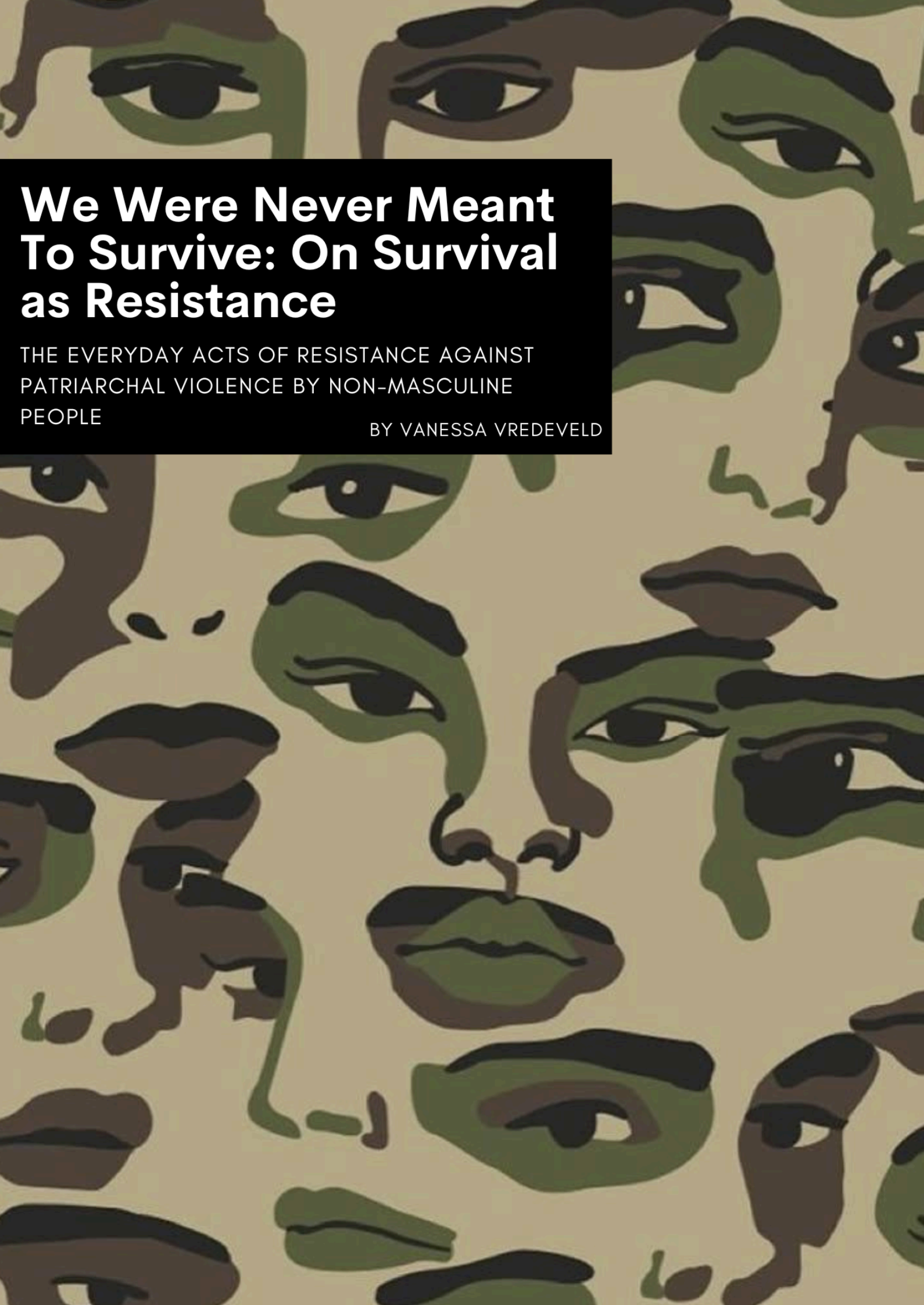




We Were Never Meant To Survive: On Survival as Resistance

THE EVERYDAY ACTS OF RESISTANCE AGAINST
PATRIARCHAL VIOLENCE BY NON-MASCULINE
PEOPLE

BY VANESSA VREDEVELD

We Were Never Meant To Survive: On Survival as Resistance

The everyday acts of resistance against patriarchal violence by non-masculine people

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Abstract

This thesis explores how non-masculine people use everyday tactics to avoid and oppose patriarchal violence in public spaces. Grounded in de Certeau's theory of everyday tactics and employing Ahmed's queer phenomenology, this study examines how subtle everyday practices, such as changing one's route, altering one's appearance, or reimagining objects, can serve as embodied expressions of resistance. These tactics are shaped by intersecting identities and embedded in daily routines. The study focuses on experiences in Rotterdam and employs qualitative techniques, including interviews, mapping, and autoethnographic reflection. Despite participants frequently interpreting these acts as a form of survival rather than resistance, this thesis argues that survival itself holds the potential for resistance. Through storytelling and a collective memory, these tactics create a living archive of resistance, challenging prevailing notions of gender, belonging, and public space. The study ultimately demonstrates how tactical creativity, adaptation, and refusal are significant manifestations of resistance in everyday life.

Embodiment, Patriarchy, Resistance, Survival, Tactics.

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Introduction

“In the autumn of 2018, as the days grew shorter and the nights stretched longer, unsettling messages began circulating in girls' group chats in Leiden. The warnings spoke of a serial sexual assault attacker, a man who would follow women on his bike or attack them in the back alleys of the street.

In response, my friends and I, like many women, adapted, not by avoiding specific routes or staying indoors, but by taking action. One friend began carrying a fork in her pocket, while another bought a safety spray, a legal alternative to pepper spray that stained an attacker for days. We all instinctively knew how to position our keys between our knuckles. A silent, unspoken knowledge passed between women. We joked about it, but beneath the humor was something more profound: a refusal to be passive. These actions were tactical adaptations, efforts to reclaim our space.”

This personal moment, from my first year of university, has stayed with me. It captures the invisible labor required simply to move from one place to another. As Vera-Gray and Kelly (2020, p.271) describe, this 'safety work' is not seen as exceptional, but rather as a condition of everyday life, performed by many non-masculine people. It responds to a social environment where patriarchal power positions cisgender, heterosexual men as dominant (Das 2008, Kolysh 2021, Vera-Gray & Kelly 2020, Ranade 2007, Hunnicut 2009).

Though often imagined as neutral or open, public space is actively shaped by gendered, racialized, and heteronormative power (Das 2008, Kolysh 2021, Vera-Gray & Kelly 2020, Ranade 2007, Ahmed 2014). For women, queer, trans, non-binary, and gender-nonconforming people, public space often feels precarious, a terrain navigated through caution, avoidance and embodied self-monitoring. Navigating public space involves making deliberate choices about how to walk, what to wear, and how to safeguard oneself.

Therefore, this thesis explores the everyday tactics of resistance employed by non-masculine persons against patriarchal violence in public spaces. Instead of focusing on large-scale feminist protests or institutional policy, this research examines small, often unnoticed acts of tactical negotiation, such as shifting a route, changing clothing, or carrying improvised self-defense tools. These everyday acts of resistance are situational and respond emergently, not from formal strategy but from lived experience (de Certeau et al., 1980). Following Michel de Certeau et al.'s (1980, p. 7) theory of tactics, which describes tactics as

subtle, improvised maneuvers employed by those without formal power, I examine how the individuals I spoke with adapt, resist, and survive in real-time.

This thesis reveals a tension between the theoretical narrative of resistance and the lived experience of my participants, who would often frame their actions as survival. However, this thesis argues that survival itself can hold resistant potential. Drawing on the work of Audre Lorde, I position these practices within the broader politics of care, arguing that resistance and survival are not opposite but intertwined. These acts, whether consciously or unconsciously, challenge dominant power structures by undermining the very conditions designed to control or endanger marginalized bodies.

This research is based in Rotterdam and draws on qualitative methods including semi-structured interviews, mapping exercises, and autoethnographic reflection. Through the experiences of Lana, Maria, Juliano, Kai, Charlie, Hanna, Roman, and Amber, I explore how people live with and respond to patriarchal spatial violence. Their stories reveal that the labor of survival often occurs amid everyday life, while commuting, meeting friends, or going out at night. It is not separate from living; it is an integral part of it.

