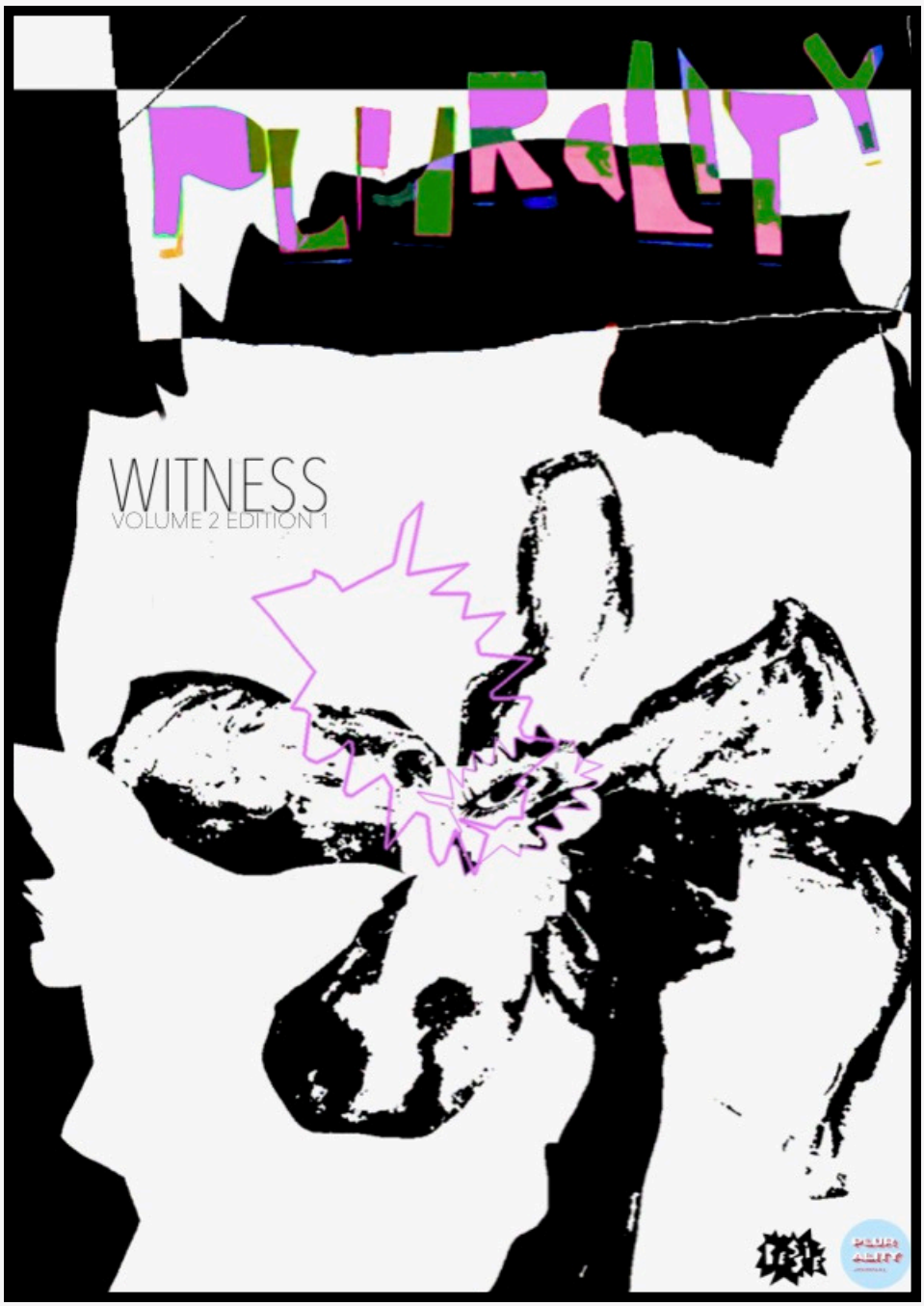
PURITY

WITNESS

VOLUME 2 EDITION 1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EDITOR'S LETTER

Plurality celebrated its first year anniversary this December, and it truly has been an incredible year for the publication. From conception to materialization to now having two issues published. I am grateful for the journey it has taken to come this far and the ways this publication has facilitated my personal growth in many ways. I hope that *Plurality* has succeeded in its goal of providing a space for undergraduate researchers to share in the study of intersectionality. Additionally, that this publication has been a learning ground for both editors and authors, as we work together to create something which will build the feminist literature.

Marx described communism as a specter haunting Europe, but it seems the liberalism of the world has looked the other way towards a more familiar form of individualistic genocidal power and found comfort in the arms for facism. In the continuation of genocide and colonialisation, memory plays a powerful role in strengthening resistant community. This issue our theme was 'Witness', conceived of by our Head Section Editor Maria Farsoon. This issue we focus on the importance of memory and how witnesshood is impacted by positionality, specifically how witnessing is a highly gendered and racialised practice.

The issue starts with Mia Taylor's exploration of whether abolitionist spaces can provide a refuge from the infamous male gaze. Rounding out our Philosophy and Divinity section, we have A Hijazi who writes about how the defiance of Palestinian witness testimony creates historical continuity from sites of dispossession. For Art and Literature, we have Rose Devine who analyses the role of women as symbolic witnesses and repositories of desire in Marie de France's *Lanval*. Jack Lyall discusses how Emmanuel Levanis' conception of responsibility appears in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Jean Rhys' *Good Morning, Midnight*. Sommer Lugert, for our Social Sciences section, looks at how current frameworks of human trafficking lack intersectionality leading to the marginalisation of certain trafficking survivors. Analysing the Jinv resistance, Tongyu Hu provides an account of how to understand this radical feminist movement happening in China. Anna Braun, starts our History and Classics section, with a critical analysis of current narratives around northern Nigerian women in the context of Boko Haram and its related conflict, arguing that the framing of victimization overshadows women as witnesses and their diversity of experiences. Next, Melissa Kocacinar looks at how the memories of the Algerian diaspora put into question monolithic narratives of national identity in France. Yuna Watanabe uses the lens of orientalism to bear witness to the lost history of Japan's premodern homosexual culture, nanshoku. For our musings section, we have Ruby Scott looking at online hate-speech using Baudrillard's "Simulacra and Simulation" framework to argue how online commenters fail to witness the personhood of marginalised people. My sincerest thank you to our authors for submitting their work and being open to developing it into the drafts you see in this issue. I encourage you to spend time in acknowledging your momentus achievements as well as the way this process has hopefully helped you grow as a researcher.

As the journal looks towards the future, I want to acknowledge the contributions of our editorial committee. Bessie and Daisy, our artists, were essential to constructing a journal which communicates these academic arguments in an aesthetically pleasing way.

EDITOR'S LETTER

For constructing the layout and formatting these beautiful pages, thank you Gabi. To our section editors, Katie, Zeynep, Megan, Rose, Helena and Ashley, for working with our authors and helping them tease out their arguments in helping them achieve their authorial goals. Our copy editing team: Abby, Daisy, Ruth, Tamsin, and Everest, has made sure that our journal maintains its strict citational and editorial standards. For putting out the word and growing the areas where students are uttering the word *Plurality*: Emilia, Rhiannon and Holly. Finally, this issue would not have been possible without the support and leadership of Maria and Grace.

Submissions for our third issue 'Coalition and Interruption' are currently open if you desire to either embark on this journey again or for the first time. I encourage you to question the fast-paced nature of modern life and constant distraction to slow down to write down your thoughts on gender and intersectionality. Since gender is unique in that we all have a truly democratic access to it. Since, borrowing from Judith Butler, it is something which the world places onto us, whether consentingly or not. Therefore, I think we are all in some ways experts on gender, and certainly our own experiences of gender, and this expertise is crucial in questioning the patriarchial and white supremacist narratives present in our social world. Writing these experiences down and spending time to question the background assumptions which seem most transparent is critical. Since, unfortunately, in the Western world we take written accounts as having a more accurate property. Despite the fact that this then leaves out ways of remembering which are communicated orally, tactically or in non-written forms. *Plurality*, provides a place for students to communicate this expertise to others in a written form and to platform the voices of both new writers who have not yet academically published their work and those of us who have had already been privy to the privilege of having a something under our name.

Looking to the future, there will soon be new faces leading the direction and operations of *Plurality*. I look forward to seeing how this will benefit the journal, expand its horizons and how new witnesses will formulate a unique memory of undergraduate gender studies research happening during this time. I hope you enjoy Issue 2: Witness.

Thank you

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Welcome to
Philosophy & Divinity

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

BY MIA TAYLOR

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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.

EDITED BY KATIE O'CONNER, COPY EDITED BY RUTH WATERSON,
REVIEWED BY MAISIE BELLE NORTON

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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THE LOST PARADISE: THE ROLE OF THE WITNESS IN SHAPING THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF JERUSALEM

BY A HIJAZI

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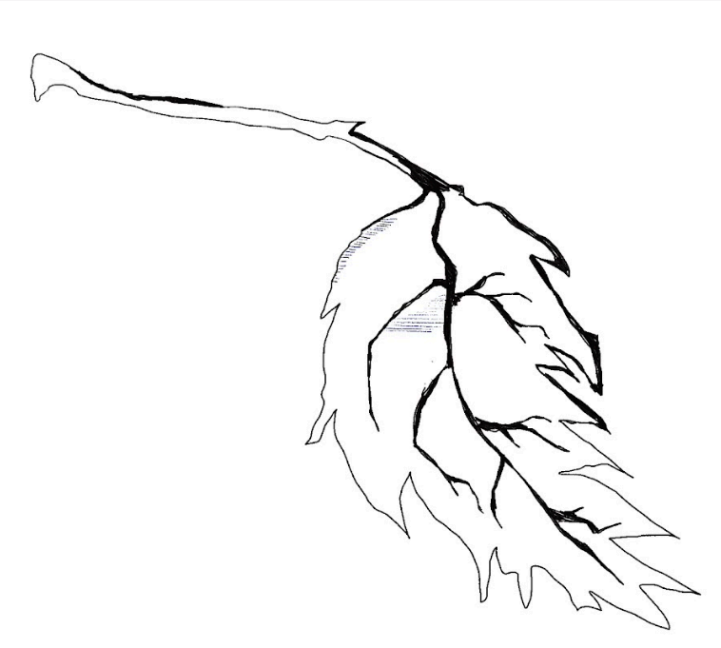
Jerusalem is not merely occupied; it is actively rewritten. This piece examines how Palestinian witness testimony defies the gradual violence of erasure, transforming the city from a site of dispossession into an assertion of historical continuity. Drawing from decolonial theory, phenomenology, and political philosophy, I argue that testimony is not merely an act of remembrance but an epistemic and ontological intervention that challenges both material oppression and the state's monopolization of historical truth. I interrogate the material conditions of occupation, positioning them within a broader philosophy of spatial domination: the destruction of Palestinian homes, the calculated deprivation of infrastructure, and the juridical apparatus that renders Palestinian existence precarious. Drawing on Nur-eldeen Masalha's concept of memoricide, I examine how settler-colonial power operates not just through territorial expansion but through the systematic erasure and reconstruction of historical narratives, turning Jerusalem into a battleground of meaning as much as land. Testimony emerges here not as passive recollection but as an act of existential resistance. The act of witnessing asserts both the primacy of lived experience and the refusal of epistemic erasure, positioning Palestinian memory as a challenge to the structures that seek to render it illegible. Judith Butler's work on 'grievability' is mobilized to interrogate how international frameworks of recognition operate to exclude Palestinian suffering from the category of the politically visible. Further on, I situates testimony within digital landscapes, analyzing the El-Kurd family's plight in Sheikh Jarrah as an extension of what James C. Scott terms 'hidden transcripts,' a counter-history that bypasses the gatekeepers of official discourse. 'Digital *sumud*' is introduced as a contemporary iteration of Palestinian endurance, where social media functions not just as documentation but as a subversion of hegemonic narratives. Ultimately, this essay argues that Palestinian testimony does more than document loss. It disrupts, resists, and reclaims. The struggle over Jerusalem is not just territorial; it is a war over meaning itself, and through the voices of those who refuse to be erased, the city remains a living archive of defiance.

EDITED BY KATIE O'CONNER, COPY EDITED BY RUTH WATERSON, REVIEWED BY PIETRO STEFANINI



You were probably too young when the Zionist monster gobbled up the most beautiful half of the most beautiful city [Jerusalem] in the world [...] But I walked up and down all its hills, among its houses built of stone – white stone, pink stone, red stone – castle – like houses [...] You'd think they were jewels [...] remind me of flowers in its valleys, of Spring, of the glitter of its blue skies after spring showers [...] Flowers like children's eyes spring up from beneath the stones and around the barren roots of trees. [...] This is why nights bring back to me memories of Jerusalem, and I grieve and rage and cry.[1]

Cradled between the Mediterranean and the Dead Sea, Jerusalem stands: a fortress where the weight of millennia collides with the everyday grit of Palestinian endurance. For over 5000 years, its history has been inscribed in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, where faith stands on the cusp of resurrection and loss; Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, wherein the Dome of the Rock glimmers gold with time-defying splendour and sanctity. Far beyond landmarks, both are witnesses to the continuity that renders Jerusalem both eternal and contested. In the heart of the Old City, four labyrinthine quarters bear the imprints of the many cultures and beliefs that found shelter within its walls, preserving their ancient rituals as they are watched, judged, and endangered. I will examine how Palestinian testimonies transform Jerusalem from a space of dispossession into a site of radical hope and resistance through interweaving sacred memory and material struggle. Their accounts consistently frame their connection to the city and the country through dual registers: the immediate reality of occupation and displacement alongside an unshakeable vision of Jerusalem as both ancestral home and sanctuary. Through analysis of these witness accounts, examination of Israeli policies as tools of oppression, and decolonial theory, I will demonstrate how testimony serves as both documentation and transformation, revealing Jerusalem as a living archive of a paradise lost and paradise imagined.

I. The Material Conditions

Beneath the Holy veneer, about 388,720[2] Palestinians live in occupied Jerusalem[3], where 'home' is often an inherited space that carries the stories of generations. Collapsing infrastructure, inconsistent water lines, and erratic electrical and sewage systems: the Israeli municipality presides over this chaos, offering little more than calculated neglect. State-protected Israeli settlers push ever closer, erecting flags like markers of conquest, dragging a long standing policy of daily antagonism. 1948 saw the *Nakba*[4], the conquest of Palestine and the establishment of the state of Israel through the expulsion and mass displacement of more than half of historic Palestine's population, and the destruction of Palestinians' cultural, social, and political structures. Thousands of Jerusalemites were expelled from their homes as Zionist forces advanced towards the city. The depopulation of the Arab neighbourhoods in western Jerusalem was among the most comprehensive of any Palestinian city. Since the seizing of 1967, urban growth has been stifled through the systematic denial of building permits and the seizure of property to constrict the future of Jerusalem and its Arab inhabitants.

II. Reimagining the Homeland

Paradise as a concept takes on a particular significance when applied to Jerusalem's Palestinian inhabitants. Their paradise, not a distant promised realm, but a tangible homeland from which they have been systematically alienated. In this context, the witness's account serves not merely as a historical record, but rather an active form of resistance against the erasure of Palestinian history and thus, identity as a whole. Through their eyes, we experience Jerusalem not as a city of abstract religious importance but as a sentient entity shaped by its people's continuous struggle and resilience. The concept of witnessing extends beyond mere observation to encompass a moral and ethical

dimension. Within the landscapes of trauma and oppression, the act of bearing witness becomes a mode of testimony that actively counters erasure and articulates a claim to justice. Palestinians witnessing the ongoing transformation of Jerusalem are not passive spectators but agents of memory; making an ethical commitment to consistently preserve and reassert an identity endangered.

III. Justice, Memory, and Paradise Redefined

In Islamic cosmology, Jerusalem is inextricably linked to paradise; being the site of the Prophet Muhammad's Night Journey and Ascension (*Isra and Mi'raj*), an axis mundi that collapses earthly limitations and the divine realm. This echoes through Christian and Jewish theology as well, which similarly imbues the city with paradisal qualities. In Christianity, Jerusalem is a vision of the Heavenly City, a prefiguration of the Kingdom of God; for Judaism, it is the focal point of messianic hope, a place to which prayers for ultimate redemption are perpetually directed.

However, the interaction with the notion of paradise transcends purely religious connotations and inevitably enters the realm of the everyday. It embodies a concrete vision of temporal justice that permeates its physical and social fabric, rooted in the lived realities of the present rather than abstract or deferred eschatological ideals. In this context, temporal justice captures the relentless efforts of Jerusalem's Palestinian inhabitants to maintain their presence and claim their rights to the city, even as they face systematic dispossession. It shifts the focus from Jerusalem as merely a religious or theological aspiration to a contested space of reclamation wherein the histories and lived experiences of Palestinians actively defy narratives of erasure. This justice is inextricably linked to the soil itself –the ontological status of the city. Within this duality lies the tension between its status as both promised and perpetually deferred paradise; its eschatological aspirations colliding with the quotidian experiences of its inhabitants.

IV. Memoricide

Palestinian scholar Nur-eldeen Masalha's concept of 'memoricide' – the systematic destruction of Palestinian cultural heritage and memory – is the ultimate framework for understanding the importance of witness testimonies in Jerusalem. Masalha (2015) explores how neutrality cannot exist when it comes to naming places, due to its inherent tie to the history, identity, and memory of those who reside there. In the case of Palestine, place names connect Palestinians to their land through generations of cultural and social memory. When these names are erased or changed, the connection is disrupted. In fact, the very act of renaming is a well-known colonial strategy – similar to Zimbabwe/Rhodesia, Ulster/Northern Ireland, and such– and is extensively utilized by the settler Israeli government. Consider the case of Silwan, a Palestinian neighbourhood in Eastern Jerusalem; branded as the 'City of David' due to an illegitimate archaeological site, and thus forcefully enveloped into a false colonial narrative which centred Jewish biblical history and strategically displaced long standing Palestinian

presence. Renaming efforts like these are made to legitimize Israeli connection to the land and advance their ideological-national goals, such as creating a new collective identity for Jewish immigrants from Europe, who were often not native to the Middle East. After the Nakba of 1948, the renaming projects were intensified. The Israeli government officially adopted a policy of replacing Arabic place names with Hebrew ones, establishing committees specifically to facilitate this, such as the Committee for the Designation of Place-Names in the Negev Region. Since 1967, the naming conventions adopted by Israeli authorities for

settlements across the Golan Heights, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip intensified, to advance broader national ideological narratives. This was particularly evident in the historical usage of the biblical designations Judea and Samaria in place of 'West Bank' – an intentional linguistic choice that reinforced particular political and historical claims to these territories (Katz, 1995). Invoking these ancient names allows the Israeli state to embed its narrative within a biblical framework, effectively intertwining modern geopolitics with religious and historical symbolism to assert legitimacy in their Zionist movement. Claiming a divine ultimatum – the biblical covenant in which God is said to have promised the land of Israel to the Jewish people – as justification allows the Israeli state to bolster its Zionist rhetoric to grant moral and scripturally-backed legitimacy to its settlement expansions and territorial annexation. Religious interpretations of Jewish texts vary significantly, with many groups viewing them through spiritual or historical lenses rather than justification for territorial control. Ultra-Orthodox groups like Neturei Karta[5] and secular anti-Zionist movements explicitly reject the notion that these texts mandate modern state formation. Despite this diversity of Jewish thought, the Israeli government frequently positions itself as the singular representative of Jewish identity and interests. This positioning serves to deflect criticism through two mechanisms: first, by marginalizing anti-Zionist Jewish voices, and second, by characterizing external criticism as inherently anti-Semitic. Such framing creates a chilling effect where critics may self-censor out of fear of being labelled anti-Semitic, even when raising legitimate policy concerns. This conflation between political criticism and anti-Semitism ultimately undermines efforts to combat actual instances of anti-Jewish prejudice by blurring the distinction between genuine bigotry and principled political disagreement. And so, in this context, Palestinian witnesses become guardians of memory, their testimonies actively counteracting memoricide. Witnessing is a reclamation of narrative and space, sustaining a vision of Jerusalem that defies state-imposed amnesia and preserving the histories that doctored maps and offshore-funded faux archaeological sites attempt to erase. The significance of such testimonies lies in their resistance to ideological hegemony and consistent assertion that the sacred and the human are intertwined, and that memory, as is the city itself, is both a battleground and a sanctuary.

