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## Becoming a manual: au(n)to-ethnography and queer performances of a Greek theía

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### ABSTRACT

In this essay, I draw on my diasporic queer aunting experiences in dialogue with observations of embodied homemaking pedagogies to think about the aunt—specifically the Greek theía—as a guidance manual. Understanding manuals beyond written instructions, as performances that create “guidelines” to live by, I elaborate on queer autoethnography that incorporates auntieness into self-narration and analysis. Describing how I become a queer aunt, I show how aunts may serve as queer manuals that teach us to engage with heterostatic conventions of “success” and “failure” only to learn how to destabilize them from within. I frame this method as au(n)to-ethnography.

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Kinship lineages may be one of the main ways through which success manuals—and guidance overall—are passed on in intertwined ways. In my family, for example, my grandmother’s father (my great-grandfather) had gifted her a cooking encyclopedia—with several instructions on how to be a “successful” housewife—two years before she got married.<sup>1</sup> Then, when I was 10 years old, my grandmother gave me a self-help book by the same publisher to learn how to “love myself” and boost my self-esteem,<sup>2</sup> along with a novel she had bought for herself, titled “Those who love do not cheat – nor beg, nor demand.”<sup>3</sup> I later realized how these gifts reflected on her life experiences. My own dad gifted me another self-help guide for boys in adolescence when I was fifteen, shortly after my parents got divorced.<sup>4</sup> While, on his side, this was a gesture that emphasized how he would always be there for me, the book only included four pages on the topic of “homosexuality” written in somewhat problematic ways—not mentioning anything about queer, trans, and/or further non-conforming identities, and arguing that for most teenage boys homosexual encounters are “just a phase”—thus, enhancing my inner feeling of closeted gay shame. The challenge of developing inner mechanisms to reclaim such emotional “failure”—for being who I was—followed me for years after.

This paper explores an understanding of auntieness as a performance that holds the potential of a queer manual; a certain kind of performativity, often left unnoticed in

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kinship and humanity studies, that brings forth new “guidelines” to live by. My ongoing doctoral research examines the queering of homemaking pedagogies and instructive becomings, focusing on the experiences of the queer Greek diaspora in the United Kingdom—of which I am also part. I am interested in how material cultures, particularly books, guide and/or instruct us into embodied becomings. As a sociological researcher, I further look at the ways we develop (queer) kinships after people who pedagogically model social worlds for us. In this context, I wonder whether aunties may become creative manuals to the extent that they suggest open-ended modes of conduct? Manuals are meant to guide us to complete tasks “properly,” but the forever potential of failure means that the creativity involved in following such guidance may also unsettle the same ideas of propriety embedded within manuals in the first place. The aunt might be a manual, but so could queer “failures” to be an aunt, which emerge as “knowledge from below” (Halberstam 11) within kinship and home formations. My focus on queer homemaking extends research on “the queerness of home” (Vider; Weston); to bring such “private” acts into the light by acknowledging the importance of homes as affective testing fields, where we try out the things we learn and bring forth ourselves in performances of what we may then carry beyond the house.

In researching how and by whom we are taught to become, I also turn to how I have been taught to do my own corporeal self and space. In this text, I draw on my intimate experience of inhabiting the figure of a domestic queer “aunt” during the last couple of years in London, to au(n)to-ethnographically navigate the Greek aunting figure (*theía*) as a potential poetic tactic for re-imagining and re-(per)forming spaces of queer home—somehow attempting to fulfill my own (queer-diasporic) “homing desire” (Brah). Overall, this follows a timely turn in Queer Studies, one that re-examines unnoticed socio-cultural figures as new potential paradigms of queerness and non-normative kin-and-kith affectivity. The origin narrations of auntiness in this article assemble a specific kind of queer (or “quare”) knowledge that our grandmothers often teach us without realizing it (Johnson). To theorize and better understand such—often hidden—kin-based passings of queer know-how I commence my reasoning by invoking a particular conceptualization of *guidance manuals* as modes of performativity.

## Manuals as dynamic performances

As popularized artifacts, western modern manuals gradually emerged under mass printing development in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, leading to a mass book-production of “how-to-live” guides that forward the “modernization” of human bodies from the nineteenth century onwards. As such, we can understand printed manuals as one of the first forms of mass media technologies to enter households. Following Michel de Certeau, most forms of public media become manuals that “present themselves essentially as ‘arts of making’ this or that” and “bring into play a ‘popular’ *ratio*, a way of thinking invested in a way of acting, an art of combination which cannot be dissociated from an art of using” (xv, emphasis in original). In other words, manuals instruct mainstream performances of *making* the self through *using* the world, based on a complex system of epistemological “knowledge” and practical “know-how” transmissions.

There are various—often gendered, classed, racialized—genres of domestic manuals one could find in a typical Western(ized) household, either physically or digitally:

cookbooks, pregnancy guides, sex manuals, self-esteem books, *Savoir Vivre* publications, domestic encyclopedias, books for making friends and having successful parties, furniture building instructions, interior design guides, crafting magazines, manuals for the use of electronic appliances, and so on. However, my aim here is not to invoke any one genre specifically, but rather to conceptualize manuals altogether as performative carriers of agentic guidance; indeed, beyond the limits of print artifacts.

