FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS

A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

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FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS: A JOURNAL OF CRITICAL STUDIES IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Founded in 2017, Feminist Encounters is a journal committed to argument and debate, in the tradition of historical feminist movements.

In the wake of the growing rise of the Right across the world, openly neo-fascist national sentiments, and rising conservative populism, we feminists all over the world are needing to remobilise our energies to protect and advance gender rights.

Feminist Encounters provides a forum for feminist theorists, scholars, and activists to communicate with each other, to better educate ourselves on international issues and thus promote more global understanding, and to enhance our critical tools for fighting for human rights.

Feminism is an intellectual apparatus, a political agenda, and a programme for social change. Critical analysis of how gender discourses produce cultural identities and social practices within diverse lived realities is key to this change. We need to think more sharply in order to strategise well: as the discourses of conservatism renew and invigorate themselves, so we as feminist scholars need to be refining our amazonic swords in order not just to respond effectively but also to innovate our own ideas for equality and social justice.

We are, of course, committed to intersectionality, a vital lens through which to see the contours of race/ethnicity, class, sexuality, age/ability, and explore how gendered scripts get lived, and filtered through these specificities of cultural organisation. Lived experience is never codified in terms of gender alone, and so our research will always be sensitive to the nexus of lived oppressions.

The journal has a large editorial board and journal team, consisting of over forty scholars in twenty countries. This is deliberately inclusive in order that we can promote diversity and engage with different concerns from across the world. Our aim is not to simply talk to ourselves, reconfirming our localised assumptions, but to generate feminist encounters across regions, even if this is sometimes uncomfortable. Globalisation has been a triumph of neoliberalism, but digital technologies have also flattened and reduced the distance between us in dramatic ways, so that now we can talk to each other with unanticipated ease.

This new access to each others' voices has also brought challenges to the way we think and do things, so that being a feminist today might be quite a different prospect to a person living in China, Iran, Norway, South Africa or the UK. Second Wave Feminism used the idea of 'sisterhood' to invoke solidarity between women. I've always rather liked Andrea Dworkin's claim, though, that: "Feminism is a political practice of fighting male supremacy in behalf of women as a class, including all the women you don't like, including all the women you don't want to be around, including all the women who used to be your best friends whom you don't want anything to do with anymore." The notion of sisterhood was challenged by Black feminists in the 1980s as being too conceptually white, thus bell hooks' trenchant critique that: "the idea of 'common oppression' was a false and corrupt platform disguising and mystifying the true nature of women's varied and complex social reality". In the 1990s and 2000s it has been fair to say that feminist theory and Feminist Studies since have engaged more intentionally and deliberately with intersectionality - though Jennifer Baumgardner did caution us that: "Sisterhood was never about everybody agreeing ....".

For our journal, sisterhood must expand and embrace our transgender allies and our men friends, reminding us that sibling relationships are rarely straightforward or inevitably blessed by golden moments of total affinity. Thus, **Feminist Encounters** welcomes the opportunity for new kinds of international discussions in the spirit of collaboration and critical intellectual enquiry. We hope for productive agreement and disagreement, and the shared struggle of fighting gender oppression, with our minds, hearts, and bodies, as the times demand.

Sally R Munt, University of Sussex
Founding Editor

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SPECIAL ISSUE: SLOW INTIMACY

Guest Editors

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Stellenbosch University (SOUTH AFRICA)

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Book Reviews

Feminist Encounters: Special Issue on Slow Intimacy

Amanda Gouws [1]*, Lou-Marié Kruger [1]

Published: March 1, 2024

Over many years a group of feminist colleagues from many different academic disciplines (colleagues who also became friends), honed and shaped ideas for feminist projects, papers or engagement with the academic institution where we work. We call ourselves the Feminist Study Group that is linked to the South African Research Chairs Initiative (SARChI) Chair in Gender Politics (Amanda Gouws) at Stellenbosch University. The ideas for this conference that took place in October 2022 were derived from discussions of the Feminist Study Group. Our Call for Papers below embodied some of these ideas.

THE CALL

Our first tentative steps toward vocalising the importance of intimacy and slowness, was in our call for papers for a conference[1] that we entitled 'Slow intimacy'. In our call for contributions we said the following:

> The verb 'to intimate' refers to the action of showing what you know. The noun 'intimacy' refers to an interaction in which a person knows something and then shows that they know and what they know to another. This intimate interaction can be with a person, other living things, inanimate objects, the planet. The adjective 'intimate' refers to that what is known or those who know and are known, those who show and get shown. The knowing or familiarity associated with intimacy can be cognitive or emotional or both and is often embodied. In intimate interactions you can show, manifest or perform the knowing in different ways: through language, art, music, physical actions, often involving skills and bodily habits. Intimate performance is involved in quotidian everyday actions (sex, sports, shopping, delivering a baby, breast-feeding, parenting, cooking, gardening, housework, household conflict, work) as much as in extraordinary ones (Olympic-level figure skating, an authoritative, yet daring execution of a Chopin piano concerto, a mother murdering her children, war). Both knowing and showing can be explicit or implicit, conscious or unconscious. Intimate knowing can manifest as a showing that has the potential to be immensely powerful, ranging from showings that are nurturing and loving to showings that are cruel and destructive.
>
> Recently, feminist and queer studies have turned to the concept of intimacy both as subject and as an analytic rubric (Berlant, 1998; De Araújo and Roy, 2022; Falkof, Phadke and Roy, 2022). In this conference the focus will be on what we call *slow intimacy*, intimate interactions that are enduring, long-standing, in process, and in development over time. We seek to explore processes of knowing and showing that are subtle and nuanced, complex, multi-layered and intricate. We also aim to explore the processes of knowing and showing associated with slow intimacy: Who gets to know and who gets to show? In what conditions are knowing and showing possible? How is intimacy tied to power and how is it informed or shaped by larger societal processes (political, social, economic)? *Slow intimacy* takes place in different sites, on different scales and involves different types of showing. The showing associated

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[1] This conference was based on the format of a conference on Slow Violence that was organised by Professor Lou-Marié Kruger in 2015 (Kruger, 2015).

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with *slow intimacy* can involve intellectual, sexual and cultural repertoires, as well as aesthetic and performative modes.

We are inviting papers or performances that engage with the topic of *slow intimacy*. We encourage potential participants to respond to and interpret the notion of an intimacy that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and dispersed over time. We do this, aware that there is a certain temporal dialectic at work in every instance of intimacy: it might take a lifetime to gain the knowing that goes into a fleeting showing.

In this conference the emphasis is also on the challenges of representation: how to represent *slow intimacy*. We want to explore ways of making an intimacy that may be relatively unseen and unrecognisable, visible and recognisable in conscious and creative ways. We hope that potential participants will engage with the concept of *slow intimacy* intellectually, but that the engagement will be expressed in different modalities including creative non-fiction, fiction, visual art, music, poetry and film. Such different representations will not only serve to make invisible intimacy visible, but also expose the constructive and destructive power that may be associated with *slow intimacies*.

THE CONFERENCE

The quality and the diversity of the proposed papers for the conference far surpassed our wildest imaginings. We immediately could see that both the terms 'intimacy' and 'slow' had some kind of meaning for South African scholars. The contributions include stories of intimate relationships with mothers, fathers, siblings, lovers, partners, friends, colleagues, patients and political comrades. In very moving ways many contributors referred to intimacy with nature: the sea, forests, gardens, trees, horses, dogs, the earth. Contributors highlighted how intimate spaces are always and inevitably political: the experience of intimacy is informed by political issues such as gender, race, class, culture, sexuality, disability, but context (north/south, developed/developing) also matters. There were stories about how intimacy or the lack thereof can be represented by a piece of clothing, a meal, a drawing, a poem, a painting, a portrait, a photograph, a magazine article, a newspaper clipping, a novel, a film or a social media post. It was clear that intimacy, in the minds of contributors, related to many human emotions: joy, amazement, elation, laughing, hope, but also pain, grief, mourning, melancholia, anxiety, terror, shame and guilt. The papers received seemed to map the human condition in late modernity, our longing for closeness and the ever-elusive certainty that closeness is indeed possible.

However, while there was so much hope in the presentations at the conference, despair was also present in many of the presentations. There were many papers about illness and death, about violence, necropolitics (Mbembe, 2008) and loss. In our call for papers we emphasised the constructive potential of intimacy, but also wondered about the destructive potential of intimacy. Our contributors certainly talked about the dark side of intimacy in explicit and implicit ways.

The conference itself (Loff, 2022), for all of us who attended it, was a very intimate experience. It was as if in the togetherness of a community of feminist scholars we could experience intimacy and the profound emotions associated with intimacy. We laughed and cried, we were shocked and outraged, horrified, moved and upset. It was a different kind of scholarly experience, where the intellectual knowledge and theory that we so cherish, were juxtaposed with an emotional experience where we got to see each other as not only scholars but also as human beings with feelings.

Apart from the conference being in line with the affective turn in feminism (Ahmed, 2004, 2006, 2017; Koivunen, 2001; Kruger 2020), the conference also represented a very clear departure from traditional academic scholarship. Presentations included academic papers, poetry, literature, reading from a play, video material and works of art. We combined the conference with two arts exhibitions that we commissioned, that one of the Feminist Study Group members, Prof Stella Viljoen, with a colleague, Prof Ernst van der Wal, curated. The art works complemented the conference in multi-layered ways. Not only were there different ways of knowing, there also were different ways of showing what we know.

We experienced the conference not only as radical in terms of the knowledges that the scholars communicated, but also radical in terms of how the knowledge was showed. It was a slow unfolding of knowledge that involved a meeting between the cerebral and the emotional; of what is experienced and witnessed and then shared in a verbal form. There were only plenary sessions at the conference so that everyone heard all the papers. This created a fertile environment for sincere and candid discussions, and the sharing of understandings that were often difficult to verbalise.

THE SPECIAL ISSUE

We were delighted that *Feminist Encounters* agreed to publish a special issue on *Slow Intimacy*. This is obviously a feminist journal, willing to publish radical content and radical ways of representing this content. Again, putting together this special issue was a rather profound experience. Our contributors submitted their presentations in publishable form in a record time, reviewers reviewed papers carefully and considerately, but quickly. It was again an experience of a certain form of intimacy. Feminist scholars thinking and feeling about contributions without ever losing their critical and scholarly sharpness.

We trust that this special issue will in some way engage with what we know about intimacy and slow intimacy, but that the papers will also challenge scholarship as we know it, by representing different ways of showing what we know.

It saddens us deeply that as we write this Introduction, the war between Israel and Palestine is raging (Butler, 2023). The war between Russia and the Ukraine has not let up since February 2022. The body count is high and many of us fear an escalation of violence and political instability in the Middle East. This is a moment in human history that we will look back upon and ask ourselves 'how did we get here?' Maybe we are already asking ourselves this question about the relentless violence globally, the precarious living conditions (Butler, 2004) in which many people are not sure if they will survive another day, the deteriorating effects of populism on the body politic and the rise of right-wing nationalism and anti-gender ideology. These wars are a spectacular display of fast and slow violence (Kruger, 2014; Nixon, 2011) which let many of us retreat to slow intimacy, to the beauty of words, art and music – to the things that make us human and make us see that to be human can also be a 'thing of beauty', of vulnerability towards each other, of care in the midst of relentless violence.

The conference followed on the heels of the COVID pandemic (Gouws and Ezeobi, 2021), when lockdown was still fresh in our memories. The loneliness of lockdown, the grief of losing loved ones, the disconnect between the global North and global South regarding vaccines and access to protective equipment formed the backdrop to this conference.

Additionally, in South Africa, we are still struggling with the aftermaths of the slow violence of colonialism, apartheid, capitalism and patriarchy. All these themes are represented in the papers included in this special collection.

As you, the reader, read these articles you will notice that they embody understandings of our relationships with ourselves, with others, with non-human species and the planet. We do hope that there is, even if virtually, an experience of slow intimacy.

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SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLES

Gabeba Baderoon, a South African poet and academic, starts this special issue with two poems, 'I Forget to Look' and 'The History of Intimacy'. The first is about her mother's experience of training as a doctor during Apartheid, where she was not allowed to observe an autopsy of a white person. The second poem shows several snapshots of growing up in the weird intimacy of Apartheid South Africa.

Different types of family or domestic intimacy are the topics of the next four articles. Sally Ann Murray's evocative autoethnographic work, '… Trans … Forming … M/othering …', takes a verbally playful approach to her own experience of mothering a trans child, while Pierre de Vos gives us a series of vignettes of his family as they prepare to say goodbye to their father in '"We Hope He will be Dead by Tonight": Shared Estrangement in the ICU of the Universitas Hospital'. Deirdre Byrne reflects on her experiences during the COVID lockdown as she comes to spend time on her own for the first time in years ('Intimate Selves: A Poetic Inquiry into Self-Knowledge). Kopano Ratele considers what is needed to change South Africa's history of violence in 'We Won't be Able to Change How We Fight Without Changing How We Love', through an in-depth look at masculinity. In part a response to this article, Charla Smith's article '"Do you Think I can Kill you?" Exploring Intimate Femicide in South Africa and why Intimacy Hurts so Much' addresses the role of patriarchy in the South African femicide epidemic, drawing on Ratele's work and that of Nechama Brodie.

The following two articles use visual art as types of slow intimacy. 'Drawing as Intimation (or Infatuations with Lines, Contours and Shades)' (Ernst van der Wal) focuses on drawing as gesture and bodily intervention through the work of visual artists Katherine Bull, Tim Knowles, Yayoi Kusama, Hentie van der Merwe and Félix González-Torres. The following article by Stella Viljoen, 'Dressing Up the Self: Feminism and the Anomalous Art of Zanele Muholi and Cindy Sherman', explores the liminal spaces of intimacy and feminism in the art of Cindy Sherman and Zanele Muholi.

Different types of slow intimacy are delineated in the next five articles. Jeanne Ellis considers death and intimacy in 'Intimate Things, Remembrance, Elegiac Remnants' through the poetry of mourning, where ambivalences are surfaced through the wearing and reading of garments of the deceased. L. Juliana Claassens, in 'Eating (With) You: Exploring Slow Intimacy in the Book of Song of Songs and *Written on the Body* (Jeannette Winterson), Through the Lens of Food', uses a biblical text and a 20th century one to study the intimacy of food and sex, as well as the ever-present sense of death and decay. 'Wild Sea Swimming as a Slow Intimacy: Towards Reconfiguring Scholarship' shows the hydrofeminist scholarship of Viviene Bozalek, Nike Romano and Tamara Shefer as an alternate form of slow scholarship, where swimming-writing-reading considers the relationship of humans and the ocean. Sandra Swart, in her article, 'Shared Skin: The Slow Intimacy of Horse and Rider', discusses the long history of the horse-human relationship and shows how feminist thinking can help challenge stereotyping by thinking about the intimacy at the heart of horse-human relationships. Jaco Barnard-Naudé uses Jacques Lacan's idea of extimacy to explore slow reflection and love in his article 'And Losing Thus the Boundary / Of the finite me, / Diffusing Outward, I Approach / The Edges of Infinity' (Plath, 2020: 133) - the Two Dimensions of Extimacy in Contemporary Psychoanalytic Thought'.

Two of the articles in the special issue concern activism and solidarity. 'When the Rainbow is Bittersweet: Being Queer and Indian in Durban' (Debjyoti Ghosh, Siona O'Connell and Vasu Reddy) explores the struggle of making a documentary film with a minority population within one such minority population – Queer and Indian – in Durban, the site of the largest number of Indians outside India. This is followed by 'The Intimacy of Held Solidarity: A Joint Memoir of Activism' in which Marion Stevens and Makhosazana Xaba talk about the slow intimacy of their personal and professional relationship over many years while working together on reproductive health.

The intimacies of death play themselves out in different ways in the works of the last three authors in this collection: 'Some Melancholic Musings about the Slow Intimacy of Grief: "(M)y Story Always Arrives Late"', by Lou-Marié Kruger, is an elegy to grief and not knowing seen through three stories. Amanda Gouws's article, 'The Slow Intimacy of Necropolitics', addresses the way in which unmournable bodies are represented in media and redistributed through a slow intimacy of necropolitics. The special issue ends with Jacques Coetzee' poems, 'An Illuminated Darkness'. Coetzee is a South African poet, musician, and freelance translator. He writes in both Afrikaans and English. In his poems in this issue, he explores the intimacy of letting go.

GENERAL ARTICLES

In addition to the special issue articles, we are delighted to share five research articles on other topics. The first of these is Zeliha Dişci's article 'Ideology, subject and gender: Undoing Representations in the Thought of Teresa De Lauretis and Judith Butler', in which she compares Teresa de Lauretis and Judith Butler's theorisation around ideology, subject and gender.

Alan Greig's article, 'The Polycrisis and the Centaur: Hegemony, Masculinity and Racialisation' explores the polycrisis through the intersecting lenses of masculinity and racialisation.

