

exists an invisible membrane making her “acutely unsuited to intimacy” (Chi, *Membranes* 1) with anyone. Ironically, defending her autonomy, Momo stubbornly made up her mind to become a dermal care technician, a profession highly reliant on intimacy, because she would rather “make a poor decision for herself, acting on her own desires, than have it made by someone else” (37). Ignorant of her false autonomy, at this moment, Momo’s presence was entirely dependent on her manipulated mental awareness rather than empirical sentient experiences. In other words, it was her “present” mind that delimited her “provisional” being. The flow of time in Momo’s chronology has been disrupted/paused by her queered hybrid identity.

In the second mode, despite being subject to exquisitely seeded memories and simulated senses, Momo’s organic brain still needed a physical body as a medium to bridge herself with the material world. After the whole-body transplant, Momo began to *hear* a strange voice that “sometimes emerged from deep inside her” and *see* “flashes of complex she couldn’t describe” (Chi, *Membranes* 84). She was bitterly astounded at the discovery that “Andy was a cyborg, not a human,” wondering, “Was Andy even born, did she even die?” (88) This time, Heinrich’s translation sensationally interrogates the authenticity of a cyborg’s life and death in powerful terseness. Interestingly, this forthright question is phrased in the Chinese text with plain curiosity: *Andy was a cyborg, not a human. Could Andy experience birth and death?* (安笛是生化人而不是人類，可否也有生死？ [Chi, *Mo* 100]) When adult Momo *touched* her scar-free body, there was no trace of surgery remaining, making her skeptical of her body’s ownership:

This beautiful young body, her torso so smooth and free of scars that it was as if no surgery had ever been performed on it. But was it? Her body? Did it belong to her? Or to Andy? . . . Momo couldn’t help but wonder if, after the transplant, Andy had become part of Momo or if it was Momo who had become some piece of Andy’s flesh. . . . Postsurgery, was Momo really just left with her head and her brain—containing her memories—while the rest of the body came from Andy? (Chi, *Membranes* 89)

If we approve the assumption that Momo’s rebirth symbolizes little Andy’s death, does it make equal sense to think of it in the opposite? Is it

possible that neither birth nor death can determine the sudden rupture of a queer-cyborg subject's temporality due to their *a priori* interdependence? For example, one tricky doubt was raised about Big Andy's "second" death. When the "male cyborg" sacrificed his independence and united with his master Paolo, he already "died for his owner" (Chi, *Membranes* 86). Thus, his second death (when renewed Paolo was killed in a car incident) "didn't really count" (87). After Momo's brain was surgically merged with little Andy's female body, the narrator got suspicious again: "Did that mean Momo was the recipient of Andy's body, or Andy received Momo's brain?" (117). Bridging the interval between Momo's queered rebirth and Andy's destined death, technologies brought forth new meanings in both parties. As the narrator stated, in the late twenty-first century, there were two main approaches to merging humans and cyborgs—transplanting healthy cyborg organs into the human body, or the other way around. Both approaches could benefit the human race and extend lifespan, hence no need to "cling obstinately to an anthropocentric *humanism*" (118). The key point here is to acknowledge the equal prowess endowed to a human brain and a cyborg body. If the intellectual capacity of Momo's failing brain were able to survive and develop in a cyborg body whose flesh was "designed to grow in tandem with her own" (79), it would be the right thing to do, even at the cost of Momo's losing all sensory organs to perceive the actuality.

In the operating room, little Andy's body had no use value and was disposed of as waste. Apart from a few samples to donate for medical research, the remains of Momo's infected organs were also incinerated. And Momo's brain was placed in a special crystal box outfitted with a life-support system, like Snow White in her glass coffin. (Chi, *Membranes* 119)

In reality, little Andy's perfectly-made and disinfected body was quickly discarded during the unsuccessful surgery, because ten-year-old Momo's juvenile brain (the only organ unharmed by the hazardous LOGO virus) did not suffice to control a sophisticated cyborg body like that of little Andy's. ISM's last plausible solution was to preserve her original brain in a life-support-enabled box. From this moment onwards, Momo's presence may have turned out to be a Foucauldian *hétérotopie*—a space between the present world and a

utopia idealized in her mother's imagination. Momo's perplexing identities were constituted by more layers of meaningful *différance* than met the eye—just like the “queerly rainbow-clad” (Martin 212) Hindu *Mahābhārata* heroine Draupadi (in reality, ISM's business representative in charge of Momo's brain experiment), who was clothed in infinite layers of saris (membranes). The removal of each layer would result in a further blockage of her naked body (Momo's original identity) to the watching spectator (Momo's conscious mentality). The gradual exposure of Momo's true self could be understood as a quiet disclaimer in regard to her planned chronotope.

In the actual world, Momo's brain was accommodated inside the body of a faceless cyborg worker whose job was to repair and restore the damaged surfaces of M units in an android factory—a highly-demanding task that only a meticulous human brain would suffice to perform:

This was where Momo's brain came in. ISM admitted that Momo's case was a preliminary experiment in using the human brain to supplement cyborg labor.