V. *Intifadas* and the Persistence of Memory

Since 1967, Palestinians in Jerusalem have lived under an occupation that permeates every aspect of daily life; the slow constriction of day-to-day activities at the hands of the IDF[6], increased settler violence, and state-sponsored failing infrastructure. In the decades following, Israel pursued policies specifically aimed at altering Jerusalem's demographical balance. The construction of settlements in occupied Eastern Jerusalem, along with discriminatory residency laws and home demolitions steadily eroded Palestinian presence in the city. The battle for Jerusalem is fought house after house, family after family. Each Palestinian home demolished and each family expelled is but a part of a larger strategy to erase Palestinian existence in the city. Witness accounts from this period document not only the hardships of surviving under occupation but also the myriad ways in which Jerusalemites stubbornly maintained their presence despite staring down the barrel of the gun.

Naturally, this was not only confined to Jerusalem. On February 26th of 1988, while returning from grazing sheep near Nablus, seventeen-year-old Wael Joudeh and his cousin Osamah encountered what would become the first recorded instance of Yitzhak Rabin's infamous 'breaking the bones' policy[7], which transformed further into a 'shoot to maim' directive as the occupation spanned decades. Both remain regularly implemented to this day as a means for Israel to continue its slaughter of Gaza and violence in the West Bank and Occupied Territories. The 2018 Great March of Return demonstrated the enduring impact of Rabin's legacy, as occupying forces targeted Palestinian civilians during peaceful protests. Of the 5,972 documented injuries, 493 involved upper limbs, 4,903 lower limbs, and 940 children were left permanently disabled[8]. Wael and Osamah were followed by IOF soldiers who severely beat them over thirty minutes, using stones to intentionally break their bones. Wael was struck on the head with a soldier's helmet, knocked to the ground, and beaten further. Osamah, who tried to escape, was dragged down by three soldiers and subjected to the same brutal treatment. "They not only wanted to break our bones and inflict physical pain on us, they also wanted to humiliate us and shatter our spirit."[9] The soldiers'

actions, including one's declaration that he was 'born to kill Palestinians,' only further demonstrates how individual acts of violence embodied broader institutional policies, despite the insistence on their supposed isolated nature. Unbeknownst to him at the time, Wael's incident was documented by a witness in a nearby building, which transformed his private trauma into public evidence and ultimately led to international media attention and eventual release. While the cousins were held at Tubas' al-Faraa detention centre in the occupied West Bank, a soldier stormed their cell berating Wael for "the whole world [thinking] [he is] dead" due to the documentation and subsequent barrage of journalists at the detention centre. Here, the power of witnesshood lies in its ability to expose oppressive systems by disseminating the truths that counter the oppressor's false narratives. In Wael and Osamah's case, the Israeli narrative relied on framing Palestinians as inherent security threats, justifying acts of violence and imprisonment under the guise of maintaining order. This framework, central to Israel's occupation policies, obscures the systemic nature of the violence imposed upon Palestinians, portraying it as reactive and necessary rather than deliberate, calculated, and intentionally oppressive. However, the act of witnessing disrupts this constructed narrative. The video evidence did not merely document violence but shifted the locus of power; it bore witness to the cruelty of Israel's engineered strategies created to physically and psychologically crush Palestinian resistance. By capturing the soldiers' deliberate brutality, the video countered claims of self-defence or necessity and ultimately forced the global community to confront the systemic use of violence as a tool of domination.

Beyond immediate outcomes, acts of witnesshood erode the foundations of the oppressor's long-term ability to sustain their narrative. Every act of documentation creates a counter-history that outlives the manufactured myths created to obscure it and preserve the truth for future generations. Witnesshood not only safeguards memory against erasure but also amplifies solidarity; mobilizing international actors who might otherwise remain uninvolved, by placing their lived experiences into the public consciousness. In Wael's case, his testimony –reinforced by visual evidence –became not only an act of survival, but a symbol of defiance in a system designed to strip it away as well.

Decades later, he returned to the site of his assault to give his testimony, breathing life into the space and re-establishing it as a site of Palestinian resilience rather than submission, challenging both temporal and spatial attempts at erasure. Witnesshood in this sense is enduring; it is neither passive nor fleeting. It actively reclaims what oppression seeks to obliterate, ensuring that the stories of the oppressed remain a challenge to the oppressor's narrative long after the moment has passed. Joudeh recalls that "the stones of Palestine were merciful, that's why we survived." The very tools used for their torture became, in his narrative, symbols of Palestinian resilience and their deep-seated connection to the land itself. Wael and Osamah are now regarded as key figures of the first Intifada; their experiences igniting a movement that compelled the Arab League to convene an emergency meeting to address the fate of the people in the occupied Palestinian territories (Hammad, 2017). "I always tell my children what happened to me. I do not ever try to hide it," Wael says. "They always tell my story to their colleagues and friends."

VI. Testimony as Existential Resistance

Within Jerusalem's contested spaces, Palestinian witness testimony crystallizes into something beyond mere narrative – it becomes an assertion of existence against

systematic erasure. The voice becomes a tool of persistence. It operates within the interstices of power, embodying what James C. Scott terms 'hidden transcripts,' (1990) vital narratives that take place offstage, pulsing beneath the official histories created by power holders. Naturally, the absence of proper state structures has transformed the collective Palestinian memory into a cornerstone of identity formation.

Memory serves as one of the few ways Palestinians can assert their identity. The transmission of pre-1948 Jerusalem memories across generations does not simply preserve the past – it disrupts the temporal boundaries often imposed on Palestinian claims to presence and establishes a continuity that defies political demarcations.

Furthermore, contemporary digital outlets have revolutionized the witness landscape. In May of 2021, the Israeli government ordered six Palestinian families to vacate their homes in Eastern Jerusalem neighbourhood Sheikh Jarrah to make way for Israeli settlers, despite living there for generations. The court rulings[10]culminate a decades-long legal and existential battle for these families to remain rooted in their community. In 1972, several Jewish settler organizations –often heavily financed by international donors –filed multiple lawsuits claiming historic Jewish ownership of the land. These well-funded efforts eventually led to the ongoing displacement of 43 residents in 2002, the Hanoun and Ghawi families in 2008, and the Shamasneh family in 2017. In the case of the El-Kurd family, who had faced displacement during the aforementioned evictions, social media emerged as a crucible of immediate testimony. 22-year-old Mohammed El-Kurd, through digital documentation, managed to lobby 81 UK lawmakers to sign a letter calling for an end to the dispossession of Palestinian families in Jerusalem, including his very own. Notably, El-Kurd was eleven years old when he returned home to his family's belongings tossed to the street as Israeli settlers took over half of his home. In an article he wrote in 2020, he describes them returning more than a decade later 'to finish what they started' [11]. In his article, El-Kurd describes his grandmother's plight after being expelled from Haifa, amongst countless others, during the *Nakba*. In 1956, she resettled in Sheikh Jarrah along with 28 refugee families where she was promised legal title to the property within three years. The false promise dissipated. "Still, my grandmother remained. She raised and buried her daughters in Sheikh Jarrah. My parents married in our house. We planted pomegranates, apples, oranges, figs."

El-Kurd reclaimed his family's narrative by summoning others to bear witness to the same injustices that had forced his grandmother into exile, pushing her from Haifa to Sheikh Jarrah in the wake of the *Nakba*. Yet where she endured her displacement in silence, bound by the limits of her time, El-Kurd wielded digital platforms to amplify his struggle, weaving a network of witnesshood that spanned continents. This contrast reveals a haunting continuity: the machinery of dispossession remains unchanged, but the mediums through which Palestinians resist and testify have evolved, turning individual grief into a global chorus demanding justice. The concept of 'digital sumud' [12] comes to mind; these platforms – from independent journalism to Instagram live streaming – transform documentation into resistance by creating networks of witness that bypass traditional gatekeepers of narrative control. This technological shift has not merely amplified Palestinian voices; it has fundamentally altered the dynamics of who controls the story of Sheikh Jarrah, of Jerusalem, of Palestine.

VII. The Moral Weight of Witnessing

The various ethical dimensions of witnessing in Jerusalem reveal much about the intersection between personal trauma and the collective imperative. Witnesses navigate treacherous terrain between the

necessity of testimony and the weight of its emotional toll as they inevitably bear the cross. Becoming repositories of both their individual and shared histories, they are transformed into custodians of truth in a space where reality itself is contested. The ethical burden of witnessing does not rest solely on those who testify; it extends to those who receive these testimonies. Judith Butler's (2016) framework of "grievability" takes on particular resonance. Testimony challenges the hierarchies of whose lives matter, whose lives are worthy of grief. In the context of Jerusalem, the challenge is to create conditions where Palestinian lives and experiences are seen as equally allowed grief. Professor Richard Falk (2023), in his extensive writings, asserts that bearing witness without action risks turning suffering into spectacle. This cuts to the very heart of the witness's dilemma –ensuring testimony catalyzes change rather than voyeuristically documenting loss. Eventually, critical questions arise regarding the responsibilities of the international community, academics, and activists who engage with these testimonies. How can one ethically do so without appropriating Palestinian suffering, and reducing it to an academic or emotional exercise?

These witness accounts are not just stories; they ar* potential evidence. In documenting the ongoing Nakba in Jerusalem, these testimonies lay the groundwork for future justice and accountability (Erakat, 2019). Each account becomes one component of a larger mosaic of documentation on the path toward justice. Thus, the act of bearing witness functions as both present resistance and future possibility – a bridge between current documentation and eventual accountability, eventual reclamation of paradise.

VIII. Conclusion

In concluding this exploration, I return to the metaphor of the lost paradise. The examined testimonies reveal a Jerusalem that exists in parallel to the physical – a Jerusalem of memory, of resistance, and of continued stubborn Palestinian presence despite systematic attempts at erasure. The witnesses to Jerusalem's transformation from Nakba survivors to contemporary digital activists do more than preserve a record of injustice. They actively participate in the metaphysical creation of a future Jerusalem, one in which the paradise is not irretrievably lost but waiting to be reclaimed.

Through witness accounts, we are able to view a Jerusalem that defies simplified narratives of division. Instead, we encounter a city that exists and continually expands in the collective memory of its Palestinian inhabitants; a paradise that persists in the face of pseudo-divine injustice. In the contested terrain of Jerusalem, I echo Mahmoud Darwish's words: "In Jerusalem, […] within the ancient walls, I walk from one epoch to another without a memory to guide me."[13]

For those who bear witness – from the ancient stones of its East to the scattered corners of global exile – Jerusalem persists, not merely a physical place, but as the embodiment of memory itself. Through testimony, the city transforms from a site of loss into a continuum of perpetual return, each act of remembrance reaffirming not only what was forcefully taken, but what endures.

Footnotes

1.From The Ship, by Jabra Ibrahim Jabra. See Jabra (1985)

2. In 2022, the population was around 971,800 residents, of which almost 60% were Jews and almost 40% Palestinians.

3. Statistics on the demographics of Jerusalem pertain to the unified and expanded Israeli-controlled municipality, encompassing the pre-1967 Israeli and Jordanian municipalities, along with additional Palestinian villages and neighbourhoods to the northeast. While some of these areas have been effectively relinquished to the West Bank due to the construction of the Israeli West Bank barrier, their legal status as part of Jerusalem has not been formally revoked.

4. Transliteration of "النكبة", meaning “catastrophe” in Arabic.

5. “Neturei Karta International (NKI) is a community of activists representing many Jews worldwide who stand up for and promote traditional Judaism in opposition to the philosophy of Zionism. Due to religious belief, [they] oppose the existence of Israel, its occupation of Palestine, and condemn its ongoing wars and atrocities inside and outside Palestine.” See Neturei Karta International.

6. Israeli Defence Forces. Better known locally as IOF, Israeli Occupation Forces.

7. Israel’s Defense Minister (1987-1993) and later Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin infamously ordered his soldiers to use “force, might, and beatings” in order to subdue the Palestinian “rebels” during the First Intifada, earning him a reputation as the “bone-breaker.” He went on to win the Nobel Peace Prize.

8. According to a Report of the UN Commission of Inquiry on the 2018 protests in the OPT.

9. See the account of Wael Joudeh in Hammad (2017) with Aljazeera for a description of the psychological and physical impact of Israeli policies during the first Intifada.

10. Under international law, the Israeli judicial system has no legal authority over the population it occupies.

11. See Mohammed El-Kurd for The Nation, 2020

12. *Sumud*, transliteration of "صمود" meaning ‘steadfastness’ in Arabic. The concept was explored by Mariam Barghouthi in 2021 via an X (formerly Twitter) thread.

13. From ‘In Jerusalem.’ See Darwish, 2005

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ART

LITERATURE

WITNESS

ART BY DAISY MARSH

WOMEN AS WITNESS TO DESIRE: POWER LINES AND STRUCTURES IN *LANVAL* BY MARIE DE FRANCE.

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This article interrogates the role of women in Marie de France's Lanval by examining how female figures function as symbolic witnesses and repositories of desire within the feudal court. Drawing on theoretical frameworks advanced by Julia Kristeva, the study argues that medieval literature constructs women as the Other, whose absence of personhood provides a space for the projection of male desire, lending itself to the pursuit of honour and spiritual ascendance. Through a detailed analysis of the dual portrayals of the fairy queen and the feudal queen, the article demonstrates how these figures, though superficially subversive, ultimately reinforce the gendered hierarchies of courtly love. The narrative techniques employed in Lanval—from lexical choices and character juxtapositions to the symbolic settings of the forest and court—reveal a deep reliance on the female form to validate the male quest for refinement and societal worth. By contrasting the two characters, the article underscores how women are reduced to 'objects of exchange', serving primarily to witness and substantiate male progress (Kristeva, 1981, p. 50). In doing so, it highlights the inherent tension between the subversive potential of Lanval and its structural adherence to patriarchal values, offering insight into the complex interplay of desire, power, and gender in medieval narratives.

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Historically, the discourse of absence is carried on by the Woman: Woman is sedentary, […] It is Woman who gives shape to absence, elaborates its fiction, for she has time to do so". Writes Barthes in *A Lover's Discourse* (pp. 13-14), establishing the role of absence, otherwise understood as the Other, in relations of love and desire. Within the context of late 12th and early 13th century French medieval literature, love and desire are wrought by the feudal hierarchy, and consequently, female personhood is warped to fit this structure. As Barthes suggests, the 'shape' she gives to absence plays an essential role in the justification and self-legitimization of courtly literature, which contrasts with the behaviour of other genres such as the *fabliaux*, which expose the arbitrary nature of such hierarchies. In particular, the chivalric romances characterised as *fin'amor* often engage in a false subversion that arguably reinforces the popularly held ideals of the period. In fact, love within the Medieval court, in all its modalities, was closely intertwined with the privileging of asceticism, a form of severe self-discipline practiced in pursuit of spiritual refinement, that emerged from Christianity. Corbellari (2009), Guerreau-Jalabert (1997, 1999), and Duby (1978) can be used in tandem to understand this occurrence; the Lady of the court, a vessel for absence, becomes an idol for her male counterpart to worship and aspire after. To maintain her status as an ideal, she is held in narrative stasis, whilst her male counterpart strives forward towards his goal of love and, in turn, honour, the fulfilment of their relationship acting as proof of his societal worth.

Julia Kristeva analyses this occurrence, both literary and cultural, in *Desire in Language: A semiotic approach to literature and art* (1980) through the binary of the *Other* and the *Same*. She states that there is a "necessity for this society to give itself a permutative center, an *Other* identity, which has no value except as an object of exchange among members of the *Same*" (p. 50**).** This centre is held by the woman, the *Other*, and consequently, women exist not as active participants but as witnesses to their own permutation in value and objectivity. This centre is 'blind', and 'mystifying', it expands 'out to infinity (of "nobility" and "qualities of the heart"), erasing disjunction (sexual difference), and dissolving into a series of images (from the angel to the Virgin)' (p.50). Its greatest task, however, remains to reflect the identity of the Same.

In Lanval, Marie de France plays upon the character tropes of the chivalric narrative, exploring its subversion through two female characters: the fairy Queen or 'la pucele' and the feudal Queen or 'la reine'. Arguably, however, this subversion only runs skin deep, as the narrative maintains a deep structural reliance on the presence of the Other. It depends upon its female characters' symbolic force for completion, a phenomenon Kristeva understands as the attribution of a structural role to the 'Other (Woman), within which is projected, and with which is later fused the Same (the Author, Man). At the same time there was produced an exclusion of the Other (…).' (p.49). This dependency can be examined through pistes of character and setting analysis, lexical engagement, and an examination of how the poem adheres to and distances itself from the structures of the Medieval court, in which female characters are bound by their symbolic power and structural significance.

I. Establishing the role of women within the politics of the Medieval Court

Writing in *Retour sur l'amour courtois* (2009) Alain Corbellari defines the terms 'fine', 'fole', and bone, to distinguish between three different modalities of love in medieval narratives. 'Fol'amor' signifies love that causes disequilibrium due to an excess of sexuality. Such relations are physical. They can be understood as two people in constant motion: the transfer of desire from one body to another. 'Bon'amor' is the opposite, denoting conjugal love, akin to that between a king and his people, complete stability, stasis, and an end to desire. In the context of Kristeva's narrative analysis, conjugal relations are ones in which fusion has already occurred. Andreas Capellanus, a clergyman and scholar, wrote in his 12th-century treatise[1] on love *De Amore*[2] that marital relations could not contain true love, 'for what is love if not an inordinate desire to receive passionately a furtive and hidden embrace?' (p. 106). It is in the final mode, 'fin'amor', that such embraces are found.

Fin'amor is the model of the elite and holds an exalted position. It designates the love shared between a knight and his lady. Corbellari establishes fin'amor as a type of love defined by ideas of 'purification and perfection'; it has 'refinement […] at the heart of its preoccupations' (2009, p. 379)[3]. This refinement is born in part from self-restraint, as exemplified by Capellanus' instruction that

love should not be avaricious, and it should not exceed its object (p. 91). Such restraint is in line with the wider Christian ideals of asceticism of the period, wherein self-discipline becomes proof of a lover's spiritual purity. These modalities can be further understood through their lexical fields. In stories of fol'amor, such as La *Folie Tristan d'Oxford*, the two lovers call each other 'ami' or 'amie' (ed. Payen, 1974). The husband of bon'amor might refer to his spouse as *suer,* emphasising the familial aspect of marriage (Corbellari, p. 380), as witnessed in the fabliau *Les .iv. sohaiz saint Martin,* where a warring married couple do not call each other by name but 'suer' and 'vilain', meaning peasant (Bloch, 2013, pp. 741-745). In narratives of *fin'amor*, however, the woman is most often *La Dame*, or 'The Lady'. The object of the knight's desire therefore occupies a higher position than his own, and to an extent, this is part of the elevation and refinement that defines *fin'amor*. Perhaps the most poignant instruction found in *De Amore* of this regard is that lovers 'shalt always strive to belong to the Knighthood of love' (p. 91). Such gendered language, knighthood being something that only men can partake in, divides the participants of *fin'amor* into two distinct localities, the active and the passive. Whilst men are judged by their knightly abilities, women are regarded for their beauty and character, the crown of all desire. The lady, in her elevated position, is an idol of restraint. *Fin'amor* consequently distinguishes itself from the other modalities of love due to this binary. Whilst the lovers of *fol'amor* are in a state of excess or agitation, and the married couple of *bon'amor* are held in stasis through lack, *Fin'amor* can equally be represented as a male body in motion whilst the female body holds still.

Guerreau-Jalabert (1999, 1997) establishes fin'amor as an exercise in sociability rather than love. She calls it the 'great undertaking' (1997, p. 237) of the medieval world, where love's practice entertains and regulates sexuality. This assessment reaffirms Capellanus' 'textbook' conception, which presents love as a series of rules that must be followed rings true, as well as Corbellari's conception of fin'amor as a means of knightly progression. Guerreau-Jalabert emphasises the fact that the literature of the medieval period was primarily an act of self-definition and self-legitimisation by the nobility and clarifies that the elevation of the self, inherent to fin'amor is, at its core, a way of socialising male desire. In the 12th century, there was a certain amount of accordance and competition between religious culture and the culture of the nobility; the ideals of asceticism and denial were at odds with the material wealth and luxury that the nobility possessed. Therefore, the ideal of spiritual asceticism prevalent in the literature can be understood as a way for the nobility to give their position legitimacy. Under the influence of the Church, an excess of sexual desire was unacceptable; however, if women become idols of purity and refinement, the regulation of lust can be reframed as a moral exercise. Combined with the period's belief in Platonic ideals, wherein beauty was understood as a moral good, sexual desire undergoes a purification. The dominant position of the woman within such relations is a way of legitimising their sexuality, exalting it for its own sake. A type of 'spiritualised flesh' (Guerreau-Jalabert, 1999, p. 113)finds host in the woman's body, and as a result, through its pursuit, the knight can claim to transcend the boundaries of the self. Love becomes a 'motor for [male] spiritual progress' as its pursuit encourages 'the knight to surpass himself' (p. 113). Therefore, the true transgression of fin'amor isn't the extra-marital relationship, but the Knight surpassing himself.