In 'Indigenous Women's Connection to Forest: Colonialism, Lack of Land Ownership and Livelihood Changes of Dayak Benawan in Indonesia', Nikodemos Niko, Ida Widianingsih, Munandar Sulaeman and Muhammad Fedryansyah address the plight of Dayak Benawan women in Indonesia as they face the aftermath of colonialism and its effects on their ancestral relationship with the forest.

Parvathy N and Priyanka Tripathi explore perceptions of the female fan through their reading of Hrishikesh Mukherjee's film *Guddi* in 'Female Fandom and the Anxieties of Agency: A Feminist Reading of the Indian Female Fan in *Guddi* (1971)'.

Finally, Vitalii A. Zavhorodnii, Serhii M. Perepolkin, Valentyna O. Boniak, Tetiana L. Syroid and Liudmyla A. Filianina address women's role in the armed forces in a comparative study that focuses on gender equality in the armed forces in legislation and state compliance in their article, 'Place of Women in the Armed Forces: Legislation and State Compliance with Gender Equality Policies'.

BOOK REVIEWS

This issue also has three book reviews. Wen Liu reviews Travis S. K. Kong's *Sexuality and the Rise of China: The Post-1990s Gay Generation in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland China*. Anelise Gregis Estivalet reviews *Birthing Black Mothers* by Jennifer C. Nash. Ida Sabelis ends this issue with her review of *Knowledge, Power, and Young Sexualities. A Transnational Feminist Engagement* by Tamara Shefer and Jeff Hearn.

We hope that you find much to engage with, in our Spring 2024 issue.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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'I Forget to Look' and 'The History of Intimacy'

Gabeba Baderoon [1]*

I FORGET TO LOOK

The photograph of my mother at her desk in the fifties
has been in my purse for twenty years,
its paper faded, browning,
the scalloped edge bent then straightened.

The collar of her dress folds discreetly.
The angle of her neck looks as though
someone has called her from far away.

She was the first in her family to take
the bus from Claremont
up the hill to the university.

At one point during the lectures at medical school,
black students had to pack their notes, get up and walk
past the ascending rows of desks out of the theatre.

Behind the closed door, in an autopsy
black students were not meant to see,
the uncovering and cutting of white skin.

Under the knife, the skin,
the mystery of sameness.

In a world that defined how black and white
could look at each other, touch each other,
my mother looks back, her poise unmarred.

Every time I open my purse,
she is there, so familiar I forget
to look at her.

(From Gabeba Baderoon, *A hundred silences*, Kwela/Snailpress, 2006)

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THE HISTORY OF INTIMACY

I.
You remember it because it's a wound.
A cut, twenty cuts, the name
for the canings on the palm,
on the knuckles, on the buttocks,
a finely graded order of pain
that we who should not exist
were assigned for our failures.

II.
You keep you white, nuh,
Mike shouts in 1987 across the heads
of the students on Jameson Steps
and the sudden pale silence shows
we are no longer in uniform in the quad
at Livingstone High, teasing hey,
why did you look through me
as though I don't exist. And this
withdrawal from being
we called keeping you white,
but saying it out loud reveals
how we have learned
to measure our existence.

III.
In the video store after I've ordered a film,
my cousin elbows me, Why you putting on?
Putting on. Transitive verb. Putting on what?
Putting on skin, putting on not nothingness.

IV.
When the Group Areas Act is abolished,
my mother aches to go back
to the street she was removed from
and it is we, grown attached
to the scar we call home, who say,
No, we don't want to live in a white area,
this time ceding it ourselves.

V.
Mother, how do I write about you?
As a medical student on duty at night
she learned to sleep so lightly she could wake
in an instant in an emergency, and for the rest of her life,
her body became a body that never again
could sleep through the night.
She told of one evening when, for some reason
a little irked with my father, she left
the table early, returning
to the bedroom by herself, and found
my sister blue for lack of breath.
To this day, she recalls what anger gave her,
how it saved my sister's life. Anger. Breath.
Since the beginning, you have been breath,
and poetry.

You told me how black students were asked
to leave the room during the autopsy of white bodies.
And of my writing about this, you said,
That is my story. That is not your story.
And now, with the illness you could not speak of for years,
Mother, am I again turning your words
and your silence into a poem?

VI.
In 1988 at Crawford train station, my brother and I find
a blue plank hand-painted in yellow letters:
Non-Whites Only on one side
Whites Only on the other
thrown away by the fence next to the tracks.
Picking it up, we see the two sides
of the sign lie back to back,
each half resting against its opposite,
intimate and inverse
but unknown to each other.
We knew this was history
someone had made by hand, then hidden
and tried to forget. We bring it home
and come across it sometimes in a corner
when we're looking for something else.

(From Gabeba Baderoon, *The History of Intimacy*, Kwela, 2018)

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… Trans … Forming … M/othering …

Sally Ann Murray [1*]

ABSTRACT

Finding inspiration in embodied life writing methodologies, the essay explores the fraught slow intimacies of mothering a trans child, now a young adult. The essay engages an experiential familial, in the sense of 'family' relations, but in seeking to process the uneasy forms of m/othering through trans allyship, the paper turns to a range of intellectual repertoires, both old familiars and newer strangers, hoping to shape ways of responding that re-home family gender troubles within wider communities of scholarly and creative thought, and reading. Wanting comfort in ideas, the author grapples and drifts, trying deliberately to open her heartmind to unbecoming methods and messy, queerying adjacencies that elude polarities, even push me aside, and admit to never completely representing the subject. Alongside conflicted negations/negotiations of mastery, then, the essay tries muted moves into intimate geographies of mutter, martyr, mater, matter, meta, all in a lived struggle 'to look for a way out of the usual traps and impasses of binary formulations' (Halberstam, 2011: 2) in search of deliberately fugitive, blurred intimations that place m/othering in difficult, witnessing relation with a transmasculine life lived at assertive gender variance.

Keywords: mothering, trans, queer, critical autoethnography

I have many questions about what this essay is doing, what it has the right to do. Yet also: what is there *more* than right | wrong. self | other. girl | boy? Through what unusual, deliberated disordering can thoughts, feelings, *lives* be called into more liveable being beyond the binaries? I enter a necessary wilderness of uncertain wrongs and potential writes where much runs rings around me. As a scholar whose academic reputation is closely tied to autoethnographic modes of critical inquiry, I have mulled over the dangers of othering, when writing about mothering in the context of a trans life. Misgendering. Dead-naming. Appropriating. In exploring relations of mother subject and other subjects – among them the person whose life slips in and out of view as the object of my love and attention, the essay risks proximities that verge on the transgressive.

Yet here I am, here we are, our subjects bonded from birth.

…

For the record: years ago, after an uncomplicated pregnancy, I was delivered of a baby girl. Vagina = F, that being the established equation. Yet even that making had taken months; the gradual transformation from embryo to foetus to neonate, reminding me that 'trans', as a prefix, tends to be associated with moving on or to the other side of something; across, beyond or through. That 'trans' might mean transcutaneous, or so as to change or transfer.

Our daughter arrived easily, almost as if without me, surfacing in under an hour with the heft of a thick, prime steak. I remember a compact, chunky body steeped in bloodied afterbirth, hauled upside down from between my mess and placed red upon my chest, a pungent mix of blood, iron, meconium. The angry wail. How avidly she latched, ready to thrive.

…

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I'd long been a queer sort of woman, although not queer identifying. Call it quirky, sometimes querulous. Down-to-earth, an amateur of the quotidian. An outspoken female too straight-talking to be nicely feminine, marked by a slant of mind and tilt tangential to chafing norms. Unmarried, though partnered. Children outside of paperwork. Happy to raise a family without the cloying obeisance of blue and pink. And as for a potentially queer orientation, nothing was ever at stake in how our children grew into themselves. Then along came the second child, a fiercely gender-variant question-making, italicised in bold.

…

For the purposes of this paper, let the young adult child be X. Let the old motherbag be Y. (Why not?) Alphabetically, X and Y are sequential, but lived experience disrupts the conventional niceties of ordinal order. If X precedes Y in the alphabet, in life's skewings Y must predate X but X does not necessarily follow Y. X both marks the spot and remains elusive. There *and* their. And why is Y always the parent in question? The mother, on call, arms open to hold, yet also anxious and angry and ready to strike out. If life is trying, she tries. If The Mother typically represents normative time (Halberstam, 2011: 76), Y does not assert entrenched, hetero temporalities and phobic routes. However much she is perceived to lack, by X, forced to stand in for the rhetorical and structural violence of normative systems, Y derives herself in close relation to X, her life a mutually queer strand of un/becoming through the gender questioning child she raises, and sometimes erases. So: never 'Let x = y', or vice versa. Life can make simple equations difficult.

…

At 18 months, our 'daughter' is diagnosed with pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS). PDD-NOS is the initial, open-ended term used when medical experts agree that development in a very young child is sufficiently delayed to constitute a probable problem. No crawling (only 'turtle tracking'). Head banging. Hyperacuity. Emotional explosiveness. Skin picking. Hair tugging. Obsessive attachment to routine. Difficulty in transitioning between activities. Imitative speech. Echolalia. Passive inertness. Manic hyperactivity. Indifference to danger. Disordered reactions to pain, time, temperature. Acute sensory sensitivities. Persistent, injurious expressions of gender dysphoria.

Despite the list of assumed co-morbidities, PDD-NOS is a curious diagnosis, a hiatus or lacuna, a paradoxical concession to *lack* of medical certainty around the infant's likely progress, and the extent to which the child will develop into what is socially recognised as a normal, functioning self. The language of labels is a powerful burden on a life, a cryptic, acronymic alphabet that variously clarifies, and calcifies. Asperger's Syndrome (AS). Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Bipolar Disorder (BP). Central Auditory Processing Disorder (CAPD). GID (Gender Identity Disorder). Gender Dysphoria (GD). Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD). Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA). Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD). Etcetera. A tome of terms we now know well, all depending on the medical specialist and the definition at work in the most current version of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM).

What can a mother do when intersecting specialist 'ologies' (biology, neurology, psychology, sociology) name multiple, disabling incongruencies in her child, likely to prevent flourishing in the cruel grist of the given world? When the experts have no solution, the mother (life maker undertaker hard taskmaster mother of determination) knuckles down to make what sense she can. Because if she knows anything, from literary-critical scholarship, it's reading for depth and surface, reading against the grain, reading creatively, reading beyond the instrumental. She knows that labels matter and that far from being self-evident, they are made, making them subject to revision. Luckily, it also happens, sometimes, that happier interpretations arrive, as in the association of autist and artist, for example. Or, when she is researching autism and queerness, and she discovers that: i. neurology increasingly posits a correlation between ASD in those identified at birth as female and the likelihood of subsequent gender variant expressions of identity and orientation. And that ii. in some current scholarship on neurodivergence, beyond the well-known descriptors 'autistic', or 'aspie', or 'atypical', or even 'neurodivergent', the word 'neuroqueer' is gaining traction, a portmanteau descriptor that takes validating inspiration from queer people's assertive reclaiming of queerness from stigma.

…

If autism is stigmatised as a developmental delay, it is inspiring to discover that delay is more productively theorised in queer theory. In a 'study of children's queerness in its broadest sense' (2009: 3), Kathryn Bond Stockton critiques the linear trajectory of growing up, the normative model of life development from childhood to adulthood 'relentlessly figured as vertical movement upward (…) toward full stature, marriage, work,

reproduction, and the loss of childishness'. As Stockton affirms, delay 'is tremendously tricky' as an idea and a pattern (2009: 4), and against the rigid normative linear model, which society presents as progressive, she makes a persuasive case for 'sideways' relations that skew developmental models of maturing (2009). J. Jack Halberstam is another voice in this conversation, suggesting that what might be perceived as 'immaturity and a refusal of adulthood' in young queer lives is a rejection that occurs *because* 'adulthood rhymes with heterosexual' (2011: 73), and thus excludes. An ostensible failure to mature can be an emphatic denial of norms, an assertion 'away from the construction of and narrativization of family' towards the queer, questioning, questing 'creation of a long, gerund-laden story of dying, reuniting, growing, learning, unlearning, losing, searching, forgetting, rising, uniting, singing, swimming, threatening, doing, being, finding, and becoming' (2011: 78).

…

This brings to mind Lauren Berlant's discussion of cruel optimism. Cruel optimism

> … names a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility (...) What's cruel about these attachments…is that the subjects who have *x* in their lives might not well endure the loss of the object or scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being; because whatever the *content* of the attachment is, the continuity of the form of it provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on (…) Cruel optimism is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a problematic object *in advance* of its loss. (2010: 94)

Through such ravelled relations, says Berlant, one 'makes affective bargains about the costliness of one's attachments (...) most of which keep one in proximity to the scene of desire or attrition' (94). This means that the 'poetics of attachment always involves some splitting off of the *story* I can tell' (94) about 'wanting to be near *x*' (95). It's clearly complex. Even Berlant's repeated use of 'one' in this context abstracts and discomforts me, in truthfully embodying an uneasy relation at once far, and a thwarted longing to be near. Not surprisingly, then, as my essay illustrates, in order to understand cruel optimism, I 'must embark on an analysis of rhetorical indirection as a way of thinking about the strange temporalities of projection into an enabling object that is also disabling' (95). In this 'poetics of indirection', Berlant explains, 'each of these rhetorical modes is shaped by the ways a writing subjectivity conjures other ones so that, in a performance of phantasmatic intersubjectivity, the writer' enables 'a performance of being made possible by the proximity of the object' (95). Transmogrify. Mother. Trans. Child. Transfer. As in Berlant's discussion, the relations of *x* and *y* are overloaded with volatile motilities of agency and passivity, subjecthood and objecthood; the motherwriter's care, hubris, witness, despair, determined single-minded doubleness, her detouring through various modes and registers, keep hope, keep hurting, keep coming up against the chafe of 'something as banal as scouring love' (95).

…

I recall. The genderqueer expression of a child classified female at birth. A toddler's enraged assertions. 'Not *broeks*![1] NO! *Boxers*.' Getting dressed with panties worn carnivale on the head, body bared rudely, in defiance. The shrieking trauma of dresses. A pointless battle soon quit for the ecstatic relief of boys' shorts, worn shirtless, or with baggy Ts. Happiness. Never again an item from the girls' section, because *obviously*. And the agony against long hair. The lush abundance of Pre-Raphaelite curls worn as insufferable hair shirt. The hair had to go; the discomfort too extreme to bear. But the cutting was also a trauma, in fear of the skinself being cut to the quick.

…

'Being transgender is not a choice. No one chooses to be transgender. It is not cool It is not easy. It has no allure. Children and teens alike do not try it on for size like a pair of shoes. Being transgender is one of the most difficult things to be because it is not understood and the binary gender system is so pervasive' (Brill and Pepper, 2008: 22). Constantly, I must weigh this up.

…

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[1] Colloquialism from the Afrikaans (usually the diminutive 'broekies'), meaning panties; the bottom part of a young female's underwear; girls' knickers

Two years old, crying in the bath. The water wells a tap of tears.

'Howww howw how will I knowww what to be?'

'Don't worry, lovey, you *will*. You will find something you like, something you can do! We will help you!' Soothing. Smoothing. Thinking: job, career.

But the child's stare unblinks me. 'No, mommy! How will I really know what *to be?* Cos I know what I am for the world and he doesn't like me. So how can I *be* who I am?'

The tenses. My tension. I have no words.

So it's time for actions, which speak louder, and I lean in close, making my Scary Face at the child who squirms in the bare slip of bath.

'Oooh ooh do the Mommy Monster, mommy. Do it!'

The little body shivers, thrills aquiver. Is lifted from the tub naked as the day, towelled in a writhing, snarling bearhug that is never a motherhold tight enough. Tight, tighter until magically I fling off the towel and gather my strength and my wits and the child's small self is dramatically inverted, grasped by the ankles, dangled over the abyss with nothing to keep a body alive except a mother's desperate, hardfast hand. How the child laughs, then, a raw guffaw, brought right to the brink of hysterical fear and then hauled back again, just in time. This is how the precarious wide world is overturned, life re-turned for a little while to happy, intimate rights.

…

Mothering is never 'just'. Mothering is unfair. Never truly just. And a mother is never just 'mother'. She is And. She is Also. She is Always-Already something other. Butcher baker candlestick maker. Uber cleaner cook accountant tutor health worker advocate. Often, I don't know where the men are, and why The System assumes it's mothers who must multitask. No wonder The Mother can materialise as monstrous, a being of so many disaggregated parts that she fractures ugly, hit and myth. The mother, in mothering, often becomes a shadow of herself, though this (they say) is said only by bad mothers, those who fail to mother properly. Never mind the mother of an autistic child. Of a trans child. The mother frantically trying to translate refusals and denials and incommensurables into liveable sense. She is a spectre of herself, making a spectacle of mothering, chasing the elusive, erratic forms of a child's intensely different becoming, hunting down the possibilities against society's No. Mother/child. Bonded. For better and for worse. Always the two of them: X and Y/Y and X, a complex tight as a desperate handhold against whose choke they both thrash. 'I spose you have to write about me, Mom. I mean, we're like this.' Makes tight fist.