Books may be obvious manuals, but surely they are not the only examples one can use to underline the dynamic performances of power and resistance embedded in guidance politics. It must be emphasized: all affect and discourse mediators may become guidance manuals in any form—as visual media, material artifacts, embodied figures. This means that any manual may also become a “scriptive thing” (Bernstein, “Dances with Things”)—and vice-versa—to the extent that the intended use of its materiality may invite us to “dance” with it, functioning as a play script that “broadly structures a performance while simultaneously allowing for resistance and unleashing original, live variations that may not be individually predictable” (69).<sup>5</sup> In other words, different forms of materiality may bear the affectively instructive textures of a manual as they unfold within a realm of *thing-power*; namely, within embodied space-times formed by “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” (Bennett 6).

Popularized manuals in the West have historically been intertwined with “self-help” projects (see also Miller and McHoul; Rimke; McGee). Self-help manuals seek to adjust individual social performance between normalized understandings of *success* and *failure*. Achieving such success or failure reflects one’s societal ability to self-identify affectively through pride (honor) and/or shame (humiliation). In turn, this process of self-identification typically feeds back to one’s doing of their self and body towards some “ideal” or “optimal” normative accomplishment (Goffman; Tate; Jansen and Wehrle). This stereotypical “success-failure” schema reflects problematic binary taxonomies of identity—regarding gender, race, class, sexuality, etc.—that have been systematically analyzed by feminist and queer scholars (e.g. Skeggs; Ringrose; Halberstam; Erigha). However, such a stereotypical binary may also enable us to grasp an important aspect of how the politics of guidance function. Instructive manuals transmit guidance to lead to the formation and utilization of specific habits, behaviors, strategies, and personality characteristics in everyday life. Normative guidance—a kind of *civilizing process* (Elias) that manifests in social interactions—confines subjectivities within loops of shameful self-rejections. Such guidance often renders a manual user’s personality into “a record of the highly individual histories by which the fleeting emotion of shame has instituted far more durable, structural changes in one’s relation and interpretive strategies towards both self and others” (Sedgwick 62). These “shameful” formations, and the worldly interpretive strategies they result in, may also be understood as self-mechanisms through which one seeks normative guidance to seemingly overcome feelings of inner failure and shame.

During the nineteenth century, the “importance” of a kind of feminized failure—reflected in “throwing like a girl” sexism (Young)—was central to the normative discourses of success manuals for men in the West (see also Sandage). Failure was praised as “a normative force” (Sandler 193); indeed, it was “by often returning young men to feminized spaces of domestic care that early failure ideally spurred them to

seek masculine achievement that much more urgently” (195). Interestingly, as Sandler also points out, this early understanding of failure functions as one of the “punishing norms” that Halberstam (3) writes against while reclaiming failure as queer art. This might partially still be the case for some genres of masculinized guidance media.

Nevertheless, embracing dexterously the failure to follow the manual by indeed performing the manual—as a means for surviving via *bargaining* with patriarchy; by developing resistance strategies “within the internal logic of a given system” (Kandiyoti 283)—crucially offers a way to navigate life beyond self-destructive shame. Such an intra-performative understanding of survival acknowledges how one may escape an oppressive system by utilizing the system itself differently. This is what *queer failure* is, “not so much a failure to succeed as it is a failure to participate in a system of valuation that is predicated on exploitation and conformity [...] a failure that is more nearly a refusal or an escape” (Muñoz, “Cruising Utopia” 174). I would, in fact, argue that such queer uses of failure are always embedded within the same structures that bring manuals and other guidance media into existence in the first place. This is particularly evident in how the dynamic quotidian performativity that manuals bring into play is expressed through formulations of *conduct*. According to Michel Foucault, in itself, this reveals the true complexity of all power relations:

[...] to “conduct” is at the same time to “lead” others (according to mechanisms of coercion which are, to varying degrees, strict) and a way of behaving within a more or less open field of possibilities. The exercise of power consists in guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome. (789)

In this sense, the repetitive use of manuals results in a twofold guidance schema of conduct performativity, where power (to lead) becomes resistance (to behave) and vice-versa. On the one hand, the manual is a *straightening device* (Ahmed, “Queer Phenomenology” 79–92) that incorporates a hetero-normalizing force—a Foucauldian knowledge-power—that instructs the body to behave “in-line” according to social norms by self-marginalizing anything “other” within the same. On the other hand, manuals render their users into creative performers who guide their intimate world, precisely because they are being guided. A manual provides its reader with a kind of everyday know-how as a “resource that gives those who possess it a degree of actual or potential power” (MacKenzie and Wajcman 22), and this indeed reflects its queer potentiality.