Returning to De Amore, Capellanus suggest lovers should not love 'in excess' (p. 91), signalling the importance of restraint in romance. When we map the concepts of fin'amor and bon'amor over the same locale, the compound of 'lady-saint' an also be understood as 'lover-wife'; La Dame introduced by Corbellari is also the conjugal suer. She is not, however, the ami of fol'amor. She is not an active participant, an equal, but an ideal. The same characteristic that defines the perfect lady-lover also confirms her status as a good wife: submission. As a result, the ideal woman in narratives of fin'amor can be understood as an idol of sublime passivity, in which her personhood is excess. Her greatest value is as a witness to her male counterpart's achievements.

Duby (1978) elaborates upon the position of La Dame, bringing her into focus within the context of a tripartite conception of the Lord's family as a device of sociability, witnessed at events such as the tournament: 'Three persons [The Lady, the Lord, and their heir]. Three functions. Three moral requirements.' (p. 363)[4] La Dame symbolises lineage, prosperity, and fertility, reinforcing her husband's position as a competent lord. Her husband has his wife become host to 'simulacres de désir', simulacrums of desire, an effigy for the vassals to

worship. He states: 'In what is known as amour Courtois, it is La Dame that is at stake, not the maiden, too innocent and easily won.' (p. 364)[5] La Dame, whose personhood conflicts with her characterisation as an idol, exists at a precipice of possibility that serves as a perpetual motivator. In using the word 'simulacrum' Duby underlines the fragility of fin'amor. It is arguably little more than an imitation of love, a projection of male desire. The true intentions of women within these relations are irrelevant, as it is their potential as witness, vessel, which holds significance. The greatest power given to the noblewoman of the medieval court noblewoman is purely symbolic.

II. *Lanval*: genre subversions and adhesions

Ultimately, Corbellari, Duby, and Guerreau-Jalabert illustrate that in courtly love narratives, the ideal woman is reduced to a passive object—her beauty and virtue serve as a mirror for the knight's pursuit of honour and spiritual ascendance. This idealisation enforces a gendered hierarchy, where the woman's role is primarily to reflect male achievements, leaving her own identity subsumed under the weight of this task. Here, female figures are not celebrated for their agency; their personhood is diminished and redefined to support a rigid, gendered hierarchy. The different modalities of love (fin'amor, bon'amor, and fol'amor) each impose a structured script upon female characters, thereby reinforcing the medieval court's social and symbolic order. Applying this analysis to Marie de France's lai, Lanval, we encounter a young knight who, despite his abilities, is neglected by the court, as well as two juxtaposing female characters, the fairy Queen and the feudal Queen. The fairy queen, with her ethereal and transformative allure, initially disrupts conventional expectations by offering Lanval a glimpse of a liberatory, otherworldly desire—one that hints at the possibility of transcending traditional feudal boundaries. Yet, her role remains tethered to that of the Other, her value ultimately derived from her capacity to mirror and enhance the knight's quest for refinement. In contrast, the feudal queen epitomises the entrenched ideals of fin'amor: her gestures of desire are formal and hollow, emblematic of a static, institutionalised order that upholds the norms. Through Lanval's interactions with these two figures, Marie de France illustrates the tension between subversion and conformity in courtly love, effectively mirroring the earlier argument that women's significance in these narratives is less about personal identity and more about their function as silent validators of male honour and societal worth.

II.a. Lines 1-214: Strangers and strange lands; characters and setting.

The titular knight of *Lanval* is undoubtedly an outsider, a foreign prince residing in King Arthur's court. He is described as:

huem estranges, descunseillez
mult est dolenz en alter terre

A man alone, with no counsel
A stranger in a strange land[6]

Despite his efforts, he is never acknowledged within the court, which eventually results in him riding out into the forest, alone, and coming to rest at the banks of a brook, having abandoned his horse moments before. This scene is heavy with imagery. The forest in Medieval literature represents an unknown. It is a site of penetration and possibility for knights (Duby, 1978, p. 368). The forest occupies a feminine position that contrasts with the harsh physicality of the court and its man-made walls; it is the locale of the *Other*, often represented by the Supernatural. In turn, the horse Lanval abandons is intensely connected to knightlihood and the masculinity of the court, an association demonstrated by the word for horse *cheval* existing inside the word for knight *chevalier*. Lanval is therefore leaving behind one world in exchange for another. The image of the stream reinforces this; water has a close association with the supernatural and represents as a portal between two worlds, an ephemeral barrier. Consequently, Lanval first encounters the fairy Queen in a situation teeming with symbolism, and such abundance becomes a character motif for her. Initially, the fairy Queen's characterisation is destabilising. Images of extreme luxury and richesse (l. 45-55, l. 83-93) contrast with the referent 'la pucele' (the maiden) (l. 93, 549, 601, 638), and significantly, no male characters assist in her characterisation, no father, no husband. She is first introduced to Lanval through two female attendants. The referent 'la pucele' itself conflicts with both Corbellari and Duby's assertions that it is *La Dame* who acts as a vessel for the Knight's affections and consequently occupies Kristeva's 'false centre'.

As previously established, fin'amor is self-contained, held within the bounds of the court, however Marie de France begins her Lai by establishing characters and setting that actively oppose these confinements. Nonetheless, such a characterisation aligns with Kristeva's description of a 'mystifying' Other of infinite possibility; descriptions of her beauty, (l. 80-106) are typical of the period, drawing upon images such as the lily and the rose and the startling whiteness of her face, neck, and chest, yet also surpass all previous understandings of loveliness. It is the fairy Queen who first approaches Lanval and promises to fulfil his every desire if he returns her affections. Lanval accepts, and they consummate their relationship from the start, another deviation from chevalric romance form. As the lai continues, Lanval transforms and transcends the alienation he experiences at the beginning of the poem. Notably, Marie de France describes Lanval as distributing dons amongst his people. Le don, a monetary gift signifying honour and approval, was a major tool of maintaining sociability in the medieval period; one of the qualities a knight was expected to embody was largesse, generosity, and in giving out such gifts, Lanval is cultivating his esteem as a knight. At the beginning of the poem, the King's refusal to acknowledge Lanval is directly linked to his lack of financial recompense. After Lanval's encounter with the Fairy Queen however, he takes on the role of most benevolent financier, subverting the feudal script:

Lanval donout les riches duns,
[…],
Lanval donout or e argent
N'i ot estrange ni privé
A ki Lanval n'eüst doné.

Lanval was now the richest donor,
[…]
Lanval did all men every honour[7]:
To stranger and to citizen
Lanval would gladly have given. (l. 209-214)

Notably, Lanval's generosity extends to strangers as well, whereas the King chooses to overlook Lanval for the very same reason. By establishing this contrast, Marie de France begins to foreshadow Lanval's eventual surpassing of the king and the feudal hierarchies that he was previously bound by.

II.b. La reine and la pucele: further character juxtapositions

Following this transformation, Lanval starting to achieve both monetary and spiritual fulfilment independently of his Lord, Marie de France brings *la reine* into play. The queen is introduced at a window, elevated above around thirty of the King's vassals. This positioning can be interpreted as a physical depiction of the internal structures of *fin'amor*, which exemplifies the Queens role as principal witness of the court**.** The Queen is held in a superior position, looking down upon the knights, supported by the structure of the court. She then descends to the garden, surrounded by thirty maidens. Whilst the other Knights converse with the ladies, Lanval remains alone, thinking of his lover. The Queen approaches him to proposition him and declares she has loved him and thought him honourable for a long time, and that she is willing to give him whatever he desires (l. 239-314). When compared with that of the fairy Queen however, her behaviour reveals a hollow core.
In lines 110-112, Marie de France creates a sense of unity between Lanval and the fairy Queen, as she too has chosen to leave her home, to meet Lanval, and consequently her identity as an outsider reflects Lanval's own.

Lanval […] beus ami,
Pur vus vinc jeo fors de ma tere:
De luinz vus sui venue quere !

Lanval, […] my friend, my dear,
I left my lands to come where you are;
To find you I have come so far! (l. 263-266)

The Queen's offer is absent of a similar sacrifice, and the repetition imparts the superficiality of her emotions.

Lanval, mut vus ai honuré
E mut cheri e mut amé
Tute m'amur poëz aveir.

Lanval, I really do respect you,
I really care, I really love,
And you can have all my love. (l. 113-116)

Similarly, the fairy queen offers her love as a motivator, a guide, for Lanval's moral and spiritual fulfilment, and her love is positioned as the crowning gift she can bestow upon him, all-encompassing and unbounded.

Se vus estes pruz e curteis, Emperere ne quens ne reis
N'ot unkes tant joie ne bien,
Kar jo vus aim sur tute rien

Be valiant and courtly in everything, and no emperor,
count or king
Ever had joy or blessings above you;
For, more than any thing, I love you. (l. 113-116)

Meanwhile the Queen, unable to reflect his true desire, offers him love, alongside anything else he might want, and, in her final lines, grounds her speech in the physical, offering herself up. She is unable to provide Lanval with a spiritualised love, and so instead cuts her deal with her flesh.

Kar me dites vostre voleir!
Ma druërie vus ostrei :
Mut devez estre liez de mei !

Tell me what you want! I expect you
Must be happy at what I say.
I'm offering to go all the way. (l. 267-270)

At first glance the Queen's request can be interpreted as departure from *fin'amor*. She has shed her role as witness and has moved towards active seduction. Nonetheless, her activity can be interpreted as an overcorrection of Duby's *simulacrum*, a consequence of her husband's neglect. She offers Lanval love and honour in the hopes that he will reintegrate himself into the natural structure of the court; return himself to her husband's sphere of influence. Although when Lanval first declines he cites his loyalty to the King as his reason for refusing, as the Queen continues to insist herself upon him, Lanval refuses more strongly, declaring that he has no use for the Queen's affections as he already has a lover, and even the lowliest of her maids would surpass the Queen in terms of beauty (l. 291-302). The Queen reacts to this insult by immediately reporting Lanval to her husband, the King, accusing Lanval of behaving *dishonourably*. From this point on the Queen's motivations become wholly indistinguishable from her husbands, when Lanval is taken to court, the king is the sole plaintiff (l. 445, 451). This underlines the Queen's status as an idol to desire, a hidden channel of mercenary control; Lanval is persecuted because he does not participate in her worship.

II.c. Narrative Resolution

The Queen's sole power lies in simulation; however, this power is muted due to the existence of the fairy Queen. The inclusion of the supernatural means that the Queen no longer occupies the role of *Other*, she instead belongs to the Same of the nobility. She is stripped of the verdant symbolism that 'the center' is expected to hold. The Fairy Queen, on the other hand, fulfils the role of ultimate *Other*. Her abundance, her beauty, her ability to reflect whatever image is required of her, Marie de France's character easily takes on the role Kristeva describes. After Lanval is put on trial, she comes to his aid on a white palfrey, cloaked in purple-red silk, a hawk at her hand. Marie de France dedicates 65 lines alone to describe her beauty and the awe it inspires, prompting even the king to rise from his chair to greet her. While she continues to be referred to as 'la pucele' with golden hair and a pale face, she is draped in the costume of a King (l. 549-614), her beauty blending with her supernaturality to overpower the court. As a result, it is the fairy Queen's preeminent beauty, the strength of this image, that frees Lanval of his accusers. If the *Other* is to be understood as an object of exchange, the Fairy Queen is of otherworldly value, and it is this value that causes Lanval to cast the Queen aside. Despite the Fairy Queen's subversive characterisation, her main role within the narrative is to empower Lanval, the richness of her image belongs to him.

The lai concludes with Lanval and the Fairy Queen leaving the court on horseback together, riding towards Avalon. Kristeva asserts that medieval narratives of this type conclude with the fusion of the Other with the Same, and this too, is what takes place in *Lanval* (Kristeva, p.49). As Lanval has joined with his Fairy Queen, he now surpasses all the humans at the court, he exists above the feudal system, and this is what precipitates his departure. Whilst Lanval has achieved an effective liberation, the reader is left to speculate what the ending of the Lai means for both the Queen and the fairy Queen. Throughout, both female characters are shaped by the reflective structure of the *Other* and the *Same*. No desire is not their own, but a reflection of desire that exists to serve the patriarchal feudal systems upon which love is wrought, each of them acting to serve the interests of their opposite, be it Lanval or the King.

III. Conclusion

To conclude, within medieval narratives such as Lanval, women are not agents, nor experiencers of love, but one of its instruments. When love is understood as a way of governing sociability, an exercise built upon feudal structures, women exist as objects of exchange. The power of the fairy Queen becomes a symbol of Lanval's power, her character proof of his own refinement, her beauty a symbol of his wealth. Both she and the Queen occupy privileged positions that ultimately serve to enrich their male equivalents, and their greatest occupation is to bear witness to male advancement. As John Berger would suggest: 'Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus, she turns herself into an object - and most particularly an object of vision.' (2008, pp, 50-51)

Footnotes

1. De Amore, also known as Traité de l'amour courtois positioned itself as an instruction guide on 'loving well', blending parody and allegory. The preface is addressed to Capellanus' 'dear friend Walter'. A large part of the text is dedicated to imagined conversations between men and woman from varying social classes, discussing how they experience love according to their societal position, as well as presenting a set of rules on how to love.

2. 1974 Edition, Chapelain, A. l. Traité de l'amour Courtois. (t. C. Buridant, Éd.) Paris: Klinskieck.

3. Translation is my own.

4. Translation is my own.

5. Translation and emphasis are my own.

6. Translation: Shoaf, J. P. (2005), University of Florida

7. In this translation, Judith P. Shoaf (2005, University of Florida) chooses to translate 'or et argent', literally 'gold and money' as 'honour', further emphasising the link between monetary gifts and societal approval.

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ART BY DAISY MARSH

TO WITNESS SUBMISSION IN HUMAN CONDITIONS: A GENDERED REDEFINING OF LEVINAS' RESPONSIBILITY IN SYLVIA PLATH'S *THE BELL JAR* AND JEAN RHYS' *GOOD MORNING, MIDNIGHT.*

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REVIEWED BY MAISIE BELLE NORTON

Emmanuel Levinas presents the human condition as fundamentally shaped by responsibility (Morgan 114). In this, we are born with a "debt contracted before any freedom and […] consciousness," paid off in an endless passivity to the needs of those around us (Morgan 125–29). While he frames this as a universal philosophy, extending beyond social structures and institutions towards an abstract 'meaning' (Morgan, 130), he articulates submission using gendered language:—'Eros, the feminine, modesty, the caress' (Morgan 125). This has since been the target of gendered critiques by feminist philosophers such as Irigaray, who maintains that "Levinas considers sexual difference as secondary to ethics, [establishing] paternity as the paradigm of self-transcendence" (Vasseleu 110). Thus, the seemingly "universal" state of Levinas' ethics highlights an important overgeneralization: submission is more readily described as feminine because it disproportionately applies to women's experiences compared with men. Under these sexual assumptions, I wish to defend the notion that Levinas' philosophical framework unknowingly functions on the "effacement of the feminine" before the establishment of social and ethical relations (Vasseleu 111).

Accordingly, this essay argues that 'Levinasian' responsibility is not an entirely universal *human* condition but rather a distinctly *feminine* way of being. To demonstrate this, I examine Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Jean Rhys' *Good Morning, Midnight*, where the female protagonists are so deeply constrained to 'passive' responsibility that they come to see themselves as sexual and social objects. This self-objectification then mutates in various ways—through imagined futures, dark' female counterparts, and a painfully embedded subordination, they become reduced to spectators of their own lived experiences. Reframing Levinasian responsibility as *extreme feminine passivity*, I contend that these women are burdened with the role of observer in order to live 'meaningfully'. Consequently, the 'feminine' drive toward death in these texts is not simply suicidal, but a rejection of the masculine demands that dictate a woman's world.

The Self-Determining Man vs The Sterile Woman

Firstly, Levinas seems to underplay the social differences of sex in his ethical framework, which overlooks the destructive "sexual duties" coded into women's roles. In *Good Morning, Midnight*, Sasha experiences an overwhelming responsibility to sexually 'perform' for men. This can be seen in her relationship with Enno, who leaves her because she doesn't 'know how to make love, [she's] too passive […] lazy, [a] bore' (Rhys 105). Here, Sasha's social value is entirely contingent on sexual desirability—her duty is to entertain, and in failing to do so, she jeopardises any 'meaningful connections' with men. Yet this demand for responsibility is inherently paradoxical: Enno condemns her 'passivity' while simultaneously criticising her lack of submission to his sexual interests. Enno expects Sasha to attain a mythical state that rejects passivity while giving into it, to lie as both victim and perpetrator. In this setting, Levinasian responsibility cannot be argued as a universal philosophy as it demands different things of these two characters – Enno actively frames the sexual expectations for Sasha, while she must passively mould herself to his contradictory, idealised desires.

Plath's novel presents a similar dynamic through Esther, who also grapples with the paradoxical and oppressive desires of her male love interests. This is seen when Buddy Willard, after first revealing his naked body to Esther, tells her: 'I think you ought to get used to me like this' (Plath 65). Once again, the expectation for a woman to actively engage in her own passivity emerges—Buddy asserts control over Esther's desire, not allowing her to experience it for herself but instead directing it toward a wider sexual duty, one that surrenders to male fantasies. This can offer a gendered reading of Levinas' notion that "the free agent is always already accused by the other" (Morgan, 131). Buddy's sexual advance is one that accuses Esther of inaction, that calls her into a passive, sexual subordination. In other words, although Buddy may be physically exposing himself, it is only Esther who is being stripped of agency.

Plath extends this theme beyond sexuality, translating Esther's enforced passivity into a wider intellectual and existential submission. Buddy's medical background compels him to demean Esther's literary aspirations by stating that a poem is a 'piece of dust' (Plath 52). For him, existential permanence is measured using the logical material of the "real world" – one of science rather than art. However, it must be emphasised that this comes as a symptom of the masculine, and not human, condition. Buddy is able to appeal to rational structures as they already work in his favour – his lived

experience is "quantifiably justified" simply by him being a man. For Esther, however, she must look for meaning outside of what is offered to her. Her feminine responsibility condemns her to servitude and passivity rather than transcendence and self-determination. In other words, Esther's search for permanence is innately disintegrating – to find meaning as a woman amongst men is analogous to building structures with dust.

This redefines Levinas' assertion that one only becomes an "I" by accepting their body as a way of being in the world (Morgan 122). For Esther and Sasha, existing as *women* means being tied to more regressive and demanding forms of passive responsibility that are *fundamentally different from men*. Their identities are shaped by submission, reducing them to silent, sexual objects. Despite Levinas' universal claim of responsibility, his framework ultimately positions female responsibility as entirely directed towards their male counterparts.

Losing Oneself in "Imagined Worlds"

As both Esther and Sasha struggle with the gendered burdens of Levinasian responsibility, they develop an intimate desire to escape their passive roles. This longing manifests in the rare moments where they have been—or imagine they will be—happy. For Esther, this is seen during her skiing accident, where she thinks: '[t]his is what it is to be happy' as she 'plummeted down […] through year after year of doubleness and smiles and compromise, into my own past' (Plath 93). For Sasha, happiness appears as a 'miracle', found in a 'vague dream' of living in an empty room with '[n]othing in it but a bed and a looking glass' (Rhys 81). In both cases, happiness exists only as an imagined miracle—either as nostalgia for the past or a fantasy of the future. In this way, Levinas' argument that the "self is object before it is subject" (Morgan 127) once again carries different gendered weights. For men, the reality of the self-as-object is not entirely objectifying – even if a man's responsibility renders him passive and subordinate to others, there still remains a residue of agency in his cultural "superiority" over women. For Esther and Sasha, however, the self-as-object is taken literally in Levinas' case – the possibility of genuine agency, for them, is something that can only truly exist in imaginary or nostalgic realms.

Levinas posits that even in total isolation, "human life is essentially social" (Morgan 125). However, from this statement, the naturalising of the social elements into personal life embeds cultural power dynamics as a fundamental part of the human condition. In this way, the characters of Esther and Sasha experience passive responsibility as a form of a woman's meaningful nature. These fantasies of detachment, then, are marked by an ironic rejection of this "genuine female authenticity."

