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# RESISTING SURVEILLANCE: CAN ABOLITIONIST SELF CARE TRULY PROVIDE LIBERATION FROM THE MALE GAZE WITHIN OPPRESSIVE STRUCTURES?

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This paper explores the pervasive nature of the male gaze within patriarchal structures, claiming that women and other marginalised groups are subject to constant surveillance. This leads to the internalisation of the male gaze, which effectively primes women to become their own witnesses in response to societal expectations. By building on Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, the paper applies this theory to social dynamics beyond the original cinematic context. It applies theories of alienation to argue that the male gaze functions as a form of estrangement for those living within systematised oppression. The paper examines how different intersectional identities-such as women of colour and queer individuals- experience its effects in distinct ways. These experiences diverge significantly from those of cisgender, heterosexual women, highlighting the complex intersections of identity within patriarchal systems. The paper makes a clear point that defiance does not erase the gaze but affirms its power as something that must be resisted. Once you become aware of its presence, it cannot simply be forgotten. The author concludes the paper in an optimistic tone, suggesting that abolitionist self-care practices can provide individuals with radical tools to dismantle oppressive structures. Abolitionist self care in isolation finds it difficult to challenge the male gaze, however, activist spaces offers a beacon of hope as means for women to resist the male gaze through mutual recognition and meaningful, interpersonal relationships.

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Many daily tasks performed by women are not acts of free will, but are rather completed to pander to patriarchal expectations. Such oppressive structures dictate the standards of worthiness, compelling women to engage in acts that maintain, rather than resist, systematic gender norms. I will demonstrate that patriarchal structures coerce women and other marginalised groups to constantly experience the scrutiny of the male gaze. They become their own witness, transforming themselves into objects of observation. This essay will consider whether the male gaze is inescapable through the practice of abolitionist self care in activist and non-activist spaces. I will ask the following questions:

- Can we ever cease to be our own witness as a consequence of the male gaze?
- How do different intersectional identities experience the male gaze under patriarchal structures?

I end the paper optimistically, offering a possible way of escaping the male gaze via mutual recognition. This will be especially beneficial in activist spaces, where individuals of similar lived experiences can validate one another and reclaim their narrative away from patriarchal control.

**The Male Gaze**

The male gaze refers to a way of seeing that sexually objectifies women, functioning as the default perspective within patriarchal structures (Eaton, 2012, p.293). Laura Mulvey originall coined the term to analyse representation of women in film. The male gaze framework elucidates how, in many films, male fantasies or desires are projected onto female figures, who are displayed as objects of erotic spectacle to captivate male viewers (Mulvey, 1975, p.11). Despite its relevance to discussing gender dynamics within cinema, it has become evident that the male gaze extends how women are perceived and perceive themselves in daily life.

Gender dynamics on screen replicate real, lived experiences. Mulvey's concept of the male gaze is frequently referenced in Berger's Ways of Seeing, where gender dynamics are similarly framed as women being displayed for men (Berger, 2008, p.25). Men are portrayed as sovereign subjects with the power to act and observe, while women are merely objects of visual pleasure.

In real life, women often come to understand their identity through the male gaze, measuring their worth by their perceived sexual allure to men. This internalisation of the male gaze often occurs because patriarchal systems of power reward women who adhere to it. For example, thinner women are more likely to succeed professionally (Fulwood, 2023). These ideals, rooted in Eurocentric, youthful and non-disabled standards, exclude women who do not conform to such appearances, where attractiveness corresponds with thinness. Thus, the patriarchy assigns greater value to thinner women because they align more closely with these ideals. As Berger (2008, p.25) observes, by trying to 'contain it and interiorise it', women believe they gain an advantage in navigating patriarchal systems. Thus, women train themselves to remain under constant self-scrutiny, ensuring the gaze becomes a permanent fixture in their way of seeing.

In this paper, I use the term 'women' to refer to individuals who identify as women, recognising this as a gender identity rather than a strictly biological category. However, I also acknowledge that gender minorities, including non-binary and gender-fluid individuals, can similarly experience the constraints of the male gaze. The experience of the male gaze is not uniform; individuals positioned differently within patriarchal systems are objectified in distinct ways. In particular, trans women face unique forms of discrimination compared to cis women, as hey are subjected to both transphobia and misogyny, altering their experience of gendered objectification. It is important to specify that not all women are perceived or affected in the same, sexually objectifying manner.