Manuals provide a critical voice to queer pedagogical and political desires by “both offering to guide and requiring others’ involvement” (Brim 187) in guidance, allowing us “to read the prescriptions they offer as points of contrast, against which the potential for things to be otherwise can be articulated” (McHardy and Jungnickel 56). In the Butlerian sense, manuals transmit a performative speech act in the form of guidance, which constantly (re)materializes what it names (“Bodies that matter” 13), however, towards an open-ended—and, arguably, also queer—possibility of identity-making. This is exactly why it might be more accurate to read manuals as dynamic performances, through which “one does one’s body differently from one’s contemporaries and from one’s embodied predecessors and successors as well” (Butler, “Performative Acts” 521).

Being central in the formation of our performative identities, manuals enter one’s life early on, in different material forms, and via a plethora of societal and institutional

routes. For example, in her study of racialized performances of childhood in the United States, Robin Bernstein examines how dolls should not be analyzed (solely) “as objects or texts that contain racial meanings but instead as things that script a repertoire of behaviors” (“Racial Innocence” 19) onto the bodies of the children they attach to; indeed as performative manuals. In aligning with such an approach on things as manuals (and manuals as things), I recall an intimate gendered *intra-action* (Barad) with a doll in my early life to uncover its scriptive potentialities of queer resistance and trajectory towards my later creative engages with auntiness in a performative corporeal becoming—by *becoming manual* myself.

During my childhood, I often enjoyed playing with my girl friends’ Barbie dolls. I loved designing new clothes for them from old fabrics, dressing them up, doing their hair, and imagining that I had somehow tailored a strong figure, capable of “successful” social interactions. I kept telling my parents how much I wanted a doll myself. Eventually, they bought me a Max Steel doll—or, as they preferred to call it, an “action figure.” I remember undressing the doll from its fighting gear and observing its masculine body anatomy. The hardness of this plastic figure—which was able to carry out more movements than my friends Barbie dolls, bending arms and legs due to having more joints—invited a certain kind of stiff flexibility in its use.<sup>6</sup> The doll had broad shoulders, sculpted abs and a small waist, but also a smooth featureless crotch, as it was molded without a penis. I was so fond of that body. Rather than merely being an inanimate *object*, the Max Steel doll was a sensual *thing* that invited both lust and abjection. Probably beyond the intentions of the toy’s producers, its materiality held a particular queer agency against my own body, which consequently scripted certain performativities around it. I started tailoring new clothes that would fit its analogies. For one outfit I took an old pink tie of my father’s and cut it at two points. It fitted my Max Steel figure perfectly, creating the sense of a long gala dress. This became my favorite outfit for the doll.

One day, my dad took me to his work and I took my doll with me, dressed in the pink gala dress. I was playing with it when two men, employees of my father, started talking to me. Eventually, they posed the one question I was afraid they might ask: “*What is the figure wearing and why?*” I panicked for a moment. Inner shame was ready to manifest once more as the result of my (queer) failure to be normal. However, I realized that I could play along—yet also against—my interlocutors’ normative expectations by utilizing the same normative context that produced the doll in the first place. Max Steel, as presented in a TV animation series, is supposed to be some kind of spy hero, serving as an athletic, straight, white-standard model for young western boys—indeed a straightening manual of normative guidance. “*Max Steel is a spy; he is at an undercover mission in a gala party, and he is dressed like this not to be suspected by the villains who host the event,*” was my response—an answer as naive and conforming as also smart and somehow rebellious. It stopped the adult men from asking any further questions and, most importantly, it provided me with enough strength to drive away from the inner shameful path I was about to take. Of course, these men were my dad’s employees and, thus, some sort of silent power dynamic might have also stopped them from making harsher comments; at least in front of me. Nevertheless, this is the first time I recall I somehow managed to reclaim my queer failure; the first time I employed the embodied mechanisms of a *double agent* who uses the manual as a dynamic performance against the manual itself.

At that moment, I somehow became a manual myself, attempting to guide my surroundings as much as I could towards my survival, instructing what constitutes “success” and “failure” on my own (childish) terms. In a way, the combination of the discursive production of the doll with its haptic agency—the thing-power that made it into a “senso-scriptive” manual—taught me how to inhabit the queer resistance embedded in its own *matterphorical* existence (Gandorfer and Ayub), allowing for intra-active sense-making on an embodied level. Manuals are all about such taught trajectories and transfers of agency (conduct) from things to bodies, selves to matters, and between felt corporealities. They lead behavior and always bear resistance along with power. Hence, bargaining with normalcy emerges within all manuals, early in life, as marginalized subjectivities learn how to *become manuals* themselves to “strategize within a set of concrete constraints” (Kandiyoti 275), by working both *with* and *against* “the conditions of (im)possibility that dominant culture generates” (Muñoz, “Disidentifications” 6).

In the rest of my article, I will attempt to take this performance of guiding an (im)possible conduct in a given context—this becoming manual—a step further, by *au(n)to-ethnographically* exploring whether aunting figures are all about performing the guidance of their own “successful failure” in open contexts of kin- and kith-making. To do so, one must first consider what it means to talk *about* and *through* felt auntiness overall.