For Esther, this is found through her relationship with Joan. Towards the end of the novel, Joan emerges as a figure of gendered individuality, unable to comprehend Esther's sexual encounters with men, which she finds 'utterly incomprehensible' (Plath 221). Despite Esther sharing Joan's aversion—she 'hated the idea of serving men in any way' (Plath 72)—she instead vilifies Joan as a gothic doppelganger, one whose feelings were 'a wry, black image of [her] own' (Plath 210). Similarly, Sasha encounters the figure of the cérébrale, 'a woman who likes nothing and nobody except herself and her own damned brain' (Rhys 134). Here, the idea of an 'active'

woman—one who exists for herself rather than in subservience to men—is framed as 'a monster' (Rhys 134). Levinas understands responsibility and passivity as the very conditions for meaning: one can only recognise herself in relation, and subservience, to others (Morgan, 130–32). A true departure from this structure, then, is not simply a rejection of duty, but a frightening rejection of meaning itself. Esther and Sasha thus remained trapped —they feel alienated in a masculine world that demands passivity, yet leaving it would deepen this alienation. In other words, they can only destroy, not replace: to bite the hand that feeds them leaves nothing but a bloody stump. Therefore, when confronted with figures of radical female otherness, it is not surprising that Esther and Sasha respond with fear rather than solidarity—to abandon their assigned roles is not merely to witness oneself from afar, but to lose the ability to witness at all.

Suffering, Suicide, and Self-Determination

Suffering, in Levinas' eyes, arises precisely from this confrontation with impossibility: it is a direct exposure to 'being,' in which there is an 'absence of refuge' (Morgan, 123–24). The female characters suffer not only under the weight of masculine control but from the realisation that there is no escape. Sasha implicitly understands this throughout the novel, acknowledging the absurdity of her dreams of happiness: 'there is no past, no future, there is only this blackness, changing faintly, slowly, but always the same' (Rhys 143). Esther echoes this bleak recognition, understanding that: '[she] had been inadequate all along, [she] simply hadn't thought about it' (Plath 72). The tragedy of Levinasian responsibility is thus not simply its demands, but its inevitability—these women despise serving men, yet they are always required to do so. Levinas spoke of the 'end of mastery' (Morgan 124) as a moment of confrontation with death, suffering, and responsibility. Yet this confrontation is more profoundly feminine than Levinas accounts for: these women do not await death to experience their limitations—they are consistently reminded of them, their world structured around the impossibility for them to have any other life. If Levinas describes the responsible subject as some kind of 'hostage' (Morgan 129), then womanhood itself is an unending hostage condition, wherein these women are always confined to the same spot, only able to witness life pass them by in their captivity.

However, even in witnessing their own immobility, Esther and Sasha retain the distinction between the internal and external self that makes a witness. The world may strip them of autonomy, but maybe the one thing left untouched is the pocket of space within themselves. This idea manifests in both novels through internal vacancy, depression, and stillness. Sasha's social agitation is 'only on the surface […] Underneath there is always stagnant water, calm, indifferent—the bitter peace that is very near to death' (Rhys 126). If a woman's life is defined according to men's disruption, then stillness—however sad—resists feminine passivity. Esther reflects this same impulse through her attraction to death, seeing it as a confrontation of her internal self: what she 'wanted to kill wasn't in that skin […] but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get at' (Plath 142). This challenges Levinas' view that to confront death is to 'encounter negation by

the other' (Morgan, 124–25). However, death for Esther is not a submission to the power of the surrounding world, nor an acknowledgement of men's power—it is a surrender to something beyond this masculine world obsessed with meaning, submission, and responsibility. Suicide, in this context, is not simply self-erasure, but a refusal of the idea that the self must be fully possessed, manipulated, or called to responsibility. Even in the extreme passivity that appears embedded in women's 'responsible' lives, a choice remains.

Conclusion

Therefore, Levinas' account of the passive, subjected self overlooks the ways in which responsibility manifests differently for different people. Social ties can tighten, cut, and bruise depending on the bodies they wrap around. Here, the extremes of responsibility, the pervasiveness of objectified self-witnessing, and the ends to which these characters are driven expose the corrosive nature of Levinas' "ethical woman". The effort to please men requires a form of self-erasure—women must hollow out authenticity, emotion, and sentience to perform the feminine identity as "significant", submissive, and above all, sexual. Ironically, the symptom of this erasure is also its cure: social death through passivity in the masculine world can be countered by literal death, which cuts the very ties that enforce this condition. Perhaps in responding to Levinas, we find that if a woman is only allowed to live as a mannequin, then the one thing she owns is the space under her caste— an emptiness entirely within her control.

Footnotes

1. In this paper, I will use Morgan in reference to Levinas as his essay offers a comprehensive outline of Levinas' theory of ethical responsibility.

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social sciences

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HOW TO UNDERSTAND JINV'S RESISTANCE TOWARDS HETERONORMATIVITY IN CHINA

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This paper explores the intersectionality of the Chinese political, social, cultural, and digital landscape, which is reflected in jinv's resistance to heteronormativity. Jinv refers to a group of Chinese radical grassroots feminists active on social media. The production of a Chinese woman ideal constructed through Confucian ideals, social norms, and policies that expect women to marry and bear children is explained, alongside an analysis of jinv's localised response and resistance on social media. The paper also discusses the potential limitations of jinv's resistance, particularly its emphasis on individual agency over structural problems, and briefly suggests possible reasons for such a limitation. The essay concludes by suggesting that a broader understanding of Chinese cultural and social environments, as well as further research into jinv as a unique feminist group, is essential to fully understand jinv's feminist struggle.

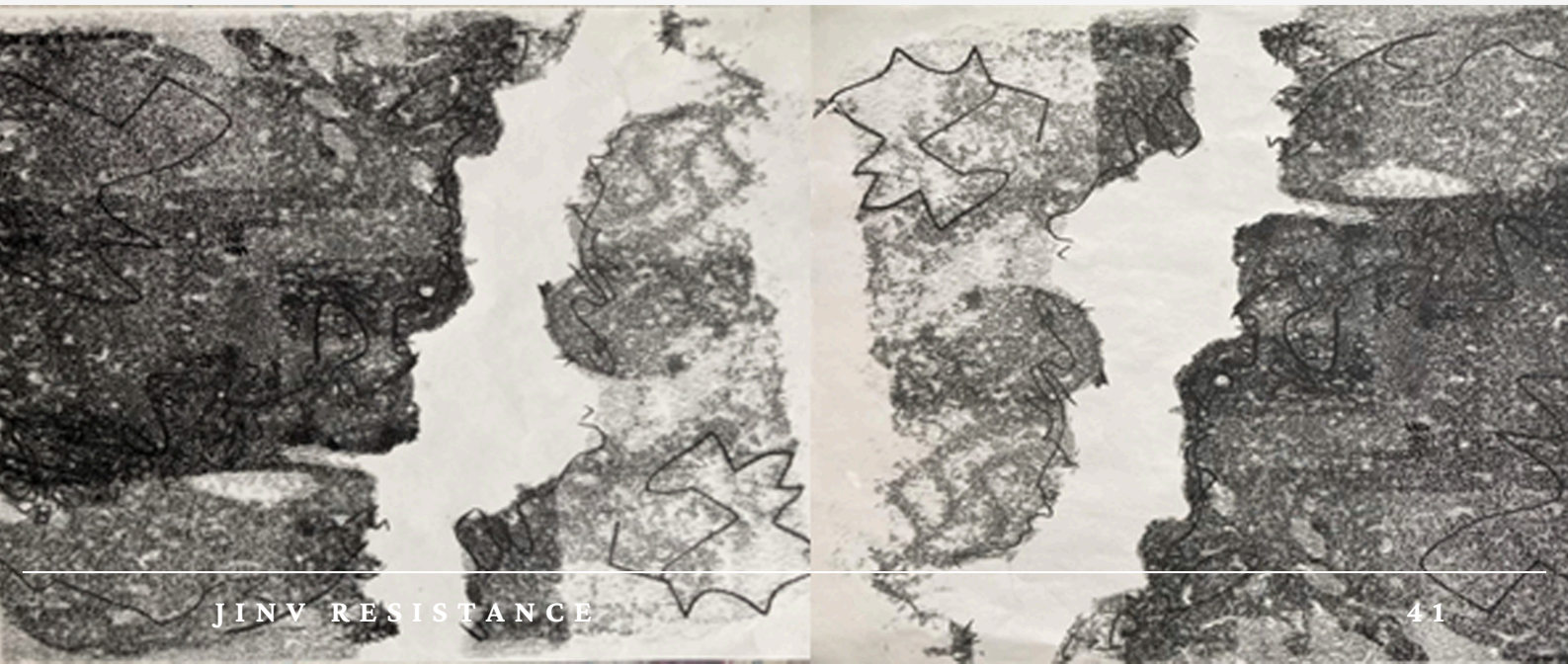
EDITED BY MEGAN HOWES, COPY EDITED BY TAMSIN DUNLOP, REVIEWED BY FIONA WONG

As a feminist born and raised in China, I've observed numerous divergences in ideas around feminist topics on social media. One group of grassroots feminists that are always being criticised by both anti-feminists and feminists are *jinv* (Chinese: 激女, short for 激进女权, which is radical feminists in Chinese). I define *Jinv* as a unique category of grassroots feminists in mainland China that has been active mainly on social media, since the #MeToo movement in 2017 (Xue & Rose, 2022, p.5). There is no agreed official definition for *jinv*, since Chinese feminists on social media are active in a very scattered way (Xue & Rose, 2022, p.8), and *jinv* is now representing something different from the radical feminists a few years ago (Telisha, 2023). Despite the absence of an agreed definition, there is a tacitly agreed commonality of *jinv* among grassroots feminists: the minimum requirement to be a *jinv* is the rejection of heterosexuality and heterosexual culture rooted in Chinese society, represented most clearly through the *jinv*'s determined refusal of heterosexual marriage and romantic or sexual relationships with men. Although such an anti-heterosexual attitude can be found to resonate with other feminists in different parts of the world, Chinese political, social, cultural and digital landscapes intersect to render *jinv*'s resistance very unique and worth investigating to better understand Chinese feminists. This is also the reason I use the pinyin '*jinv*' to refer to this specific radical group of feminists on Chinese social media, rather than using the general term "radical feminists". I want to emphasise that, because *jinv* is still a relatively new concept, there is no sufficient ethnography or academic research on this group of feminists in China, which can cause limitations on my understanding and explanations of *jinv*.

What I intend to achieve by this essay is to suggest a possible theoretical starting point for more research with ethnographies on jinv to understand their resistance. Taking the intersection of Chinese culture and social environment into account, alongside fragmented texts available online by jinv or about jinv, I argue that the jinv's resistance to heteronormativity is highly specific to Confucian culture, the patriarchal and heteronormative social environment in China, where these two factors contribute to shaping a woman ideal who is willing to marry and reproduce. Three aspects will be discussed to explain my argument, including a few core concepts in Confucian culture, the social environments in China focusing on media propaganda and reproduction policy, and jinv's specific forms of resistance to heteronormativity which includes my critique.

Confucian Culture

The patriarchal and heteronormative culture seen within China is heavily influenced by Confucianism. Confucianism is a system of thought developed in the 5th century BCE by the Chinese philosopher Confucius. With its history and development across almost the whole of Chinese history until the 20th century when it began to decline, Confucianism has been deeply embedded into Chinese culture. Given that reproduction and heterosexuality are the main aspects of a female ideal discussed in this essay, patriarchy is understood as the sum of norms and regulations that allow men power in all spheres of human space, especially in women's sexuality and labour (Ueno, 2022). The sanctity of age-old patriarchal rules is essential, where the older males have the power over the younger generation.



Heteronormativity is understood as a discourse that intersects with patriarchy and normalises heterosexuality to produce the ideal heterosexual subjects (Marchia & Sommer, 2019). In ancient China, heteronormativity and the sanctity of patriarchy were evident in early Confucianist ideas about women and the family, and I will select a few core concepts to elaborate to explain these two elements.

There was the concept of nei/wai (内/外, inside/outside), corresponding to a spatial distinction between family and political/social sphere, where women were assigned to the inside sphere of nei, unlike men who can express and engage in the wai sphere of the public political area (Lee, 1999). Based on the concept of nei/wai, the moral requirement sancongzhidao (三从之道, three principles of obedience) for the ideal woman is advocated, where a woman needs to follow the rules of (1) her father before marriage, (2) of her husband after marriage, and (3) of her son after her husband's death (Liji, "Jiaotesheng" chapter). Sancongzhidao further establishes women as unquestionable heterosexual objects, whose roles are restricted to that of a daughter, wife, mother, or widow and whose space is restricted to family, marriage and reproduction.

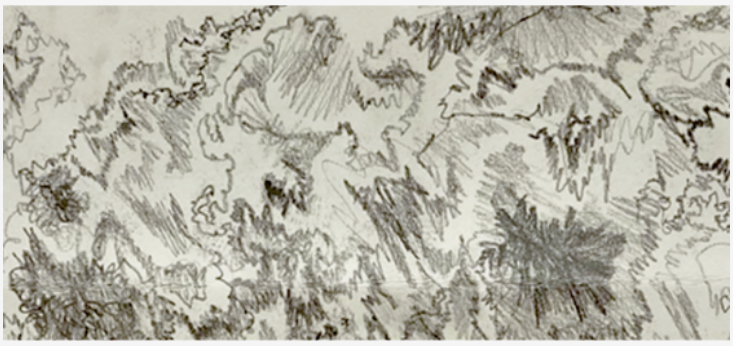
In addition, there is also the idea of xiao (孝), representing family members' filial piety towards the elder, particularly to one's parents. Filial piety, which means respecting the elders of one's family and taking care of them when they get old, is a moral value and a responsibility to be practised. Xiao is considered one of the central elements of Confucianism. Evidence can be found in the Analects, where Confucius argues filial piety is the root of morality (1.2). The necessity for women to marry and reproduce is further justified by xiao.

In Li Lou in Mencius, Mencius argues that out of the three unfilial things, the worst one to commit is having no offspring (26). Being restricted in the field of nei, what a morally upright woman ought to do, and the only thing to do, is to behave as a good daughter, wive and mother – i.e. a proper servant of the patrilineality, thus achieving filial piety. This restriction of women's role as primarily the maid of patrilineage is also highly praised as a gender-specific virtue in Confucian thoughts (Rosenlee, 2023).

Importantly, xiao's importance is not restricted to personal morality but is deeply embedded in the political scheme under the core political concept of jiaguotonggou (家国同构), which stands for the same structure of the family and the state (Csikszentmihalyi, 2024; Lee, 1999, p.17). This political connotation of xiao can be seen in the Analects as well. Confucius parallels filial piety to the elders and loyalty to superiors, which highlights their being biconditional to each other (1.2). In this respect, to 'respect' the elders as part of xiao is not simply to have a high opinion of the elders, but is to defer to them, signalling a similar hierarchy to one between the people and the king. Thus, in the context of family, xiao, beyond its importance in the political framework, is crucial not only as the root of moral values but also as an important ruling principle to sustain patriarchy within the family.

After the collapse of the imperial system in 1911, several intellectual movements set Confucianism as the main target of past feudal ideas to be discarded (Furth, 1983,

p.322). Particularly during the New Cultural Movement from the 1910s to 1920s, the political framework of Confucianism, which has its basis in the concept of xiao within the family, was heavily criticised, and a break of the conceptual link between the family and the state was instead argued for (Wu, 1985, pp. 61-66). Even though Confucianism's influence in politics - particularly the concept of xiao - has been largely reduced since then, xiao's importance in the Chinese cultural system remains central (Furth, 1983, p.325). In contemporary China, xiao in the family as a moral value has become further intertwined with love and emotional bonds in a complicated way (Sun, 2017). In Yuezhu Sun's research with young Chinese singletons in Beijing, these young adults express their view on filial piety in a way that is closely linked to awareness and gratitude towards parents' care and love for them (2017, p.791). This filial piety is not a one-sided obedience with no condition, but is only required to obey when parental love and care are present. However, the filial obligation that the children feel is not only about reciprocal love, but also involves the feeling of guilt. Vanessa Fong's research in Dalian shows that, parents in urban Dalian tend to consider their love and care for children a sacrifice (economic, emotional, etc.), which should be compensated by children's obeying filial obligation. This thought also affects their children, especially when their parents are ill, the children tend to feel a stronger necessity to fulfil their filial obligation resulting from guilt, for both the children and the parents attribute the illness partly to parents' sacrifice to raise the children (2004, p.143-147). Hidden behind the idea of filial piety, the patriarchal form of ruling and obedience within the family is justified by both moral and emotional factors (Schwartz, 1985, p.155), where the necessity of getting married and having children is justified as filling in their filial obligation as the time in ancient China (Chai, 2021).



Social Environment

The patriarchal and heteronormative elements in Confucianism remain influential, even after the Cultural Revolution in the late 60s and the cultural reforms – through education, media propaganda and legal changes - which aimed at removing Confucianist feudal ideology to improve gender equality (Hashimoto & Ikels, 2005). It can still be spotted in present gender norms, practices and policies where marriage and reproduction are tacitly regarded as women's primary tasks. For example, in 2007, the derogatory term leftover women (剩女), used for single women in their late twenties and above, was used by the government to urge women to marry (Fincher, 2016, p.86). The term leftover women was also disseminated by the mass media to spread the anxiety of being a single woman. Cultural and commercial products, including varying TV shows, were created to teach leftover women 'out' of their 'single predicament' (e.g. cosmetic products). Thus, leftover women became a consumer group characterised as sexual subjects to be disciplined (Liu & Zhang, 2013).

Additionally, under the Three-child Policy introduced in 2021, which encourages women to have more children to combat the demographic imbalance within China, the discussion around women's declining willingness to have children is mostly about the high costs of bearing and rearing, gender discrimination in the workplace and, the lack of public care resources. Lv Pin - the founder of Feminist Voice (女权之声), which was one of the most influential feminist media in China - pointed out that both such policy and discourse treat women's reluctance to be mothers as an issue caused only by external factors, which assume and normalise women's obligation and willingness to reproduce for the country and treat women as having the natural impulse to be heterosexual mothers (2021).

From the prohibition of contraception and abortion in the 50s, to the *One-child Policy* to restrict the population increase in the late 70s, and to the *Three-child Policy* now, the government's policy on reproduction has always been viewed by feminists as female bodies *planning* policy rather than a *family planning* policy (Xue & Rose, 2022, p.3). In this context, sex, especially women's, is the target and means to manage life and to serve public welfare, where regulating sex becomes a necessity for the sustainability of the country's economy (Foucault, 1978, p.25, pp.146-7). In the above two cases, the ideal of a

heterosexual Chinese woman who is willing to marry and have children is reproduced, coinciding with the female ideal established in Confucianism. In the principle sancongzhidao, it is made explicit that women should obey their fathers, husbands or sons, and women's role as daughters, wives and mothers come first. In contrast, this control over women's sexuality is made much more implicit in family planning policy and media propaganda, and women's role as citizens and consumers becomes the primary.

Jinv's Resistance and their Limitation

Facing the instrumentalisation of women in the name of the nation and the misogynist element in culture affected by Confucian thoughts, *Jinv* reacts to Chinese heteronormativity in a destructive way. In their recent feminist slogan *sanzhengsanfan* (三争三反, three things to fight for and three things to fight against), designed in 2021 specifically to adapt to the Chinese context[1] , three things to fight against are the following: filial duties, heterosexual marriage and the fetish of men. This fetish refers to both the romantic and sexual relationship with men, as well as any form of entertainment related to the fetish of men or the male gaze, where they take idol culture as one form of it. For *jinv*, heterosexuality might be defined as how Adrienne Cecile Rich describes, which is a 'political institution which disempowers women' that is socially constructed, to be imposed on women and regulated through norms, economic pressures and law structures, where these aspects are all inter-related (Rich, 2003, p.11). Among these means of regulation, *jinv* take filial piety as what Chinese women should be specifically cautious of, for how it justifies the necessity of marriage and reproduction of women in the name of morality and love, as I explained above. I think, by including fighting against filial duties as part of their feminist movement, *jinv* localise their resistance to heteronormativity with a consideration of the Chinese cultural context.