The thesis is structured around four key concepts that emerged from the analysis: visibility, tactics, survival, and storytelling. First, I examine how bodies marked as feminine, queer, trans, or racialized become hypervisible in public, often perceived as disruptive or misaligned with dominant spatial norms. Second, I explore the embodied tactics used to navigate their visibility. Third, I address the tension between survival and resistance, asking whether the two are truly distinct or instead entangled in practice. Ultimately, I examine how these tactics are remembered, shared, and passed on through storytelling, thereby creating an intergenerational archive of resistance and survival knowledge.

These everyday tactics challenge the dominant assumptions about what resistance looks like. We often imagine resistance as loud or confrontational, but these accounts reveal that it can also be quiet, improvised, and deeply embedded in the body. What appears as avoidance, submission, or coping is often a tactical negotiation of space and power.

Finally, this thesis challenges the notion that patriarchal power is absolute and unchallenged. Instead, power is constantly being negotiated and bent in daily life. Rather than framing non-masculine people as passive victims, this thesis centers their resourcefulness, agency, and tactical ingenuity. It offers a feminist analysis of everyday resistance as care, survival, and embodied navigation.

Theoretical Framework

This research examines the everyday tactics of resistance used by non-masculine people in response to patriarchal violence in public space. It is grounded in an intersectional feminist framework that draws on feminist phenomenology (Young, 2005; Ahmed, 2006), queer spatial theory (Ahmed, 2006), and critical theories of power and resistance (de Certeau et al., 1980; Johnson & Vinthagen, 2014). The theory focuses on three core concepts: patriarchal violence, public space, and everyday tactics of resistance. Approaching these concepts as interrelated and co-constituted, showing how systems of dominance actively structure bodies, practices, and spatial relations.

Patriarchal violence

First and foremost, this study centers patriarchy and heteronormativity as the primary systems of power that shape the patterns of inequality and violence under investigation. Rather than treating gender as an isolated category, it follows an intersectional understanding of oppression, shaped by race, class, ability, and other social hierarchies (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 2023; Hunnicutt, 2009).

This thesis understand patriarchy as a broader political and social system that privileges hegemonic masculinity while subjugating those who fall outside of its norms, meaning women, queer, trans, non-binary, and other non-masculine persons (Das 2008, Kolysh 2021, Vera-Gray & Kelly 2020, hooks 2004). As bell hooks (2004, p. 18) explains, patriarchy “enforces male dominance by positioning men as inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females,” and sustains this through psychological, social, and physical violence.

Heteronormativity, which positions heterosexuality as the default and superior sexual orientation, functions alongside patriarchy to structure and sustain dominant gender and sexual hierarchies (Ahmed 2014; Sumerau, Cragun, Mathers 2015; Kolysh 2021, p.7). Together, they normalize cisgender heterosexual male dominance while marginalizing anyone who deviates from these norms (Das 2008; Ahmed 2014; Sumerau, Cragun, Mathers 2015; Kolysh 2021; Vera-Gray & Kelly 2020; hooks 2004). This highlights how gendered and sexual norms intertwine to produce layered forms of oppression that shape personal experiences of both violence and resistance (Kolysh 2021).

This framework moves beyond a binary framing of gender, such as women as victims and men as perpetrators, and instead adopts a broader perspective of non-masculine people. It

emphasizes that the issue at hand is not simply male violence but patriarchal violence, underscoring that the harm is rooted in systemic power relations (hooks, 2004; Barker, 2016, p.14). Patriarchal violence includes violence against women but also violence between men, particularly those in subordinate positions (Barker 2016, pp.3, 11). By adopting this perspective, the analysis shifts from individualized accounts of violence to a structural understanding of oppression, framing the issue as one between oppressors and the oppressed within interconnected systems of domination (Collins, 2000; Barker, 2016; hooks, 2004; Hunnicutt, 2009).

These systems operate at macro and micro levels, shaping institutions such as governments, legal systems, and economies while simultaneously influencing everyday social interactions (Hunnicutt 2009). These levels are interconnected, as macro-levels reinforce patriarchal norms in daily life, while micro-level interactions help sustain and normalize the broader system (Hunnicutt 2009, p. 558). Because everyday interactions embed patriarchal violence, resistance must also take place within the everyday.

(Public) Space

Space is not a fixed, neutral location but instead a dynamic and socially constructed site shaped through bodily movement, social norms, and relations of power (Ahmed 2006; Spain 2014; Ranade 2007; Listerborn 2015). Drawing on feminist phenomenology (Young, 2005; Ahmed 2006) and queer spatial theory (Ahmed 2006), this research views public space as a gendered and contested terrain, where bodies are continually regulated and classified.

According to Sara Ahmed (2006, p. 8; Ahmed, 2014), space becomes intelligible through the orientation of bodies, which take shape in relation to space, objects, and others. These orientations are informed by systems of gender, race, class, and sexuality, influencing what becomes visible, who feels comfortable, and who appears out of place (Ahmed 2006, p. 23). Those who do not align with dominant expectations become misaligned, marked as out of place, and are more likely to experience friction within public space (Ahmed 2006). Repetitions play a crucial role; through repeated interactions, specific spaces come to feel familiar, while others feel disorienting or even hostile (Ahmed 2006, pp. 8, 23). Repeated spatial encounters sediment norms and reproduce what society considers normal (Ahmed 2006, p. 15).

This means that heteronormative and patriarchal structures profoundly shape orientation. Heteronormativity acts as a 'straightening device,' aligning men and women in

particular roles (Ahmed 2006, p. 20). It positions men as desiring subjects and women as objects of desire, while simultaneously excluding and erasing queer identities (Ahmed 2006, p. 20). Drawing on Iris Marion Young's (2005) phenomenological model of female embodiment, Ahmed (2006) described how women internalize this gaze. According to Young (2005), women learn to perceive their bodies both as subjects capable of action and as objects under observation. This results in what she terms inhibited intentionality, a tendency to take up less space, move cautiously, and regulate behavior (Young 2005; Ahmed 2006, p. 60).

These internalized orientations are reflected in public spaces, where gendered expectations continue to influence visibility, access, and safety (Listerborn, 2015; Pain, 2001). Historically, public spaces have been aligned with masculinity and relegated femininity to the private sphere (Spain, 2014; Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020, p. 266). Women, queer, and other non-masculine persons frequently encounter spatial limitations (Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020; Ahmed, 2006; Spain, 2014). For example, people often read a woman seen alone in public without an apparent reason (e.g, doing groceries) as ‘‘available’’ or ‘‘out of place’’ (Ranade 2007, p.1523; Ahmed, 2006). These judgments function to police gendered behavior and reinforce spatial hierarchies. In contrast, cisgender men often enjoy greater mobility and spatial authority (Kolysh 2021).

This gendered division of space has material consequences. Being perceived as available often provokes a fear of harassment (Ahmed, 2014; Vera Gray & Kelly, 2020; Ranade, 2007). This fear is not incidental but the result of what Vera Gray and Kelly (2020, p. 268) call a spatial manifestation of patriarchy. Therefore, feminine, queer and other non-masculine bodies engage in safety work, the invisible labour of constantly creating a sense of safety in public spaces (Vera Gray and Kelly, 2020, p. 271). This labour becomes an internalized and normalized part of everyday life, shaping a distinctly gendered experience of space. Importantly, space is not only gendered, but other axes, such as race or class, can also heighten these spatial experiences (Ranade 2007; Ahmed 2006). For instance, younger women struggle to become invisible in public, while racialized women experience heightened surveillance, hostility, or harassment (Ranade 2007, p. 1523).

However, space is not only a site of domination, but it is also a place of negotiation and resistance. Following de Certeau et al. (1984), people contest power through everyday practices that allow them to navigate, outsmart, and manipulate the very structures meant to regulate them. Non-masculine bodies resist by reclaiming presence, disrupting norms, or subtly re-shaping how they use space. Public space, then, is not static; it is in a constant state

of becoming, produced and reproduced through movement, social interactions, and resistance (de Certeau et al., 1980; Ranade, 2007).

Everyday tactics of resistance

This research focuses on the everyday tactics of resistance, often small and improvised actions, through which non-masculine bodies navigate and push back against gendered power in public spaces. De Certeau et al. (1980, p. 7) define tactics as localized, flexible, and responsive acts that people perform within spaces controlled by dominant systems, distinguishing them from overt political strategies.