…

In a review of Tey Meadows' *Trans Kids: Being Gendered in the Twenty-First Century*, Best emphasises that 'the parents of trans and gender nonconforming children' are key allies. 'Impelled by the deep ache of parental love as they witness their child's cumulative distress', these parents 'square off against an unknown future, press for greater institutional support and protections at school, and seek the appropriate medical care to support their children' (2020: 220).

Why do I feel so alone?

…

Three years old. Pre-school. The Principal calls me to a meeting. 'We're very worried. Something is really wrong. Your daughter is in despair. She keeps saying it's better if she dies. Says no one can love her. And so matter-of-fact! It's terrible; *terrible*. Her teacher doesn't know what to do. We tell her we love her. That she *is* loved. But. Here's the name of an excellent child psychologist.'
(Uncanny fingers: I typed the phrase 'mater-of-fact'. True story.)

…

Some m/other related subjects, trying tying vying, their modes and materials, making up disquieting incongruities:

mother. madder. mutter. mudder. murder. mummer. maimer. martyr. mater. meddler. muddler.

the minotaur destroys. the medusa laughs.

the mother s/cares, carries, is precarious.

Is she any good, this woman? You tell me.

As ever, you will tell me. (And you. And you.)

Of that a mother can be sure.

But how many times has X warned Y not to make this about herself. *This is not about you!*

But also: it is, isn't it? Constantly it is.

…

WHETHER LONG   OR SHORT

[Family Christmas] *Why's it she's built like a boy when she's supposed to be a girl?*

[Family Easter] *But you're going to grow up into a lovely little girl. Yes you are, don't shake your head! So you mustn't be silly and say this about being a boy.*

[Everywhere] *Are you a girl or a boy? Are you a boy or a girl?*

[Shopping mall] A belligerent man calls the security guard, who threatens to throw me out of the men's bathroom because I am a woman, but this is the only bathroom my toddler will agree to use, and we're already battling with recurrent bladder infections and mental distress from all the *knyping*.[2] The kid just wants to pee.

[School: girls] *What are you doing in the girls' toilets?*

[School: boys] *What you doing in the boys' toilets?*

[Teacher] *I said boys this side, girls that side! You line up with the girls right now!*

[The Wimpy] *And him?* (Gestures with the pen.) What does your son want? We just say, *A cream soda please.*

[Anywhere] *But his face is too beautiful for a boy!* But she's so big, for a girl!

[Principal's Office] *You signed the rules when your child entered this school. All the girls must wear the regulation full black Speedo.*

[Teacher] *It's hate speech. She cannot call a black child that just because he calls her a butch dyke. I'm sure he doesn't even know what that means! And as you know, two wrongs don't make a right. Unless you stop this defiant streak now, establish respect for boundaries, she will grow up a criminal. We are a remedial school; we can't handle these other things.*

[Head of School Board] [Different school] *Look, Mom, can I give you some advice? Don't encourage her behaviour. Draw the line and don't let her cross it. Just nurture her femininity; then she will become the beautiful little girl she naturally is.*

[Parents' Representative] *The code of conduct is very clear. It does not permit such short hair. Not for girls.*

DAMNED IF YOU DO   DAMNED IF YOU DON'T

DAMNED DAMNED DAMNED   DAMN PEOPLE

(Murray, 2019)

…

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[2] Colloquialism from the Afrikaans 'knyp', meaning 'to pinch'. In this context: to tighten the bladder muscles to withhold urination

I have no issue with 'those who manage to negotiate sex/gender congruity more or less easily', but I want to 'foster an awareness of how that negotiation is neither natural nor universal' (Elliot, 2010: 4). Contemporary paediatric endocrinology 'is resolute that gender has a stable biological element' but, at the same time, 'emerging scientific consensus is that the felt sense of gender subjectivity' – puzzling, dispersed – 'inheres somewhere deep within' (Best, 2020: 222). Kathryn Bond Stockton mulls over the 'words through which I made myself out' in *Avidly Kissing: Making Out* (2019), her memoirish account of reading as/and gender-nonconforming: '"girl" turning "gay" feeling "trans" under "white" facing "God" soaked in "shame", having a "blast"' (2019: xv). As she remarks, 'We're made of "words" as much as made of cells' (2021: 8). 'Words enter us and words live inside us, birthing whole realms of meaning *in* us. Words are even draped on us. We wear "girl" or "boy", for instance, in the form of clothes and hair and so much more. It can be hard, to put it mildly, to get words off of us – especially words put onto us before we were born' (Stockton, 2021: 14).

…

In *The Argonauts*, Maggie Nelson pays homage to 'the many-gendered mothers of my heart' (2015: 57), a phrase she borrows from the poet Dana Ward to signal the powerful revolutionary work of many feminist, queer, and antiracist thinkers, writers, activists, and artists of different genders who have nurtured her ideas or provided her with intellectual precedents. 'I was cruising for intellectual mothers', she says of her college-age self (2015: 58). My own mind creates 'collage self', a bricolage of imaginative-academic connections, imaginary companions who keep me, allow me to gather together, to keep myself going, in the ongoingness of trans-allied mothering. While alliances are never direct, I am drawn to varieties of queer theory, since 'queer theory's antinormative methods have a key role to play, allowing us to imagine ourselves and the world otherwise' (Owen, 2020: 13). In my otherwise searches, the many possibilities form a sustaining mixed company, across many media. Printed volumes. Websites. TikTok. Google Scholar. Instagram.

Jack Halberstam Kathryn Bond Stockton Ocean Vuong Leslie Feinberg Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick Djuna Barnes Hil Malatino Maggie Nelson Zanele Muholi B. Camminga Maia Kobabe Bhanu Kapil Chris Mosier bell hooks Sara Ahmed Dennis Francis Anne Carson Gender DynamiX Alok Vaid-Menon Susan Stryker Chella Man Audre Lorde Chase Strangio Alison Bechdel Ernst van der Wal Aydian Dowling Kopano Ratele.

Somehow, they hold together.

Ocean Vuong says, 'I wandered into a bookstore' and 'Anne Carson was somehow under queer literature' with the queer texts, but '*Autobiography of Red*, right? And I think that's right, right? (…) and then queerness in a way helps us hold all of them simultaneously true. We don't have to decide, we don't have to have a binary polemic' because categories and genres are 'much more nebulous than the commercialization of genre tells us'. And then as a writer, 'I think I looked at my bookshelf and I said, okay, how do I create a matrix out of these weirdos who've been lifegiving to me' drawing on 'the plurality of what's possible[?]' (Vuong and Elkins, 2023).

…

'As a not-girl', writes Stockton of her genderqueer childhood (2019: 130), and also a 'Not-girl notboy all my life' (138), 'I always had the feeling of 'being 'beside myself' (138). Elsewhere she says: 'I've been a fiction to myself, as it happens, as I sought from youngest days to kiss girlbodies but kiss the boy-word upon my own self' (2021: 108):

> Those of us said to be 'girl' or 'boy', without any way to ditch our one word and get the other word, were impaled upon both while falling between them. Not-girl-not-boy (wasn't the one, couldn't be the other), not 'trans' either (no such word I knew), we were prequel-people, linguistically stranded at that point in history. With no surgery or drugs known to us, weird word-kissing – kissing a word we could not 'have'– was all we knew to do. (Stockton and Josiowicz, 2021: 112)

I am attracted to Stockton's queer world-making in words, her tussles with creating a response to gendering as presence out of absence, self through re-doublings. Stockton reflects on a queer child's knowing while not knowing that is a way of being both with *and* beyond, a certain uncertainty (an uncertain certainty?) made through aloneness, projection, longing, desire, constraint. In conjuring this strange agency, she also reminds us that since '"children" do not obey' adult orders of 'the Child' (Stockton and Josiowicz, 2021: 109), in some sense 'the queer child (…) is every child, since every child is strange from the standpoint of adults (…) full of crafty swerves' (109) that entice and threaten the norms that would prefer to deny the 'intense varieties of racialized gender and sexual yearnings and cultural flavors and strange reflections (…) encased in our own (weird) bodies' (108).

Stockton reminds us that we have good reason to trouble the troubling category of gender, sharing her discovery of the 'unexpected history' (2021: xii) of 'gender' she encountered in Jules Gill Peterson's *Histories of the Transgender*

Child (2018). Stockton, like many people, had found inspiration in 'feminists' separation of the concept "gender" from "sex" in the 1970s', making 'gender our hero' against the conventional givens of biology, and 'crafting gender as the happily changeable cultural behaviors that mute the force of sex' (Stockton and Josiowicz, 2021: 110). Yet as Stockton discovers via Peterson's research, in 1950 the sex researcher John Money and his team had got to gender first, laying the rigidly influential foundation that would shape 'all of our lives' (Stockton and Josiowicz, 2021: 110):

> From his contact with intersex and transgender children, Money knew that bodies were 'naturally' 'indeterminate' in terms of sex. He and his colleagues knew that numerous 'predictors' for male or female status were (…) unpredictable. Chromosomes were not a sure grounding force; a body's having testes or ovaries didn't anchor it; hormones, with all their complexities, Money knew, didn't predict with any finality; and genitals or secondary sex characteristics could present askew. Enter gender. To *shore up* sex. To unqueer what is queer about biology. In the face of children's 'plastic' bodies, Money said that children needed to grow in 'developmental' channels – male *or* female channels he called *gender* – if they were going to escape social stigma. (110)

In other (tautological) words, society's enforced gender 'binary corrects a problem of its own making. And medicine complies, against its own research. Quite unlike later feminist notions – that gender is dynamic, changing, changeable, and capable of undermining social norms and their stigmatizing ways – Money's 'gender' (…) argued for something much more fixed and stigmatising, all while purporting to sidestep stigma' (110).

…

As a child, 'I was seduced by my unseen face', recalls Stockton, 'I was at the mirror, straining to kiss the face I felt, trying for the life of me to make myself out. I felt myself a boy, saw myself a girl. Somewhere deep inside me I was discerning a face I couldn't see, except that I could sense it (...) By stark contrast, my observable face was a quandary' (2019: 31).

A quandary. In that quotation from Stockton, the word prompts in me an unruly queue of Qs, never quiescent: quiddity, quirk, quizzical, questioning, quisling, querying, all words in queer company among more naturalised, everyday (*quotidian*) lexicons. Even relative to supposedly more typical reference points that designate positions X and Y, Q seems pointedly questionable, necessarily out-of-order, even disorderly. Q is never either this or that, no obedient glyph standing for male ♂, or female ♀. Q cues me towards an orientation that is other; some body not quite. To put this another way, the very q-ness of 'Q' has come to conjure queerness for my imagination, making space and place for the questioning to which I am called. Q is a crucial figure of my intransigent queerying as the mother of a trans child.

This should not engender surprise.

And lest you forget: this involves you, too, however cis, straight, hetero. For in the questioning that Stockton shapes in *Gender(s)* (2021), you, the reader, must be prepared 'to enter a story that is yours, however strange it could end up seeming' (xi), for the book is 'a plunge into gender's strangeness, no matter how 'normal' the concept seems' (xii). For as Stockton cautions, in her reading 'biology turns strange for everyone – *especially* for people who assume gender is given and "natural"' (2).

…

'Whereas trans belonged to an overly pathologized category in the not-so-distant past, today trans childhood represents one iteration by which gender is done' (Best, 2020: 222). I wish it were that simple. The world over, that 'past' reappears, spectrally or more bluntly. In the United States. In Uganda. Even here in South Africa, for X, it is so difficult to find a path. Make a path. To path a life that is authentically 'selving'. And even when I resist pathologising, trying emphatically and empathetically to parse a trans life sentence without conventional assumptions of passing and passing privilege, the fugitive lack of clarity can be disorientating. I scarcely know where I am.

…

Having relocated with the family as a child from Durban to a new town, X often recalled a bridge in the old mother city of childhood, a vast, curved arch spanning a major multi-lane route into the city centre, connecting one side of the city to another. 'Their' side, where they lived, to 'the other' side, where they did not live. Umbilo/Glenwood/Manor Gardens ↔ Berea/Musgrave/Morningside. This bridge had to be crossed several times a day, to and from remedial school. The bridge was both coming and going, a familiar but also an unsettled

habitus of leaving and arrival. The bridge was not the marker of 'from' and 'to, but some less binary form of connection, at once mode and material. Being. In process. Ongoing.

In the family's new home town, the once-repeatedly seen and experienced object of the bridge became a missing landmark, an empty site of memory that young X actively missed. X would mull over the bridge, pondering aloud.

There came a point where X explicitly understood that she had fixed on this bridge as an imaginative mnemonic of self. X wanted to fly back to the old city, to re-experience the bridge. Since that was not possible, the bridge of talking had to answer to the unfulfilled need.

'What was that bridge thing again?' X asked every few days in the still unsettled new home town. Never mind how often X had been told, X would forget. Or appear to forget, in order to be able to ask, again, about the bridge to which X was so attached and which formed part of X's attachment to an old (*younger*) self. Also, the given, proper name of the landmark constantly slipped X's mind. So again X would ask, and again X would be told: Tollgate Bridge.

But this very idea flummoxed. How could there be a bridge that was also a gate? It wasn't possible. And if it was possible, *somehow*, then where *was* the missing gate? How come, X said, no one could see the gate? And what was a toll? Where was the bell, if there was a toll? And when X was told about the toll being money, X asked what it was for, and who said it must be paid, and who'd put those people in charge? And how come we never paid?

Again and again and again. So many questions asked and answered about The Bridge but still never answering to the child's questions about The Bridge. Time and again the time they spent, X and Y. crossing over and over.

…

Barely a teen (after a long childhood period answering to a self-chosen boy's name), X declared herself done with pretence and came out. As a lesbian. Some were a little surprised, but also not really surprised. Relieved, even. A family could do lesbian, no problem. Even if the psychosocial intricacies of the identity were unknown, it was a familiar style of queerness, especially in the androgyny that often marks early female adolescence. The back of a denim jacket stencilled 'Baby Butch'. ('You mean, like, dyke?' a relative grimaced. 'But isn't it obvious?') Hair cropped. Doc Martens. Carabiners. Dad's leather jacket. A kerchief tucked into a pocket. Head shaved. Stick and poke tattoos. Bedroom artworked in photographs of female nudes, and gender-ambiguous male-presenting bodies. Drawings of human beings morphing into monsters (and/or the other way around?). Chest binding. Secrecy. Dodgy relationships with food. Trauma every bloody month. Self-harm. Hours of solitary (social) media, and reading. (A lesbian friend chats to X. Tells Y she needs to be more careful about X going online.) The books are a better-known quantity: Ann Cvetkovich. Sarah Waters. bell hooks. Garth Greenwell. Ocean Vuong. Maggie Nelson. Leslie Feinberg. Girlfriends are found and loved and lost, sometimes with dangerous intensity.

In style, self, thought, in this period, X lives a violent angularity, wildly at odds with everyone and everything. There is rage. Many things get broken. And yet through it all, we sense the undeniable authority of someone struggling to be themselves.

Several difficult years later: 'I'm trans'.

( ) Lacuna. But after the gamut, the pieces, the mother knew nothing else to do except accept, and go figure. Trans. If a person, like X, experienced a severely disabling discrepancy with the gender assigned at birth, trans presented as a narrative of transformation. A person who identified as trans wanted to cross from one gender to the opposite gender. F2M, in X's case. The mother's weirdly-wired mind tossed up Todorov's narrative schema: 'situation – transformation – situation'. In a transman's transition, multiple obstacles would need to be overcome, in stages:

> social transitioning: living as the desired gender, passing, pronouns, re-naming…

> biomedical transitioning: testosterone, top surgery, bottom surgery, other masculinising/gender confirming surgeries…?

> official transitioning (doctors again, plus Home Affairs): formal change of name and gender on birth, ID, bank cards, school transcripts…

All extreme, and extremely daunting. But this had to be done, since life had shown that the dire alternative, for X, was living in deathly extremis.

And yet, after a time – a long time – the mother slowly understood the stupid facility of her clear, linear, longing for the certainty of a transformation from → to. She saw that subtending such a resolute narrative arc are the old, predictable binaries, the pressure for trans individuals to present *appealingly* through society's preferred codes of 'transnormative respectability politics' (Miller, 2019: 304). She meant well, but Y's thinking had been unwittingly caught in the cis assumption that trans people would/should render themselves legible through the prevailing

norms: male /female. Either/or. (Never mind the added complexity of straight/queer.) The best way to prove yourself a 'good', 'worthy' trans person, was to transition *properly* from M2F, or F2M. And, ideally, to do so quietly, without any disruptive genderfuck trouble. Then, what followed: while of course you could never really be a real man, or a real woman, when you had fully transitioned you could settle into your authentic trans self, leaving the old, wrongbody you behind, and society (generously) would more-or-less bypass your strangeness if you could pass as the real deal without making waves.