However, considering the heavy-handed crackdown on activism and censorship (Xue & Rose, 2022, pp.4-5), jinv's strategy to fight against heterosexuality is restricted to individual rejection of heterosexual relationships and to inspiring other women to turn away from heterosexual relationships. Although a lot of radical feminists have argued that the "personal is political", such an individualistic strategy emphasising personal agency might be criticised for melting down the structural problem of heteronormativity to an individual level, therefore hindersing the potential structural systematic issues (Mohanty, 2013, p.971). I think this worry is reasonable. In jinv's defiant discourse against heteronormativity, women entering heterosexual relationships should be excluded from the social category of 'women' - the category of women as a whole - for they think heterosexuality is a choice of complicit with men, which is a betrayal towards all women (Wang, 2021). A famous *jinv* blogger on Weibo posted that, 'heterosexual women are masochists, and there is no such distinction between jinv and normal women, only the distinction between natural women and masochists' (Qian, 2024). There are also specific stigmatised words for married women, like *hunlv* (婚驴, married donkey, a homophony of *hunnv,* 婚女, meaning married women) and *hunren* (昏人, people losing their mind, a homophony of *hunren,* 婚人, meaning married people); and for women in heterosexual relationships with men, they are called *jiaoqi* (娇妻, meaning docile wife). These words, connotating the humiliation of women in heterosexual relationships as losing their agency and becoming the accomplice of heteronormativity and patriarchy, can be seen as ways to exclude heterosexual people from feminists' and women's communities. In this instance, *jinv*'s affront and exclusion of heterosexual women exemplified the aforementioned worry of ignoring structural problems. In the Chinese heteronormative context, where being a heterosexual woman who enters heterosexual is still the dominant expectation and lifestyle, going against this discourse can take a lot, and some women might not be able to bear it (Mimiyana, 2023). The choice and agency to not be in a heterosexual relationship is rather a luxury open for only certain groups of elite women with good education who are economically independent. This overemphasis on individual agency might be related to the overwhelming proportion of well-educated, young and (or) high-income women in the online feminist

community (Wu, 2023), who are less likely to be negatively affected by choosing not to enter heterosexual relationships. However, I think it is still not clear whether jinv, as a specific feminist group, is rooted in specific classes, since there is not enough research at present. Despite the disagreement I have with the ruling out and stigmatisation of women in heterosexual relationships, I think the individual rejection of heterosexual relationships is a valuable and essential form of resistance, especially in China. Under the oppression and internet censorship of the feminist movement and discourse, the rejection of heterosexual relationships, as a form of nonviolent resistance, might be the safest yet still rebellious form of resistance. And though such rejection only focuses on personal choice which seems to be minor, we should be aware that the resistance is not always massive or violent, and that the most common form of resistance is usually like *jinv*'s, which is at the individual level, scattered in the social stratification. When these minor pieces of resistance come together, they can be subversive (Foucault, 1978, p.96).

Conclusion

In this essay, I have analysed the Confucian culture, social environment and jinv's resistance towards heteronormativity in a Chinese context. With a heteronormative discourse traced back to Confucianism rooted in Chinese history over 2000 years, society, including the mass media and the government, is still reproducing a similar ideal of women like the one in Confucianism, who is heterosexual and willing to marry and reproduce. It is exactly in such a context, that Chinese radical grassroots feminists jinv show their resistance towards heteronormativity in a localised and unique way to respond to the intersection of Confucian culture and social and political environment. I have also argued that there is a limitation in jinv's resistance, for they underestimate the structural problems and overestimate women's agency as individuals, which leads to the exclusion and stigmatisation of certain, often lower class groups of women. Such a limitation might be understood in relation to the severe crackdown on feminist activism, as well as the demographic of jinv, who are mostly young and elite women. In conclusion, I think to understand jinv's unique resistance towards heterosexuality, an understanding of Chinese Confucian cultures and the social environment, particularly the policy and regulation, should be taken into account. However, given the fact that jinv is a relatively new concept lacking enough literature and research, as well as the scattered reality of jinv and internet censorship, my analysis and understanding might deviate from the reality of jinv. I hope that more research and work about these grassroots feminists will emerge, to understand their unique and determined resistance towards heteronormativity and inequality.

Footnote

1. Due to the fact that the original post that suggested this slogan has been deleted, and there has not been any academic research on this, there is no available resource to cite this slogan properly. The only resource I found is this Reddit post reposting the screenshot of the original discussion of the slogan: https://www.reddit.com/r/DoubanFeministGroup/comments/xc1uas/%E4%B8%89%E4%BA%89%E4%B8%89%E5%8F%8D/..

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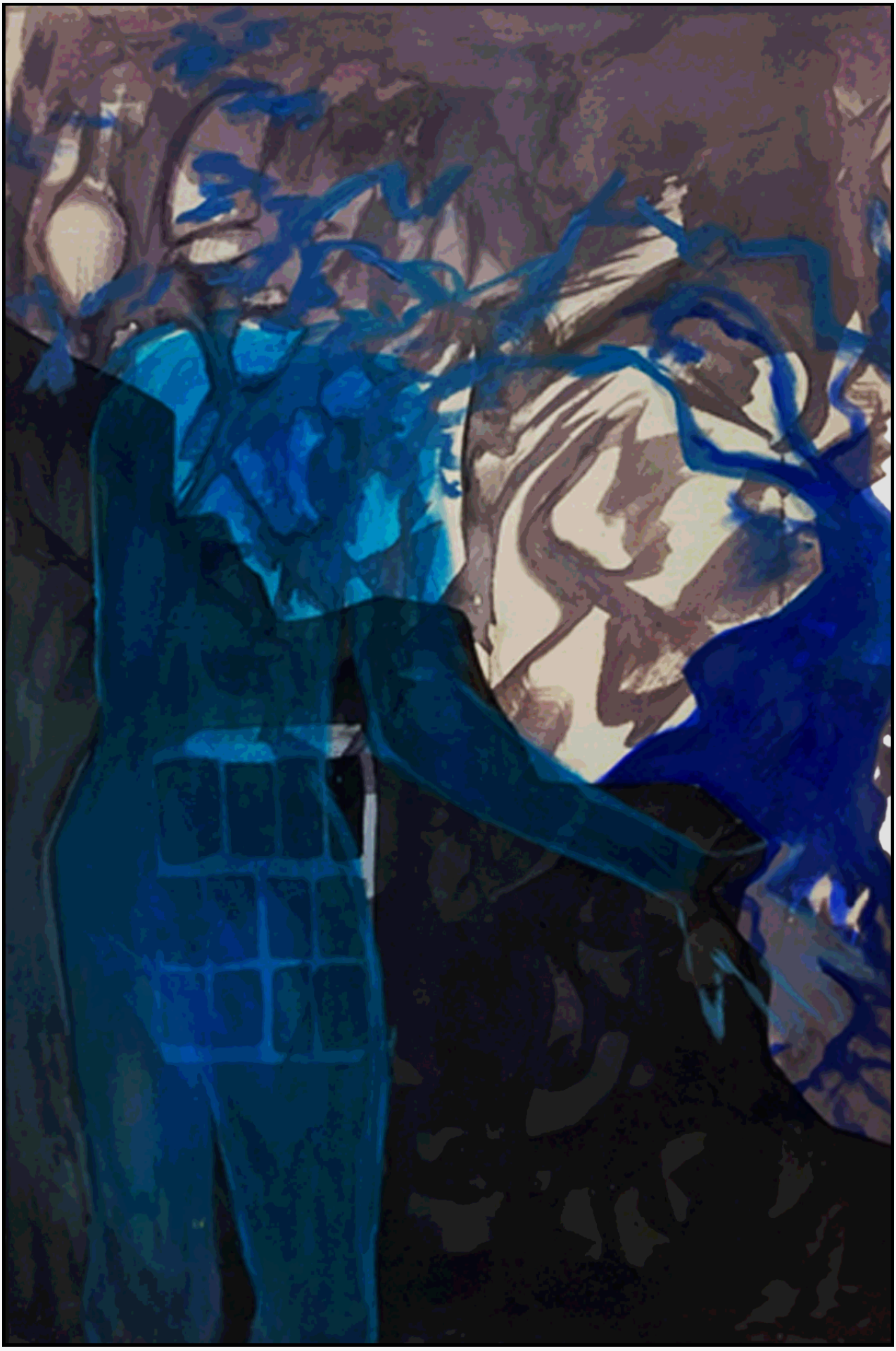

BEYOND VICTIMISATION: EXPLORING NARRATIVES ON NORTHERN NIGERIAN WOMEN IN THE CONTEXT OF BOKO HARAM

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This essay examines the portrayal of northern Nigerian women in the context of Boko Haram and the related conflict, arguing that they have been predominantly framed through a narrative of victimisation, overshadowing their agency and diverse experiences. It first explores the historiography of northern Nigerian women before Boko Haram, highlighting their marginalisation in both historical and international discourse. It discusses how the limited accounts, shaped by colonial and Western perspectives, depicted these women primarily as oppressed and in need of external intervention, thus solidifying a restricted, homogenised portrayal of their experiences. The essay then focuses on the 2014 Chibok Girls' kidnapping, which brought global attention to northern Nigerian women and reinforced their portrayal as victims. This perception was intensified by Boko Haram's use of women as suicide bombers and the human rights violations committed by all sides of the conflict, further reinforcing the view of women as passive victims trapped in a cycle of violence. Finally, the essay highlights limited but important sources that discuss northern Nigerian women's agency, including their voluntary association with Boko Haram and active roles in counterinsurgency and peacebuilding efforts, challenging the dominant narrative. By exploring these examples, this essay underscores the multifaceted roles these women have played in the conflict and emphasises the importance of incorporating their agency into discussions to move beyond reductionist portrayals and fully appreciate their diverse experiences and contributions to conflict dynamics.

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REVIEWED BY ANTONIA JUELICH

Since 2009, the north-eastern region of Nigeria has been greatly impacted by the violence and instability caused by the Islamist terrorist group Boko Haram, which has led to thousands of deaths and widespread displacement, posing the largest threat to the security and stability of the country since the Nigerian civil war of 1967-1970[1] . Among its most notorious acts was the attack on a secondary school on April 14, 2014 in Chibok, Borno State, where 276 schoolgirls were abducted from their dormitory[2]. Although the group had been active for years, significantly affecting the region and its people, it was the Chibok Girls' kidnapping that sparked outrage and drew attention to the lives and struggles of the people in the region, more significantly women[3]. This essay examines the extent to which northern Nigerian women have been framed in NGO reporting and news media predominantly through a narrative of victimisation, and argues that such portrayals have overshadowed, but not entirely excluded, discussions of their agency.

The historiography of northern Nigerian women before Boko Haram is first explored, emphasising the limited interest in and sources about them beyond a few accounts of their marginalisation and victimisation. Then, the solidification of victimisation as the dominant narrative is shown through the Chibok Girls' kidnapping and the ensuing international scrutiny, with the main focus being placed on their victimhood. Finally, various ways in which northern Nigerian women have demonstrated their agency, along with the limited reporting of these actions, are examined, illustrating that despite the scarcity of coverage, these accounts of agency add significant nuance to the dominant narrative.

The historiography of northern Nigerian women and their representation in international media prior to Boko Haram, and more particularly the Chibok Girls kidnappings, has been significantly limited. This scarcity stems in part from their minimal presence in primary sources and the limited number of sources they have produced themselves. Contributing to this is the broader neglect of women's and gender history in Africa, which was compounded by the academic marginalisation of women in the male-dominated field of African scholarship until the 1980s when a new area of scholarship on women's history was institutionalised.[4] However, as Aderinto highlights in his discussion of the historiography of Nigerian women, even when women in Nigeria became a subject of study, northern Nigerian women were largely excluded[5]. One rare but significant account from a woman discussing her experiences and life in northern Nigeria is *Baba of Karo: A Woman of the Muslim Hausa*[6]. This source is particularly valuable because it offers a direct account of events and experiences from the perspective of a northern Nigerian woman, in contrast to the sparse accounts about them found in colonial and foreign official documents. An example of such sources is the 1936-1937 annual report of the Church Missionary Society, which reports solely on their traditional household roles and lack of education[7]. Documents such as the Church Missionary Society report shaped narratives about northern Nigerian women, often depicting them in contrast to Western women. They primarily portrayed them as marginalised, emphasising their victimisation and framing them as in need of foreign intervention. This narrative, which emphasised the victimisation of northern Nigerian women, continued to develop into the 21st Century. This evolution was particularly marked after the implementation of Shari'a criminal law in twelve states in 2000 which stressed ideas of public morality and punishment for specific offenses, including *zina*: 'any form of consensual sexual relations between a man and a woman who are not married to one another'[8]. The implementation of punishment for such offenses, particularly where women were concerned, drew significant exposure from the international community. Indeed, reports and articles from NGOs such as Human Rights Watch and media outlets such as CNN highlighted these cases[9]. Furthermore, a 2004 Human Rights Watch Report on the implementation of Shari'a law and potential human rights violations noted that international attention was sparked by the 2001 condemnation of a woman to death by stoning for adultery[10] . As Edwin argues, such cases, along with events such as the protests by Islamic conservative groups against Nigeria hosting the Miss World pageant in 2004, citing fears of corrupting women's modesty, were central to renewed media and international interest in Islam in Nigeria, as they aligned with Western narratives about Islam and fit into a 'pattern of the all-too-familiar stance that Islam is oppressive and violent, particularly to Muslim women'[11]. International discourse on northern Nigerian women in the early 2000s was largely shaped by their stigmatisation as both women

and Muslims, further framed by Western discourse on the 'savagery sanctioned by Islam'[12]. This constructed a narrative centred on their victimisation and collectivised the perception of the women as oppressed and marginalised, while ignoring the demographic diversity of the region and the women's varied experiences. Thus, accounts of northern Nigerian women in historical sources and international discourse before Boko Haram were generally sparse and restricted, and in the few instances they were discussed, the focus was primarily on their oppression and marginalisation in society, whether through colonial narratives or in international headlines. Consequently, this limited a nuanced understanding of their experiences and solidified a dominant narrative of victimisation.

The year 2014 marked a turning point in Boko Haram's use of women in their insurgency, with the kidnapping of the Chibok Girls and the subsequent deployment of young girls and women as suicide bombers driving widespread international attention and reinforcing the victimisation narrative. The Chibok Girls held significant symbolic meaning, particularly because they were abducted from a governmentally sponsored secondary school, and most of them were Christians. Smith discusses this symbolism as crucial to capturing Western attention and sympathies, noting that the girls embodied ideals highly valued in the West: women striving to break free from tradition and backwardness by pursuing education[13]. This was further intensified by pejorative Western views of gender and Islam, which were compounded by Boko Haram's claim that they had converted the girls to Islam[14]. Also, the #BringBackOurGirls campaign brought the Chibok Girls to global prominence, gaining widespread support on social media and endorsements from prominent figures, including the US First Lady at the time Michelle Obama[15]. Two years later, she referenced their kidnapping in a World Bank speech to emphasise the broader challenges to girls' access to education worldwide[16]. They therefore became a symbol of the oppression of girls, not only in Nigeria but globally, reinforcing the dominant narrative of their victimisation. The significance of this symbolism was striking because, although Boko Haram had previously attacked schools and abducted women, these factors were what shocked and drew widespread condemnation from the international community[17]. Indeed, it is important to note that Boko Haram initially started abducting women in retaliation to the imprisonment by the government and the Nigerian military of some of Boko Haram's wives and had already recognised the benefits of using women as a bargaining tool[18]. However, Zenn and Pearson argued in an article published just before the Chibok Girls' kidnapping that gender-based violence and the instrumental use of women by the group was an 'under-researched aspect of Boko Haram's activities', contrasting with the scrutiny it received after April 2014[19]. Following this, Boko Haram recognised that the victimisation of girls was also a powerful tool for drawing international attention, which contributed to the group's decision to escalate the use of girls and women as suicide bombers in June 2014[20]. Indeed, a report by Warner and Matfess on the demographic profile of Boko Haram's suicide bombings highlighted the group's awareness of the shock value of using women to elicit both local and international outrage[21]. Agbaje similarly argued that the group acknowledged the 'propaganda value of women and significance of the use of innocent girls'[22]. Boko Haram's shift in tactics therefore highlights the extent to which the victimisation narrative had become dominant, further reinforcing it by adding more instances of exploitation. Since 2014, numerous reports and studies have documented not only the abuses against women perpetrated by Boko Haram but also broader violations by multiple actors involved in the conflict against the group, including the Nigerian military and a community-based vigilante group called the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF)[23]. This surge in reports has directly correlated with the intensification of the conflict among all parties between 2013-2015, which also saw a significant increase in human rights violations and violence against civilians.[24] As discussed by Hassan and Pieri, the activities of the CJTF and their direct connection to civilians increased violence and causalities, as Boko Haram deliberately targeted civilians to deter them from collaborating with, joining, or supporting the CJTF[25]. Additionally, the CJTF also started perpetrating human rights violations against civilians, including women[26]. As a result, northern Nigerian women have often been depicted as trapped in an unending cycle of violence. While this was true for many, it is crucial to acknowledge, as Nagarajan points out, that their experiences during the conflict varied significantly depending on their location, as conflict dynamics and the impact of Boko Haram differed across

states[27]. However, the near-exclusive focus of these reports on their victimisation has resulted in a singular, oversimplified portrayal of their experiences which has overlooked these differences. This pattern is also discussed by Clark in the context of the conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina, who argued that the collectivising phenomenon of NGO reports on sexual violence towards women neglected individuality, grouping all women into a 'homogenous unity'[28]. Furthermore, as Ayiera argues, much of the research, policy, and advocacy surrounding women in conflict has mainly focused on addressing sexual violence, exposing such abuses, and 'wielding international political will to condemn sexual violence in conflict situations'[29]. The attention given by NGOs and other bodies to the victimisation of northern Nigerian women and girls can therefore be framed within the wider global focus on women's victimisation and marginalisation in conflict situations. Thus, the extensive emphasis on their victimisation in reports underscores how their experiences have predominantly been portrayed in terms of oppression and exploitation, shaping the prevailing narrative in both public opinion and discourse around them.

Finally, although largely overlooked, northern Nigerian women's agency has been examined in a small number of studies and reports, particularly in relation to their voluntary involvement with Boko Haram or participation in counterinsurgency and peacebuilding efforts, offering a more nuanced perspective on their experiences. An important contribution to this discourse is Matfess's book Women and the War on Boko Haram cases, which examines women's agency within Boko Haram, including instances of voluntary association[30]. Women who joined the group voluntarily were motivated by a variety of reasons, such as gaining access to Islamic education and medical care provided by the group, improving living conditions and social status as commanders' wives, or, in some cases, seeking revenge against security forces by volunteering as suicide bombers[31]. This challenges conventional perceptions of women's roles in conflicts. As Henty and Eggleston argue, the idea of women joining a terrorist organisation voluntarily is difficult for many to accept because it disrupts traditional gender assumptions that portray women as inherently peaceful in conflict settings[32]. Matfess also acknowledges that 'the lines of consent, coercion, autonomy, and oppression are blurred by the structural violence that women face in Nigeria', highlighting that their victimisation and position within the patriarchal society also, to some extent, shape their decisions to join the group[33]. This was further emphasised by a psychologist working directly with women rescued from Boko Haram as part of a deradicalisation program, who noted that Boko Haram's recruitment strategy was powerful because it offered some women more freedom and advantages than they typically had access to in the region, particularly when married to commanders or when joining voluntarily[34]. This also prompted some women to return to the group after having been rescued, preferring their status within Boko Haram to the one they returned to in society[35]. However, while it is important to frame their actions within this broader structural context and set of constraints, an excessive focus on these factors risks overshadowing their will and decision-making, which become particularly evident in their ability to navigate such challenging environments and make choices for their own benefit[36]. Moreover, while some women voluntarily joined Boko Haram, others actively resisted the insurgency by participating in counterinsurgency efforts, further underscoring how they have actively shaped their own experiences, even though these contributions are not often discussed. Some examples include a 2016 International Crisis Group report, which highlighted the 122 women who had joined the CJTF in Borno State at the time, as well as an article published by Punch that detailed the vital roles women played in the CJTF, particularly in gathering intelligence, and their motivation for joining[37]. Additionally, some media outlets covered the story of Aisha Gombi, known as 'Queen Hunter', who led a group tracking Boko Haram members[38]. Their motivations for joining counterinsurgency efforts ranged from seeking vengeance against Boko Haram for the loss of family members, volunteering to work at checkpoints and search women's bodies to prevent men from doing so, to a more general desire to directly contribute to restoring peace in the region, emphasising their personal decision-making and independent agency[39]. Through their efforts and by challenging common perceptions of women as non-violent and passive in conflict, they managed to gather crucial intelligence and take actions that have directly helped thwart Boko Haram attacks[40]. These examples illustrate how women have played an

important role in countering the insurgency, seizing opportunities to assume roles traditionally attributed to men, and directly impacting the dynamics of the conflict. Similarly, only a limited number of sources have addressed women's engagement in women and peace organisations, with notable examples including a 2020 report by the Chr. Michelsen Institute[41]. This report emphasises how, despite being politically marginalised and excluded from formal peacebuilding processes, women independently took action to address violence and restore peace in their communities[42]. Amnesty International also briefly discussed the 'Knifar movement', an activist group of displaced women advocating for their husbands' release from detention and accountability for abuses they endured, such as starvation and sexual violence[43]. They successfully submitted a list of names to various bodies investigating military abuses, attracted domestic media attention to their cause, and, according to Amnesty, the release of hundreds of men from detention in November 2021 was a 'testament to campaign power' of the Knifar movement, highlighting their pivotal role in securing the men's release[44]. Despite the challenging environment and limited opportunities due to both the conflict and structural constraints in the region, women have asserted their agency by striving to improve their own lives, assisting other women, and supporting their communities, thereby taking on active roles in the conflict. Thus, while the agency of northern Nigerian women in the context of Boko Haram has received less attention than their victimisation, these examples underscore some of the various and important roles women have played in the conflict, offering a more nuanced understanding of their experiences and challenging the predominant narrative that portrays them solely as victims.