Tactics in his words are, ‘the tools of the weak’ (de Certeau et al., 1980, p. 8), which include adjusting bodily posture, selecting specific routes, or appropriating space in subtle ways. People enact tactical ruses and surprises through everyday activities, such as living, walking, reading, shopping, and cooking (Ibid.). These practices often draw on *metis*, a form of cunning, practical intelligence frequently passed on through storytelling (de Certeau et al., 1980, pp. 8, 36). Storytelling, in this context, becomes a performative practice, a tactic in itself that operates across time, persevering and passing down survival knowledge (de Certeau et al., 1980, pp. 33). As de Certeau et al. (1980, p. 41) suggest, memory is to time what warfare is to space; implying that it is a means of sustaining resistance through the preservation of a collective memory of survival knowledge, and keeping resistance alive across generations, even when space becomes hostile.

These actions are not always consciously oppositional. Building on Bourdieu's concept of ‘knowing ignorance,’ de Certeau et al. (1980, p.18) suggest that people act subversively without being fully aware of the broader implications of their actions. Many serve primarily as ways of navigating everyday life within existing structures without explicitly confronting or resisting them (de Certeau et al. 1980).

Johnson and Vinthagen (2014) similarly argue that everyday resistance can occur without explicit intent. What marks such acts as resistance is not their form, but their relational position to power and their capacity to challenge the status quo, even if only subtly. They further emphasize that these personal tactics, which may not appear significant in isolation, can collectively contribute to broader transformations (Johansson and Vinthagen, 2014).

To explore the boundary between survival and resistance, I draw on Audre Lorde, who frames survival itself as a radical act. In her poem *A Litany for Survival*, Lorde writes

“we were never meant to survive,” articulating survival as defiance for those made to feel out of place. In *A Burst of Light* (1988), she asserts that “caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation and this is an act of political warfare.” Survival in this sense becomes a form of resistance when it asserts one's presence, voice, or care in a world that seeks to erase it.

Making these tactics visible is often met with resistance. Ahmed (2023, p.18) shows “to expose a problem is to pose a problem.” When we name structural inequalities, we disrupt the social order. “When we name the problem, we become the problem,” she writes (Ibid.). In this way, those who draw attention to the problem, often referred to as killjoys, are usually punished for disrupting normative comfort. Within this framework, we see how making these tactics visible is itself a form of dissent, one that challenges established structures and invites backlash.

Through this lens, I analyze the small, everyday tactics that non-masculine people use to navigate the hostile gendered public space. I aim to make the invisible visible by focusing on the mundane, often overlooked acts that are embedded in our daily lives. These are not grand gestures, but somewhat repetitive acts of negotiation that reveal how power is embedded in spatial, embodied, and social routines in daily life. Intersecting dynamics of gender, race, and sexuality shape this form of resistance, which we must understand within specific spatial and temporal contexts.

Methods

Methodological Approach

This research employs a qualitative approach. Focusing on small, everyday acts, the study aims to make visible the often-overlooked tactics and embodied forms of resistance. To this end, I conduct field research combining three interrelated methods: semi-structured interviews, mapping, and autoethnography. This triangulated approach enabled a deeper understanding of how safety tactics emerge, circulate, and become embedded in everyday life.

Finding participants

Recruitment began through my networks, including a WhatsApp group called Safety Chat, where over 700 members, not all of whom are women, can share their live locations or warn others about risky areas in public spaces. Although it quickly generated interest, initial responses came almost exclusively from cisgender women. This made me reflect on the heteronormativity within my network and prompted me to expand outreach.

To address this limitation, I contacted a range of queer and trans organisations in Rotterdam and distributed my call through their networks. Although most organisations declined or did not respond, I ultimately reached a more diverse group, including two cis gay men, a non-binary person, and a trans man, primarily through snowball sampling and extended community outreach.

Initially, I intended that all interviews were to be in-person to facilitate rich, embodied interaction and walking interviews, or on-site mapping. However, to include a trans male participant, who could only join remotely due to work and study commitments, I adjusted my methodology to include remote interviews. For these cases, I utilized Google Street View as a tool for spatial reflection, allowing participants to still engage with place-based storytelling.

Data collection

In total, I conducted interviews with eight participants, each of whom I met two to three times following the initial interview. Each session lasts around an hour, resulting in approximately 20 one-on-one interviews overall. The conversations were held either in person or online, depending on the participant's availability or preference. The locations were

participant-chosen; they include cafes, university spaces, or outdoor walks in parks, creating a comfortable setting for open dialogue.

Participants ranged in age from 21 to 28 and were mostly students or young professionals. They identified across a range of gender and sexual identities, including cis and queer women, cis gay men, non-binary, and trans men. I conducted the interviews in either Dutch or English, depending on the participants' comfort level.

The first interview followed a topic guide focused on public space, safety, and tactics. The follow-up interviews deepened prior conversations, offering space for reflection, revisiting topics that emerged organically, or sometimes making connections between earlier discussions or sharing stories of other interviews.

In the second or third session, we also conducted the virtual mapping exercise. Using Google Maps street view, the participants would walk me through their typical routes, whether to home, work, study, or social gatherings. As they navigated these routes, pausing to reflect on places where they had felt unsafe, adapted their behavior, or experienced harassment. We also paused at spaces of safety or comfort to offer a comparative lens.

The mapping exercise allowed us to move through the digital streetscape and helped participants anchor their experiences in concrete, visually identifiable environments. Sparking spatial reflection on how space is socially constructed and emotionally experienced.

Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed and analysed through inductive thematic analysis supported by reflexive coding. Rather than starting with a predefined coding framework, I read and reread transcripts to identify recurring patterns, language, and emotions that emerged directly from participants' narratives. While I aimed to be guided by the material itself, the interviews were semi-structured around the topic list. In this sense, the data was already shaped to some extent by theory-informed attentiveness.

Recurring patterns such as survival, internalisation, normalisation, visibility, and stories appeared across many conversations and shaped the early thematic structure. First, I began by highlighting the recurring terms, then grouped the material based on frequency and thematic similarity. These groupings helped me trace both overlap and divergence across experiences.

Once preliminary themes emerged, I returned to theory. Connecting concepts such as survival with resistance or storytelling with *metis*. For insights that didn't immediately align

with existing theory, I turned to new frameworks, such as Ahmed's (2006) queer phenomenology, to gain a deeper understanding of feelings of being 'out of place'. Importantly, I noticed moments of tension between the participants' lived experience and certain theoretical concepts. Rather than ignoring these, I allowed such friction to guide my analysis. These moments prompted me to reflect critically on my theoretical assumptions and to remain grounded in participants' interpretations.

At the same time, I also cataloged the tactics participants described. Innately, I organized them by frequency (which came up most often), and later refined the categories by:

- type of practice(e.g., dressing choices, avoidance, using objects),
- Context setting (e.g., nightlife, commuting)
- Embodied identity markers (e.g., gender, race).

Although location-specific patterns emerged (e.g., Chinatown, Blaak), I chose not to foreground places, as the experience of safety and harm often coexisted in the same spaces. Practices, context, and identity proved to be more meaningful explanatory categories.

I distilled the findings into four central themes: visibility, tactics, survival, and storytelling, as these clarified why the participants used specific tactics, which ones they chose, how they experienced them, and how they shared them.

Quotes were selected for their emotional resonance, clarity, or insight, whether they were representative or contrasting in nature. I aimed to balance voices, including those of more reserved participants. I treated quotes not simply as evidence but as situated, embodied expressions of lived experience.

Reflexivity & Positionality

As a white, cisgender woman who has personally navigated safety in public spaces, my positionality shaped both my access and interpretation. My familiarity with specific tactics created moments of resonance and mutual recognition during interviews, fostering trust and openness. At times, participants expanded on their experiences after I shared my own.

However, this insider perspective also risked assuming shared understandings and overlooking nuance. To counter this, I remained attentive to the unique meanings behind the participants' words, especially when their experiences differed from my own.

Moments of unfamiliarity, such as racialized hypervisibility or transmasculine experience, highlighted the limits of my perspective. In these cases, I deliberately paused,

listened more deeply, and asked clear questions. I adjusted how I represented aspects of my identity depending on the participant and conversation, always to foster openness without erasing difference. For example, my Eastern European migrant background created occasional moments of cultural connection with Amber, while my heterosexuality and whiteness remained axes of privilege I stayed aware of throughout. These reflexive practices helped me maintain critical awareness and strengthened the relational quality of the research.