In comparison, Hil Malatino motivates for trans lives lived through a processual 'trans-ing', an ongoing, life-long range of transitioning practices and trans becomings; a shifting agglomeration of adjustments, re-visions and re-versionings of trans that has no obvious 'delimited outcome' or fixed endpoint or comprehensive legibility (2019a: 644). For Malatino, trans-ing occurs in the 'interregnum' of structural and personal violences and pleasures, of wounds, wishes and fugitive joys, of uneasy intersections of social, individual and medical expressions of self beyond clear cut, old-style categories of coherent gender identity. Or, as Susan Stryker writes, 'it is the movement across a socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place, rather than any particular destination or mode of transition that characterizes the concept of transgender' (2017: 1).

...

Still, ideas, like people, can be tough cookies. Even when we're eager for their company, they can leave us wanting. Ideas call my supposed open mindedness into question when I happen on Halberstam again, again a goad. Halberstam asserts: the texts 'I examine (...) refuse to think back through the mother; they actively and passively lose the mother, abuse the mother, love, hate, and destroy the mother, and in the process they produce a theoretical and imaginative space that is 'not woman' or that can be occupied only by unbecoming women' (2011: 125). This is difficult; learning to be 'capable of recognizing the political project articulated in the form of refusal' (126). As Halberstam observes, 'radical forms of passivity and masochism step out of the easy model of a transfer of femininity from mother to daughter and actually seek to destroy the mother-daughter bond altogether' (131).

Is this what trans masculinity is teaching me?

Is this one of the lessons I must learn?

...

Over the years (a slow shadow of intimacy) schooling is a bridge almost too far. The rigours. The challenges. Extreme demand avoidance. The difficulties of being alive. The stress permeates everything. Y and X must leave at 6.15am to arrive on time at the small independent learning hub in a town about 40 kms away. Breakfast is a sleepy bowl in the car. Often, X sleeps, or tunes out. Hardly sun up, but emotions are already explosive.

Then one early morning, on the drive, X suddenly asked to read to Y. Long extracts from Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. X reads hesitantly, at first, unused to the soundfeel of reading aloud. A traumatic episode in the narrative is mumbled in a stilted monotone that gains confidence and fluency in the reading of passages through passages of time, the reading aloud delivered from the back seat, directed at the back of the mother's head. Because: the relief, for X, of no eyes to see, and no mouth to urge.

Is this what it means to find your voice? To have your voice heard? To be heard by another, for exactly the duration you wish, without interruption? To ventriloquise your voice through the published voice of a writer who is also queer? For this suspended duration, Y feels how X feels themselves 'seen' via a synesthetic effect, without being constantly surveilled by forms of concern or judgement, whether benign or malign.

This unexpected *togetherness* in the car, through reading and listening, offers a shared affect, materialising an elusive, uneven connection. The possibility for X and Y to be differently. It is as close as touch. As intimate as kissing. It is as if the car has transformed into another kind of vehicle, a tentatively shared space, and Y remembers that metaphor, too, is a kind of transformation, as metaphors combine by carrying meaning from one thing to another, in the process trying to change one thing into another with an uncanny sense of in/completeness. In metaphor, things are rendered similar, and yet nothing is ever quite as it seems.

...

Y remembers   when X eventually learnt to read. A long process. Late. The child's desperate relief: 'Now I can breathe!' Not metaphor, but fully-embodied feeling, so different from the characteristic autistic masking.

Y remembers   another early morning. Dark winter. Again the drive to the distant school. Provoked beyond her limit she'd veered onto the verge, jamming the brakes, screaming. She'd yanked open the back passenger door and punched and pummelled X, in a deadly frenzy. The early morning traffic continued, in both directions.

Violence. Vital life. Both appear in the same trans-ing story, which offers no sudden transformations for the better.

…

Halberstam assertively queers Cvetkovich's take on the relatively narrow archive of feelings associated with canonical gay male writers in their 'responses to the banality of straight culture and the repetitiveness and unimaginativeness of heteronormativity' (2011: 109). Beyond the camp formulae of ennui, ironic distancing, and arch dismissal as expressions of antisocial affect, Halberstam claims varied modes of negativity, among them 'rage, rudeness, anger, spite, impatience, intensity, mania, sincerity, earnestness, overinvestment, incivility, brutal honesty, and disappointment' (109). These, in queer lives, comprise a powerful politics that releases – *unlooses* – 'the promise of self-shattering, loss of mastery and meaning, unregulated speech and desire' (109). Here, in wider political company we find:

> [d]yke anger, anticolonial despair, racial rage, counterhegemonic violence, punk pugilism – these are the bleak and angry territories of the antisocial turn; these are the jagged zones within which not only self-shattering …but other-shattering occurs. If we want to make the antisocial turn in queer theory we must be willing to turn away from the comfort zone of polite exchange in order to embrace a truly political negativity, one that promises, this time, to fail, to make a mess, to fuck shit up, to be loud, unruly, impolite, to breed resentment, to bash back, to speak up and out, to disrupt, assassinate, shock, and annihilate. (110)

I understand this, in conceptual terms. And yet Halberstam's antisocial turn is terrifying, for me, in its (necessary) intent to destroy forms of collective socialisation that refuse to meet queerness as it is, spilling over, perhaps, to refuse forms of fragile allyship that exert overconcern. Mothering. Care. Harm. Othering.

Hobbled by my own repressed maternal rage, I find myself processing my fear of female rage by working through Hil Malatino's version of trans rage as 'tough breaks' and 'trans resilience'. Malatino turns 'away from (…) culturally dominant articulations of rage' that position rage as necessarily *negative affect,* as a 'deleterious emotion' (2019b: 122) to be worked through at the individual level, and overcome, discarded. Instead, for Malatino, 'rage is key to the survival of minoritized subjects', offering a 'critical resource' (2019b: 122). Malatino extends into trans discourse Sara Ahmed's assertion that rage is a necessary feminist affect (2006), a force that moves us and others variously away from, and towards. Rage,

> … is a repellent affect, meaning it scares away certain others and, in doing so, propels us as well. It is our vest of porcupine quills, that which makes us prickly, that which prevents proximity, deters the closeness of threatening forces. It is a kind of armor, shielding us from that which seeks to harm. It can form a force-field; it is a radiating affect that distances. This distancing can produce a small modicum of space for being that is less subject to trespass, less likely to be violated. Rage can make us seem unfriendly, unapproachable – it can deter less-than-welcome approaches. Being perceived as unfriendly can be an important mode of self-preservation, a way to inure ourselves in/relation to hostile publics, a way to inoculate ourselves against the emotional toxicity that is directed our way. (2019b: 122–123)

In the context of trans lives, Malatino mobilises rage as a complex affective force with multiple inflections and overlays: 'Rage breaks things. Rage signals a break. Breaking leads us beyond rage. Rage enables a break' (2019b: 124) without 'necessarily imposing hard separations of sense among them' (124).

This rage can *enable*:

> We tell our uncle his joke is racist. We leave the family table when we're consistently gendered incorrectly. We ask our loved ones to stop deadnaming us. We tell a transphobic street harasser to fuck off. We refuse eye contact with the stranger aggressively ogling us. We make eye contact with the stranger

aggressively ogling us and sneer. We trouble others. We make trouble for others. Rage helps us come unstuck, helps us find an exit from these troubling relations. (2019b: 123)

...

During a chef school industry placement, the middle-aged male Head Butcher, a man of colour, jibes:

'Looks like you never have a boyfriend?'

X: 'I'm trans masc. And I wanna *girlfriend*.'

'What the fuck you even saying, trans-what? You don't *smaak*³ the sausage?'

X: 'Fuck you man. Just leave me and my life alone. Go back to your *meat*.'

Unfortunately, this behaviour could get X fired.
Fortunately, it is the penultimate day of the internship.
Is it always going to be like this?

...

Queerness has been cast 'as the dark landscape of confusion, loneliness, alienation, impossibility, and awkwardness' (Halberstam, 2011: 97). As Halberstam points out:

> While liberal histories build triumphant political narratives with progressive stories of improvement and success, radical histories must contend with a less tidy past, one that passes on legacies of failure and loneliness as the consequences of homophobia and racism and xenophobia. (98–99)

There is undeniable truth in this, *trauma*. As the mother of a trans child who over his young lifetime has grown, is growing, will further grow, into his transmasculine identity, experience has shown me a slow, fear-filled violence of fragile deferred hope. But I also remind myself that 'nothing essentially connects gay and lesbian and trans people to these forms of unbeing and unbecoming' (Halberstam, 97). And yet, again, I know – counterintuitively – that 'the social and symbolic systems that tether queerness to loss and failure (...) cannot be wished away' and 'nor should they be'. For to 'simply repudiate the connections between queerness and negativity is to commit to an unbearably positivist and progressive understanding of the queer' as subject to the cruel optimism of redemption, progress, inclusion (97–98). So I grapple with the thought, following arguments that reposition failure as a necessary repertoire of Halberstam's 'queer art', that being trans deliberately disfigures, disrupts, the blindsiding, exclusionary nature of optimistic narratives of hope that privilege individual responsibility, hard work, and dedicated agency as the primary markers of success. Trans-ing calls bullshit on such myths, exposing the systemic injustices and structural disparities that pretend equality while keeping injustice in place.

...

I feel my way into reading my child's transness where I am. Here. South Africa. A country with an enviable Constitution and accompanying Laws and Acts, that 'have theoretically created radical opportunities for the imagining of different gender embodiments' (Monakali and Francis, 2022: 15–16). Hard as things are, for those who are trans in South Africa, lately I am relieved X is not transitioning in Florida, or Texas, or any number of American states where trans rights have been rolled back in terrifyingly phobic legislative sweeps. We are here. X is on T. 'Here' has made possible some things that maybe once I thought impossible.

Local scholarship helps me to figure out the relational pressures and possibilities X is likely to face, in living in this country as a transmasculine person. A recent article by Monakali and Francis helps me to place X's experiences in tentative relation to the lives of other local transmasculine people, in communities across the Western Cape. I learn to acknowledge masculinities, plural, as 'not the exclusive embodiment of bodies assigned to the male sex but a collection of roles, behaviors, and imaginaries that are continually being challenged' and transformed (2022: 6). I start to see, in X, how for a transman the 'relationality of gender is highlighted as power shifts become more pronounced as a result of the status of being men and occupying masculine subject positions' (15).

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³ Slang from the Afrikaans word for 'taste', meaning 'to like, to fancy, to be keen on'

Like the transmale participants in Monakali and Francis's study, since X lives in a cisnormative, raced patriarchal context with the ubiquitous 'threat of gender-based violence and sexual violence' (14) against 'women and femme-presenting people' (15), he is bound to grapple with his 'preferred expression of masculine identity' (14). As a transman he is consciously challenged to devise, revise, negotiate masculine subjectivity in relation to privileged 'available violent masculine ideals' (14). In a society where transness is subject to violence, erasure, debasement, *death*, how will X learn to assert himself, his rights, without drawing on the dominant discourse of violent masculinity that prevails?

…

He goes to clubs. Says guys look at him *skeef*.[4] Mocking. He wants to fuck them up. He does not. (Is he weak? Is this strength?)

He does his weekly shopping. Says people give him the side-eye. He feels rage. Shame. Flagrant fuck you willfulness.

He sees men treating a homeless woman badly. Says he wants to fuck them up. He does not. (Is he weak? Is he strong?)

His blind date gets blind drunk. He says she ditches him, preferring to be railed in the bathroom by some random bro. He feels a complicated girlboy rageshame. Rants about No Respect for *Me*. No Self Respect Either. Has to be restrained.

He walks home late at night, in the early hours. Says no one will mess with him. Not when he looks like this. (Gestures. Gym is starting to pay off.)

He's got a mouth on him. Swears. (Says: 'So what? Everyone does. You're just old.' Swaggers. Shadow boxes. Presents himself through common male codes.)

He goes to buy cigarettes from a hole-in-the wall café. Says when he pays, the man in a kurta behind the counter clutches his wrist and reaches over the chips and lighters trying to stroke X's stubbled cheek. Smiles. 'Hello, Lady Boy'. (X recoils. '*Don't you fucking touch me!*')

He's with female friends, outside a club. Says five guys pin him to the ground and jack his cellphone. Says he cannot even think about resisting. As if this is just something that happens. To him. As if he is not really present, in himself.

…

Dicks, whether literal or discursive, X can do without them, mostly. (Of course, it's complicated.) But: a beard, a buff build, a square jaw, a deep voice, a body 'that communicate[s] normative interpellations of masculinity' (Monakali and Francis, 2022: 6) – these X wants, along with the commanding ability to occupy public space without fear. Is this complicity in the gender binary?

I find myself thinking that if some transmen prefer to embrace 'a gender nonconforming masculinity which speaks to the porous qualities of gender' (15), it is also not surprising that passing unremarked as a man is a desirable goal for many transmen. If it's about happiness, it's also about safety; liveability. Plenty of scholarship indicates 'that transgender subjectivity is navigated through the often slippery dichotomy of visible and invisible, where recognition, acceptance, and sometimes survival frequently hinge on transgender people's embodiment and performance of normative gender subjectivities' (Monakali and Francis, 2022: 8). Our Constitution aside, the 'binary imaginary of gender' is 'deeply embedded within the legal, sociopolitical, and cultural fabric' of South Africa, and a significant South African survey estimates that about 500 000 people 'have physically harmed women who dressed and behaved like men in public' (Monakali and Francis, 2022: 4). In other words, given genderism's 'hostile readings of gender-ambiguous and gender nonconforming bodies', a transman is in danger of being a target if 'publicly occupying a trans masculine gender expression that calls the gender binary into question' (Monakali and Francis, 2022: 15).

…

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[4] Slang from the Afrikaans word for 'crooked', 'skew'. In this context, meaning 'to side eye', to look with the likelihood of giving offence

Once again, I am teaching Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). Some of the contemporary scholarship (building on Susan Stryker's early insights) interprets 'the monster' as a narrative figure for trans-lating transness. In the novel, the nameless being created and then abandoned by Victor Frankenstein mulls over the pained isolation caused by his physical form. He begs to know whether he is, then, a monster, a blemish upon the earth, destined to be shunned and disowned.

As Anson Koch-Rein observes, the 'monster is a ubiquitous figure in transgender rhetorics', used both against and for trans life-storying. '[T]ransphobic uses of Frankenstein's monster as a trope generally draw on ideas of monstrous bodies and physical monstrosity' so as 'to cast transgender people as 'monstrous, crazy, or less than human' (2019: 44). Against such denouncing, however, are trans-affirming imaginaries that assert the so-called monster's 'ragefueled agency to carve out a transgender speaking position in the face of the silencing gestures of transphobia' (Koch-Rein, 2019: 44). Additionally, he reminds us, 'Rage is not the only means of understanding trans affect through *Frankenstein*'. As 'a figure laden with negative affect, the monster offers transgender readers a way of addressing feelings of shame, gender dysphoria, and alienation from heteronormative gender and sexuality' (44). Again, this is tricky to read. In part, stories of 'queer shame' are 'read as relatable, sympathy-generating, and therefore acceptable queer narratives, while proud, fluid, perverse and politically angry narratives are deemed 'too hard' for most listeners to see, hear, or bear', meaning that 'these narratives remain persistently unintelligible, characterised as 'monstrous accounts of queer selves and lives' (Jones and Harris, 2016: 521). Further still, we might begin to appreciate that the illegible 'monster' is a construct that surfaces the social, beyond the individual trans life:

> [t]racing how affect creates the monster lets us see gender dysphoric shame as a response to perceptions of non-normative embodiment in the social world and reveals the role of disgust in the naturalization of transphobic violence. (Koch-Rein, 2019: 45-46)

My thoughts shift and swerve. They move over and across familiar lines, protocols, practices, then turn slant, all in making my understanding of trans necessarily otherwise. With difficulty, I break the comforting balance of either/or, gathering purpose and chance and their numerous relations into an erratic, noisy colloquy, a swooping, looping murmuration: stigmata martyr mater master m/other, a melee motherfesto. I beg and steal and borrow from what-have-you, notably from queer arts of failure that stumble and stammer, halting even as they move towards coming to know trans more intimately. I like that this ongoing movement of allyship aligns with trans-ing, a verb in the present continuous tense. I also like the incongruity of the fact that this tense is sometimes called the present progressive, or the present imperfect.