For example, women of colour are often more sexualised than their white counterparts. This heightened objectification leads to disproportionately high levels of gender-based violence and discrimination, as they are more frequently perceived as passive objects (Holmes, 2016, p.1). These disparities stem from the Eurocentric and white supremacist foundations of the male gaze, which intersect with racism to perpetuate harmful stereotypes. Historically, those marginalised from Eurocentric beauty ideals have been viewed as 'lesser' (Kharem, 2006, p.26). In mainstream narratives, women who deviate from Eurocentric beauty standards are deemed less attractive, thus further dehumanising

women of colour. This devaluation may, in turn, contribute to the higher rates of gender-based violence they face, as patriarchy diminishes the worth of women who are not fulfilling their "purpose" as objects of desire. Additionally, the male gaze frequently fetishises lesbian relationships and other queer partnerships that deviate from patriarchal norms, subjecting them to a different form of hypersexualisation. These experiences diverge significantly from those of cisgender, heterosexual women, highlighting the complex intersections of identity within patriarchal systems.

**Alienation of the Male Gaze**

The internalisation of the male gaze becomes a fundamental aspect of women's lived experience. Their sense of self is split into two (Ibid, p.25): they learn to perceive themselves as objects meant to satisfy male desire while simultaneously existing as conscious subjects. In this process, a woman's internal being is reshaped—she comes to see herself through the eyes of an imagined male observer (Bartky, 1982, p.38). For many women, this self-surveillance makes it difficult to live authentically, as they are estranged from themselves. I will argue that because the male gaze is inescapable, the resulting self-estrangement is likewise unavoidable.

Before examining how such alienation is inescapable, it is important to first define what alienation entails for an individual. Alienation refers to the fragmentation of the self and the restriction of one's ability to exercise human agency in the world (Ibid, p.34). The male gaze exerts its alienating force in two aspects of women's lives: their labour and the final product of said labour. I will illustrate this dynamic through the lens of abolitionist self-care.

**The Male Gaze is Inescapable**

Consider a woman who, after learning about the male gaze at university, suddenly becomes aware that all her actions have been shaped by it. Frustrated, she no longer wants to satisfy the desires of men. *From this moment onwards, I will no longer allow the male gaze to dictate what I do.* Perhaps she shaves off the long luscious hair deemed beautiful by patriarchal standards. In this act of rebellion, she might believe she has escaped the male gaze.

Margaret Atwood, like myself, would argue otherwise:

> *Even pretending you aren't catering to male fantasies is a male fantasy: pretending you're unseen, pretending you have a life of your own, that you can wash your feet and comb your hair unconscious of the ever-present watcher peering through the keyhole, peering through the keyhole in your own head, if nowhere else. You are a woman with a man inside watching a woman. You are your own voyeur* (Atwood, 1993, p.392).

Atwood's passage reveals a paradox: even in defiance, a woman remains surveillance under the male gaze. The 'ever-present watcher' symbolises its omnipresence, an invasive force that continues to sexualise women even when they believe they have escaped it. The imagery of the keyhole suggests a voyeur secretly observing a woman in what she assumes are private moments, stripping her of subjectivity and reinforcing her status as an object to be consumed. Through patriarchal conditioning, the male gaze is internalised—once you know it exists, you cannot forget it. Even in defiance, you cannot erase the power that it holds over you. You become your own witness under the male gaze.

It is paradoxical to claim that an entity, such as the male gaze, has no control over you. Any interaction with it—whether in compliance or defiance—acknowledges its influence over you. To insist that something has no power over your actions is still to recognise its presence and how it shapes your behaviour.

For instance, a woman who consciously rejects the male gaze, rather than unconsciously conforming to it, is still engaging with it. Defiance does not erase the gaze but affirms its power as something that must be resisted. Once you become aware of it, it cannot simply be forgotten.

**Abolitionist Self-Care**

The male gaze is upheld by patriarchal structures, meaning that only radical acts can effectively dismantle it. Abolitionist self-care, as championed by Audre Lorde, is an act of survival focusing on caring for one's inner self to resist against oppressive structures. It is not self-indulgence but a radical act of defiance that allows activists to preserve themselves, enabling them to continue campaigning for social justice (Porteous-Sebouhian, 2021). Self-care can involve activities such as journaling, poetry-writing, reading, or meditation, all of which foster emotional wellbeing and self-awareness.

Self-care can be unsettling and raw. It requires confronting uncomfortable emotions and may not immediately helpful. However, these activities ultimately equip individuals to navigate oppression with greater resilience.

One way in which abolitionist self-care may counteract the male gaze is through poetry- writing. In this process, an individual confronts the psychological burden imposed by patriarchal surveillance within a non-activist space. Lorde explains that it allows our feelings to 'first be made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action' (Lorde, 1977, p.1). Here, poetry-writing allows an individual to articulate their experiences, transforming the abstract weight of oppression into something tangible.