Given the sensitive nature of the topic, I paid particular attention to the emotional well-being of participants. Making sure they were aware they could withdraw at any point without explanation, that certain things said in the conversations could be left out in the research, and that their identities would be anonymous using pseudonyms.

Chapter 1. Visibility as Risk: Navigating Public Space

Non-masculine bodies are often perceived as 'out of place' in public space, attracting unwanted attention. To reduce their visibility, they frequently employ subtle tactics of self-regulation. In this chapter, I analyze how public space disciplines bodies through visibility and how people respond with embodied tactics to minimize exposure and maintain safety.

Getting home

After my night shift, I would always try to avoid Tiendplein. It added ten minutes to my route, but this way I felt safer. That street is usually full of men just hanging around, groups of them, catcalling. Sometimes they even followed me. I would wear a flight attendant outfit, so yes, that attracted a certain amount of attention.

Says Lana, a petite woman in her twenties who lived in Rotterdam during her student years. She shows me her route home using Google Street View, pointing out the streets she would take and those she would avoid. Even though she tried to steer clear of Tiendplein, her alternative route was not exactly safe either. She would take the tram from Rotterdam Central station to 's-Gravendijkwal, where she had to choose between going left or right, but on both sides of the street came with their own risk. As shown in Figure 1, a shisha lounge and nightshop on the left and a sex club, erotic massage salon on the right. As we stood before this crossroad, even if only virtually, my body physically cringed at the sight of the shops. I could feel what she might have felt, because I know that feeling; my body knows this, as it would also move through these sites. It is this trigger of unsafety, a sort of warning your body makes. I asked her how she would decide which path to take.

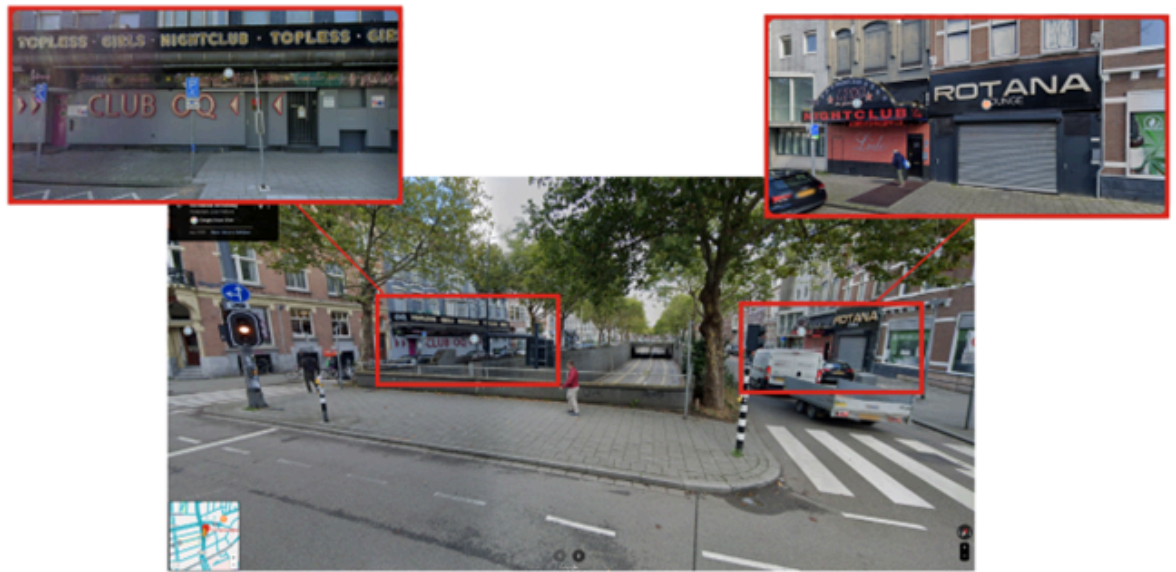


Figure 1. Screenshot from Google Maps Street View of Tiendplein, Rotterdam, visually showing the crossroads Lana would pass while walking home.

She replied: ‘‘Well, it depends on how crowded it would be, but I would usually go right, my house is on that side of the road, so I would have to cross the street at some point.’’ Sometimes she did not have a choice:

If the train were delayed and I missed the last tram, I would have to walk, and that meant Tiendplein. It's only a fifteen-minute walk, but it felt really unsafe. I would pretend to be on the phone, even though at 4 a.m. no one was actually awake. I would walk faster. I wore different shoes; I changed my heels to flats. I brought sweatpants to put over my skirt and put on an oversized coat with my hood up. Avoiding any sort of eye contact. All of that. Just to get home.

Lana’s experience illustrates how navigating public space involves tactics that manage visibility and risk. Her femininity, expressed through her clothing, posture, and presence, becomes hypervisible in a context where cisgender, heterosexual masculinity operates as the norm. This hypervisibility is constructed through the cultural association of femininity with the private sphere and its framing as passive and vulnerable, rendering it out of place in public (Spain, 2014; Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020, p. 266). As a result, Lana’s presence becomes a site of scrutiny and unwanted attention.

For Lana, the simple act of getting home becomes a calculated form of risk management. Movement, then, is not simply about getting from one place to another; it requires navigating a complex and challenging environment. Careful decisions, such as which

route to take, what to wear, and where to walk, exemplify the everyday tactics employed to minimize risk, reduce visibility, and subvert dominant power structures (de Certeau et al., 1980; Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020; Ranade, 2007; Kolysh, 2022).

Out of Place: Misalignment and Visibility

Ahmed's (2006) notion of orientation helps us make sense of this misalignment: when bodies do not line up with dominant expectations of gender, race, or sexuality, they disrupt the flow of public space. These bodies are often perceived as deviant or disruptive and must constantly navigate the risks associated with being visible, prompting them to employ tactics to subvert or avoid hostility (Ahmed 2006).

This experience of misalignment and risk is not limited to feminine-presenting bodies. Juliano, a gay cis man who has lived in Rotterdam for several years, describes how his queerness renders him visible in ways that destabilize even his masculine-coded appearance. While taking a drag from his cigarette, he recounts how young men would approach him while he would smoke from his window “not just to ask for a cigarette” but to initiate what he described as “weird conversations.” They would casually ask “Are you gay?” in a tone that blurred the line between curiosity, mockery, and threat.

Although seemingly light on the surface, these moments carried a deeper subtext of confrontation and boundary testing. Juliano explains that the more he responded, the more intense or unpredictable the interaction became. “If I would respond with shut the fuck up, it would give them more energy and recognition to what they are getting at.” Over time, he developed a tactic of disengagement, which he referred to as “not feeding into it,” as a way to minimize confrontation.

As I take his image in. I imagine how he might appear from the street, framed in the window: visibly tattooed, muscled, with piercings. At first glance, I would consider his appearance to be ‘tough’ or ‘intimidating’. Yet, his experience reveals how perceived queerness can override even normative masculine markers, making his body readable as ‘out of place’. As he says:

Sure, I know I don’t fit the societal norm. But you don’t live your life consistently with the idea, I’m different, I just know that in the back of my head. And still, when it gets confirmed, that’s just an unpleasant feeling.

Drawing from his background in architecture, Juliano offers a striking metaphor to describe this dynamic:

If you think of an architectural building where everything is slightly the same, it takes very little energy to take that in. But if the windows were all crooked, that would take a lot more energy to look at. I think that's the same, when something is slightly out of the norm, that's where the energy goes, and that will stand out.

His analogy resonates with Ahmed's (2006) idea of orientation and misalignment, illustrating how what falls outside the norm becomes highly visible. These experiences of misalignment, of being read as 'out of place' in public spaces, produce an embodied awareness of hypervisibility that demands constant negotiation (Ahmed 2006, pp. 9-10). When comfort is absent, public space becomes something to be cautiously approached, not simply moved through with ease. Visibility becomes risk: bodies are not merely seen, but read as deviant, vulnerable, or out of place.