In conclusion, the portrayal of northern Nigerian women in the context of the Boko Haram conflict has often been dominated by a narrative of victimisation, obscuring the multifaceted roles they have played in the conflict. While this essay does not seek to diminish their experiences of suffering and violence, it underscores the importance of acknowledging their agency, which they have demonstrated in various ways. The limited but significant studies highlighting these roles reveal the necessity to move beyond reductive narratives that tend to homogenise women's experiences into a singular, oversimplified perspective. Although violence against women remains crucial to report, recognising the complexity of women's experiences in conflict settings is equally important. This broader approach challenges traditional narratives that focus solely on their victimhood, ensuring that women's resilience, agency, and contributions to conflict dynamics are fully appreciated within wider historiographical debates.

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WITNESSING ERASURE: DIASPORIC MEMORY AND THE ALGERIAN STRUGGLE AGAINST FRENCH NATIONAL AMNESIA

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The concept of diaspora, often entangled within the nation-state's rigid boundaries, presents a crucial yet often overlooked lens to denaturalise ossified narratives associated with the linear progression towards the centralised 'neutral' state[1]. In crossing borders and boundaries, the Algerian diaspora in France occupies a liminal space that continuously reimagines, challenges and deterritorialises notions of ethnicity, citizenship and belonging[2] . Pierre Nora's seminal work *'Lieux de Mémoire'* provides an important theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between locations, events and symbols as central to the collective memory of the nation[3]. It is notable that he, being a member of the French settler community in Algeria, was deeply entwined with the history of French colonial rule. However, Nora's works often anchor themselves in a collective memory that has sanitised the traces of empire as if deemed unworthy of remembrance or simply considered marginal[4] . Whilst Nora's works are central to the field of memory studies, his perspective risks perpetuating a vision of France that obscures the foundational violence of its colonial enterprise and the enduring liminality of its post-colonial subjects. Although post-colonial perspectives have gained traction within and amongst French academic circles, they often challenge key aspects of French national character[5] . Namely, the foundational role of *Liberté* (liberty), *Egalité* (equality), *Fraternité* (fraternity) and *Laïcité* (secularism) that underscore French national pride and embolden France's historical claim to modernity. Nora's colonial amnesia is 'neither an oversight nor blindness' but indicative of a broader structural issue within France reverberating across all levels[6] . During a speech in Senegal, former French President Nicolas Sarkozy pronounced 'the tragedy of Africa is that the African man has not entered history…he remains motionless'[7].

The relegation, erasure and essentialization of 'non-European' history are not merely semantic, but emblematic of institutionalised reductionism and dismissal. Ideas of progress and modernity are presented as inherent and universalistic. In this sense there is a dual process of historical erasure, firstly the erasure and essentialization of 'non-European' history and secondly the erasure of the memory of the atrocities committed during French colonial rule. This dynamic ultimately affirms the positional superiority of France through disseminating a worldview that privileges Western epistemologies. This dual process of erasure is particularly pronounced when understanding the experiences of the Algerian diaspora whose presence actively challenges the memories and imaginaries of French colonial rule and modern claim of neutrality. The Algerian diaspora dispels the myth of a static, territorially bound nation-state by merely existing within French borders. The post-memories and mythification of Algeria in the consciousness of second and third-generation Algerians challenge the assimilationist policies of the French state whilst unsettling what 'home' means for these communities. Thus, diasporic memories are a form of resistance, recasting the past in a light that illuminates the pluralistic and often contentious nature of identity and belonging.

The memories of the Algerian diaspora unsettle monolithic narratives of national identity and immigrant histories as they challenge the entrenched binaries of Muslims as 'oppressed' and the secular French state as 'free'. In doing so, such memories expose the essentialisms these communities are often subjected to, revealing the constructed nature of cultural identity and the non-neutrality of the French state. The modern French nation-state often characterises itself on its secular liberal values that emphasise the separation between the public and private and the centrality of constitutionalism[8]. One of the key principles embedded is that of Laïcité which aims to protect the freedom of thought, legal equality and state 'neutrality'[9]. However, in a country whose empire encompassed a wide array of races, religions, and ethnic groups, such assimilationist principles expose the extent to which the French state's claim to neutrality is undermined. These principles often serve to demobilise and diminish what the state deems 'unneutral' identities, particularly those of diasporic groups[10]. In France, individuals with Algerian heritage constitute one of the most prominent demographic groups with a significant proportion identifying as Muslim[11] . The enactment of laws prohibiting conspicuous religious symbols in schools in 2004, followed by the 2010 ban on the niqab underscores how the memories and cultural identities of Algerian Muslim women are muted as they unsettle cultural binaries of the 'oppressed Muslim women' vs the 'free Western woman'[12]. These measures reflect how the French state's

ART BY BESSIE SCHOFIELD

claim to neutrality is not only constructed but deliberately maintained.

The examination of the French states attitudes towards Algerian women aligns with Edward Said's contention against the Orientalist tradition distinguished by its pernicious 'veil of objectivity', which through problematic ethnographic writings on the Middle Eastern Orient characterised the region into a consciously fabricated and immutably essentialized 'other'[13] . Although a feminist perspective occupied a peripheral role in Said's work, his critique of the Orientalist discourse provides an important theoretical framework from which to understand how the memories of the female Algerian diaspora, challenge and confronts the binaries that has been normalised and deemed acceptable in the French societal 'Overton window'[14] . The discourse of liberte in modern French liberalism is deeply problematised by the harrowing memories of Algeria's colonisation from 1830-1962, throughout this period Algeria endured violent repression, systematic exploitation, and attempts to erase its cultural and religious identity. In this context, French colonial 'specialists' often essentialised the entirety of Algeria's culture into a singular binary, stagnant monolith, feeding into a narrative that justified colonial dominance as a 'civilising' mission[15]. The works of the French neo-classical painter Gaston-Casimir Saint-Pierre are emblematic of the Orientalist tendency to fetishise and sexualise the 'Arab Muslim woman'. His paintings of Algerian women, in sheer clothing and unveiled, suggest that the Muslim woman was waiting to be undressed, stripped and liberated from her 'backwards' culture by the 'modern' European man[16] . This dynamic is not independent of the colonial reality, as Islam's purported backwardness was often used as a justification to impose colonial rule. This can be seen through the works of Ernest Renan who argued that an 'Iron band was crowned on the heads of Muslims' which prevented 'scientific thought'[17]. This was mirrored by his mentor and predecessor Silvestre de Sacy, when he proclaimed the proclamation of the Algiers which announced French rule over Algeria[18] .

The discourse of secularism, western feminism and its relation to colonial violence has often been erased from the consciousness of the liberal and 'neutral' French state, however, is embedded deeply within the collective memory of members of the Algerian diaspora. Throughout the Algerian Revolution, French colonial authorities orchestrated Algerian women burning their veils, framing these acts as symbols of 'liberation for Algerian women' to justify colonial rule, whilst simultaneously perpetuating acts of gendered violence, rape and torture as a weapon of war[19]. This dynamic is indicative of what the Algerian-born French writer Francois Verges termed 'civilisational feminism', a form of colonial rule that weaponises the feminist discourse to help maintain control[20]. The painful memory of colonisation and the weaponisation of the feminist discourse has been emotionally and physically inscribed upon the consciousness of members of the female Algerian diaspora community who contend that the entrenched binaries surrounding the 'oppression' of Muslim women have been used to maintain a neo-colonial control of their social skins; replacing 'paternal' patriarchy with colonial patriarchy. The contemporary instrumentalisation of the veil has come to encapsulate the false dichotomies of the Orientalist discourse To the French state, the veil symbolizes 'Muslim women's subjection under Sharia Law,' a moral and legal framework derived from the Quran and Hadiths. However, in the West, Sharia is often reductively portrayed as inherently oppressive, obscuring the complexities of its interpretation and practice. This framing positions the veil as incompatible with adherence to French law. Yet for Algerian women who choose to wear the veil, it can symbolise resistance against the demobilisation of their Algerian heritage and an attempt to assert their identity in a country that continuously marginalises and diminishes their agency[21].

The memories of French colonisation of Algeria amongst the present-day diaspora unsettles the neutrality of the French state depicting the irony of how narratives of French modernity and liberté apply unequally to these communities, carrying contested and deeply troubling memories.

The spatial dynamics within France, impacted by the presence and memories of the Algerian diaspora communities, unsettle the territorial and cultural demarcations of the nation-state. This is rooted in the lived experiences of trauma and re-traumatisation for members of the Algerian diaspora who engender transnational ethnoscapes through their negotiations with sites of memory[22]. The French national memory of the Algerian war occupies an 'ambiguous' role through a

continuous interplay between the 'societal amnesia' and relativist yet reductive explanations that disconnect the past from the present responsibilities of the French state.[23] Following Algerian independence, the French state enacted concerted efforts to repatriate colonial monuments which celebrated French rule. Here, Kirk Savage's contention that 'public monuments do not arise as if by natural law but rather built by people with sufficient power to marshal public consent for their erection' becomes pressing[24] . Dorothée-Myriam Kellou is the daughter of Algerian-born members of the diaspora in France and described how the statue of Sergent Blandan a French officer who served in Algeria was 'terrifying' for her father who used to see the very same statue in Algeria when walking from his village to Algiers and now confronts it in his new hometown in France[25]. The statue was repatriated to France in 1963 and erected for public display amongst other statues which have similar symbolic meanings, depicting how states can engage in selective memory practices[26]. Savage's observation that the construction of public monuments is a manifestation of power and public consensus, highlights how such processes can lead to re-traumatisation of diaspora communities whose memories diverge from the sanitised narratives that 'post-imperial' states prefer to emphasise. This challenges Benedict Anderson's thesis of nations consisting of a unified 'imagined community' suggesting that the process of imagining community is not uniform but layered with memories of the past that may conflict with the territorialised state[27] . As a political entity, the territorialszed state derives its legitimacy from fixed geographic boundaries, asserting sovereign control and a cohesive national identity tied to a specific territory. However, this framework often overlooks the transnational and diasporic dimensions of identity, where collective memories and allegiances extend beyond the state's imposed borders. Ernest Renan's idea of the 'nation as a daily plebiscite' resonates, depicting how spaces can become repositories of national memory and places where engagement with these sites can reaffirm or challenge the collective identity associated with the area[28] . Here, Algerian-French individuals navigate hybrid identities tethered to colonial memories and their present lives in France. The Algerian diaspora's interactions with such monuments underscore the emergence of 'parallel' imagined communities unsettling the traditional confines of identity and nationalist ideology within the territorialised state.

Spatial politics and racialised place-making policies in France further depict how the memories of the Algerian diaspora unsettle national histories and imaginaries of a 'neutral' public space. Although French liberal values emphasise a universal, neutral public sphere, in practice, this ideology works to denigrate and marginalise communities of Algerian descent who do not share equal racial, economic and cultural status with the mainstream French population and thus limits their access to exist within these spaces apolitically[29] . The Algerian diaspora have historically faced forms of spatialised segregation having been 'moved and relocated' by French authorities to 'poor neighbourhoods' in the outskirts of the cities called *'la banlieue'* with 'other Algerians'[30]. This started in the 1960's where through the creation of 'socio-spatial subjectivities' and boundaries, the state attempted to 'integrate Algerians economically while excluding them socially'[31] . The forced ghettoization of these communities has resulted in their memories and experiences as French citizens denaturalising traditional narratives of French *egalité* and *liberté* as these identities have been systematically ostracised from the public sphere to ensure its supposed neutrality. Here, Lefebvre's concept of the non-neutrality of space and Simon Sleight's argument of memory as inherently spatial is important to consider, whereby the binaries of the Orientalist discourse have been physically imprinted onto the urban geography of France[32]. Hassan a third-generation member of the Algerian diaspora, described how 'although I never grew up in a *'banlieue'*, I am immediately labelled as a *'banlieusard'* with all the prejudices that follow… after a while I ended up believing and accepting that I am from there too'[33] . This elucidates Lefebvre and Sleight's contention that spaces are inherently imbued with social meanings and power relations that can reflect and reinforce social hierarchies. The physical otherisation through the specialised segregation of Algerian communities, links to the racialisation of urban spaces through the pejorative term *'banlieusard'* often directed towards North-African youths. Silverman described how French nationalism speaks with two tongues at the same time anchored within a social paradox: 'the more the state insists on uniformity and neutrality within the public sphere the

more it constructs the visibility of this particular difference'[34]. Here, it is important to note that majority groups (in this context non-immigrant French citizens) tend to have the prerogative and privilege to create spatial norms regarding how the public sphere is defined and thus rarely, if ever need to examine or question their hegemony of space[35]. Hassan's experience depicts how his memories of exclusion and discrimination in working, living and existing within the normative, secular and white French public sphere have led to him feeling a sense of belonging and comfort within the disreputable and 'unsafe' localities of the *'banlieues'*.

Although the production of space within the French public sphere is often predicated upon assimilation, exclusion, domination and erasure, it is also important to consider how memories of marginalisation have led to creative ways of unsettling notions of home and belonging for second and third-generation Algerians. Asma Saïdani notes how the supposed neutrality of French nationality is often used to reinforce distinctions between the national in-groups and out-groups, whereby groups such as the Algerian diaspora, despite being French citizens and socialised within France are still perceived as out-groups[36]. Memoires of this experience have led the diaspora to construct Algeria as both a real and imagined homeland 'depicted as an authoritative source of value identity and loyalty'[37]. In this context, Nahid Kabir's notion that identity cannot be performed alone, as it is both individual and group-centred is pressing, suggesting that through post-memories transmitted by parents and grandparents, second and third-generation Algerians feel a sense of identity and belonging from imagining Algeria as a place receptive towards their identities that have often been othered[38]. A study conducted on members of the Algerian diaspora revealed that 80% of second-generation participants and 70% of third-generation participants were raised on the myth of return to Algeria, so their 'children will grow up there and not feel what [they] felt in France'[39]. The desire to reclaim and return to Algeria is imbued with a desire to gain agency, unsettling what 'home' and national belonging traditionally mean whilst also unsettling French assimilationist policies. However, whilst these groups certainly imagine themselves as deeply connected to Algeria, it is important to disconnect this from a rigid binary of a rejection of their French identity.

Homi K. Bhabha's concept of 'hybridity' is useful here, as it captures the way postcolonial diasporic communities negotiate identity through everyday practices, resisting fixed notions of national belonging. Rather, the Algerian diaspora embody a transnational identity and a hybrid sense of belonging that is not anchored in the geographical or cultural confines of either country.

The memories of the Algerian diaspora deeply unsettle both national and immigrant histories through challenging the cultural and physical boundaries of the nation-state. In this sense, the diaspora community challenges the myth of state neutrality, through their lived memories and post-memories of colonisation, French secularism and racialised spatial politics, problematising the national identity of the native population. The spatial politics within the French public sphere, imbued with colonial yet sanitised vestiges of the past often result in a process of retraumatisation for members of the Algerian diaspora whose histories and memories have been erased. The process of state-sanctioned memory erasure and forgetting have resulted in entrenched binaries, essentialisms and discrimination which memories of the Algerian diaspora often destabilise.

Footnotes

1. Victoria Redclift, "The Demobilization of Diaspora: History, Memory and 'Latent Identity." Global Networks (2016) p.501.

2. Vijar Agnew, "Diaspora and Memory." In Diaspora, Memory, and Identity: A Search for Home." University of Toronto Press (2005) p.19.

3. Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire." Representations (1989).

4. Edward Baring, "Liberalism and the Algerian War." Critical Inquiry (2010) p.239.

5. Etienne Achille, Charles Forsdick and Lydie Moudileno, "Postcolonial Realms of Memory: Sites and Symbols in Modern France." Liverpool University Press (2020) p.8.

6. Etienne Achille, Charles Forsdick and Lydie Moudileno, "Postcolonial Realms of Memory: Sites and Symbols in Modern France." Liverpool University Press (2020) p.6.

7. Francois Richard, "Recharting Atlantic Encounters. Object Trajectories and Histories of Value in the Siin (Senegal) and Senegambia." *Archaeological Dialogues* (2010). p.2

8. Etienne Achille, Charles Forsdick and Lydie Moudileno, "Postcolonial Realms of Memory: Sites and Symbols in Modern France." Liverpool University Press (2020) p.2.

9. Cees Maris, "Laïcité in the Low Countries? On Headscarves in a Neutral State." NYU School of Law (2008) p.5.

10. Nina Hoel, Sa'diyya Shaikh, "Veiling, Secularism and Islamism: Gender Constructions in France and Iran." Journal for the Study of Religion (2007). p.112.

11. Catherine Delcroix, "Two Generations of Muslim Women in France : Creative Parenting, Identity and Recognition." Identity and Recognition. Oral History Review, (2009). p.87.

12. Nina Hoel, Sa'diyya Shaikh, "Veiling, Secularism and Islamism: Gender Constructions in France and Iran." Journal for the Study of Religion (2007). p.111.

13. Edward Said, "Orientalism" Penguin (1978) p.129.

14. Laura Nader, "Contrarian Anthropology: The Unwritten Rules of Academia" Berghahn Books (2018) p.129. A concept that describes the range of ideas and policies considered acceptable and politically feasible to the mainstream population at a given time.

15. Edward Said, "Orientalism" Penguin (1978) p.129

16. See Appendix Image 1 and 2.

17. Robert Priest, "Ernest Renan's Race Problem." The Historical Journal (2015). p.309.

18. Edward Said, "Orientalism" Penguin (1978). p.129.

19. Neil Macmaster, "Burning the Veil the Algerian War and the "Emancipation" of Muslim Women, 1954–62." Manchester University Press (2020).

20. Françoise Vergès, "A Decolonial Feminism." Pluto Press (2021) p.15.

21. Victoria Redclift, "The Demobilization of Diaspora: History, Memory and 'Latent Identity." Global Networks (2016) p.513.

22. Ibid.

23. Fiona Barclay, "France's Colonial Legacies: Memory, Identity and Narrative." University of Wales Press, (2013) p.71

24. Kirk Savage, "Monument Wars: Washington D.C. the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape" University of California Press, (2009) p.15.

25. Myriam Francois, "France in Focus: The Legacy of Colonialism in France | the Big Picture." Youtube, 2023.

26. Etienne Achille, Charles Forsdick and Lydie Moudileno, "Postcolonial Realms of Memory: Sites and Symbols in Modern France." Liverpool University Press (2020) p.360.

27. Benedict Anderson, "Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism", Verso (1983)

28. Ernest Renan, "What Is a Nation? And Other Political Writings" Columbia University Press (1882).

29. Elizabeth Nelson, "Politics of Belonging: Identity, Integration, and Spatial Practices of Algerian Immigrants and Their Descendants in Paris, France" University of Southern California Press (2021). p.261.

30. Asma Saïdani, "Ethnic, Religious and National Identities among Second and Third-Generation Algerians in a Post-Colonial France" University of York (2023). p.61.