Practicing abolitionist self-care holds the potential to carve out a space beyond the male gaze. The poetry that emerges from this practice belongs to the writer, not to patriarchal structures or those who benefit from them. The act of self-expression strengthens activists, and strong activists do not cater towards the systems they seek to dismantle. Poetry can function as a revolutionary mouthpiece, amplifying the voices that would otherwise be suppressed. Crucially, self-care is non-alienating— it does not fragment a woman of from her inner self but instead brings her closer to it. Through poetry, she ceases to view her frustrations as external but rather as a part of her identity. Rather than being consumed by frustration, she integrates them into a fuller sense of self.

However, even abolitionist self-care is not entirely immune to the influence of the male gaze. Poetry-writing, despite its radical potential, may still serve patriarchal expectations. A woman isolating herself to write and escape patriarchal expectations may appear as an image of passive, introspective femininity. Instead of amplifying her voice, the process of writing may instead paint a picture of women elegantly putting their thoughts to paper rather than an agent of change.

This reveals a troubling reality: the male gaze has the capacity to sexualise any action a woman performs, even those intended to resist it. Since the male gaze is embedded within patriarchal structures, it cannot simply be unseen. Any act of compliance or defiance is influenced by the male gaze. A woman writing poetry to reclaim herself is still affected by the male gaze. The omnipresent 'watcher' that Atwood describes continues objectifying through the metaphorical keyhole.

Thus, a woman regaining her sense of self through poetry is not liberation from the male gaze in and of itself. The very fact that self-care is necessary for women to reclaim their subjectivity demonstrates the inescapability of patriarchal surveillance. Even resistance is shaped by what it resists. The male gaze exerts its power not only by dictating how women should behave but also by structuring the terms of their defiance.

**Activist Spaces**

In non-activist spaces, individuals cannot fully overcome the male gaze and the resulting alienation. To address this, I will explore how activist spaces can serve as a means to overcome alienation. An activist space is a community of like-minded individuals working to dismantle oppressive systems. In such circles, women and other gender minorities can create interpersonal, meaningful relationships with others facing similar oppression. By resisting the structural force of the male gaze together, they create a sense of self without the pressure of external objectification, providing momentary relief from the male gaze. In such spaces, individuals validate each other's experiences and identities, fostering recognition beyond objectification.

However, the male gaze objectifies women differently based on race, sexuality, and other intersecting identities. It will be more difficult for a cisgender, heterosexual white woman to meaningfully connect with a queer woman of colour, as they have different lived experiences. One cannot fully understand oppression unless you are the one being oppressed. Women of colour are hyper sexualised and fetishised as 'exotic' under the male gaze (Stanton, 2022, p.443). Furthermore, queer women are not only objectified by the male gaze but are further fetishised by men for their queerness. Their sexuality is objectified further than heterosexual individuals' sexuality would be (Dilloh, 2019). While understanding and solidarity are possible, they remain inherently limited. Additionally, activist spaces may unintentionally cater towards white, cisgender, and heterosexual women, making it more difficult for queer women of colour to form connections and experience full recognition within them.

Yet, connection remains possible. When a community is built on mutual recognition, individuals can free themselves from the internalised male gaze. Together,

they could exist in a vacuum for a few moments in time and be the overpowering gaze that affirms their subjectivities. This gaze is one that does not reduce them to an object. They feel seen as an equal, as another person who is imperfect. They will no longer look at themselves in the same voyeuristic way in such spaces, as it is a judgment free space, and individuals will understand one another through mutual oppressive experiences. This will prevent a woman from alienating herself as she stops observing herself as if she were an object. Furthermore, activists in these spaces can point out if your actions may be stemming from the male gaze, even if you yourself have been unaware of it. Not only is there this sense of mutual recognition, but accountability, which can inspire activists to continue fighting against the internalised gaze.

An activist environment that is free of judgement must be delicately constructed. Each individual within the community must constantly fight against the influence of the male gaze. They must never objectify the other individuals within the community. However, since the gaze is so deeply internalised within us, disengaging from it and its influence on how we perceive the world is not a simple task. Despite this, activist spaces offer us hope to disengage from the male gaze through meaningful, interpersonal relations.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I have demonstrated that the male gaze alienates women and other gender minorities within patriarchal structures. Overcoming this alienation is more difficult in isolation or non-activist environments. However, I have proposed that mutual recognition offers a way to escape the male gaze and its alienating effects. Activist spaces foster non-judgmental environments, where like-minded individuals value each other as their authentic selves, rather than being reduced to the objectifying perceptions imposed by the male gaze. While it is difficult to achieve this mutual recognition and deep understanding, it provides an individual with the means to transcend the male gaze's oppressive influence.

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