I am looking. Witnessing. Searching for alternatives 'to cynical resignation on the one hand and naïve optimism on the other' (Halberstam, 2011: 1). I am reading 'across feminist, queer, and trans terrains' (Elliot, 2010: 9), making 'a way out of the usual traps and impasses of binary formulations' hoping, for X and for Y, 'to locate (...) the in-between spaces' (Halberstam, 2011: 2) and gather together amid the 'fugitive strivings' (Elliot, 2010: 13) that promise the flourishing of trans as diverse emergence. This process unsettles comfort, even while consolation is sought. It is a method that tries to create a workable piecework of feelings and ideas by 'making its peace with the possibility' that mothering a trans life entails even less mastery than motherhood more usually, the mother learning to become other, leaning in to embrace 'alternatives' that 'dwell in the murky waters of a counterintuitive (...) realm of critique and refusal', rather than expressing some idealised 'mother love'. I am working to accept 'a more chaotic realm of knowing and unknowing' than familiar ways of being in the world, as a mother mothering trans (Halberstam, 2011: 2). This too is living in the m/other's hope of a potentially queer, trans futurity coming sometime into being.

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'We Hope He Will Be Dead by Tonight': Shared Estrangement in the ICU of the Universitas Hospital

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ABSTRACT

This article recounts the week in which the author and his four sisters spent waiting for their father to die, and suggests that intimacy or friendship viewed as 'shared estrangement' – a friendship or intimacy not rooted in sharing common ground – might provide a lens through which to consider the nature of the deep bond that developed between the author and his siblings during that week. Raising the possibility that the relationship between author and his sisters could in some ways be read as a *queer* one, not least because it demanded an openness to alterity and requireds attention and care, mutual trust, and, bizarre as it may sound, even betrayal, the author suggests that a deep bond slowly developed between the siblings during the week being described, not *despite* the prtofound differences between the siblings, but partly *because* of it.

Keywords: friendship, intimacy, auto-ethnography, death

FOUR SISTERS AND A BROTHER

I saved this picture on my laptop under the name 'Family Zoo' (**Figure 1**). It must have been taken in the winter of 1967 at the Pretoria Zoo.[1] My mother still has her own teeth, which means it was taken after my father was disbarred from the legal profession for misappropriating Trust funds – after the repossession of the large house in Messina, the house with the field of bright yellow and orange Namaqualand daisies in the front garden – but before we moved to the second house in Oribi in Pietermaritzburg – the converted army barracks house with its communal bathrooms and toilets down an open corridor.

On the far right stands my oldest sister, Marie-Luise, who became a reborn Christian in my final year of high school when we lived in a town called Pietersburg (renamed Polokwane after the advent of democracy) during a period of several years when my sister had struggled on her own and lived with my parents. Marie-Luise, who can talk the most awkward silence into submission, and who is always quitting smoking but still sucks on each cigarette as if it is life itself. Marie-Luise, who designed and made the handful of new shirts with which I was packed off to Stellenbosch University in 1984, including the white linen shirt with the flowing sleeves and the hand-made wooden buttons of different sizes that shouted: *armblanke moffie*[2] from Pietersburg.

On the far left stands my second oldest sister, Antoinette, who was reborn a few years later after she stopped seeing Willie, her hairdresser friend-but-maybe-boyfriend with his flowing shoulder-length hair and clanging copper bangles on his wrist, who had in 1983 berated me for taking them to see Pieter Dirk Uys's play *Paradise is Closing Down* at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg, demanding to know why I had brought him 'to this moffie

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[1] After I shared a draft of this piece with my four sisters, Anna-Marie pointed out that the picture was *not* taken at the Pretoria Zoo, but in Burgerspark, situated in the city centre of Pretoria between what was then called Jacob Maré Street, Van der Walt Street and Andries Street (renamed in 2012 to Jeff Masemola Street, Lilian Ngoyi Street, and Thabo Sehume Street respectively). The Park was first established as a botanical garden in 1874 by the then President of the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR), Thomas Francois Burgers. The history of the park is recounted by Carol Hardijzer in an article on *The Heritage Portal*.

[2] *Armblanke* is a term used to describe poor white Afrikaners, and was widely used in the first half of the twentieth century by supporters of apartheid, who argued that the introduction of apartheid policies were necessary to "uplift" *armblankes* by shielding them from economic competition by black South Africans. *Moffie* translates as 'faggot' or 'fairy', although mostly used as a derogatory term to insult gender nonconforming gay men, the term is also ironically and self-affirmingly used by some gay men.

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Figure 1. The author, his mother and his four sisters. 1967. Copyright: Author.

play'.[3] Antoinette, who is a stickler for rules, gets advice directly from God, and sometimes shares humorous videos and conspiracy memes on our sibling WhatsApp group. During the trip the five of us took to Prague, Lviv, and Budapest in 2012, I jokingly dubbed Antoinette 'Scary Spice'.

Between Antoinette and my mother stands my middle sister Anna-Marie, who when I was four years old for several weeks got me to do all her chores by telling me gentlemen did everything for ladies without even having to be asked, and that she was willing to give me a chance to prove that I was indeed a gentleman. Anna-Marie, the big game hunter who – after becoming a judge – appointed my ailing 70-year-old mother as her judges' clerk, one of her many schemes to save other people from themselves and from those around them, which in this case was from my father. Anna-Marie who I sometimes jokingly call Racheltjie de Beer[4] and who after my father died organised an inheritance swop: she receiving the rifle that had belonged to my namesake grandfather and had been bequeathed to me and me receiving some of the jewellery my mother always wanted her to have because 'there is nothing wrong with making an effort to look pretty'.

In the pram, hidden from view, lies my youngest sister Trinka, who was reborn in 1985 in the first year of her studies towards a law degree at Stellenbosch University and who married a partially sighted man at the age of 24, a man who called me on a Friday evening in 2011 to ask me to drive with Trinka from Cape Town to Plettenberg Bay the next morning because, he said, my sister needed me as she was going to tell our other sisters that she is a lesbian. Trinka, who is relentlessly generous and kind, and seldom expresses anger, but told me out of the blue (but not really out of the blue) a few months after my father had died that she had forgiven me for sometimes being ashamed of her and pretending not to know her when we were both studying at Stellenbosch.

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[3] Pieter Dirk Uys Uys is a South African playwright, actor, and comedian, best known for his character Evita Bezuidenhout (also known as Tannie Evita, Afrikaans for 'Auntie Evita'), a white Afrikaner socialite and self-proclaimed political activist, who satirises South African politics and society. The character was inspired by Australian comedian Barry Humphries's character Dame Edna Everage. Martin Doyle described *Paradise is Closing Down* in *The Scotsman* as a 'hard, searing and relentless investigation of (South African) whites through the bottom of a bottle, in which their bitchiness is played out on each other against a background of racial tension ... one feels that his extraordinary method of investigating apartheid by concentrating on the people who are part of the problem rather than part of the solution, is perhaps the most powerful way it could be done.'

[4] Racheltjie de Beer is the hero of an Afrikaans folktale, based on the true story of an American girl, Hazel Milner, who saved her two younger siblings from a blizzard by sacrificing her own life. In the version of the story written by Afrikaans author Eugene Marais around 1920, Racheltjie saves her younger brother from certain death and sacrifices her own life when they get lost in a snowstorm, by laying him down in a hollowed out ant hill, and covering him with her warm clothes and her body.

I am, of course, the dishevelled boy with the protruding ears (which my mother unsuccessfully tried to fix by taping them to my head with large pink plasters) and the ill-fitting hand-knitted jersey standing in the front on the left. The only boy among four sisters. My brother born a year before me having died three days after his birth, a fact I was unaware of until Annie-Marie told me about my phantom brother in my grade 11 year at *Pietersburg Hoërskool*, the week after my father was sent off to the *Staanvas* rehab clinic in Pretoria to treat his alcoholism for the first time. Anna-Marie, who often tells the joke (a queer joke perhaps) about me being the only boy among four sisters (we joke, therefore we feel). The joke goes like this: 'Yes, we are four sisters and one brother – but we have not decided who the brother is yet.'

I must have been 4 years old when this picture was taken. My face gives away little. I am already learning how to keep secrets.

ON SHARED ESTRANGEMENT

When I told my then boyfriend, Lwando, over dinner that I wanted to suggest in a piece I was writing on slow intimacy that my relationship with my sisters was in some ways a *queer* one, or one of queer friendship, he gave me that look he often gives when I am about to leave the house in an un-ironed shirt or a tracksuit top, a look that says I am pushing my luck. Knowing my sisters well, and knowing queer theory even better, he reminded me that there was hardly anything queer about my sisters or our relationship. 'It's a stretch. The facts do not match the theory.'

But I don't tell Lwando that I have an ace up my sleeve. I have been reading Tom Roach's *Friendship as a Way of Life: Foucault, AIDS, and the Politics of Shared Estrangement* (2012), a queer exploration of the paradoxes and ambiguities of the friendship between two French public figures – the famous philosopher Michelle Foucault and the less well-known novelist and photographer Hervé Guibert. Guibert was a transgressive, unflinching writer whose books interwove fact and fiction in ways that would be familiar to readers of the work of the late Afrikaans writer Koos Prinsloo.[5] One critic cannily praised Guibert's work for 'its breath-taking indiscretion, tenderness and gore' (Sehgal, 2020). Others accused him of betraying everyone, notably his own parents whose skeletons he uncovered in his lightly fictionalised novel *My Parents* (1986). Guibert had befriended Michelle Foucault in 1977, and they fleetingly became lovers. (Reading about this period one gets the impression that all the queer intellectuals in Paris – at least the male ones – knew and fucked each other, or knew and hated each other – sometimes hating and fucking each other at the same time.) Some years after Foucault died of an 'undisclosed illness' in 1984, Guibert wrote what became his most scandalous and well-known book *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life* (1990) in which he revealed his own HIV status and also, obliquely, that Foucault (called Muzil in the book) had died of an AIDS related illness.[6] At the time, this 'breath-taking indiscretion' caused an uproar among French intellectuals, but today it is difficult not to see Guibert's 'betrayal' as a radical act of friendship which humanised his friend and revealed that he was more complex and fascinating than his public persona suggested. It helped to make Foucault, for a while at least, the darling of queer social sciences academics working in the global North.[7] The year after *To A Friend* was published, Guibert chronicled, in the public eye, his own surrender to AIDS. He died on 27 December 1991, two weeks after a failed suicide attempt, at the age of 36.[8]

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[5] Koos Prinsloo was a gay, award-winning, Afrikaans short story writer, who died of an AIDS-related illness in 1992. A selection of Prinsloo's short stories (translated into English by Gerrit Olivier) was published in 2022 under the title *Place of Slaughter and Other Stories*. In a postscript, Olivier praises the 'astonishing creative freedom' in the use of narrative modes displayed in Prinsloo's original collection of stories title *Slagplaas* (Place of Slaughter), which was published in 1991. According to Olivier, 'amidst the violence and the suffering [in *Slagplaas*], it also is an uncompromisingly desolate and elegiac work'.

[6] Guibert's betrayal of his friends' trust in *To a Friend*, went beyond the revelation about Foucault's HIV status. As Sehgal notes, Guibert 'aired his friend's laundry with ruthless efficiency, his closet full of "whips, leather hoods, leashes, bridles and handcuffs," his love of "violent orgies" in San Francisco's bathhouses'. The 'betrayal' of friends and family also a characteristic of Koos Prinsloo's work, while bathhouses also feature in several of them.

[7] In the mid-1990s I decided to make Foucault's work on sexuality and identity the centrepiece of my PhD dissertation after reading James Miller's *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (1994), in which the biographer made much of Foucault's closet full of whips, and his love of violent orgies in San Francisco's bathhouses, and argued that his exposure to the sadomasochism community as well as psychedelic drugs like LSD during stays in the USA influenced his later political and philosophical works.

[8] The most comprehensive and thoughtful analysis of Guibert's work and life available in English, can be found in Ralph Sarkonak's book, *Angelic Echoes: Hervé Guibert and Company* (2000). This book partly informed my discussion in this second section of the essay. Additionally, I also relied on Guibert's *Cytomegalovirus: A Hospitalization Diary (Forms of Living)* (2014) in which he offers an autobiographical narrative of the everyday moments of his hospitalization because of complications of AIDS, as well as *The Mausoleum of Lovers: Journals 1976–1991*, (2001). To this must be added a fifty-eight-minute video-diary, *La Pudeux ou l'Impudeux* (described by one academic commentator as an act of 'self-mourning') in which Guibert documents himself undergoing medical treatment and suffering from the increasingly painful symptoms of HIV-AIDS. It was only shown

Tom Roach explores the profound but complex intimacy of this friendship between Guibert and Foucault, a friendship characterised by its 'conversations at once casual and serious', its 'narcissistic betrayals, and the telling of secrets typical of the life of gay bars', and the 'braiding together of life's daily rituals – including illness and death' (185), to make his case for 'friendship as shared estrangement' (2). A call, as I see it, for the emergence of yet unseen forms of relation across lines of identity, experience, and beliefs: a relationality, as Roach puts it, which exceeds commonality (12). This is a vision of friendship and intimacy that demands 'an openness to alterity' and thus encourages an active practice of friendship that requires attention and care, mutual trust, and, bizarre as it may sound, even betrayal, 'guided by an ethics of discomfort' (123). Friendship as shared estrangement embraces 'a relationality in which friends can only recognize each other as such in concomitance with a recognition of their own finitude, the continuous possibility that they may betray one another, and an openness to irreconcilable strangeness' (Halse, 2014: 288).

Lwando is probably right. There may well be nothing queer about the relationship between me and my sisters. But I want to hold out the possibility that the rather queer idea of intimacy or friendship as 'shared estrangement', a friendship or intimacy not rooted in sharing common ground, provides a lens through which to consider what comes next.

A glorious betrayal which is also a radical act of friendship. This is what I am aiming for here.

IN THE ICU WAITING ROOM

In July 2022, three months before the Slow Intimacy conference takes place, I still have no idea what to talk about at the conference. I had promised to participate months earlier, but now I find that I have nothing to say. In my usual scholarly writing on South African Constitutional Law, it is easy to hide behind court judgments and rights rhetoric, and to write about my own pain and anger, if at all, by retelling the stories of vulnerable litigants fighting for their rights. But as the emails demanding the submission of an abstract pile up, I write to my friend Lou-Marié (one of the organisers of the conference) and offer two possible topics for my presentation. Perhaps, I write to Lou-Marié, I could write about intimacy and queer spaces.

> I am thinking of the time in Paris in the mid-1990s when I met a boy from Ivory Coast in a bar called Banana and how he did not want to believe I liked him because he had a shrivelled left hand and how we spent the night whispering to each other in my bed in a dodgy hotel (the whispering was necessary because I was not allowed to entertain a gentleman caller) until I smuggled him out of there at dawn, and how he had wanted to go from the bar to a nightclub called Queen but I did not want to go as it would be far too expensive, and how I did not see at the time that he wanted to go there to show me off and that my reluctance to go was probably read as a confirmation of his anxiety about his arm. And then there is the story of Sean from Singapore who I met on the boat from Mykonos to Turkey and finally kissed when we walked home from a bar in Goreme where a drag queen in a Burka sang 'I will Survive', and who emailed me 25 years later out of the blue to tell me that I was the first man he ever kissed.

In the end I ditch this idea, worrying that while I have a lot of stories to tell, I might not have anything to say, and that such a piece would turn into just another older white guy writing nostalgically about his cruising days. Instead, I opt to do a piece for the conference about the week in December 2003 that my four sisters and I spent together in Pretoria waiting for my father to die, and about how I had learnt to love my sisters during that week. But a few weeks before the conference I had not written one word. I don't know how to write about any of this – underqualified (or unqualified) to write about intimacy, let alone death, slow or otherwise. Despite the ever more urgent demands of the organisers as the conference draws near, I don't send an abstract – I don't know what I want to say. Was it really true, as Trinka sometimes claimed, that the week we waited for my father to die was the best week of our lives? Or did we make up this story too, to soothe ourselves, to soothe each other? What do I even know about my sisters – even now – and what do they know about me?

And, in any case, I realise that I can't remember much of what happened that week, apart from the funny parts (or, at least, our mutually invented version of these funny parts). I remember these parts because the five of us retell them sometimes when we get together and the wine is flowing, and I invariably joke about *that* play we still have to write one day, the play about the week our father almost missed his own funeral because he was too

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on French television shortly after his death, and is 'mostly remembered for one of the film's final scenes, in which Guibert stages a mock suicide'. Koos Prinsloo died in 1994. Like Guibert, he was 36 years old when he died.

stubborn to die. It is only after I read *Friendship as a Way of Life* that I begin to think that it might be possible to write about my sisters and the beauty of our shared estrangement.[9]

After completing a first draft, I tell Lou-Marié that my piece will probably be a failure, but that I will try to make sure it is at least a spectacular failure. The melodramatic ending of this piece is my attempt to honour this promise.