### Queer au(n)to-ethnography

Similar to the Spanish *tía*, the Italian *zia* and the Portuguese *tia*, the modern Greek word for “aunt”—*theía* (θεία)—derives from the ancient Greek nouns *tēthē* (τήθη) and *tēthís* (τήθις), which respectively refer to the “grandmother” and the “aunt” (Babinotis 555). There is little historical or literary evidence about aunts before the seventeenth century and no relevant ancient Greek narrations (Christiansen 18).<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, this old linguistic connection between the “aunt” and the “grandmother” arguably signifies some kind of perceptual linkage between the two figures. At first, this connection could be seen as a result of particular cultural contexts that render a woman’s role as that of a child’s caretaker—similar to how socio-political developments during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries produced figures of maternal aunts as “mother substitutes” in English literature (Perry 347).<sup>8</sup> However, one could also argue for a parallel understanding of the relation between “grandmother” and “aunt” through their quotidian guidance connotations; *outside*, *aside*, and/or *after* experiences of motherhood. This is not to claim that figures of Greek aunts render in any way a solid archetype close to the “grandmother.” On the contrary, it means to understand aunting as a dynamic process that brings forth multiple selves within kinship and community surroundings. Patricia Sotirin and Laura Ellingson point out how “aunting offers a repertoire of cultural practices characterized by relational flexibility and responsive variations that has broad applications for intergenerational relationships whether in the family, education, or the workplace” (“Where the Aunts Are” 8). It is this variability of experiences and performances of auntiness that may eventually render *theía* into a creative manual, a fruitful character for feminist and queer investigation.

To enact such an investigation that approaches auntiness beyond normative kinships, I utilize a particular method of queer autoethnography. Using the term *au(n)to-ethnography*, I develop an autoethnography that incorporates auntiness into self-narration and analysis; a willingness to call myself “theia” to counter and reclaim how this term is often resisted inside and outside queer communities, by Greek aunts in general, as a simplistic signifier of “old age” or “outdated” femininity. Au(n)to-ethnography embeds an understanding of quotidian multiplicity: it means writing about aunting communities through doing the self as an aunt, being guided by felt auntiness in performances of *affective memory*. This is achieved via remembering, sensing, and reflecting on “the *feelings* you forgot, not the *memory* of those feelings but the *actual feelings*” (Fox 70, emphasis in original). In other words, au(n)to-ethnography emerges in how we, researchers, emotionally recall our aunts (and grandmothers) within ourselves—in how we *carry* them within us (Puwar)—via living our (queer) lives in senso-mnemonic appropriations of their aunting performativity and material spatiality.

Au(n)to-ethnographic narrations may also invoke a live *phantasmagoria of memory* (Kuhn 125–46), via which we constantly rebuild familiarities—families, affinities, and homes—in the present, while utilizing the past through creative recalling and affective mourning. This means that au(n)to-ethnography may further incorporate (*h*)*aunting* performativities as research devices that produce certain “architectures of memory” (Fox 72) which are worth exploring. Such a device emerges, for example, every time I spatially re-feel the safety I once felt in my grandmother’s kitchen when I smell thyme in my hands, as I become an aunt by cooking her recipe.

By dressing, criticizing, caring, advising, cooking and homemaking after intimate aunting figures, we may elaborate on sensory research of re-feeling and re-experiencing warmth, ambivalence, care, survival, and overall, communal auntiness as an affective technique for queering *epistemological intimacy* (Smith). This is to say that au(n)to-ethnography creates space for non-normative inquiries; it becomes an imaginative method that outlines queer worldmaking and the conditions of a livable life (Ghaziani and Brim), and it draws on the tools of queer autoethnography to disrupt normative taken-for-granted knowledge and research methodologies (Holman Jones and Harris 4). Au (n)to-ethnography becomes queer through offering methodological and conceptual space to the know-how that aunts incorporate as “double agents” (Sotirin and Ellingson, “Where the Aunts are” 2)—as figures that transcend normalcy from the inside. By pointing out new modes of non-conforming community-making in-between homing ordinariness and heterostatic kinship transgression, the queer au(n)to-ethnography utilized in this text also responds effectively and affectively to the call to

reclaim the word *queer* in the name of autoethnography, in the name of challenging categories and achieving identities and communities that are fluid yet complex, multiple yet cognizant of the attention, negotiation and care that impinge on any scholarly project. (Holman Jones and Adams 213, emphasis in original)

Arguably, the scholarly project at play here is Auntie Studies. Kareem Khubchandani’s intimate narration of an intergenerational passing of auntiness (“Aunty Fever”)—as a kind of embodied guidance through which one learns how to become beyond the normative—further highlights how the creation of aunting origin stories matters for queer subjectivities and our research. The mnemonic figures that emerge in these narrations



are what link us unconventionally with each other, and set paradigms to live by in hostile normative worlds. They allow us to enact queer disidentifications with ordinary space-times to refigure our performative connections to family (Muñoz, “Disidentifications”), and to rethink “home” as a process of becoming that includes “its own otherness, its own ‘foreignness-to-itself’” (Rus). This is indeed what *queer au(n)to-ethnography* is all about: narrating the *self* through the *other*, and vice-versa, in an intimately political act that inhabits “aunt” beyond the normative. Following such a method, I turn to the affective recall of my deceased grandmother’s (h)auting phantasmagoria to locate my “foreignness-to-myself” during (un)familiar homemaking.