In response to the threatening sphere, Juliano maneuvers by disengaging, aiming to diffuse tension and reduce the risk of escalation. His act of ignoring and 'not feeding into it' functions as a slight situational adaptation to subvert the powerful structure that is looming over him, trying to ask, 'Do you belong here or not?' In de Certeau's et al. (1980, p. 7) terms, such an ordinary act could be understood as a tactic; a small, flexible, and situational act that emerges within the constraints of the dominant system, not pre-planned or formally articulated, but remembered and repeated over time as part of survival knowledge.

Across conversations, people described how their misalignment, whether because of gender, queerness, or racially biased appearance, made them hypervisible. In response, they adapted their routes, altered clothing, posture, or pace in subtle yet deliberate ways. These tactics were employed to divert attention and enhance safety, thereby finding ways to navigate these hostile power structures (de Certeau et al., 1980). While these seem like surface-level adjustments, they reflect a process of negotiating belonging within spaces that were never meant to include them.

Chapter 2. Everyday Tactics

This negotiation of belonging unfolds daily through the body's interaction with space and the norms that structure it. This chapter examines how such negotiation unfolds in everyday activities, such as going to the supermarket, meeting friends, or going out. In doing so, people improvise subtle tactics to minimize risk, adjust visibility, and reclaim agency within spaces not built for them. Spatial, temporal, and intersecting power relations shape these tactics.

Blending in

Amber, a woman in her early twenties who came to Rotterdam from Ukraine to study and still resides here, tells me how she picked up these tactics early in life. Her mother had taught her that “the more feminine you look in the streets, the easier it is for someone to take an interest in you, follow you, etcetera.” In response, Amber deliberately dresses in a way that she calls more 'boyish' to avoid being perceived as feminine and thus vulnerable. As she puts it: “The less feminine you look, the less attention you draw to yourself. You wear your hair in a bun or loose instead of a ponytail, because a ponytail is easier to grab. You wear a hoodie over it.” As she gestures to her hoodie.

While Amber's tactics were shaped through early instructions, Maria, an exchange student from Brazil, developed similar practices through direct experience. She recalls the moment when a simple errand to the supermarket resulted in a wave of hypersexualized and racialized attention:

There was this specific time that I wore a jean skirt and a Brazilian shirt. Yeah. And I think I received more than 20 catcalls at the same time, about being from Brazil and blah blah blah. Even from a car, like stopping by and calling stuff like that, it was this bad. [...] But I was like, wow, this is so uncomfortable, you know, this is horrible for me, just wearing a cute outfit because I was gonna meet up with my boyfriend.

Maria's body, read through the hypersexualised stereotype of a Latin woman, became a target of racialized and gender harassment. In response, she tactfully avoids certain areas, especially Chinatown, unless it's during daylight hours or she's dressed less femininely, noting:

Every time I go through Chinatown, especially if I'm alone, I don't wear like short stuff. Even though you have every right, it's so uncomfortable there[...] Like after 5:00 PM, I need to be before, I need some light. I'm never going if there's no sunlight. [...] Or I would

wear a coat or something like that. I don't want to wear a dress. It's just super annoying and super scary.

In contrast, Kai, a trans man who works and studies in Rotterdam, finds that his safety during nighttime, particularly because, as he describes it, he does not yet feel like he “passes” :

In the dark, I can come across as just like an average guy on the street. So, for the longest time, I had like zero interactions[...] However, in more well-lit areas around the casino, people began to approach me more frequently.

For him, the darkness of the nighttime offers a kind of protection, draping over him like an invisible cloak. In low visibility, he is more easily read as the normative male figure, which provides a sense of safety. Yet in well-lit areas, this tactic falters: his visibility comes to light, in the most literal sense, making his transness more legible and increasing the risk of being singled out.

Similarly, Charlie, a non-binary person, shares that they noticed how wearing an oversized, bulky work coat, resembling those worn by construction workers as shown in Figure 2, helped them pass as more masculine and reduced comments on their queerness: ‘‘I never experienced anything when I wore it. I think it makes me look like a man.’’¹ Although they did not wear the coat with the explicit intention of concealing their queer identity, they observed that their appearance aligned with cultural markers of masculinity in public spaces. Through this adaptation, their clothing allowed them to blend into dominant gender norms, thereby drawing less attention and reducing their visibility.

¹ To protect participant anonymity and avoid visual overexposure. I chose to use illustrations based on the objects described or shared rather than including the direct photographs of them. In this way, the analytical repression of the material is preserved while maintaining ethical distance.



Figure 2. Illustration of the actual work coat that is hanging at Charlie's home.

Lana, in contrast, uses spatial selection to avoid hostility. Her tactical approach involves choosing environments where her body feels more in sync with the surrounding space. As she reflects on how her Asian identity attracts “the most unwanted attention”, especially in predominantly white areas:

When I went out, I went to City Hall Square, for example. That's pretty White. So, when I was there, it was often those White friends who liked to go there too. I would, well.. I stood out because I looked different, so I received some aggressive attention from the men. [...] But suppose you go. For example, to Witte de With, or to West, where you have Weelde, it is just something more multicultural, more alternative. And, there I just feel less looked at or something [...] You have a lot of queer people there, you have a lot of people of color, so it felt more inclusive.

Roman, a gay man who has lived in different neighbourhoods across Rotterdam, similarly sought out queer spaces, avoiding the distortions he faced in heteronormative places. However, for him, this tactic failed when the queer space itself became overrun by straight people:

This club was technically a queer space, but there were so many like straight people that I often felt uncomfortable. [...] To the point that I like, I changed my outfit in the middle of the night because I just felt uncomfortable. Even though it was technically a queer space, I

saw that there were so many like straight guys there and straight women, and it was sort of like infested with it and everyone was looking at me weird for wearing a crop top. So, I just felt really uncomfortable, and I changed into a T-shirt.

Although his initial tactic failed, his experiences illustrate how he adapts to the shifting composition of the space. When the spatial tactic of choosing a queer space failed, he turned to a bodily tactic, changing his clothes to navigate the discomfort. This moment highlights the fluidity and responsiveness of tactical navigation, where individuals can adjust their tactics to maintain a sense of comfort and safety.

Altogether, these examples reveal how everyday activities, such as going to a supermarket, walking home, dressing up, or going out with friends, are shaped by constraints that can limit one's comfort. At the same time, they highlight the subtle maneuvers people use to navigate these constraints, such as avoiding specific spaces, adjusting routes, choosing certain times, or modifying their attire. These small, mundane acts are the tactics that de Certeau et al. (1980, p.7) refer to, often emerging without conscious intent or deliberate planning. Yet, they serve as a form of camouflage, allowing people to blend in, reduce their visibility, and draw less attention.

Still, the meaning and effectiveness of these tactics vary depending on how different bodies are perceived in various moments. As bodies are oriented and constructed through gendered, racialized, and sexualised power relations, visibility is unevenly distributed and heightened differently, on one's intersecting identities (Ahmed 2006; Ahmed 2014; Vera-Gray & Kelly 2020). As a result, the tactics people use are equally varied and contingent upon their circumstances.

What offers one person protection might place another at greater risk. Tactics are not simply a matter of preference or choice; they emerge as a response to the situation that occurs. While daylight offers Maria a sense of safety, for Kai, it is the cover of darkness, highlighting how the same tactic (choosing certain times) can yield very different outcomes depending on one's embodied position. People can easily shift fluidly from one tactic to another, revealing adaptability and flexibility. Ultimately, it shows that tactics are contextual, situational, and personal. The interplay between bodies, environment, and the monetary dynamics of power shapes them.

Ordinary Objects, Extraordinary Tactics

Although these tactics seem minor or improvised, they can also be more foregrounded and intentional. People can alter everyday objects to gain a sense of control in unsafe or unpredictable situations (de Certeau et al., 1980, p. 5). This creative use of ordinary items exemplifies how people reclaim personal agency and exert resistance (de Certeau et al., 1980, p. 3).

Hanna, a blond, tall woman who has experienced some unpleasant situations on the street, digs into her coat pocket and pulls out a cluster of keys. Holding one between her fingers, she says “This is my favourite. It’s long and pointy, I think this is the best one to use,” smiling with a sense of pride. As illustrated in Figure 3, her grip, with the key protruding outward, ready to strike, transforms a mundane object—a tool to open her front door—into a makeshift weapon. In her hands, the key becomes a subtle instrument of self-defense.