But before I get there, let me do the safe part. The basic facts. Trinka calls me on Saturday 13 December 2003 while I am having lunch with Marcus (my boyfriend at the time) and other friends in the lush garden of a restaurant near *The Point* shopping centre in Sea Point in Cape Town to tell me that *pa* had had a massive stroke, that he is in a coma in Universitas Hospital in Pretoria, and that she is going to book us on the next available flight to Johannesburg, instructing me to pack a bag and hurry to the Cape Town airport. Marcus and I were planning to go clubbing at *Detour* that night with our usual gang of queer friends, so I am not keen to fly to Johannesburg that very night. But my younger sister seldom tells me what to do, so I don't object by suggesting that we might as well wait another day to see which way this is likely to go. Not that I considered the possibility then that my father might pull through and recover. What I worry about is this: what if it takes weeks for him to die and I am forced to spend all that time with my sisters in Pretoria? It is not as if I could talk to them about white supremacy or queer theory, or about the practical difficulties of arranging a threesome when you and your boyfriend have radically different tastes in men.

Trinka and I arrive at the hospital around nine o'clock that Saturday night. Anna-Marie, Antoinette and Marie-Luise, who drove all the way from Plettenberg Bay in Anna-Marie's fancy judges' car, arrive after midnight. For now, we all stay with Anna-Marie, in a *rondawel*[10] in the backyard of Professor Elize Botha's house in Brooklyn where Anna-Marie stays during the week while performing her duties as a judge, before flying to Plettenberg Bay on weekends to spend with her long-term girlfriend (now wife). Professor Botha (who later became chancellor of Stellenbosch University) and her husband had already left for Hermanus for their December holiday, so I do not sleep in the *rondawel* with my sisters, but in Professor Botha's single bed in the stuffy and impersonal room on the upper floor of the double story house.[11]

On Sunday 14 December we get to speak to a doctor who tells us with pursed lips that it is not looking good, but that it is too soon to say how things will turn out. He touches his face when he says the last part, which is why I know he is lying. Nothing much happens for a day, then another, more senior doctor with better professional insurance (a man as handsome as any not-yet-gone-to-seed former *Afrikaans Hoër Seunskool* head boy)[12] calls us to his office and shows us my father's brain scan. Black spots (or were they white spots?) covering the entire one side of his brain. My father's heart had stopped for almost 15 minutes before he was resuscitated, the doctor explains, which meant it would only be a matter of time before he died. It could be days, or it could be weeks. On the morning of Wednesday 17 December the five of us agree to switch off the ventilator that keeps my father alive, and to start organising the funeral.

But my father does not die. At least, not immediately. He had been smoking heavily since he was fifteen years old (always Gold Dollar Plain) and for many years had polished off a bottle of Richelieu brandy almost every night. Being brain dead was not going to kill him off that easily.

It is with the help of an extra shot of morphine that my father finally succumbs in the early morning hours of Thursday 18 December. We bury him on the afternoon of 19 December in a desolate face-brick NG Kerk in Pretoria North, in a service presided over by a thin-lipped and disappointed *predikant* who never met my father, and who struggles to remember his name. (His name is Pierre, *dominee*.)[13] At the funeral I deliver a diplomatic eulogy in which I attempt to say something about my father that is both true and kind, or not untrue and not unkind.[14] I read from my handwritten notes, quoting John Lennon ('Life is what happens to you while you are

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[9] I am also struck, at this time, by Halse's discussion of Roach's idea of shared estrangement, and particularly by the following remark (88): 'To be queer is always already to be in some way unknowable, and thus the basis of queer relationality must be predicated upon a certain unease, a certain distance.'

[10] A a single-room round dwelling with a pointed roof that is usually made from thatch.

[11] Professor Elize Botha was an influential academic specialising in Afrikaans literature, who often championed the work of Afrikaans writers critical of apartheid (including Koos Prinsloo), while remaining a highly respected figure within the Afrikaner establishment. Years later I would pore over the selection of letters Professor Botha wrote to various Afrikaans literary figures, compiled by Heilna du Plooy and published as *Gespreksgenoot – 'n Brieweboek*, to check (without success) for any mention of her bedroom or any other details about the house she and her husband shared for so many years.

[12] *Afrikaans Hoër Seunskool* (Afrikaans Boys Highschool) is an elite Afrikaans boys' school in Pretoria, known for producing a large number of Springbok rugby players. The Springboks is South Africa's national rugby team, and four time winners of the Rugby World Cup.

[13] A *predikant* refers to a minister of a church parish, usually of the Dutch Reformed Church, while a *dominee* is a more informal term for a predikant, also used as a form of address.

[14] The phrase is borrowed from Phillip Larkin's poem, 'Talking in Bed', from his *Collected Poems,* edited by Anthony Thwaite (1988), at p. 129. I bought a copy of this book in June 1997 in London at Foyles bookshop in Charing Cross Road, shortly

busy making other plans') and Dylan Thomas ('Rage, rage against the dying of the light') to make the point that while my father had not always lived wisely, he lived fully and burnt brightly. But mostly, I hide behind jokes. ('Do you remember the time *pa* was asked by a colleague at work why he was laughing to himself, and he answered that it was because he was happy that he had such a brilliant mind.')

So much for the facts. But one should not conflate the facts with the truth. Or with any version of the 'truth'. As Antjie Krog writes in *Country of my Skull*:

> The word truth makes me uncomfortable…. the word truth still trips the tongue… I prefer the word lie. The moment the lie raises its head, I smell blood. Because it is there … where the truth is closest (36).'

What I have not told you is that when the five of us – Marie-Luise, Antoinette, Anna-Marie, me and Trinka – are finally all standing around my father's bed, curtains drawn around the bed, at two o'clock in the morning, on that first night, we hardly say anything. And we don't look each other in the eye. My eyes are mostly on the machine that monitors my father's heart rate. My body is there next to the bed, but I do not feel I belong there. As so often, an imposter. I wonder if my sisters are also thinking, and feeling guilty for thinking – as I do – that it would not be the worst thing in the world if he died. (But this is not true, exactly. What I really think is this: thank goodness he is going to be dead soon.) What I am also thinking as I watch my father lying there is this: he cannot talk. And then, with some wonder: he cannot talk *back*.

If this had been a movie or a play, we would all have stood there carefully arranged around the ventilator near the head of his bed, looking sad or angry or confused. We would have talked very little, and then only in platitudes, nevertheless revealing far more about our feelings and the nature of our relationships than we had intended. But for now, what we mostly do is *not* to look, or to pretend not to look – at each other; at the body on the bed. It's then that I first think: 'This is like the setup at the start of an Ibsen play'. Not that I know any Ibsen plays, but I vaguely remember seeing an Afrikaans version of *Hedda Gabler* on South African television more than a decade before the unravelling of the apartheid state, a play I watched because my favourite Afrikaans actress, Sandra Prinsloo, played the title role. (When I wrote the previous sentence, I suspected that I might have invented this memory, or might have conflated this memory with another memory of another play I saw on television in which Sandra Prinsloo spoke on the phone for ninety minutes to somebody we never hear or see. But apparently *Hedda Gabler*, with Sandra Prinsloo in the lead, was broadcast on the SABC television in 1983.)[15]

In the play or the movie, the one I am imagining me and my sisters are in, we would start squabbling the next morning, old resentments would be aired, dark secrets would be revealed, somebody would stare into the middle distance and make a speech about how one of us ruined their life, or – as a character in the movie *Withnail and I* said about Chekov's plays – would start 'moaning about ducks going to Moscow'. This is what I imagine when I phone Marcus on the Sunday morning (he is on his way to have lunch with his mother in her two-bedroomed house in Westridge, Mitchells Plain) to tell him that he does not need to fly up for the funeral. It's awkward I say, 'as you can imagine'. We have no idea when he will die and when the funeral will take place. And Antoinette, I say, has probably not yet forgiven me for coming out of the closet to my parents when I was 27 years old during a family holiday in the windswept face brick house in Struisbaai on Boxing Day in 1993 ('my Boxing Day surprise', I later joke), 6 weeks before her wedding, and for bringing my then boyfriend, Neville, to the wedding, and for the fact that Neville is an Indian man and the only black guest at Antoinette's wedding at the Police Gymkhana Club in Pretoria, a year before legal apartheid formally ends.

The few times I had previously told this particular coming-out story – despite my nagging worry that 'coming-out' sounds like 'confessing' – I told it as an amusing family anecdote, making much of how I had hidden behind Vikram Seth's 1,000-page novel *A Suitable Boy* the entire holiday, and of my father's response to my announcement: 'It does not come as a surprise at all.' What I had never mentioned, and what I don't tell Marcus now, is that my mother had smiled when I told her that Boxing Day that I now had a boyfriend, and had asked to see his picture, and had started to weep quietly only after she realised that I was not dating a white man.

But we are not characters in an Ibsen play. We are five siblings – four sisters and a brother, but we are still deciding who the brother is – waiting for our father to die. We don't fight, and, at first, we do not talk much either. Mostly, so I tell myself at the time, we are bored. We spend the first day, Sunday, in the ICU waiting room of the Universitas Hospital in Pretoria. Together, but apart. While my sisters make small talk to pass the time, or whisper into their phones, I hide behind my book. I am mildly resentful that Anna-Marie had told me the previous evening

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before cruising a skinny Chinese student who told me a few hours later – while we were lying naked in bed – that he did not believe my claim that I was a South African living in Cape Town. Too white.

[15] This was adapted by Stephan Bouwer from the Afrikaans translation of André P. Brink, and filmed as a TV movie for the SABC, directed by Bouwer, with Sandra Prinsloo as 'Hedda Gabler' and Ernst Eloff as 'Jürgen Tesman'. See https://esat.sun.ac.za/index.php/Hedda_Gabler.

that there was not enough space in the *rondawel* for all of us*,* and that I had to sleep in the main house, in Professor *Tannie*[16] Elize Botha's bed. I am reading Samuel R Delaney's bulky *The Motion of Light in Water: Sex and Science Fiction Writing in the East Village* (1988). Delaney, a queer black science fiction writer, writes about having a lot of sex with strangers in public places all across Manhattan, places even I would never have dared to try out. (I had already checked the toilets outside the ICU at the Universitas Hospital on Sunday morning to see if they were cruisy. They were not.) While I am reading about Delaney having sex with two burly black men in the back of a truck close to the legendary Pier 45, Antoinette asks me what my book is about. When I show her the cover, she frowns and says: '*Dis 'n bietjie erg*' ('It's a bit much'). But she giggles while she says this, seemingly more embarrassed than disapproving. I am relieved, then, that I had not brought along the copy of *Weifeling* (1993) (translated as 'Hesitation'), Koos Prinsloo's last volume of short stories published shortly before his death, which I had found the previous evening on a bookshelf in Professor Botha's house and was planning to re-read for the third time. That terrifying book is filled with rage and with vengeful acts of betrayal – which is why I had often thought of it by a different title: *The Book of Love*. It was probably vanity that stopped me from bringing the copy of *Weifeling* to the hospital. I was embarrassed by my lack of originality and imagination, which led me to draw parallels between my own situation and that of the narrator (who is and also is not Prinsloo) of 'The Story of My Father', a story within a story in which the narrator foreshadows the day when he will tell his own father that he was dying of AIDS ('Well, is there a surprise waiting for him' (Prinsloo, 2022: 225)), suggesting that this act of revelation will not, or not merely, be an act of revenge, but also an act of acceptance and reconciliation (Olivier, 2008: 237).[17] After I test positive for HIV in 2008, many years after my father's death, I wonder for the first time whether my decision not to bring that book to the Hospital had more to do with shame than with vanity.

While I hide behind my book, I listen with one ear to my sisters' conversation. They are not talking about the hospital or the ventilator that keeps my father alive. Instead, they reminisce about the past. Trinka tells the story of the time the yuppie with the sharp haircut and the red tie came to our door in the Grobler Street house in Pietersburg to complain that our dog Baster had run in front of his car (a silver BMW), and had damaged it. This is the story of how my father, drunk, but not yet angry drunk, had shaken his head and said the man's version of the accident sounded unlikely because we had taught Baster basic road safety tips, taken directly from the Grade 4 *Gesondheidsleer* (Life Skills) syllabus: when crossing the road, look left, look right, look left again, and then walk briskly over the road. How he told the man about the *audi alteram partem* rule (the legal rule that requires one to hear the other side first), how he whispered into the dog's ear, and told the man afterwards that the dog had told him that the man was lying and that he had been speeding, and that, in any event, blood was thicker than water, so he believed the dog. I am smiling now too. Trinka looks pleased. She gives me an encouraging look and rests her hand on my shoulder. I close my book. (What I only wonder much later, when I edit this piece, is whether the man's sharp haircut and suit – in Pietersburg in 1979 – might have signalled that the man in the BMW was gay, and whether my father's response was not as funny as we had always thought. Give the fucker his due, he could be funny, and he could be cruel, often at the same time.)

On Monday afternoon the head nurse we mockingly call *Matrone* behind her back (Matrone is a 'coloured' woman, and far more formidable than Anelise van der Ryst, the actress who played the original *Matrone* in the Afrikaans soapie *Sewende Laan* (2000-2023)) gives us our first dressing down for 'making such a racket' and for 'having no respect for the ill' (what she means is: for the soon to be dead), and tells us that if we thought it was all a joke we should take our party somewhere else because 'there are people dying in there.' *Matrone* is intimidating, and, more importantly, we all need a stiff drink – so we do take the party to *tannie* Elize's *rondawel* and drink every drop of liquor available there, and it is then that I remind my sisters of the *Baardskeerdersbos Orkes* and their song *Sannie se Ma kan Engels Praat, parlez vous,* ('Sannie's mother can speak English, parlez vous') and we all shriek with laughter, remembering how my father – drunk and self-pitying – played this song on repeat in the days before my mother's funeral, launching occasional precision strikes at each of his children to touch them where he thought it would hurt most. (It is then that he says to me, and being honest about it for the first time, that he cannot accept that his son sucks cock, and I turn away, embarrassed by my father's lack of originality and self-control.)

On Wednesday morning, we finally make the decision to 'pull the plug', as Anna-Marie had said drunkenly the previous night. Without knowing it, we had been rehearsing our excuses for this decision since at least Sunday

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[16] *Tannie* is a form form of address loosely translated as 'aunty', used by a younger person when addressing an older woman as a form of respect. In some contexts it is also used to describe a narrow-minded, straight-laced (Afrikaans) woman

[17] As Olivier (337) points out, at first the story is one told by the narrator for the amusement of his lover on the night they celebrate the second anniversary of their meeting ('And see how he laughs, my lover, laughs at me and my family. We really always are so funny to him'. But soon the tone of the story changes, the narrator's scorn for his father ('my poor, poor, oh so spurned, oh so obstreperous, oh so lethally sorrowful and disgruntled, poor ancient fucking old father' softens ('My father's voice settles into my belly. Slowly but surely my heart breaks.', and the narrator contemplates the day he would be able to write his father a letter to tell him how afraid he had always been of him, but how he had recently been 'rewiring his heart and his head' in order not to be afraid anymore.

afternoon. The story is this: our father would not have wanted to have lived if he could not have a full life, and a full life would, at least, require him to be able to read the newspaper or sneak off to the bathroom to top up his drink from the brandy bottle hidden in the toilet cistern. Marie-Luise is the one who takes things in hand, 'because we can't stay in this godforsaken *rondawel* for ever'. She had been on the phone on and off for the previous few days, taking orders for a video her and her husband's business is hawking. According to the advertisement in the *Huisgenoot*, the video would teach even the most ham-handed person how to construct a realistically looking rocky water feature out of plaster of Paris. But during a lull between calls, she phones a man at AVBOB[18] and tells him that my father's funeral was 'tentatively scheduled for Friday' afternoon. And then, after listening to the AVBOB man's response, she shakes her head in irritation and says: 'Ag, no man, I told you, my father is not dead yet. But we hope he will be dead by tonight.'

'Tell him we are carefully optimistic,' I say.

'Ask him if it would be a fire hazard if we placed some newspapers for him to read in the coffin,' Trinka jokes.

Marie-Luise says: 'Sjoes! I need a cigarette.'

Hearing the laughter, *Matrone* arrives on cue to shame us into silence. Like children, which we are again, only for this one week, but still, like children, almost happy children, we only hold in our laughter and our sniggering until *Matrone* disappears behind the swinging doors of the ICU unit. '*Dis bietjie grim hier*' (It is rather grim here), says Anna-Marie, sounding just like my late mother. Driving home to Brooklyn in Anna-Marie's fancy judges' car to freshen up for the long night ahead, Antoinette gives me a stern look and tells me that God had told her that I am struggling. '*Pierrie, die Here het vir my gesê jy kry swaar.*' 'You must ask Marcus to come. You need him here, we need him here.' The CD of Joan Baez's greatest hits is playing on repeat and for the third time since Sunday I hear her sing that she and a man who must be Bob Dylan both know that memories bring diamonds and rust. I squeeze Antoinette's hand. She squeezes back. At the traffic light a homeless man offers to wash the car window with his dirty rag, but Antoinette shoos him away, then turns to Marie-Luise to ask her if she has enough cigarettes to last her through the night. We drive the rest of the way in tender silence, my hand lightly resting on my second-oldest sister's hand, until Anna-Marie turns the car into the driveway of the double story house in Brooklyn.