31. Ibid.

32. Henri Lefebvre. "Everyday Life in the Modern World" Routledge (1968). p.5.

33. Asma Saïdani, "Ethnic, Religious and National Identities among Second and Third-Generation Algerians in a Post-Colonial France" University of York (2023). p.62.

34. Max Silverman, "The French Republic Unveiled." Ethnic and Racial Studies (2007). p.629

35. Elizabeth Nelson, "Politics of Belonging: Identity, Integration, and Spatial Practices of Algerian Immigrants and Their Descendants in Paris, France" (2021). p.262

36. Asma Saïdani, "Ethnic, Religious and National Identities among Second and Third-Generation Algerians in a Post-Colonial France" University of York (2023). p.8.

37. Rogers Brubaker. "Ethnicity without Groups" Harvard University Press (2006). p.15.

38. Nahid Kabir. "Young British Muslims" Edinburgh University Press (2012) p.20.

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OVERCOMING INFERIORITY THROUGH THE PAST-ORIENTALISATION AND THE PRESENT-OCCIDENTALISATION

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This article examines the erasure of Japan's premodern homosexual culture, known as nanshoku, through the lens of Orientalism. It argues that the decline of nanshoku through Japan's westernisation following the Meiji Restoration (1868) entailed a process of "past-Orientalisation" and "present-Occidentalisation." While Edward Said theorised Orientalism as a Western discourse that subjugates the "Orient," this study extends his framework to analyse how Japan internalised Orientalist logic to distanse itself from its own past. By historicising its own sexual past as an "Othered" element belonging to an inferior "Orient" ("past-Orientalisation"), Meiji Japan sought to align itself with the dominant Western cultural and ideological framework ("present-Occidentalisation"). Drawing on the discourse of Orientalism and expanding its application to Japan's internalisation of Oriental inferiority, this study explores how Japan's restructuring of its sexual norms was not merely a process of westernising the past norms but a subjective redefinition of its own identity. This article further contends that this pattern persists in contemporary Japanese society, where discourses on gender and sexuality essentialise Western paradigms. By illustrating how Japan's internalisation of Western ideology contributed to the persistent suppression of its cultural autonomy over sexuality, this article contributes to the discourse on how societies in the non-West have shaped modernity under the enduring legacy of Orientalist frameworks.

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Introduction

Culture of sexualities is a rich source for the investigation of interpersonal relationships in ethnography. In colonial Latin America, sexual practices represented a caste to which individuals belonged in colonial society, where female chastity and male promiscuity symbolised privileged positions (O'Connor 30-31). In ancient civilisations such as Rome, Greece, and Persia, legal restrictions against homosexuality reveal that concerns about citizenry and the concept of human dignity developed alongside the flourishment of philosophy (Kelleher 1-24). However, the culture of sexualities and its trajectory also inform power relations that the region has endured upon encountering with the dominant external cultural norms. In Japan before the Meiji Restoration in 1868, male homosexuality was commonly practised, yet the memory of this culture has been erased in the contemporary Japanese society (Furukawa and Lockyer 98-127). In this essay, I argue that the politically motivated revising of past homosexual culture through Japan's westernisation since the Meiji era (1868-1912) parallels the imposition of Orientalism, a philosophy theorised by Edward Said. Specifically, I contend that Japanese governmental intention to erase homosexual culture was a process of Orientalising its past self to bring its present self closer to the Occident — a representation of power in global politics from which the Empire of Japan wanted to sought recognition.

Review of Discussions on Orientalism Practised in the Orient

In Orientalism, Said claims that the concept was established by Western Orientalists to make a distinction between "the West" and "the Orient" to assert Western superiority in politics, economics, culture, academia, and bodily races that created Western civilizations. The discourse of Orientalism reveals the West's process of "Othering" the exteriority. Thus, "the Orient," which in Said's argument initially referred to the Middle East and Arab world, transcends the geographic location of the Orient to encompass indigenous cultural spaces in the East, such as pre-modern Japanese homosexual practices, which this essay examines.

Regarding the practice of Orientalism within "the Orient," Said extends his argument by claiming that today the practice of Orientalism is also joined by individuals from the Orient who were educated in the United States and adapted to playact the exoticised, eroticised image of the Orient as constructed by Western Orientalism, the phenomena of which he calls "a triumph of Orientalism" (323). Other scholars also have further developed theories on how Orientalism has been exercised within "the Orient" by analysing its dynamics in specific cultural practices. For example, by focusing on the imperial Japan's promotion of traditional Japanese handcrafting in its Asian colonies, Yuko Kikuchi's theory of "Oriental Orientalism" argues that Imperial Japan responded to Euro-American cultural dominance up until the wartime by spreading its own handcraft traditions and subjugating traditional crafts of its colonies in Southeast and East Asia. These colonies, themselves subjects of Western Orientalism, were thus hierarchized by Japan as part of Japan's effort to overcome its own sense of inferiority as an "Oriental" nation (Kikuchi). Similarly, Koji Kobayashi et al. proposes the notion of "self-Orientalisation" in the field of Japanese sport brand advertising in the global market, in which Japanese individuals subjectively reproduce Japan's cultural image as a desirable "Other" to European and American audiences (157-174). These theories illuminate how "the Orient" has subjectively performed what has been labelled as "Oriental" in either a subversive way (as in Kikuchi's "Oriental Orientalism" theory) or in an adaptive, yielding manner (as in Kobayashi et al.'s theory and Said's "triumph of Orientalism") in response to the acknowledgement of

the Oriental gaze directed towards them from the West. However, further arguments must be made about the subjective eradication of Oriental cultures within "the Orient" as a result of the internalisation of the philosophy of Orientalism. By examining Japan's strategic erasure of its traditional homosexual culture as one form of cultural eradication driven by Orientalist shame, this essay seeks to identify the notion of "Oriental inferiority," wherein Japan found itself positioned lower within the power-knowledge framework upheld by the Western Orientalists. The essay furthers examines the notions of what I would call "past-Orientalisation" and "present-Occidentalisation," in which Japan tried to make a distinction of cultural power imbalances marked by "time," rather than conventional geographical spatiality as practised by the West, in order to assert its cultural superiority in the present by aligning its present self with the culture in the Occident and degrading its own past as containing despicable "Oriental" elements.

Background of Japanese Homosexual Culture and Philosophical/Religious Justification

The dynamics of "Oriental inferiority" that led to the "past-Orientalisation" and "present-Occidentalisation" are deeply complex because, for the widely accepted male homosexual culture in Japan up until the Edo-period, the encounter with the West entailed a painful clash of dissonant ideologies about sexuality, along with the introduction of the philosophy of Orientalism, which hierarchised them. But in order to discuss this complex intersection of philosophies, it is essential to first understand the historical background of homosexual culture in Japan.

Since ancient times, spaces associated with power that were dominated by male populations had evolved alongside *nanshoku*, the term for traditional male homosexuality and its culture in Japan. The first allusive reference to *nanshoku* appears after the eighth century during Heian period (794-1185), in traditional-style poems compiled in 万葉集*Man-yo-shu*, the oldest extant compilation of poems, suggesting that *nanshoku* was practised in the palace (Leupp 25). The Heian period was marked by stable power maintained by emperors for almost four centuries, during which culture, including homosexual practices in the palace, flourished. By the fourteenth century, under the Kamakura shogunate

(1185-1333), which marked the commencement of the feudal military government, male homosexuality in Japan spread from the ruling class of shogunates, who took over the nobility in the Heian period, to the warrior class, and eventually to the bourgeois. This was due to the expansion of the feudal system into rural areas, where nanshoku was often practised in lord-retainer relationships (Leupp 47-57). By the early Edo period (1603-1868), nanshoku had become a conduct that deserved to be praised. Nanshoku-okagami [The Great Mirror of Male Love], a nonfiction novel published in 1687, portrays male homosexual love stories that presented nanshoku as an integral mindset that strengthened the moral codes of the samurai, emphasising values such as loyalty and sincerity to maintain faithful and intimate lord-retainer relationships (Ihara). These documentations demonstrate that the martial culture had institutionalized homosexuality by the early Edo period and that Japanese male homosexuality had strong ties to vertical male relationships.

While practising male homosexuality, people sought ideological justification for their practices in philosophy/religion. This phenomenon was also prevalent in China, where Confucianism, yin-yang, and Daoism played a significant role for Chinese monks and literati, who were the major body of the homophilic practices, in interpreting homosexuality (Leupp 11-22).

In medieval Japan, Buddhism fostered the social acceptance of homosexuality by providing an interpretation that justified nanshoku. Unlike continental Buddhism, in which homosexuality was regarded as a sin that violated the religion's goal of overcoming desires, Japanese Buddhism was more open towards male homosexuality (Leupp 21-32). This contradictory situation is argued to have arisen from the reality in which monasteries in Japan had become another centre for male-male sexual relationships since the medieval era. Tsunoda et al. argue that the environment where approximately three thousand juvenile monks underwent training for a decade in the desolate Mount Hiei, the tradition of which had been practised since the ninth century, led the trainees to naturalise the expectation of sexual relationships with androgynous-looking male monks (114 cited in Leupp 28). Hinsch attributes the divergent evolution from Continental Buddhism to the possibility that Japanese monks, upon their return from studying Buddhism, may have modified the continental teachings to align with their own homosexual desires, which they had observed during their time in China (cited in Leupp 21). Japanese Shintoism, another major religion practised in Japan (though more commonly understood as a national identity (Godart 75)), was also tolerant of sexual desire by seeing it as purely natural phenomena, while only penalizing bestiality and incest and allowing room for believers to interpret their sexual passion for the same sex as equally encouraged as heterosexual desires (Crompton 415). Therefore, premodern philosophy/religion in Japan did not function as ethical frameworks to outright reject homosexuality. Instead, individuals sought philosophical justification for their homosexual desires by refining and reinterpreting the teachings to align with their personal experiences.

Decline of *Nanshoku* through the Clashes of Ideologies under the Orientalist Gaze

What allowed Japanese male homosexuality to flourish until the mid-nineteenth century was the national isolationist policies implemented by the Tokugawa shogunate in a step-by-step manner, which were completed in 1639 and lasted until the 1850s when it re-opened the border by signing unfair diplomatic treaties with Western nations, including the US, Britain, Russia, and the Netherlands. The isolationist policies were rooted in fear of Spanish and Portuguese aggression and the Christian influence, which led to the banning of Christianity in the initial phase from 1614 (Hagemann 151-153).

One might contextualise the decline of nanshoku after the end of the isolationist policies in the narrative of the westernisation of Japan following the Meiji Restoration in 1868. However, I argue that the complicated trajectory of the eradication of homosexual culture, through which the governmental and public attitudes struggled to align, is a strong representation that the westernisation was not an ideologically straightforward shift with a positive mindset for the advancement of national competitiveness. Rather, I contend that it was a process of acknowledging Orientalism and its own Orientalised position and endeavouring to overcome its Oriental inferiority.

The Japanese encounter with Western philosophy and religion concerning sexualities was not as simple as the dichotomous clash between traditional Buddhism and Shintoism and Christianity newly spread by missionaries. Before the Meiji era in Japan, there was no obvious distinction of categories between "religion" and "philosophy" such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shintoism, and those between "science" (Godart 74-75). If anything, the concept of "religion" started to emerge in the 1880s to specifically indicate Christianity, gaining the connotation of being in opposition to scientific rationality and patriotic loyalty because Christianity was prohibited by the government (Godart 75). As a full-scale introduction of Western nomenclature began in the Meiji Restoration, the institutionalised concepts of "religion," "philosophy," and "science" were brought in, which collaboratively contributed to the degradation of homosexual culture in Japan. Specifically, Christianity's disapproval of homosexuality, with the "religious" concept, was tied with the "scientific" category of sexology, which defined homosexuality as a perverted and unnatural attitude of humans. Meanwhile, Western "philosophy" denied the existence of traditional philosophies in Japan that had previously justified homosexuality, regarding Western-style philosophy as the only legitimate forms of philosophy (Furukawa and Lockyer 119; Godart 75-76). It is noteworthy that the majority of Japanese philosophers back then admitted that pre-Meiji "thoughts" like Buddhism did not meet the standards of "world philosophy," with Godart

describing this attitudes as "'secondary-orientalist' essentializing of Western thoughts" (76). Thus, it is reasonable to argue that the Western-style philosophy indoctrinated in Japan included Orientalism, which hierarchised the cultural imbalance of categories. The discourse of Orientalism also connotes "homosexual otherness" built on eroticised myths about the non-West, which I argue was internalised in Japan as a sense of inferiority regarding its own sexual body (Averbuch 318). Therefore, nanshoku was placed under structural subjugation in terms of the concepts of religion, philosophy, and science, with the Western hegemony in each being affected by Orientalism.

"Past-Orientalisation" Accompanied by "Present-Occidentalisation"

The Oriental inferiority led to the "past-Orientalisation" in the form of detaching the pre-Meiji philosophy/religion from its present self by devaluing them. In the context of homosexuality, past-Orientalisation was followed by "present-Occidentalisation." The Meiji government pursued the criminalisation of homosexual acts through the sodomy ordinance in 1873 by drastically revising Tokugawa criminal codes with the aim of gaining approval from the Westerners, given the fact that all European powers except France penalised homosexuality at that time (Furukawa and Lockyer 108-110). It also published a school guide advising male students to be wary of the seductive behaviours of older male students (Yamaguchi 1901 cited in Leupp 1997:203). This was due to the reality that nanshoku culture among the abolished samurai class in the Edo period was taken up by middle and high school students' vertical relationships in the Meiji period (Furukawa and Lockyer 100). These governmental efforts to conceal the homosexual remnants in society by revising the legal framework in order to historicise them parallel the Western Orientalists' effort to "Other" homosexual cultures in the "Othered" space.

The discourse of Orientalism practised in this context by Meiji Japan is by and largely invisible because it is subjectively practised in its indigenous land by the objects to be Orientalised themselves. However, in this act of self-Orientalisation, the entity being "Othered" is its past self, meaning that the distinction of inferior "Other/Orient" and superior "us/Occident" is structured through the historicization of "time." Thus, underlying the westernization of the sexual norms throughout Meiji Japan is the discourse of Orientalism, and it was the process of Orientalising its past self and Occidentalising its present-self to overcome the Oriental inferiority.

Legacy of Orientalism and Future Vision for Addressing Sexuality Issues in Global Contexts

In the turmoil of westernisation under the influence of Orientalism, Meiji Japan relinquished its bodily autonomy of indigenous sexual culture and partially lost the subjectivity of its own present body in exchange for gaining the subjectivity to Orientalise its own past body. This absence of bodily autonomy over one's sexual self persists, as the perception of homosexuality eternally shifted from an indigenous view that considers it a taste to an exogenous view that defines it as an identity through the modernisation process. (Saeki 127). The lack of autonomy over one's sexual self and culture is naturalised in contemporary Japan, while the society essentialises the Western ideology on gender and sexuality to interpret its own reality. For example, current efforts at the legalization of homosexual marriage in Japan, which requires the reinterpretation of the Article 24 of the Constitution that presumes only heterosexual unions, primarily focus on adopting Western-style theories and legal practices (Kobori 101-104; Horie 37). It is crucial to recognize that this dependency on Western-style solutions is rooted in the Orientalist influence on the process of drafting the Constitution with European legalists involved, who embedded Western ideology which was homophobic

during the Meiji Restoration (Furukawa and Lockyer 1994:109). The naturalised sense of not possessing autonomy over their gender and sexual culture is also evident in the public myth that women's liberation movements in Japan had been merely Western imports, despite the contradictory fact that the efforts were made by early Japanese women's liberation activists (Ueno 10). Such condition in the non-West represents the continuous reproduction of present-Occidentalisation within the "Othered" non-West nation that has strived to overcome Oriental inferiority, the phenomena of which I argue is the legacy of Orientalism imposed upon "the Orient."

What is immediately apparent from the trajectory of sexual and gender culture in Japan is that Japanese current gender norms are a system shaped by structural subjugation of its sexual self and cultural identity in relation to the West. Thus it is vital for the future of Western feminism and Western governments' efforts to not promote itself as leading the world in addressing gender/sexuality-related issues, so as not to reconstruct the power/knowledge relations between "the West" and "the Orient" and reproduce Oriental inferiority. To achieve this, it is essential that influential bodies of knowledge production, including academia in the West, recognize more widely the discourse of Oriental inferiority and the subsequent present-Occidentalisation ongoing in "the Orient." It is my hope that countries, regardless of their positions on the West-Orient spectrum, join in discussions on gender and sexuality liberation on equal footing.

Footnote

1. Furukawa and Lockyer argue that the public ignorance of pre-Meiji male homosexual culture, or *nanshoku*, is attributed to two major systemic constraints. One is the restriction of freedom of speech during wartime from the late 1930s, which limited the available medium through which the culture of *nanshoku* could be informed in the public sphere. The other is the shift in the framework for the public understanding of male homosexuality from an indigenous culture to sexual perversion in the 1920s.

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Miscellaneous
Musings
super adhésif

“I RAN TO THE COMMENTS”: SOCIAL MEDIA CULTURE, HATE-SPEECH, AND HYPERREALITY

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While social media has allowed our world to become more interconnected and informed on global issues than ever. It has also aroused much criticism in the way it facilitates unrestricted hate-speech and violent rhetoric, especially towards historically oppressed groups. While the abundance of hate-speech online may be credited to the facelessness facilitated by internet profiles that negates accountability, this essay argues that there is a more cognitive and deeper explanation for how people are able to engage so violently with one another online. It will explain this through the framework of Baudrillard’s “Simulacra and Simulation”, elaborating that this discourse on social media exists within a hyperreality in which people are trained to jump to comment in a discriminatory way as soon as they witness the existence of a represents historical traits of otherness. The essay situates this idea of otherness in literature concerning the social architecture of gender, race and sexuality. Due to this process of reproduction of information, people are able to comment so aggressively as they are not witnessing another human being but instead, through the hyperreality they are only witnessing an image of a historically category of other, and thus they do not authentically engage with what they see but instead play into the simulation.

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Introduction

Social media has maximised the possibilities of global communication; in many ways, it has allowed people all over the world to see and connect with one another (Gonzales, 2017). This is especially noteworthy when it comes to marginalised peoples such as women, racialised people and queer people. These groups are able to better spread their message or connect with others via social media than in the real world despite a lack of diversity in the world around them, and the internet acts as a portal for meeting others with similar experiences (Gonzales, 2017). However, these marginalised groups are also much more likely to be the victims of internet harassment like cyberbullying or trolling (Llorente et al, 2016).

Social media has facilitated an immense rise in the spread of hate speech and harassment (González-Esteban et al, 2024). This is often attributed to the anonymity that social media provides users, which protects them from the consequences that would arise from this sort of behaviour in the real world (Mondal et al, 2017). However, this assumption suggests that users with provided anonymity have the potential to attack or be attacked, which suggests that an insidious agenda exists within them already and it only needs an excuse to arise. This essay will argue against this idea and use the framework of Jean Baudrillard's "Simulacra and Simulation" to situate social media culture and hate speech within his idea of "hyperreality". This will demonstrate that hate speech is facilitated by the continuous distorting reproductions of historically patriarchal and colonial narratives within modern discourse. As this discourse is continually reproduced, it is ingrained into our culture and becomes difficult to release. This renders an instantaneously hateful reaction on social media when a historically or demographically marginalised person is scrutinised by commenters.

Simulacra, Simulation, and Social Media

In Jean Baudrillard's 1981 treatise, "Simulacra and Simulation", he discusses the four stages of Simulacra that are present in the world; simulacra are copies of existing or non-existing things, and represent aspects of the real world but hold the possibility of morphing into their own object. He discusses four stages of Simulacra that are present in the world; and these stages can be observed throughout the complex structure of modern ssocial media and the culture it inhabits, despite being a concept created before the invention of social media. While Baudrillard used art, advertisements and media to discuss his perception of simulacra, these can be easily transferred onto the world of social media. The first stage of simulacra is that which clearly and accurately represents something found in the real world (Baudrillard, 1981, p.6); an example on social media would be an unedited photograph that has been posted. The second stage is something which has been distorted from reality and often harbours an "evil" agenda (Baudrillard, 1981, p.6). This stage can be associated with the editing of photos on social media, with the agenda of looking "better" within patriarchal and Eurocentric standards. The third stage is that which masks the lack of reality around it (Baudrillard, 1981, p.13); online profiles on social media constitute an example of this, as their existence suggests that our real-world personas are real in contrast, which in Baudrillard's argument cannot be seen to be the case due to the fourth stage. The fourth and final stage is when the simulacra have no relation to reality at all, and simulacra are just reproductions of previous simulacra- this constitutes part of "hyperreality" (Allan and Daynes, 2017, p.242).