Attached to her keychain is a small black device. She explains that it's a personal safety alarm. “If I pull this, a deafening sound will go off,” she says with a laugh, joking that she won't test it inside the café. Outside, however, she offers a demonstration. When she activates it, a sharp sound cuts through the air, loud enough to stop people in their tracks. The sudden noise draws immediate attention, disrupting the space and making any potential attacker highly visible. This moment illustrates how sound itself can become a tactical tool to reverse the visibility onto the other.



Figure 3. Hanna demonstrates how she holds her key for self-defense. The key, an everyday object, is tactually represented as a protective tool.

Similarly, Lana describes a noise-making tactic of her own: she usually keeps a small whistle attached to her bag. As she begins to show it to me, she realizes it's in her other bag, the one she typically uses when she is going out. That detail alone subtly reveals her intention: to keep it with her in situations where she might feel unsafe.

Another item she always carries in her bag is a mini deodorant. While it is primarily used for its intended purpose, namely hygiene, its function can shift in moments of discomfort or threat: “It's not pepper spray, but I think that also stings a lot when you spray someone in the face with it.” In such moments, it becomes a tool of self-defense.

Juliano takes a different approach, relying on his bike lock as a means of defense. He shows me the heavy chain he carries: “It feels very safe... like a shield.” Lifting it onto his shoulder in one smooth motion, he adds “more like putting on a bulletproof vest.” The chain hangs diagonally across his chest, like a strap. He continues, “But it could also become an extension of your arm if you threaten to swing with it.”

As I hold it in my hands, captured in Figure 4, I feel the weight pulling me downward. It is dense, yet oddly soft, wrapped in black fabric that conceals its steel core. I hear the faint clicking of the metal links locking together, and the cold of the material spreads through my fingers. The objects shift in meaning: from a tool for locking a bike, to a shield for the body, and finally, a potential weapon. It creates distance between the body and the possible threat, not only by becoming a shield or armor, but also by literally extending the body's reach in an

act of defense. Designed to secure property, the lock is reimagined to protect the self.



Figure 4. Illustration of Juliano holding out his bike lock.

Though the objects were not designed for safety, they are creatively reimagined to meet the everyday risks people face. By altering the function of familiar objects, people quietly reclaim a level of control and assert their agency, showing that power is not absolute and they are not passive bystanders. The shifts in meaning are situational: a key, a lock, or deodorant can become a weapon of defense in a single moment, depending on the context and perceived threat.

From a Certeauian perspective, the creativity and improvisation exhibited by Hanna, Juliano, and Lana can be interpreted as acts of resistance, arming themselves to fight against patriarchal heteronormative power structures. However, in conversations with them and others, these tactics were rarely framed that way. Instead, they were described as a form of survival. This raises an essential question: whether we can speak of everyday tactics of resistance, or whether we should refer to them as tactics of survival. This tension between the interpretations, between survival and resistance, will be the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter 3. Between Survival and Resistance

“I don't want to die right away. I would like to have a chance to get away,” says Hanna. During the conversations, many described their tactics not as acts of resistance, but as ways to survive. The tactics used felt more like a manner to cope than a way to fight back. In this chapter, I explore the tension between survival and resistance and how the line between the two is often blurred.

Managing, Not Resisting

Lana tells me, “It is a way to survive and to reduce the chances of something happening—it's about the chance of survival.” Hanna echoes this by saying, “It is more like a necessity.” Amber articulates a similar view:

It's more about knowing that I have the option to defend myself. Knowing that at least I have something I can use because it's better than nothing, it's not that I would be prepared to stab someone with my keys. It's more about knowing that I could, and I'm at least doing something to keep myself safe. That knowledge goes a long way in terms of just feeling safe.

They describe their tactics as offering them a sense of preparedness, a way to manage the constant threat. Employing them provides peace of mind, helping them cope with the unpredictability of public space. They are less about confronting the dominant structures but more about what Lana calls “leveling the playing field” or “simply doing what one must to feel safe.”

By contrast, in the conversations, resistance is often described as something loud, visible, and direct, such as refusing to comply, protesting, reporting to the police, or not stepping aside when a man walks past. Amber explains “With resistance, you might potentially get into a fight, you will stand your ground, and you will uphold.” She recalls a small social experiment she came up with:

What I've heard is that when you walk on the street and pass a guy, you feel an instinct to move, but they don't. So if you don't consciously try to move, they won't avoid you, and you will actually end up bumping into each other. And I've tried that, and it does work this way; I think in this instance, this is indeed an act of resistance.

For her, resistance means actively challenging the existing structures. Not by making yourself invisible or blending in, but by actively standing your ground. This contrasts sharply with how Amber comments on her tactic of dressing more boyish “It's about being as

unprovocative as possible. Really shrink yourself.” Which reveals this mode of self-erasure, where you make yourself smaller and invisible to avoid danger.

Lana sums it up concisely: “I don't think it's resistance. More than the idea of surrendering to the situation.” Suggesting that these tactics feel less like acts of defiance and more like a form of submission to survive. They are not employed to fight the structure head-on, but to find a way to endure within it. It's a form of management. Amber notes, “It definitely falls much more into the realm of survival. Because this is a fact of life that I have to deal with as a woman.” It's something that must be done to navigate and survive in this environment. The tactics used are not optional; they are seen as part of being a woman, and they are embedded habits required simply to get through the day.

This internalisation and normalisation of tactics echoes what Young (2005, p. 35) describes as 'inhibited intentionality', a form of embodied restraint where women are thought to hold back their movements and actions. This happens because women are socialized to see their bodies not just as tools for doing, but also as objects that are constantly watched, judged, or sexualized (Young 2005, p.32). This embodied internalisation can persist even when one's outward identity shifts. As Kai recalls:

There was this very uncomfortable situation where a guy on a bike was kind of following me. I just kept walking, ignoring him, but it was one of those moments where I snapped back. I instantly felt like a 13-year-old girl walking alone. That mindset is just innate, like a sort of fight-or-flight response.

Despite no longer being outwardly read as feminine in his day-to-day life, his reaction reveals how deeply this bodily socialization can be embedded. The moment of fear activated the internalised script of being alert. His experiences underscore how this responsive behavior is etched into the body. Therefore Young's (2005) idea extends also to other non-masculine bodies who instead of using their bodies freely, modify themselves in anticipation of being gazed at through this patriarchal and heteronormative constraint. The act of shrinking oneself, of consciously occupying less space, and trying to become as invisible as possible, is not a grand gesture of defiance but an embodied negotiation to cope with a structure that resists accommodating non-masculine presence.

Over time, such behaviors become habitual. They are repeated until they feel natural. As Ahmed (2006, p. 57) suggests, norms leave an impression on the body, much like a scar formed through repeated strain. These everyday acts of shrinking, avoiding, and adjusting

leave an impression on the body and the self. The labour of staying safe becomes embedded in the body as muscle memory.

I recognise this in my body when I walk faster at night or tense up as I pass a group of men. These are not conscious decisions; they are learned reflexes entrenched in our bodies, embedded through repetition. This subtle choreography becomes part of how one learns to navigate space. Survival tactics shift from deliberate practices into an entire mode of being.

The labor is not only physical but also emotional. Lana tells me, “I never look at people. I already know it's going to happen. So I just look straight ahead.” Charlie echoes this when he says, “I try not to let everything come in. If I took everything seriously, I wouldn't dare go outside anymore.” Both describe a form of emotional numbing, a learned detachment from their surroundings, as a means of coping. As Maria puts it bluntly, “It happens every day, it's like eating breakfast. You don't even think about it at some point.”

What begins as a response to an uncomfortable situation becomes routine. Survival tactics are absorbed into everyday life, including posture, clothing, silence, and avoidance. Hiding their visibility becomes a form of quiet labor. These traces, etched not by trauma alone but by the slow grinding work of existing in a world that constantly reads certain bodies as “wrong.” These are the scars of survival, not always seen but carried in the body in breath, in vigilance. A choreography of minimising visibility and avoiding harm is performed daily, quietly, and often unnoticed.

When self-protective tactics are learned early, repeated daily, and expected socially, they begin to feel more like coping instead of confronting. They become internalised, where living in the body of a woman, queer, trans, non-binary or otherwise non-masculine feels more like a burden. Adapting, shrinking, or withdrawing do not offer victory over a structure, but the continuity of surviving it.