Then I think: it is about now that my father would have cracked a joke.

When Anna-Marie opens a beer and says '*kêrels, dit gaan dalk 'n lang nag word*' (guys, we might have a long night ahead of us), I leave my sisters and walk towards the main house. It is the first time that I notice the dead patches of the otherwise green lawn. The December heat rises from the slate tiled *stoep* in the fading light. In this kind of house in white suburbia in South Africa there is usually a swimming pool in the back garden, but as I write this, I have no memory of such a pool. I do remember the sound of ice clinking in glasses, my sisters' laughter, and further away the sound of a weed eater humming in complaint. I take a deep breath, watch a large Hadedah[19] shit on Professor *Tannie* Elize Botha's back stoep. I shoo the bird away, shouting. (Shouting like a girl, my father might have said.) As the Hadedah lazily turns away from me and flies off, I shout again: 'Do you know whose stoep you are shitting on? Do you have no respect?' Except, Hadedahs only speak Afrikaans, so I shout it in Afrikaans. '*Weet jy op wie se stoep kak jy nou? Het jy geen respek nie?*'

Who am I shouting at?

I take out my phone to call Marcus, thinking that I had never met his father, who had died about a year after we had met. I was the only white person at his father's funeral, and as I awkwardly tried to make small talk with the funeral goers who all seemed to be members of the same congregation of the New Apostolic Church, I realised that through my presence I was outing Marcus to the members of his congregation. I wonder now why we never spoke about it. Then I hear his voice, neutral but friendly. 'Please come,' I whisper. 'It is not as bad as I had thought it would be.' I love him fiercely for years longer than was good for either of us because, just then, he says yes, he will book a flight for early the next day.

It is almost dark now, my sisters' laughter drifting from the *rondawel* where the lights have been switched on. Before I walk back towards the light, I pause, take a deep breath, and, for the first time since my father had a stroke, I feel tears welling up.

But I do not weep for him.

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[18] AVBOB is an abbreviation for Afrikaanse Verbond Begrafnis Ondernemings Beperk, and is currently Africa's largest funeral services and insurance company.

[19] A Hadedah is a a large (about 76 cm long), grey-to-partly brown species of ibis native to Sub-Saharan Africa. It is named for its loud and distinctive three to four note 'haa-haa-haa-de-dah' call – from which its onomatopoetic name is derived.

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Intimate Selves: A Poetic Inquiry into Self-Knowledge

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ABSTRACT

This article uses poetic inquiry to explore the author's experiences of the global COVID-19 pandemic, which brought about a State of Disaster in South Africa from 26 March 2020 to 5 April 2022. The author had, before the pandemic, been used to going to an office and interacting with colleagues every day, and was not used to spending long periods of time alone. The poetry presented in this article was written during, and about, time the author spent alone during the pandemic and afterwards. The methodology of poetic inquiry, which was introduced as a scholarly approach in the 1970s (Davis, 2023), is used to reflect on the poems. Poetic inquiry typically fashions a poem from research data, instead of presenting the data according to the conventional schema for reporting (for example, with separate sections for 'Findings', 'Data Analysis', and 'Conclusions'). Advocates of poetic inquiry find it an apt method for reducing data to a much more manageable corpus. In addition, it enables researchers to include affect, and to use evocative figurative language. The article uses the author's subjective experiences as research data, presents the poems crafted from them, and comments on the poetry.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, South Africa, self-knowledge, poetry, poetic inquiry

INTRODUCTION

This article uses poetic inquiry to explore my experiences of the global COVID-19 pandemic, which brought about a State of Disaster in South Africa from 26 March 2020 to 5 April 2022. The need to limit infections of the disease and to curb the increase in COVID-related deaths, brought about intense and far-reaching changes to lifestyles across the globe. Most countries implemented lockdowns of varying levels of severity (with the exception of Sweden, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, two states in Brazil, and several in the United States), ordering people to stay at home and refrain from social or economic interaction with the world outside their domestic environments. People were thrown back onto their own devices as they obeyed the orders to stay at home except for essential outings. These sudden changes to lifestyles that people had followed for decades brought psychological suffering in their wake. The World Health Organisation succinctly states:

> A great number of people have reported psychological distress and symptoms of depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress. And there have been worrying signs of more widespread suicidal thoughts and behaviours, including among health care workers. (WHO, 2022: n. p.)

In a similar vein, Konstantinos Kontoangelos, Marina Economou, and Charalambos Papageorgiou (2020) mention that several psychological symptoms are directly traceable to the pandemic: anxiety, stress, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), boredom, loneliness, and depression. The cost of the pandemic's long duration and its attendant lockdowns in various countries has yet to be accurately measured or documented.

With all this in mind, I expected to suffer from loneliness and isolation during the State of Disaster in South Africa. To my surprise, I did not experience these emotions. What followed was a period of deepening intimacy with my self. This would be more accurately written as 'my selves' since I became aware, through the hours and days spent alone, that I have a number of 'selves' — each linked to and dependent on the others — that emerge, depending on the context.

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THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Poetry is my chosen medium to explore the deepening intimacy with my selves that has arisen over the past two and a half years. In this, I follow the methodology of poetic inquiry, which was first introduced in the 1970s (Davis, 2023) as a way of creating space for marginalised and subaltern voices in traditional qualitative research. In the past two decades, poetic inquiry has acquired prominence as an alternative to 'objectivist' forms of scholarship (Elliott, 2012: 7). Objectivism assumes that research is a process of discovering something in the world 'out there' — that is, separate/d from the researcher — and communicating it to others in terms that are devoid of subjectivity. Carolyn Elliott defines poetic inquiry as 'a mode of thought and discovery that seeks to reveal and communicate truths via intuitive contemplation and creative expression' (2012: iv). This makes it clear that poetic inquiry is a mode of being, an existential orientation towards the world and experience, which is based on contemplation and creates intuitive, creative texts as opposed to the rational, analytical ones that are often published in academic journals.

The term 'poetic inquiry' is used in connection with social science research. In this relation, poetic inquiry involves crafting 'research poems', which are distinguished from 'literary poems' by their intention to 'remain faithful to the essence of the text, experience, or phenomena being represented' (Furman, Lietz and Langer, 2006: 27). Literary poems may incorporate the fictional, the fantastical, or the fantasies of the poet, while research poems strive to convey, in poetic form, the kernel of data gathered through traditional social science research. Van Rooyen and D'Abdon emphasise the corporeal aspect of poetic inquiry as a method of 'blend[ing] the arts and humanities with scientific inquiry to craft more embodied ways of understanding the social and physical world' (2020: 2), reinforcing poetry's roots in bodily and intuitive experience, rather than in rationality. In this sense, poetic inquiry uses poetry to present, report and analyse data. My use of 'poetic inquiry' in this article partakes of both Elliott's understanding, and that articulated by Furman *et al.*, as well as Van Rooyen and d'Abdon. During the COVID-19 State of Disaster in South Africa, I engaged in intense contemplation of what was most directly to hand: my own experiences. I was my most constant and often only human companion: I had an opportunity to encounter and learn about my selves in more detail than ever before, except perhaps during my intensely introspective adolescence. The poems record my own deepening intimacy with myself, during which I learned about my palpably ageing body, my less conspicuously ageing mind, and the daily shifts in my consciousness as I navigated the predictable threats and unforeseen benefits of the pandemic.

Giving form to my inner explorations called for lyric poetry, the 'the genre of personal expression' (Jackson and Prins, 2014: 2, in Burt, 2016: 423). Lyric is characterised by its musicality (an echo of the other meaning of the words 'lyric' and 'lyrical') and by the fact that the speaking voice in the poetry is close, or identical, to the poet's. (Even if the poet writes in her own voice, she will, simply because of the nature of poetry, craft a voice that is not identical to her conversational voice to write the poem.) The lyric is to poetry what autobiography is to prose. Some critics feel that lyric poetry's focus on the speaking self comes at the expense of its own historicity: Kevin McGuirk (in Jeffreys, 1998: x) goes as far as to state that 'the binary poetry versus history … means, in effect, the lyric self versus history'. I disagree with such critics (Jeffreys's edited volume is full of them) because I maintain that my poetic inquiry into intimacy with myself in my poetry is firmly rooted in the historical realities of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa, and in my own situation, as a white female academic in late middle age, living in Johannesburg.

Because 'The researcher is the instrument' (Davis, 2023), and because my poetry is about myself, it is important to spell out the intimate, familial aspects of my life. I am single; my only child has left home, although she and I see each other regularly, and I share my home with three cats. In beginning to explore why I landed up romantically single (a condition that may be seen as that of a spinster or maiden aunt, but has also been seen as empowering[1]) I turned to my personal history and wrote the following poem:

Bluebeard's Chamber

I
The midnight-coloured door
at the foot of the stone stairs
bristles with locks.
It looms: 'NO ENTRY'.

I do not have the keys.

---

[1] See, for example, Simpson (2005).

I have ransacked
drawers, cupboards, shelves and vases;
I have knocked, pummelled, called and pleaded;
but the door remains
blank and shut.

II
When I lean against the door,
it melts.
The stone hall is awash with blood.

My ex-lovers' dead bodies,
rolled downstairs and hauled in here —
door slammed, bolted and padlocked —
have continued bleeding.

III
I slide all over
on salty-sweet blood
as I slippingly cross the hall
and come to the head
of the narrow wooden steps
leading down into the dark.

The cave is cool,
lit by lantern fungi.
Water tinkles
into glittering pools.
The innermost recess
holds no mutilated lovers:
only the faintest notes
of shining water dripping
into silence deeper than moss.

The poem (inspired by Andreas Vollenweider's 1982 album, *Caverna Magica*) pivots on a metaphor representing my romantic history as a forbidden hall, akin to Bluebeard's chamber. The hall is forbidden because — in keeping with the late twentieth and early twenty-first century obsession with well-being and 'being well' — I tend not to dwell on the failures of my relationships, or to discuss them with others. But, as the poem reveals, the door, which appears impenetrably shut, is not even there: as soon as I attempt to enter, it melts and the gruesome history, which never could be fully hidden behind the door, is revealed. The blood of my former lovers symbolises their continued presence in my emotions; my experiences of interpersonal violence; and the pain of ending the relationships. As I cross the blood, slipping and sliding, I must come to terms with what my past holds. The final section of the poem sees me arriving in a cave, where, contrary to conventions of claustrophobia and hidden dangers, I feel at home and I am soothed by the soft lights and sounds. The silence that ends the poem is not the menacing stillness of waiting to be attacked or to fall into a bottomless pit, but the silence of completely accepting my situation as a single person.

Five weeks' hard lockdown was followed by a slight easing of restrictions in May 2020, when the National Coronavirus Command Council of South Africa allowed citizens to go outside our houses between 6:00 and 9:00 am. I was suddenly able to leave my house and look at the world outside my four walls. On that first day, I was up and dressed 15 minutes before we were allowed to leave our houses, despite the fact that, for the previous 12 years, I had left my house on most days at 5:30 for a walk with a friend and had been late many times. I was overwhelmed at the bright colours and vivid atmosphere of my neighbourhood. When I returned home, the impressions of my walk seemed to me like a set of pictures, and I wanted to write about how vivid they were. I wrote 'Snapshots of a Walk', which was published in *All Shook Up: A Global Anthology* (Friedman, 2021: 29). I originally wrote the poem with the most minimal punctuation, but later decided that the drama of the experience called for the pauses that punctuation affords. I present both versions of the poem below:

Snapshots of a Walk (original version)

wake up it's time
the window will close soon
fish the reluctant mind from dreams of 'normal life'
clothes takkies keys
remember the compulsory accessory

up a hill, round a corner,
the sun crests the ridge all *Lion King*
and gold floods towards us,
cupped in geologic hands.

It's the end of the world as we know it
but the aloes haven't heard
Their candle-buds aim heavenwards
spark, catch, ignite
flaming *we are here*

STOP says the sign
GROW says the convolvulus
soft, thin green stalk winding
up the pole to shoulder height
periwinkle blue
blaring *we will outlive you*

Snapshots of a Walk (revised version)

Wake up! It's time!
Don't miss the walk window!
fish the sleep-fuddled mind
from dreams of 'normal life'.
Clothes, takkies, keys;
remember the compulsory accessory.

Up a hill, round a corner,
the sun crests the ridge all *Lion King*
and gold floods towards us,
cupped in geologic hands.

It's the end of the world as we know it,
but the aloes haven't heard.
Their candle-buds aim heavenwards
spark, catch, ignite;
flaming, *We are here!*

STOP! says the sign.
GROW! says the convolvulus.
Soft, thin green stalk winding
up the pole to shoulder height;
periwinkle trumpets
blaring, *We will outlive you!*

My revised version of 'Snapshots' more closely approximated the rhythms of human speech, with exclamation marks for emphasis and some approximations of natural syntax. The aloe and convolvulus flowers, burgeoning in the sudden drop in pollution caused by motorised transport, flourished, despite their urban setting. The

punctuation allowed me to make the flowers' messages of defiance against human dominance more strident, and their reminders to human beings that they, not we, will endure, louder and more noticeable.

At the same time, the National Coronavirus Command had enforced new fashions:

Fashion

The new wave has taught us
that humans are dangerous to each other.
We must seal our faces,
keep our spit, snot, smiles and souls
safely under wraps.
Even so,
it's still a fashion parade.

'Fashion' is an example of a dramatic monologue, spoken in a voice, and from an existential position, that I find comfortable. The speaker is at some distance from my subject (the compulsory anti-virus face masks that South Africans had to wear for nearly three years). The first four lines adopt the position of a parent or sage, telling the reader that the regulation is for her own good. The final two lines switch to satire, remarking wryly on the human habit of turning even health rules into a fashion competition. The irony of pandemic-stricken humanity unable to give up their aspirations for glamour has a mordant bite.

As the masks and solitude grew commonplace, I settled into a routine alone and started to take stock of where I was, existentially, geographically, and chronologically. My body, I was surprised to find, was neither as young nor as resilient as it had been when I was an undergraduate. I was not the first person to be surprised by their body's ageing while their emotions and thoughts are still filled with curiosity, enthusiasm and wonder: but common experiences are always new in individual lives. Either through forced solitude or physical ageing, I reflected on great existential questions: Where am I? How did I get here? Where am I going? And, do I even want to go there? I remembered a section from TS Eliot's *Four Quartets* from my undergraduate years:

> So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years —
> Twenty years largely wasted, the years of *l'entre deux guerres* —
> Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt
> Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure
> Because one has only learnt to get the better of words
> For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
> One is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture
> Is a wholly new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
> With shabby equipment always deteriorating
> In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,
> Undisciplined squads of emotion. (1943: 30–31)

Eliot's great poem, *Four Quartets*, had enchanted me as an undergraduate. His metaphysical reflections appealed to my transcendental and metaphysical bent, and I was awed by his ability to switch between forms and voices mid-poem, adopting whatever voice suited his subject. His 'middle way' passage extends the experience of living between two world wars to the chronological middle of life and, metadiscursively, to the experience of a poet who has finished writing something and now has no idea how to begin what he next wants to write.

I drew on Eliot's 'the middle way' in a slightly sardonic poem about being well past middle age (some might say heading for old age):

The Middle Way

I pause on a highwire
vertiginously suspended
over an abyss.

Behind me yawn the reaches
of years filled with fairies,
ice-cream, trauma,

> whole days of swimming pools and sunsets,
> summer-seared skin regrowing.
>
> The road ahead smells sweaty.
> It may already have been lived by someone else.
> Its swirling, murky brown depths
> are tepid and uninviting.
>
> Looking back // looking ahead,
> I follow pinpricks of light.
> Behind me a bell tinkles
> as a door shuts.

The poem pivots on the contrast between the road behind me and that which is still to be travelled. As is common among ageing people, I indulge in nostalgia for a childhood that — with the benefit of hindsight — appears enchanted and blissful. If I had been completely honest, I would have said that my childhood included magical and happy moments, but was certainly not so all the time. While writing poetry allows us to express emotion, such as nostalgia and trepidation, it also allows us to flee, in writing, from some emotions we do not wish to probe or express. 'The Middle Way' is not centrally about my memories of a (non-)blissful childhood, though: it is centrally about my apprehension towards what Philip Larkin, with characteristic toughness, calls 'age, and then the only end of age' (n. d.). I used the well-worn metaphor of life as a journey, but, without being conscious of it, I added an allusion to Ferlinghetti's 'Constantly Risking Absurdity (#15)' (n. d.) in the first stanza. Ferlinghetti's poem about the craft of poetry, where the poet balances between ridiculousness and the audacious act of capturing beauty in words, is not only close to my own experience of writing, but also captured my feelings of being poised on the edge of age.