. . . ISM didn't want her to know she was repairing military weapons technology, and so deliberately misled her. She believed that the M units she worked on were naked human bodies. (Chi, *Membranes* 125)

After the surgery failure, Mommy had no option but to commission ISM to take care of her daughter's brain at the price of a twenty-year custody lease. In reality, Momo's renewed body (in her mind, that of little Andy) was locked in an M unit repair shop (in her mind, her beauty salon) to provide maintenance services. In Chinese, “ISM” is pronounced like *yishen* 一神 (one deity). Chi Ta-wei appropriates this suffix attached to provocative hegemonic ideologies like *imperialism*, *heterosexism*, *racism*, *fundamentalism*, etc., in order to lampoon the vulnerable, easily-manipulated human minds (Heinrich, “Promiscuous Literary” 138).

On the other hand, when applying varnish on the surface of a M unit, Momo thought she was using the lotion-like M skin. At this moment, Momo was able to *hear*, *see*, and *touch* by virtue of her foreign body, so as to “complete” herself “as a human”—at least in her imagination. As reminded by Hayles, some posthumanist scholars insist that “the body cannot be left behind”

and that “mind and body are finally the ‘unity’” (246). Momo’s *present* empirical contacts, coupled with the *pre-scripted* experiences by Mommy,¹⁶ the *inserted* (redacted) thoughts by ISM, and the *remaining* memories from before her childhood surgery, had worked together to constitute Momo’s cyborgian chronotope. It was not until she watched in awe the confidential video recordings at the end of the story that she discovered these surrealistic accounts of her life were simply replicated memories. With the synchronic collapse of Momo’s world of senses, she painfully realized the rationale behind the slight delay in everything “she (re)experienced with a terrifying sense of *déjà vu*” (Chi, *Membranes* 113). Over the course of her desperate pursuit of her true identity, Momo was overwhelmed by her endless, elusive self-gazing:

Momo watched herself watching herself onscreen, a scene within a scene of her watching herself, and watched the scene of her watching herself, and watched the scene within this scene of watching herself onscreen, watching, watching the scene of The Latin term *ad infinitum*—infinite and endless—flashed through Momo’s mind. The world order only seems intact until it reaches a state of *ad infinitum*. Then it begins to fall apart, known as “deconstruction.” (Chi, *Membranes* 113)

Momo’s *montage-séquence* lifestyle suggests the passage of time recurring in a *mise en abyme* fashion that never came to an end. Her chronology was like a well-tuned assemblage of temporal pieces scattered at different moments in her “life.” Nearly all her physical senses, interactions with people, and sensual memories were simply transcribed into her vatted brain in dynamic association with her cyborg body. The only thing over which Momo (or her brain) had vestigial authority was probably her translesbian sexuality. Although her sex-gender-sexuality remains subject to dichotomy-based categorization, Chi Ta-wei endeavors to render her sense of self least adhering to anything biologically, socially, and even technologically assigned. Readers will eventually find Momo’s intersex/inhuman identity shifts arbitrary, temporary,

¹⁶ Mommy fabricated Momo’s life pieces in the form of laserdisc diaries (from her fairy-tale birth to her winning a skin-care competition prize) and uploaded them into her brain, misleading her to believe those diary entries were her real life, so that she could “imagine all the things a girl might imagine” (Chi, *Membranes* 121). After all, for Mommy, it was in Momo’s best interest to have her “live forever in a fashionable lie than discover the bitter, brutal truth of her circumstances” (125).

and leaky. It can be concluded that Momo's non-human-centric and gender-ambiguous BIV pattern may have cancelled the temporal-spatial parameters delimited by (heterosexual) humans and/or cyborgs on the compulsory grounds of ableism, thereby creating a chronotope imbued with trans-queerness that refuses to be "humanly" defined.

III. Conclusion

This study is an explorative investigation of the cyborg chronotope queered in the Taiwanese novelist Chi Ta-wei's speculative fiction *The Membranes*. As a queer-themed masterpiece produced during the socio-cultural upheavals of 1990s Taiwan, *The Membranes* has been received and broadly studied in the senses of homoerotic lesbianism, transgenderism, and posthumanism. As a complement, this study seeks to analyze the narratives of the novel from a "cyborg chronotope" perspective. This article first outlines existing academic scholarship regarding theoretical articulations, with particular respect to the notions of queer temporality, cyborg, and posthuman politics with literary implications, followed by an in-depth analysis of the translesbian protagonist Momo's BIV being. One primary aim of this article is to unfold the non-linear, multi-dimensional time-space and the (in)human monstrosity incubated during the cyborgian becoming of the disembodied, transfeminine Momo. It seems to me that Chi Ta-wei aspires to reframe the spatio-temporal metamorphosis of life and death for those deemed critically trans, queer, and cyborg, or a mixture of them. The deletion of anthropocentrism in *The Membranes* points to the inhuman violence that jeopardizes what it takes to occupy the species of mankind. In particular, Momo's cyborg chronotope opens her eccentric existence to all kinds of possibilities liberated from the hegemonic human centrality and the subaltern cyborg bias. It can be concluded that the discursive time fragments, implanted memory scripts, and her "contaminated" body composition may have queered her contingent subjectivity in defiance of the tyranny of normative determinism in a myriad of transgressive alterities.

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