As a woman, I understand this deeply. While I recognize the value in de Certeau et al.'s framing of everyday resistance, their framework feels limited in this regard. It does not fully capture the emotional burden and embodied realities of survival under a dominant power structure. However, it also raises the question: Must resistance be intentional, conscious, and politically recognized to be considered such?

The Radical Act of Living

De Certeau et al. (1980, p. 18) draw on Bourdieu's idea of 'knowing ignorance,' suggesting that people act subversively without fully grasping the broader implications of their actions. These everyday acts exceed what people consciously intend to do. Amber touches on this when I ask whether the act of carrying a key as a weapon might, in itself, resist the stereotype of passivity or weakness that is placed onto women and other non-masculine bodies. She pauses and says, "I do think it could be seen as resistance in a very unconscious way. However, I would definitely still feel it as a form of survival." Her response captures this ambiguity; the act holds resistant potential, but is not necessarily lived as such.

Johansson and Vinthagen (2014) similarly argue that everyday resistance should be understood as a practice, not necessarily defined by clear intent, consciousness, or outcome, but as something entangled with power. From this perspective, actions that are not explicitly labeled as resistance by those performing them can still be understood as such, because they respond to the subtle subversion of dominant relations. These practices emerge from necessity or survival; yet, because they respond to and disrupt power, they carry resistant potential, even if the actor is not aware of or does not frame them that way (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2014).

I begin to approach an answer to whether survival can be understood as resistance through the words of Audre Lorde (1978), who powerfully articulates what survival means in her poem *A Litany for Survival*:

For those of us
who were imprinted with fear
like a faint line in the center of our foreheads
learning to be afraid with our mother's milk
for by this weapon
this illusion of some safety to be found
the heavy-footed hoped to silence us
For all of us
this instant and this triumph
We were never meant to survive.

– Audre Lorde, *A Litany for Survival*

Lorde reminds us that for those who were never meant to survive, continuing to live is itself a triumph. For those who are constantly made to feel 'out of place,' simply

continuing to live, speak, and take up space is already a courageous and powerful act. In her essay *A Burst of Light* (Lorde, 1988), she writes: “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation and this is an act of political warfare.” For Lorde, survival is not merely about staying alive, but about protecting oneself in a world that was not built for you. In this sense, survival becomes a form of resistance.

Choosing not to confront this hostility directly, but instead to move carefully, quietly, and protectively, is not passivity; it is a radical act of self-care. Amber, for example, said: “My main priority is to leave the interaction.” Although she does not describe this as resistance, her decision to prioritize her safety in a world that renders certain bodies as out of place — the decision to care for oneself, to choose safety over confrontation — can itself be understood as a quiet form of resistance.

Amber's action is not submission but a refusal to be broken by a structure that was never meant to protect her. In choosing to de-escalate rather than confront, she acts out of self-preservation and care. In a world where survival is not guaranteed, that choice becomes a radical form of resistance.

Survival does not always take the form of avoidance or fear. It can also appear as care, pride, and the creation of space. As Roman puts it:

Resistance to me is also the feeling that, for example, I am proud of myself. I am proud of myself, for example, with my gayness and so on, and that is a form of resistance because I am actively resisting the system, trying to tell me that I am lesser. [...] The form of resistance that you can take is advocating for life. [...] Creating space so that we can experience, at least for a moment, a place where we aren't pushed toward death.

His words reframe resistance as the act of living and caring within a system not built for you. This aligns with Lorde's notion that survival is an act of self-preservation. Choosing life, caring for yourself and others, creating space where one can breathe, exist, and feel safe, is also a form of survival, as much as it is a form of resistance.

In this sense, survival and resistance are not opposites but entangled responses to the same systems of power. Roman captures this entanglement when he says: “I don't think that they are completely the same thing, but they are. It's like they're not twins. They're cousins.”

Survival and resistance differ in how they are perceived or described, but they arise from the same conditions of oppression and share the same underlying terrain. Their relationship is not binary, but rather ambivalently intertwined, messy, overlapping, and profoundly significant. Even when not labeled as resistance, survival operates within its

horizon, guiltily challenging systems that were never meant to accommodate the bodies moving through them.

Chapter 4. The Archive of Resistance: Storytelling, Memory, Survival

Having explored how everyday tactics emerge in response to gendered, racialized, and heteronormative violence, and how these acts, even when not consciously named as such, can hold resistance, I now take a step further. In this chapter, I shift the focus from individual acts to the ways these tactics are learned, remembered, and shared collectively.

Passed through storytelling, these tactics form a collective memory of survival. In this sense, storytelling becomes a tactic in itself: transmitting knowledge, preserving memory, and sustaining resistance. By exploring this site, I reflect on how the stories shared become part of this ongoing practice.

Shared through narrative

Amber recalls how her mother began teaching her how to stay safe when she was just fourteen or fifteen:

I've had those conversations with my mom, who was the first person to like, really teach me about how to keep myself safe in the streets. What you can do, how to hold your keys right [...] You get that lesson fairly early. Yeah. And we've had those conversations a lot, about where I would go. [...] When I started going out more, I started hanging out with people more, like you know, spending time with friends. Enter that teenage life a bit more [...] and it was less like specific. Let's sit down and talk about this now, and more, just like, hey, you're going out. Make sure you have your keys. Make sure you have a jacket, so if you're wearing something that doesn't cover your shoulders. Make sure you tie your hair up, things like that.

As she speaks, I recognise this immediately. My mother, like Amber's, also from Eastern Europe, would say the same things, saying "don't dress too provocatively, don't walk home alone, be cautious with your drink." We share a quiet moment of recognition, we smile, we laugh, finding comfort in the familiarity of our shared experience.

It's through the stories of our mothers that many of us first learned how to keep ourselves safe in environments that often make us feel exposed. These stories don't follow a clear beginning, middle, and end. Sometimes, they appear as small fragments - "cover your shoulders," "don't walk home alone" - yet each piece gestures toward a larger narrative of patriarchal violence. Taken together, they reveal a deeper storyline of gendered survival, and we can see the broader narrative unfolding.

Survival tactics are not invented in isolation. These warnings, advice, and stories are passed down through families, friends, and peers across generations. Charlie explains how he only started picking up safety tactics after he moved to Rotterdam. “Back home,” he says:

I could just go for a walk at 2 a.m. in the dark and never think twice. I kind of learned safety behavior when I came here. I picked up like, oh, other people are worried about safety as they talk about this, and would like to call each other, or we would walk home in groups.

Similarly, Juliano notes, “I picked up the idea of holding your key between your fingers through conversations with his female friends.” Just as Hanna reflects how she inherited her mother’s vigilance: “I think kind of copied a lot of that behavior from my mother as well [...]’ She was always very frantic – Oh yes, you can’t go home alone, You have to bike with someone” and so she did. She turned her mother’s advice into a personal practice.

It demonstrates how these tactics are not only shaped collectively but also serve as a performative practice. As we listen, we absorb these stories, make them our own, and carry them forward. The knowledge they transmit reflects what de Certeau (1980, pp. 8, 36) calls *metis*: a form of cunning intelligence that is embodied, adaptive, practical, and responsive, rather than theoretical or codified. Storytelling is thus a method that sustains other tactics. If, as de Certeau et al. argue, tactics are tools of the weak, then storytelling is one of their oldest and most effective tools (de Certeau et al., 1980, p. 8).

Storytelling in this sense is not merely descriptive; it is a form of resistance, and this resistance builds a collective memory of survival knowledge. Suggesting that “memory is equivalent in the realm of time to what the ‘arts’ of warfare are to space” makes storytelling a tool that transcends time and space (de Certeau et al., 1980, p.41). It transforms past experiences into present tools, preserving embodied knowledge across generations, even when access to space is limited or denied. Taken together, these tactics reveal a broader transformation: a collective memory formed in response to patriarchal violence (Johnson and Vinthagen, 2014).

Colliding with discomfort

By sharing the tactics we use to navigate public space, we expose the underlying power structures that necessitate them. These subtle acts of navigation and resistance point to something larger. As Ahmed (2023, p.18) writes “to expose a problem is to pose a problem.” Naming these everyday tactics and the structure they respond to is rarely met with ease.

Instead, it often provokes discomfort, especially among those who benefit from the very structures named.