Baudrillard argued our society no longer could be connected to a natural reality. When he wrote "Simulacra and Simulation", he argued that society was so inundated by symbols and reproductions of symbols and the discourse spun off by all these inauthentic reproductions that we no longer had any reality left, only hyperreality (Allan and Daynes, 2017, p.242). Within hyperreality, it becomes impossible to tell simulacra from reality and there is a loss of the real. Social media can be argued to have taken this immersion of hyperreality to the next level, as it facilitates the constant and unlimited reproduction of information, symbols and opinions. Though Baudrillard's work was written far before the internet it can be argued that his observation of reproductions of images and information becoming oversaturated and detached from society, this has become a process exponentially execrated by the invention of the internet and social media. Misinformation, AI generated images, satire and rumours can all spread quickly and without regulation on social media and it is increasingly challenging for the user to decipher between what is real and what is not (Mondal et al, 2017).

On social media, people increasingly interact with posts and comments that have no basis in reality, and thus a feedback loop of simulacra production and surrounding discourse is inevitable. This catalyses the creation of hate speech as discourse loses the context of its original source and historic oppressive narratives become more ingrained and harder to inspect and reject. It is important to note that oppression and ridicule towards these groups has not begun with social media but exists within this historical narrative and social media simply reproduces and aggregates these narratives through hyperreality.

From the Empire to the Comments Section

It is no secret that discriminatory language and actions towards marginalised people did not first emerge on social media. We must inspect how people came to become marginalised the way in which they are today to understand the patterns in which these groups are now approached on social media. There is a continuous theme surrounding the oppression of marginalised people and that is the labelling of them as "other" and different from the norms of their oppressors.

We can observe the creation of the woman label through the lens of colonisation and empire in the work of Maria Lugones, who identifies the "Modern/Colonial Gender System" (Lugones, 2007). She describes how the gender binary and ideas of "man" and "woman" were spread throughout the world with the work of European empires. These colonists placed their understandings of gender upon the peoples they colonised. This demonstrates how those how the binary is used to other those who it transforms into women, an idea first earlier elaborated by Beauvoir in "The Second Sex" (2015). Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí furthers this in her observations of Yorubaland pre-colonisation (Oyěwùmí, 1997). She argues that the modern idea of a "woman" was not present in this society and that modern universal ideas of gender were not present in non-colonial societies. Oyěwùmí claims that the invention of "woman" was a key tool in naturalising power hierarchies within society and helped colonisation to be better facilitated as it both naturalised men's hierarchy over women as well as the white peoples over the colonised as it stripped half of the colonised peoples of any agency at all (Oyěwùmí, 1997).

The mission of colonisation targeted gender constructions, but also led to the advent of the creation of "race" as a social label to control; Anibel Quijano described race as, "the most efficient instrument of social domination invented in the last 500 years" (Wynter, 2003, p.263). "Race" as a concept was cemented and defined during the European Enlightenment when scientists were attempting to use science (incorrectly) to define different "races" as biologically different and assert white supremacy through this (Wolfe, 2016, p.17). We see similar ideas in Edward Said's "Orientalism" wherein he observes how European thinkers "othered" what they defined as the "Orient" and constructed images of what life was like in this part of the world (Said, 1978). This constructed image of the primitive and uncivilised Orient was spread and is still prevalent through the reproduction of this produced knowledge today and is used to justify ongoing racism in modern-day social media discourse (González-Esteban et al, 2024).

Said's analysis of the production of knowledge as power is inspired by the work of Michel Foucault, who used this framework to understand the moralisation of sexuality. In "The History of Sexuality", Foucault outlines how, historically, discourse surrounding sexuality was produced in order to control a population and gain power over those who are "othered" by the process of normalised heterosexuality and classing homosexuality as "deviant" (Foucault, 1978). In suppressing one group in society, a system of knowledge is also produced; one that encourages a society that needs to know what everyone's label is and thus judge them when they are seen to be the wrong one. This is advanced through Foucault's concept of Biopower, whereby the state or authority uses ideas around the body to assert what is healthy or normal for it to do, through this it creates a division between those considered normal and right, and those who are other and strange (Foucault, 1978). This concept can be tied back to the othering of women and racialised peoples as state institutions like medical practices historically have treated the white man as the standard and other bodies have suffered at their secondary class within medical practices (Johnson et al, 2004).

These frameworks are important to acknowledge when discussing marginalised peoples' experience today on social media as the harassment and hate speech that is targeted towards them has not come out of a vacuum. Instead, as this essay has outlined, there has been a

historical narrative created to "other" certain groups that has been a project of power. It is especially important to consider these different historical narratives together as they are interconnected . As identified previously, the colonial mission was a patriarchal one too, so we must inspect these power systems with reference to intersectionality. Kimberlé Crenshaw's 1989 essay "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-discrimination Doctrine Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" coined the term intersectionality and demonstrated how, within legal systems, sexist and racist frameworks of discrimination were not enough to understand the intersectional way that black women were treated by their employers which was different from white women and black men. This same pattern is prevalent on social media as people who occupy multiple spheres of historical oppression are often more exposed to hate speech than others, and there are different elements of oppression that touch each identity too. Furthermore, an intersectional lens shows us how different narratives are related such as fatphobia, which is largely related to colonial racism towards non-European bodies; especially women's (Strings, 2019), and fatphobia is also common within hate speech on social media (Kamiński et al, 2024). Taking these historical narratives, and looking at them together intersectionally, demonstrates what has happened to form ideas of marginalised peoples' as less than or deserving of hatred, we can see that over time as information is reproduced it becomes entrenched in society's way of thinking and patterns of knowledge.

Especially on social media, because knowledge reproduction is possible so quickly and without limit, reproduction of these kinds of thinking happens in a way that is inauthentic to the knowledge before it and becomes purely symbolic and untethered from the history of what led to the conversation. Because social media exists within a hyperreality that is no longer connected to an authentic reality, racist, sexist and homophobic thought is a given and a "natural" reaction to people who fall outside perceived patriarchal and colonial standards. This discrimination becomes hard to question or fight back against since it is separated from reality and exists as its own entity, as a simulation within hyperreality. For instance, with diverse casting in film and theatre productions, such as Halle Bailey in the 2023 Little Mermaid adaptation, and Francesca Amewudah-Rivers in the 2024 West-End production of Romeo and Juliet, there has been an influx of very reactionary racism towards women of colour. A further hyperreal element of this discourse was when false rumours were spread that American actress Avantika, who is of Indian descent, was going to be cast in a live-action adaptation of "Tangled" in which the original character was white with blonde hair (Flam, 2024). This false rumour led to increased racist discourse, both around Avantika, as well as people of colour in general as critics would argue that these characters had no place being people of colour. Leading to some people of colour to argue that white people should be chosen for these roles as they were tired of the discourse (favoreden, 2024). It shows how increasingly hate speech is so confused with both "real world" colonial legacies and hyperreal discourse that it is hard to know what is real anymore and discrimination is easily rapidly escalated.

Furthermore, because social media is now etched into everyday life, it has become the language of our society so the need to comment on social media posts becomes the new way to interact with the world, but it is not an authentic interaction with the world. Because of this all discourse becomes reproductions of previous discourse, and social media is often defined as an "echo chamber", simply a device to facilitate the reproduction of opinion, and when this opinion is supported by the global patriarchal and colonial order, this inevitably leads to hate speech towards marginalised peoples under this order. It becomes second nature, so as marginalised peoples are witnessed, they are often immediately othered.

Hyperreal Hate Speech

As previously mentioned, this essay does not support the idea that hate speech is an inevitable part of social media given the ability to be anonymous. Instead, it identifies hate speech as being linked more to apathy than to pure malice. Social media is so immersed within hyperreality that users increasingly become less attached to the real world and real interaction with other human beings. This is because as they interact with videos and comment sections, they are not seeing real people or hearing real discussions and opinions. Instead, they are witnessing the inauthentic reproduction of other human beings and their voices which creates a cognitive

dissonance between them and those on the other side of the screen. In effect, this breeds mass derealisation, the feeling of detachment from oneself, body, surroundings and the world around one (Ciaunica et al, 2022). This process has been linked to increased use of social media, especially in young people (Ciaunica et al, 2022). This has developed an increasingly apathetic population with a seemingly blasé and unempathetic attitude towards others and their crises or challenges (Le, 2020).

This cultivation of derealisation creates a population that is more susceptible to the practice of hate speech as users increasingly approach videos and their comment sections as though playing a game, detaching from the individual humanity of their solely digital victim (Pradhana and Tania, 2021). Users attempt to receive numerically large responses through interactive actions like comments, duets, remixes, polls, likes, and dislikes. Algorithms promote a user's controversial videos or comments for more to see, rewarding this behaviour through instantaneous wider exposure. Furthermore, feeding the internet information by commenting or producing content that is based on existing narratives of oppression is reproduced through AI programmes. This has been observed in chatbots who recreate racist stereotypes to form their identities for user "entertainment" (Attiah, 2025). In contrast, private interactions are rarely rewarded at all. This causes people to approach the platform as if they are a person interacting with others, social media becomes a platform in which inauthentic interaction is the goal, in order to gain the most attention or even monetary gain.

This process that rewards controversy on social media leads to more and more discourse surrounding hate speech itself, whether it is contributing to it or arguing against it (Romaine, 2021). As people reperform and recreate the hate speech it becomes more and more ingrained in the cultural consciousness, and it becomes a given within the hyperreality. Now, when those who are the regular targets of hate speech (the marginalised peoples who were outlined previously) engage in social media and allow themselves to be witnessed by others through reproductions of themselves and their image on social media, they are very often met with a ready supply of hate speech (Romaine, 2021).

This hate speech is widely normalised on social media as it becomes a given within the hyperreal. Users often comment the phrase, "I ran to the comments" (niki_patton, 2020) when they witness someone who is observed to be outside the norms of patriarchal and colonial standards; someone who intersects the marginalised peoples as outlined earlier. This phrase is used to indicate the user knows that the perceived person within a video is going to receive hate speech because they do not exist within social norms, and so they "run" to the comments section to witness and further perpetuate this hate. Furthermore, this phrase is very apt in demonstrating the hyperreality of social media as it shows that users know that this inauthentic reactionary hate speech will always exist - it is a given within the space of the internet. In fact a trending phrase that users have placed over their videos is, "when someone posts the cringiest video so u run to the comments but all of the comments are nice and u realize u might be the problem.", if this phrase is searched on TikTok dozens of examples can be found (Anthonypert, 2024, Avaminaa, 2024, and Camfant, 2024). This trend demonstrates the reactionary element to witnessing "cringy" content, which generally can be demonstrated to pertain to people not deemed societally acceptable. Users are so used to reacting quickly and negatively to this content that they know others will feel the same, and they even know what insult or comment hate speech to use towards those they are witnessing. These videos have comment sections full of other users confirming this negative rhetoric commenting, "sometimes I get disappointed when they're all nice." (Camfant, 2024). This demonstrates how reactionary this hate speech is becoming in the digital hyperreal world. This hate speech is especially common as a reaction to the physical image of the rejection of patriarchal and colonial norms such as people whose gender is hard to place within the binary to the observer, or people who are racialised and also do not comply with Eurocentric beauty ideals (Llorent et al, 2016).

Conclusion

Jean Baudrillard's "Simulacra and Simulation" provides an interesting framework to understand how hate speech and harassment towards marginalised peoples became so entrenched and rife within social media. It demonstrates that the discourse that this hate speech constitutes does not represent authentic interaction with reality but instead demonstrates that our society has become so inundated with symbols and discourse and

their inauthentic reproductions of themselves that there is no longer a connection to the real natural world and instead we live within a hyperreality.

However, it must be noted that Baudrillard himself may not agree with the nature in which this essay situates his thesis as he would argue against the importance of power placed within the frameworks of understanding the oppression of marginalised peoples. This can be demonstrated in his tract "Forget Foucault" where he criticised Foucault for the same thing in his works (Baudrillard and Lotringer, 1987).

Despite this, Baudrillard did not experience the current social media experience, nor was he a marginalised person. To this, this essay concludes that Baudrillard's framework can be used to understand real-world oppressions and help us understand the fragilities of our labels within society and the lack of reality that oppression and specifically discriminatory social media content roots itself within.

This hate speech exists within what we have identified as a hyperreality, however, there are real-world consequences to it as violent rhetoric can turn into violent acts with hate crimes and violence also increasingly linked to online discourse (Castaño-Pulgarín et al, 2021). Consequently, this essay advises that social media does have some merits; that is, in bringing together marginalised peoples and facilitating activism amongst them, and that this should be encouraged. Movements like the hashtags: "blacklivesmatter", "metoo", "stopasianhate", and "freePalestine" have all been credited with raising awareness and reclaiming the internet space that is so often hateful of people who these movements are concerned with. However, we must be careful we engage with simulacra and social media discourse that does not link substantively to reality. In the real world, many people are discriminated against and face persecution because of who they are; we look to understand them, not just what is being said about them.

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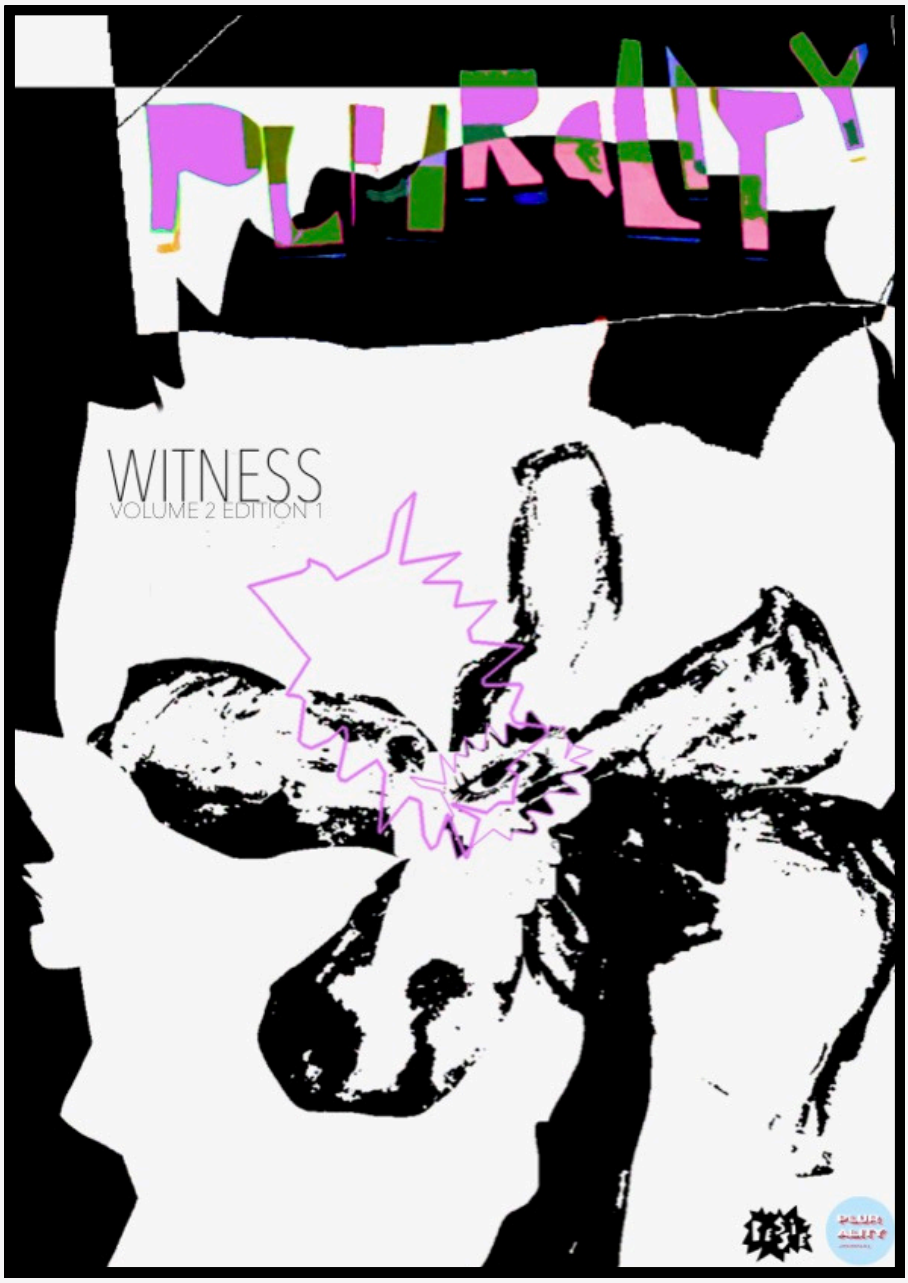

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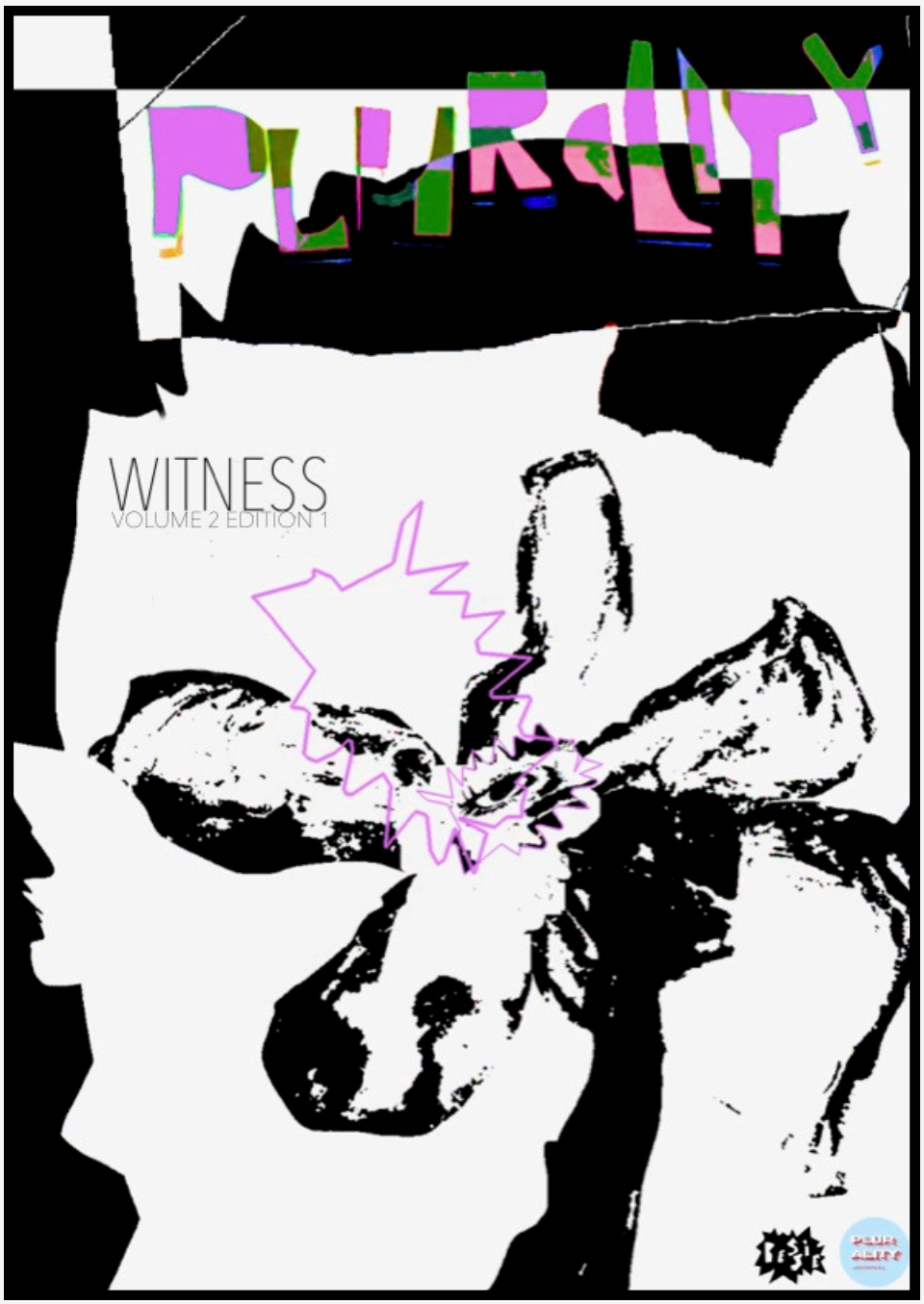
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