### Theía Marika and me

My grandmother (1938–2012) had been an aunt to many people in her kin-and-kith circles in Greece. Being known in my wider family as theía Marika, she orchestrated an affective community around her that functioned as an intimate realm of influence; one that she managed to handle through care labor and skillful guidance. Theía Marika was the person to whom the rest of my grand and younger aunts would turn for caring advice, housekeeping tips, and occasionally, gossip. She transmitted felt provision, guidance, and judgment via ways that were mostly quiet, yet so bold. Performing fluidly between the loving *theía*, the instructing *thiá*, and the cunning *theítsa*—all being different expressions of Greek auntiness—she became a reference figure within clusters of friends and family.

However, my grandmother was not solely an aunt. Except for being a (grand)mother, a sister, and a wife within her closer kinships, she sometimes also was Mrs. Maria or Mrs. Kalivi—using her husband’s last name at formal acquaintances. The world she lived in was far from ideal: from being forced to quit school at a young age to raise her younger siblings, to bringing forth her own family and household as a full-time job while also assisting in her husband’s business; staying humble and silent at all times while being married to a hardworking yet often cheating man. Such intersection between patriarchy and further social inequalities inevitably laid a somewhat marginalized life path for my grandmother to follow. But she managed to mediate all this by bringing forth her auting self in-between her intimate relationships and the patriarchal surroundings she lived in.

Being an aunt allowed her to bargain connections to people and her position within communities, although admittedly, not always easily or successfully. She performed a process of *becoming aunt* as a means for surviving patriarchy the best way she could, producing felt know-how within the context she lived in. Remembering my grandmother’s life, I find myself wondering: Is it possible to re-imagine Greek auting performances provocatively, and if yes, what could this mean for queering our current living and homemaking?

It’s been almost two years since I became a kind of *theía* myself, or at least I claimed the right for people close to me to call me that. Ever since I started researching my relationship with my deceased grandmother, I slowly elaborated on some of the domestic tactics she used in the past to navigate life in a patriarchal setting. I started cooking more like her, allowing time and space for fiddlier dishes on the menu. I began posting small notes of housekeeping instructions around the house, regarding where items should be

stored and how appliances should be used. I gained weight almost unintentionally, allowing my body to become more like hers, as its tendency already was: an “apple-shaped” corpus with a wide torso and relatively thin legs and arms. I started painting my nails creatively from time to time and wear fancy comfortable DIY skirts and dressing gowns in the house while cooking, cleaning, and working on my desk.

My goal was not to incorporate a stereotypically “beautiful” feminine figure, nor to perform in drag in front of other people—although admittedly, I felt quite confident, playful, and peaceful while becoming a *theia* before my non-binary partner and a handful of our closest friends. I aimed to locate my grandmother inside me, and in attempting to do so, I became an “aunt.” Being somehow guided by her—through felt recalls of our common past and the re-lived phantasmagoria of her instructive and caring figure—I inhabited our in-betweenness, bringing forth my performative self as something a bit more than the one “character” society made me think I had, and less than the two selves my grandmother and I once were.

In this fluid space of existence, I recrafted myself as the *theia* I never knew I could become. I was not seeing “me” as being or having a self anymore, rather I was constantly re-*doing* one. This was no longer the “grandson,” nor had it become the “grandma.” I fluidly found my multiple self in-between the two, incorporating some kind of queer aunt. Such performativity enabled a re-rendering of my intimate connection to a queer home; away, yet also closer than I thought to the contexts I grew up in.<sup>9</sup> Arguably, this queer homemaking potential of the aunt as a figure in an origin story may become vibrant when theorized as a mode of performativity on a level of guidance politics. In this sense, all *theias* may become performative manuals themselves.

### The guidance of *theia*

Sara Ahmed describes how she found feminism through her aunties, who taught her that her mind is her own and not owned (“Living a Feminist Life” 4–5). Arguably, as the author intimately tributes a poem to her deceased auntie, Gulzar Bano—a prominent feminist in Pakistan—Ahmed also offers one of the aptest affective descriptions of what it could mean for an aunt to become a non-conforming manual:

[...] Even though you have left  
 You are guiding me  
 The words of an aunt  
 Shimmering with life  
 Are a path  
 A way of following  
 Without being led [...]. (“Feminist Aunties”)

Could such guidance, which emerges as an open-ended path for one to follow without being led by any means of coercion, be what may eventually render auntying figures into performative queer manuals? From dinner tables (Shah) and cooking shows (Seid) to academia (Lee; Ellingson and Sotirin, “Academic Auntying”), aunties can pedagogically guide modes of intimate feminist survival and resistance within the same structures of kin-and-kith power that dominate social living in the first place. Then, may we claim that aunties indeed become (queer) manuals that instruct (de)familiarizing

conduct by transmitting knowledge as know-how—as a way of performing in the world through using and making *with* and *beyond* the normative, allowing for creative interpretations to result in liberatingly finding, accepting, and reclaiming one’s marginalized self-multiplicity? Ultimately, do aunts enable a dexterous queer survival via a “successful failure” to be normal, and if so, how exactly do aunting performances render such queer manualisms?<sup>10</sup>

Returning for a moment to the socio-linguistic connections between “aunt” and “grandmother”—as rendered through the etymology of the Greek word “*theía*”—it could be useful to further elaborate on the affective relationality *with* and *between* these two figures to better locate *theía*’s manual textures and queer potentialities. This relation may be understood beyond social conditions that produce a particular kind of aunt as a maternal figure.