These tensions became clear to me long before I began this research. I would often discuss my experiences and safety tactics with others. Usually, cis het men would dismiss them or see it as paranoid and irrational. Frequently, they would not believe that it was necessary or that the problem was real or serious enough. Discussing these tactics did not always bring the same comfort of resonance in every room.

This sense of frustration was shared with others in their stories. Maria, for instance, gets visibly wound up when she recalls how the men in her life made her feel like she was exaggerating:

And you know, I just don't understand. Like, it's so annoying. I was so annoyed. And I had to say like, like what happened to me, like how normal it is [...] For them to understand that, like we are not exaggerating, you know, like it's so frustrating. It's so disappointing.

The frustration being felt reveals how this lived reality is often questioned by those who can't relate to it, where embodied knowledge is being discredited.

She continued, almost in a kind of despair, "It makes me sound like I'm such a man-hater and like I'm not."

I want to pause here and draw attention to what her words reveal. Being perceived as a man-hater exposes the deeper workings of patriarchal power. By naming the problem, Maria risks becoming the problem. Her speaking out is reframed not as a response to harm, but as hostility, as man-hating. Yet what she is expressing is not hate, but fear, frustration, and the experience of not feeling safe. In that moment, she becomes the killjoy who ruins the mood. This reaction reveals how patriarchy operates beneath the surface of our everyday lives.

As Ahmed (2023, p.18) writes, "when we name the problem, we become the problem." This is how disciplinary power works: it teaches us to prioritize male comfort over our truth. It punishes those who speak up, not through direct silencing, but by making us question our tone, our legitimacy, and even our right to speak (Ibid.). Speaking about gendered violence is so often met with deflection or discomfort. It is dismissed as overreaction or hostility, mainly when directed toward structures that remain unnamed.

However, that discomfort stems from a system attempting to protect itself from exposure. This kind of dismissal and disciplinary power also operates through the way women relate to one another. Lana describes a similar experience:

Since I'm really aware of those differences and those relationships, I do talk a lot with friends about this and with my family, mostly with friends. But I also have girlfriends, for example, who really find this super irritating that I talk about this, that I am aware of this kind of thing. They've even called me a man-hater.

Her words show how patriarchal power circulates not only through men but also through how women are socialized to seek validation from men, not only as a form of desirability but as a way to gain legitimacy in a world where male voices are often treated as the default authority. I can understand this personally, as I have been called the same or even worse. I remember friends asking me not to talk about it, and my grandmother warning me that speaking out would make me less attractive to men.

So let's make one thing very clear: this isn't about hatred toward men, nor is it simply about male violence. It's about the patriarchal violence that shapes the public spaces, affecting not only women but all those who fall outside the hegemonic masculinity (Hooks 2023; Barker 2016). When we expose these structures, it's often misread as an attack on men. However, the critique is directed at a system, not individuals. As Roman puts it: "I don't think that there's anything innate about like straight men that, like, makes them dangerous or anything like that.[...] I don't think of everyone as being like a monolith. Even straight men."

Having clarified this, I want to explain how speaking out challenges authority, and how silencing or dismissing those who speak is a desperate strategy of that authority. The fear of disrupting harmony makes Lana cautious "So I also know that I don't want to, or can't share. Because then I immediately feel uneasy, and so do they. [...] I think maybe it's a kind of not wanting to see or hear it." These moments reveal how deeply this discomfort runs in our social relationships. The discomfort of the listeners becomes a form of silencing. When our stories make others uneasy, especially those in positions of power, that discomfort becomes a tactic of dismissal, an attempt to invalidate, ignore, or suppress. These tensions are captured in the final lines of Audre Lorde's poem:

And when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid

So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive.
– Audre Lorde, *A Litany for Survival*, 1978

Lorde reminds us that even when we fear rejection, resistance lies in the act of speaking itself. As we were never meant to survive, it's better to speak out and remember. That has been the aim of this research: to speak out, to make visible the ways we navigate patriarchal structures, to bring these personal acts together, and reveal their collective significance. By sharing experiences, tactics, and knowledge, we build a collective memory of resistance.

The conversations held, the questions asked, and the stories told are not just research data; they are part of this lived archive of resistance. In that sense, this thesis becomes part of the tactic it documents; it's a contribution to the ongoing practice of survival care and defiance.

Conclusion

What began as a study of everyday tactics of resistance evolved into something much more: a deeper understanding of how survival and resistance intersect in daily life. Drawing on conversations and stories shared in Rotterdam, this research examines how non-masculine people reconfigure public space through small, subversive acts of navigation.

Public space disciplines bodies through visibility. Feminine, queer and other non-masculine bodies are often perceived as out of place and thus become targets of risk and regulation. Navigating these spaces requires embodied, everyday tactics to reduce their visibility and avoid attention. These tactics emerge from the spatial misalignment between non-normative bodies and dominant patriarchal and heteronormative structures.

They manifest in ordinary activities, such as commuting, dressing, or simply walking home, as people adjust their routes, clothing, posture, or timing to manage their exposure and enhance safety. These practices vary across bodies and contexts, as intersecting identities shape them. Although this research primarily focused on gendered, racialized, and sexualized experiences, it suggests that tactical responses likely vary further based on factors such as age, disability, body size, or social class. These dimensions, though not explored in depth here, offer important directions for future research.

Even everyday objects, such as keys, deodorant, or bike locks, are creatively reimagined for self-defense. These acts, while subtle or improved, reveal an ongoing, embodied negotiation of power and refusal to remain completely vulnerable, even if not always consciously framed as resistance.

Most participants describe their tactics not as resistance but as survival practices born out of necessity rather than political intent. These acts are internalized, habitual, and often emotionally exhausting. Still, survival and resistance are not opposites. For those never meant to survive within dominant systems, survival itself can be a form of resistance. Self-preservation, avoidance, or adaptation may be quiet, but they challenge power in deeply embodied ways.

Survival tactics are not isolated but shared across generations and communities through storytelling. These stories convey practical knowledge, foster collective memory, and validate lived realities that are often overlooked and underappreciated. Storytelling becomes a tactic in itself, an act of resistance that challenges the silence imposed by patriarchal norms. By speaking, remembering, and sharing, people contribute to a living archive of embodied resistance. This thesis, too, becomes part of that archive.

Let it be clear: while we devise these tactics, it should never be normalized that they are necessary. It is not the sole responsibility of marginalized people to adapt or speak out; it is the responsibility of institutions and those who benefit from these systems to help dismantle the structure that makes such tactics necessary.

While this research centered on others' experiences, it inevitably transformed my understanding. What began as an attempt to map everyday resistance became a deeply personal reckoning with my assumptions and my place within the very systems I was analyzing.

Opening with a personal memory from my early university years. That moment, while not the only one, shaped my awareness of public space and became the entry point for a broader reflection.

I already knew these safety tactics weren't unique to me. I understood they were gendered and shared by many non-masculine people. Still, there was something deeply comforting in hearing others name the same feelings, voice the same frustrations, and describe tactics I had never thought of. I did not realise how much I needed to hear those stories to make sense of the invisible web of patriarchy we move through daily, to make sense of this exhausting, often infuriating reality.

For a long time, I struggled with the idea that these acts were a form of submission, things we had to do, but cis men did not. It felt like a burden placed solely on us, while they moved freely, unbothered. However, through engaging with the work of de Certeau, Ahmed, and Lorde, as well as other feminist scholars, I began to understand these acts in a new light. Choosing to protect yourself in a world that does not care for you is not submission; it is survival, and it can be a profoundly resilient act. One of the most radical things one can do is care for oneself and others in the face of systems designed to make you disappear.

Listening to trans, queer, and racialized people pushed me to confront how unevenly safety and visibility are distributed, and how certain forms of vulnerability remain unfamiliar to me. I feel honored by their openness and the trust they placed in me. Their words shaped my thinking and guided my analysis.

Through our conversations and theoretical discussions, I came to see that survival and resistance are not binaries; they overlap, blur, and shift depending on who is moving where and when. This recognition brought a sense of resonance.

As we said goodbye, Lana smiled and said, "Hopefully I'll see you at a protest or something." While this research focused on quiet, everyday tactics rather than public forms

of resistance, her words stayed with me. They hinted at something larger, that the idea that these small acts we discussed could connect us. That they could build toward something more is perhaps the most radical hope of all.

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