I wonder whether Aunties may correlate with Grandmas as guidance tropes (manuals) for surviving patriarchy, through the affective relations that marginalized people develop with these figures beyond normalcy. Both cultural groups of aunts (*theíades*) and grandmothers (*giagiádes*) traditionally coincide in Greece, being perceived as assemblages of societal performances that are typically inhabited by older women who have survived patriarchy. Such survival is often achieved by coming together within kin-and-kith gatherings where know-how is passed on to younger *aunties-to-be* by older grandmas and aunts.<sup>11</sup> These guiding figures allow for flexible autonomy in creating and dismantling kinships by inhabiting a peripheral insider-outsider position to normative “nuclear” formations of the patriarchal family.<sup>12</sup>

Grandmas become Aunties by entering the repertoires associated with aunts—by aunting: “nurturing, leading, encouraging, mentoring, teaching, and listening beyond traditional family structures to include friends, neighbors, and other close relationships” (Ellingson and Sotirin, “Aunting” 5). The bodies of both aunts and grandmas emerge as spatial centers of affective communities beyond biological kin by bringing forth home (house and family) as a creative “sensory domain” (Pink 145). From how they dress and speak to the ways they cook and clean, aunting figures generate tactical knowledge of homemaking through quotidian acts. They develop broader idiosyncratic techniques for sustaining, remodeling, and repairing the house as ways to relate affectively with others. Ultimately, aunties and aunting grandmas perform resiliently within felt practices of care and criticism by utilizing their lifestyles as communication devices to instruct non-conforming ways of existing.

In this context, the emotional connections that we establish with aunts (and grandmas) might further lead towards intimate understandings of cultural auntiness *within*, *around*, and *after* such figures. When attempting to locate sensory affectivity in personal memories, experiences, and relations with an Auntie or Grandma, one may performatively embody a kind of “auntie” themselves. In other words, intimately felt guidance transmitted by an aunting grandmother or older aunt may result in an empowering *becoming theía*; or as Jesús Valles might put it, a *becoming planet*:

The most powerful thing you can turn yourself into in a family is a planet. If you become large enough, if you adorn yourself with enough metals and stones and color, eventually, everything around you will just catch wise and just spin itself dizzy around you. Eventually, you will teach others to become a planet. My grandmothers, the planets, taught my tías, and my tías, in turn, showed me. (02:06–02:36)

This process of becoming an aunt/planet includes nurturing guidance as a kind of gravity field that may attract anyone around, and hold them within queer dynamics (*in-orbit*) rather than hetero-normative fixtures (*in-line*).

Indeed, “aunting is a *choice* that is available to *everyone*—women, of course, but also men, children, and people in all walks and seasons of life” (Ellingson and Sotirin, “Aunting” 5, emphasis in original). For example, “[a]unts can be relatives of fictive kin, genderqueer or paragons of traditional virtue, nurturing men or ball-busting old ladies” (Cobham-Sander 28:59–29:10). In this sense, aunts equally fail and succeed to be both “normal” and “abnormal” at the same time, as the multi-agentic affectivity of *becoming aunt* transgresses all expectations of normalcy.

It is here that a subversive understanding of auntiness within a performance of guidance—as a potential queer manual—may appear beyond any form of normative conceptions of kinship and homemaking. If aunts are queer manuals, this occurs as they are (per)formed in-between success and failure; as they generate communal spaces in-between the ordinary and the unfamiliar. Therefore, as queer manuals, aunties may offer the hetero-bargaining potential of establishing failure within the doing of a “successful” home. However, “successful” here does not mean “normal,” rather an accomplishment of queering home by engaging with heterostatic conventions only to disturb them (Bryant). Then, could we claim that this “successful failure” of the manual that aunt might be is all about learning how to generate felicitous responses to desires of queer kinship, queer homemaking, and queer belonging? To put it differently, does homemaking become a queer performance when done by following auntiness as a manual?

I become a homemaking theia as I invite friends over for dinners—fellow queer researchers, artists, and philosophers from different diasporas in London. I often experiment with spices in preparing vegan versions of my grandma’s traditional recipes; dishes such as *gemistá* (stuffed vegetables), *spanakópita* (spinach pie), *fakés* (lentil soup), *kritharáki* (orzo pasta) with vegetables, *pastítsio* (layered baked pasta with veggie mince and béchamel sauce). Before hugging my friends as they arrive, I make sure to have some melodic music on, often based on my mood, the weather, and the particular group of people visiting. I want them to sense my homing atmosphere in every way possible. I always serve large portions of each dish to everyone—even though I know they might prefer otherwise or not be able to eat all of it—along with different appetizers, salads, and wine. Each dish opens up a different spacetime of discussion and performativity around the table. While passing around bowls and plates we start commenting on the food’s ingredients, gradually moving on to sharing our daily news and fantasizing about our common living outside a patriarchal capitalist world.

Part of my queer homing auntiness is also registered onto my long dressing gowns and pashminas; a couple of them being more vibrant than the rest. I usually complete my auntie outfits with accessories such as colorful socks, hand fans, rings, necklaces, pins, and/or my favorite pink IKEA bag-sealing clip, which I find a great (un)fashionable way to hold fabrics together. Lately, as my hair grew long, I also started using headbands more often—“*they are particularly useful while cooking, and they make you feel that you’re wearing a crown or something*,” I told my friend the other day. Once, several of these clothing accessories belonged to my mother and both grandmothers, and thus, by wearing them I feel that I somehow embody a different version of these femininities

in my lineage. I am wrapped in my pashminas as I cook and host my dinners, as I distribute home-cleaning tasks with my partner, as I sing songs while hanging freshly washed clothes to dry and taking care of my plants on the balcony. I wear my dressing gowns as I choose what language to use to offer advice to friends and family about anything practical or theoretical I may be able to help with, from love-life and work issues to existential problems and ideas—“*all of which seem to be more related to each other than we usually think,*” my inner theía just forces me to say in a somewhat critical tone. I wear my auntie garments as I keep our kitchen planner updated and fill the wall next to my desk with post-it notes about my research; as I post small visual instructions on the door intercom phone, washing machine, fridge, cupboards, doors, and computer screens to remind my partner (and myself) which keys to press each time, which household chores are to be done, and list items in the house.

Each note, each dinner, each pashmina, each plant on the balcony is framed by a set of aunting guidance acts. Being the dinner’s theía, I follow my grandma’s domestic guidance (as an old manual) to set up my own performative environment (as a new manual), where friends come together and warmly open up to each other; guided by the food, the music, and the caring gestures orchestrated around them. Being the home’s pashminawearing theía, I embody my (grand)mother(s) differently. I take their guidance outside traditional contexts and disidentify with their figures in queer ways that allow me to produce (counter)guidance for redefining relations to home.

Performing theía au(n)to-ethnographically as a queer man means to read my relationships—past and present—as a creative guide for re-doing myself and my body within a reclaimed (de)familiar home setting. Auntieness allows me a way to perform my feminine masculinity in a somatic figure that brings forth home as an intimate place of queer freedom. The sensory feeling of being in space is re-shaped as inner aunting permits me to develop queer contact with domestic objects. In fact, this reminds me of how “[b]odies may even take shape through such contact, or take the shape of that contact” (Ahmed, “Queer Phenomenology” 54), which is to say that bodies “become the space they inhabit” (53). From cooking my grandma’s recipes with a twist and hosting dinners, to using a pink bag-sealing clip and a piece of fabric to temporarily dress my body, it is through quotidian defamiliarizations with domestic items that I bring forth myself as an aunt who becomes her house through her corporeality.

Such artifacts become methodological as they allow for life and research to engage with “a narrated time, person, or place” (Fox 73). Moreover, they lead to performative au(n)to-ethnographic *matterphors* (see also Spry) that enable “both sense-making and sensing in the making” (Gandorfer and Ayub 2) of somatic spaces and selves; within material onto-epistemic intra-actions between homing things and the body. This understanding of worldly matters is then subjected “to the commitment of addressing injustice (s) inherent in our very modes of thinking and sense-making” (6) as human actants are being decentered *on stage* and agentic status is equally given to *costumes, props, and scenery*. For example, the hardness and pinkness of the bag clip that tightly holds together two edges of a large, soft, dark blue pashmina, and the ways these materialities engage with the plumpness of my upper body and firmness of my legs, generate folds and forms that shape what becomes visible and performative; hence, affecting my aunting guidance beyond normative embodiment.

Becoming an aunt offers a way to both become *at home* and become *a home* differently. But what kind of home is this? An “unfinished” one (Lerup); a home that is always becoming through intimate actings of material auntiness via body and space. Most importantly, such engagement with thea’s performative matters further permits an experience of aunt’s own means of community control. There is a certain guidance power that I obtain when I am an aunt: the power to generate my temporal and fictive kinships through gestures of caring for, instructing, and sometimes, criticizing people nearby. In this sense, following aunting practices as a manual to become an aunt allows me to also become a manual of auntiness myself.

## How to be a manual

If aunt is a manual, what is it for? If aunt is a trope for a “how-to” something, what is this something? Arguably, LaWhore Vagistan—the drag-auntie-queen performed by Kareem Khubchandani—offers a concise response to this when she inhabits aunt as a manual to tell us “*How to be an Auntie.*”<sup>13</sup> In this sense, aunt is a manual for learning how to become a manual, to guide other people on how to become aunting manuals too. Aunties become aunties to teach others how to be Aunties, and this is in itself a manual—a performance of guidance which might be particularly evident in queer becomings of auntiness. Aunts are manuals to the extent they *perform* guidance to *provide* guidance, achieving their queer potentials once this guidance is incorporated by others in open-ended ways that transcend the ordinary. In a way, the important current establishment of Critical Auntie Studies is also a testimony to this, for it acknowledges the need to theorize around this guidance that aunts bring forth as a feminist and queer manual. Auntie Studies render a platform for all kinds of aunties (around the world) to inscribe their know-how within a manual. And what else is this manual other than a set of performative scripts of open-ended auntiness that teach us *how to become manuals* ourselves(?)

## Notes

1. Tselementes, Nikos. *O Néos Tselementés tou ‘63: Odigós Mageirikís kai Zacharoplastikís* [The New Tselementes of ‘63: Guide to Cooking and Confectionery]. Athens, GR: Fitraki, 1962. Print.
2. Kaufman, Gershen, Lev Raphael, and Pamela Espeland. *Agápa ton Eaftó sou: Odigós Paidión kai Efívon gia Prosopikí Dýnami kai Aftoektímisi* [Love Yourself: A Guide for Children and Adolescents for Personal Strength and Self-Esteem]. Trans. Pit Konstanteas. Athens, GR: Fitraki, 2003. Print. Originally published under the title: *Stick Up for Yourself: Every Kid’s Guide to Personal Power and Positive Self-Esteem*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit, 1999.
3. Hatzis, Thanasis. *Ósoi Agapóun den Apatoún – Oúte Epaitoún, Oúte Apaitoún*. Athens, GR: Empiria, 2001. Print.
4. Schneider, Sylvia. *To Agóri stin Efíveía* [The Boy in Adolescence]. Trans. Thalia Spyropoulou. Athens, GR: Patakí, 2007. Print. Originally published in German under the title: *Das Jungen Fragebuch*. Vienna: Ueberreuter, 1993.
5. In fact, for Bernstein, a manual in its original form as a print artifact—a material book that incorporates textual guidance and instructive narrations—would lead its readers to a process of “enscription”; meaning a particular “interpellation through a scriptive thing that combines narrative with materiality to structure behavior” (“Dances with Things” 73).

6. There is also much space here for analyzing stereotypes of doll-play and the technical characteristics of dolls as things that script kinetic gendered performances of stillness (Barbie) and motion (Max Steel).
7. For further references in ancient texts see also the entries “τήθη” and “τηθίς” in Liddell and Scott’s *A Greek-English Lexicon* (1940). One may observe an acoustic relation between the ancient Greek words “τηθίς” (tethís)—meaning “aunt”—and “Τηθύς” (Tethys)—being the name of a maternal Titaness in Greek mythology. Moreover, in terms of spelling and acoustics, the modern Greek word “theía” holds a twofold meaning: that of the “aunt” and the adjective “divine.” While there seems to be no etymological connection of the “aunt” with any kind of divinity, one cannot reject a (sub)cultural one. Here lies a field for further potential research where affective, rather than linguistic, relations with the ancient and modern Greek words for “aunt” may be investigated (see also Motamedi Fraser)—regarding the conceptualization (or not) of aunts as the cultural “offsprings” of an “ancient goddess.”
8. Similar constructs of maternal auntieness also exist in modern Greek popular culture. For example, one may consider Alexandra Papadopoulou’s novel “Aunt Eftychia” (*I Theía Eftychía*)—first published in 1904, in 40 parts printed in a liberal daily newspaper of Istanbul—that tells the story of an aunt who raises the children of her deceased sister as her own; as well as the popular storytelling media-figure of Theía Lena, impersonated by Antigone Metaxa (1905–1971), a Greek children’s author.
9. The enforcement of house isolation as a direct result of the Covid-19 pandemic (since Spring 2020) certainly assisted this re-figuring of my relationship to home, by allowing different experiences of time *in*, but also *with* the house.
10. I use the term “manualisms” to refer to the multiple textures of performative guidance that render bodily figures into manuals, and vice-versa.
11. This social proliferation of aunts is typically met in small Greek communities where “[o]ne way or another, almost everyone is related to almost everyone else” (Just 122). The potential resistance that emerges in such schema also relates to regional conventions regarding postmarital residence—virilocal, uxorilocal, or neolocal—which traditionally render social perceptions of womanhood closer or not to one’s strong maternal lineages (Loizos and Papataxiarchis 15). Overall, several ethnographers have pointed out overlooked ways through which Greek women traditionally support and empower each other in kin-and-kith formations. From the utilization of irony towards men in closed sewing cycles (Herzfeld) to resisting through food preparation (Vardaki) by becoming “controllers of pollution” in the kitchen (Dubisch) and witch-cooks (Kaminiotis), women confined in their domestic and nurturing roles have long been developing ways to bargain their power relations to survive patriarchy the best way they can.
12. Grandmothers, however, do precondition the absolute insider’s past maternal experience.
13. Khubchandani, Kareem. “How to be an Auntie | LaWhore Vagistan | TEDxTufts.” *Youtube.com*. Uploaded by TEDx Talks. 13 May 2020. Web. 27 July 2021. <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z9IYJIC\\_VWY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z9IYJIC_VWY)>.

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