'The Middle Way' ends with the nihilistic image of possibilities closing off as I pursue my journey along the road. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, I was not always nihilistic and am not, by nature, a nihilistic person. The most intimate knowledge that I gained during the lockdown was a profound awareness of my body: its intricacies, its frailties, its mortality, and the extent to which I depend on it. The pandemic threw most of human society into reflections on the body's frailty, along with anxious hypochondria about the meaning of small ailments and symptoms. During the first stage of lockdown, many people addressed their anxieties by becoming obsessed with physical fitness. They turned their homes into domestic gymnasia, using doorways and chairs as equipment, while others used their gardens as jogging or walking circuits or completed workouts on YouTube.

As I watched acquaintances and friends become ill, and some pass away from COVID-19, I marvelled at my own health and wondered how long it would last. I mused that, having reached my late fifties, it would be, as popular parlance has it, 'downhill all the way' to decrepitude and death. Nevertheless, I also nurtured care and gratitude for my body, as 'To my Body' confirms:

> **To my Body (Move over, René Descartes)**
>
> I love cardigans, pullovers, polo necks, and sweaters
> (although 'sweater' is not **real** South African).
> Among cupboards and drawers filled with knitwear,
> you, body, are my favourite.
> You are stretched comfy with long use,
> stained and fraying,
> but still warm and serviceable.
>
> Your sack of patched and thinning skin
> is tattooed with innumerable stories
> (seventeen deep in places)
> for me to read to pass the time.
>
> You are disreputably wrinkled and crumpled.
> You seem to have escaped
> being hung on the laundry line
> for your lines to dry into insignificance.

From the mirror, no terrible fish
but a whole landscape,
contoured, folded, speckled,
looks back at me
through eyes I barely know
though their sadness is my own.

Yes. You and I are still one,
 marvelling at all that passes,
loving water, oxygen, sun.

The poem joins countless other texts that have repudiated the famous Cartesian split between mind and matter. Descartes proposes fallaciously that 'the essence of matter is extension, and the essence of mind is thought' ('René Descartes', 2014). He does not give any thought to the fact that his mind would not function without matter (that is, without his body). My poem asserts that the mind and body are 'still one' despite the body's having changed with age. It also expresses the ambivalence I felt towards it. On the one hand, it is a comfortable sweater, keeping me warm and safe; on the other, it looks and feels unfamiliar. (The reference to 'not a terrible fish' in the penultimate stanza alludes to the terrifying last two lines of Sylvia Plath's 'Mirror':

> In me she has drowned a young woman, and in me an old woman
> Rises towards her day after day, like a terrible fish. (n. d.)

'Mirror' records a middle-aged woman's terror at the prospect of ageing and becoming 'an old woman' through the voice of a mirror. The poet's anguish at losing her youth and becoming an old woman is captured in the image of the fish rising unstoppably toward her through the murky water. My poem expresses more moderate emotions than Plath's, possibly because I am psychologically more sanguine than she was; and it ends on a reaffirmation of my enjoyment of physical pleasure, despite the knowledge that all delightful phenomena will pass.

After spending weeks in my own company, I realised that, despite my having dedicated my whole professional career to cognitive pursuits, my mind was a problematic part of my experience. Instead of being disciplined and focused on the task/s at hand, which did not stop during the pandemic, it would run off in any direction, captivated by frivolous images on social media, fruitless regrets about the past, or anything else. In response, my poem, 'Central Processing Unit', tries to unseat the mind from the pride of place it has enjoyed in many accounts of human existence:

Central Processing Unit

Duplicity and manipulation
are your stock-in-trade,
fuelled by your incessant sales pitch
and multiple failures to focus.
Guilt and fear are the big guns
in your arsenal.
Like a toddler,
you scream
for all the sugar and fat you see.
You are known as diamond,
X-ray, sword,
but you skitter
like dropped mercury.

Zen Master Shunryu Suzuki Roshi explains the difference between 'big mind' and 'small mind' — a distinction that appears frequently in Buddhist thinking — as follows: 'If your mind is related to something outside itself, that mind is a small mind, a limited mind [….] Big mind experiences everything within itself' (2018). 'Central Processing Unit' concerns what Buddhism calls 'small mind': the mind where thoughts arise incessantly, usually with no relevance to present experience. The poem accuses the mind of multiple misdemeanours: it lies and schemes; it tries to persuade a person into self-destructive actions; it only knows instant gratification. The final two lines of the poem seal the mind's coffin by alluding to its reputation as being pure and valuable, penetrating and incisive. The 'mercury' in the final line is the climax of the poem's undoing of the mind's popular reputation as crystalline, focused and sharp.

I initially became aware of age-related bodily weakness through orthopaedic conditions, rather than through a COVID-19 infection, when I developed an arthritic lower spine that caused intense hip pain and made it difficult to perform simple household chores such as vacuuming the carpets or sweeping the floors. I experienced all of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's celebrated stages of grieving (2005) as I slowly came to terms with the fact that my spine was not going to recover, but would have to be accommodated. As I reluctantly and disjunctively approached acceptance, I wrote a love poem to the ailing column:

To my Spine

You are an architectural crane
with multiple complex controls.
You swivel like an owl's eye:
up, down, sideways,
even (occasionally) diagonally.
But you are a superannuated model
longing for the stillness
of permanent retirement.

You dare not say this
lest it become your last choice,
your life death sentence.

You are a string of jewels,
but your edges are blunt:
planes touching, rubbing, grinding,
radiating blinding lightning
through nerve and muscle.

I have become an engineer —
chemical, athletic, metaphysical —
with your daily care in my hands.

'To my Spine', like 'The Middle Way', expresses my ambivalence towards an ageing body. The spine is represented as an 'architectural crane' (recording my wonder at its range of movement), as well as a 'string of jewels', suggesting how valuable each vertebra is. The value of each bone in the spine became more evident to me as I realised that the pain I was experiencing daily was caused by degeneration of the spinal discs and could not be cured, although it could be managed. I slowly and reluctantly learned to work with the pain and to practise daily exercises to alleviate it.

As South African society progressed from Lockdown Stage 5 (where we were required to stay at home except for essential or emergency outings; no social gatherings; no alcohol or cigarettes) to Stage 1 (where almost everyone was working from their offices again), I developed an intimate relationship with my home and began to understand that it is a symbol, in material terms, of myself as it holds and contains my aspirations, my history, and the possessions I have accumulated. My first stab at writing about the space I have lived in for 28 years focused on past inhabitants and past selves:

Ghost House

The humans who once lived here
are gone. I alone remain.
You might expect thick dust;
spiders' nests; shadows falling deep.
But the rooms are inhabited
by plants and furred people,
who live and love and talk
in different tongues from me.
My home is also host
to the women I have been
and the women I am:

daughter, wife, lover, friend.
They watch me from their walls
with kind eyes and mute, curious love.

'Ghost House' is about the traces left by people who have vacated a home in the memories of those who remain. My three-bedroomed house was once inhabited by three people, and the remains of their lives are still to be seen, particularly in things that mark my daughter's growth through childhood to adulthood, which are still on shelves, in cupboards and other storage spaces. The second half of the poem returns self-reflexively to the idea of the house as a larger form of myself, with traces of my former selves. These are listed in terms of relationships: I am the daughter of my parents; I was once a wife; I have been a lover; and I remain a friend to many. In listing these human connections, I was reminded that, however alone I might feel under lockdown, I remained inextricably entangled with others. In addition, I realised anew that what I experience as 'my self' is often a construct generated through relationship and in no way possesses substance independent of its interweaving with other people, life-forms, and the material world.

As a feminist theorist of more than thirty years' standing, I was struck by the ways in which my space was gendered. I was raised by two generations of women who took intense pride in their houses. My grandmother and mother, together with all their sisters, were concerned to train the next generation to keep their homes as pristine and well-run as theirs had been. It did not escape my notice that — in my family, as in many others — this was an exclusively female activity, and I explored the patriarchal roots of these practices in 'A Woman's House is her Castle':

A Woman's House is her Castle

Every woman knows
that a woman needs a house
more than she needs a man.
A man may be useful
as a means to the end
of obtaining a house
but is not indispensable.

Home is always a woman,
and a house cannot be a home
if there is no woman
to polish, tend, and arrange it.
She knows, as though by magic,
what she has learned
from her foremothers and Google:
how to clean, fix, furbish,
compose and grace her space.

Here I am: a woman in my house,
barred, locked, and sealed inside,
like a gift; like a prize.
But there is no competition,
no act of giving.
I am my own reward.

'A Woman's House is her Castle' is an obvious reference to the often-quoted proverb: 'A man's house is his castle', used to reinforce the patriarchal idea of a man as the unquestioned head of the household. The poem ironically subverts the popular idea that women are better at home-making than men, especially when the woman demonstrates skills that she has learned 'from her foremothers and Google'. Google is the *de facto* assistant of any hapless homeowner confronted by a leaking basin, a non-functioning electrical plug, or any other perplexity. The woman in the poem, much like the American wife of the post-World War II era,[2] disguises the sources of her knowledge to make her household skills seem innate.

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[2] Betty Friedan famously described this kind of behaviour in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963: 57–122).

The poem's final stanza, however, exposes the patriarchal division of labour, where men are supposed to work outside the home while women work inside it, as a way of confining and restricting women 'like a prize or a gift' rather than the agent of her own life. The bars and locks of this stanza allude to the alarming rate of domestic crime in South Africa and to what Pumla Gqola has called 'the female fear factory' (2022). Gqola incisively observes that the female fear factory makes women believe that they own nothing, not even their own bodies. In my case, as an older woman living alone, the fear that I, or my home, which is also my larger self, will be violated is a constant, even when I am not directly conscious of it. Hence I have bars and locks, and I am vigilant about security, even as I realise that it makes me a prisoner in my own home. Despite this, have come to understand that, in the absence of a man whom I have to please, I can, fortunately, become my own prize: a realisation that dawned slowly, through the deepening intimacy with myself that I enjoyed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

CONCLUSION

Intimacy is frightening because it calls for honesty and vulnerability and is not satisfied with anything less. My experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic were not as dramatic as those of others who lost their jobs, or lost loved ones, or even lost their homes. I could not write about those experiences and call it poetic inquiry, since I did not live through such losses. My subject had to be myself, and my poetry had to be about my own life. My final poem describes how I came to write poetry about my own minoritarian, bourgeois or maybe just uninteresting experiences:

Poking It

Walking around my neighbourhood one morning,
I found it on the road: a heap of grey, crumpled rags,
barely larger than my foot.
It was a no-account, throwaway thing,
something you would toss into a rubbish heap.
It was whimpering softly,
so I moved closer and touched it with my shoe.
It moaned and shrank back into itself.
I leaned down and poked it, calling,
'Are you hurt? Do you need anything?'
My life leapt into my arms
and lay there, warm and soft.
'I need to speak. Please help.'

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We Won't be Able to Change How We Fight Without Changing How We Love

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ABSTRACT

This article draws from and elaborates on some ideas conveyed in my book, *Why Men Hurt Women and Other Reflections on Love, Violence and Masculinity* (2022), to reflect on the relationship between love and violence. It contends that as a society we will not be able to change how we fight or oppose each other, at least we will find it more difficult to reduce the magnitude of men's violence against women, without changing the dominant narrative of love. Although the reflection on the relation between violence and love applies to other kinds of aggression and intimacy, such as between men's violence against and love for other men, the focus of this article is men's violence against women they love. Love and violence, the article shows, are not necessarily and always incompatible but instead are sometimes nested in each other.

Keywords: violence, men, masculinity, love, botho

1

In this article I draw from and elaborate on some ideas conveyed my book, *Why Men Hurt Women and Other Reflections on Love, Violence and Masculinity* (henceforth, *Why Men Hurt Women*) (Ratele, 2022) to further reflect on the relationship between love and violence. I contend that as a society we will not be able to change how we fight or violently oppose each other, at least we will find it more difficult to reduce the magnitude of men's violence against women, if we do not change the dominant narrative of love. Although the reflection on the relation between violence and love applies to other kinds of aggression and intimacy, such as between men's violence against and love for other men, between siblings, or between parents and their offspring, my focus is on men's violence against women they love. Love and violence, I wish to submit, are not necessarily and always incompatible. Instead, all too frequently we observe them nested in each other, at times even bracing each other, one the alibi for the other. This is not an argument for toxic relations, fatalism, nor justifying violence. On the contrary, it is realistic to accept that conflict between individuals (as well as groups), which can assume different forms, is not an exceptional state. From the moment humans arrive in the world as neonates to the end of their lives, they are likely to encounter and experience frustration and aggravation, not only pleasure and peace (because of a myriad of reasons such as laws, unmet needs, not knowing what others feel, and not being able to make others do we want them to), and even open conflict with others. Since it is reasonable to accept conflict to be a commonplace phenomenon in the world at large, and therefore unreasonable to expect all intimate life to be immunised from conflict, what is required of the individual or group is to know how to deal with conflict. That also implies being able to deal with negative affect and experiences such as frustration, shame, and anger.

2

It remains stimulating for me to puzzle over what kind of person is more interesting when it comes to what we refer to as love (which can mean different things in different cultures): Is it the person who labours at trying to intellectually fix the meaning of love, who talks (about) love, that is, the person who must define and analyse it so that love can be well-understood? Or is it the individual who is less perturbed about what love in the abstract

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means, accepting its elusiveness, and simply navigates in actual life love's promises, disappointments and compensations?

These questions can be viewed as another way of engaging with the question of what we refer to as love itself. Love - what it is, its place in human life, how it arrives, how to do it, how it feels, how it ends if it does - can never be fully resolved because love looks different in different places and times. Even within a single culture it is not uncommon to find individuals holding divergent views about the essence of love. Besides the difference and elusiveness of defining love, no *love in action* is exactly like another. While it is not totally ridiculous that quantitative psychological research requires a phenomenon to be measurable if it is to be adequately grasped (the quantification of love admittedly having a place in the study of love), it seems rather irrational to think we can compare two loves or love across cultures in any exact way.

What we refer to as love, that is, is frustratingly difficult to define. The difficulty is compounded when there is no hegemonic view of love. This difficulty is, moreover, not confined to conceptually or operationally defining love – such as when researchers want to study it or when a person whose relationship has ended wishes to understand it for herself – but extends to how love is displayed (if it is at all) or 'seen'. The difficulty is exacerbated when we wish to understand love cross-culturally. Even more maddening is to try to measure the quantum of love within a relationship or individual.

Similar difficulties that confront us when attempting to understand love are evident when trying to understand lovelessness. How are we to define lovelessness? Is it the feeling of being unloved, the sense of the self being unworthy of love, or the experience of being insufficiently loved? Is it a personality attribute or situational factor? Are we able to confidently measure lovelessness? Can we compare lovelessness across relationships? What about cross-culturally? In light of these difficulties, but also to point to an example illustrative of the complexity when studying love across cultures and individuals, I would like to describe a common way people in some cultures get to love in many places in our multi-cultural society, a way which will be very familiar to some of readers but unknown to others.

Where I grew up, as in many other places in South Africa, there is a practice called *ho fereha* in Sesotho,[1] though most people use the term *ho shela/shelana* from the isiZulu *ukushela/ukushelana*. Here follows a very brief description. A man approaches a woman (it is a heteronormative practice) to persuade her that he loves her, and that she should love him in return. Historically, the occasion would involve a kind of praise singing, a poetic performance, about the woman's abilities, ancestry, beauty, or other physical, behavioural and cultural assets, as well as the man's own assets. The best outcome in this love game is to get a favourable response at first attempt. In most cases the man will have to return several times until the woman is convinced that he is 'serious' and indeed worthy of her love. Love, in this worldview, is verbal performance, a language game, in which the object of having his love accepted has to be argued for. The performance is not just any performance but must be persuasive.

When I read for a postgraduate degree at university, at an institution that was then a predominantly white university, I would learn that *ho shela* was unknown among the majority of my fellow students. Later, as Black South Africa opened up more and more to the white and Western world, I learned from television dramas, from films, as well as from the stories of love among many whose company I kept that this practice of getting to love was unknown. Given the dominance of Western and white cultural ideas in our lives, including ideas about love, many westernised Black people also turn away from *ukushela*. A man must quickly learn that it is not acceptable – and may be regarded as harassment – to walk up to a woman and 'unpack' to her why he loves her and he is worthy to be loved by her.

There is another way of initiating love in our society with which many readers will be familiar. In contrast to *ho shela*, among some groups love is usually supposed to follow after a certain undetermined period of dating. This period may involve going to watch the sunset, having drinks, going to the beach, eating out, and other such activities, in order to get to know each other. As a shorthand, let us call this a predominantly *modern* Western practice of getting to love.

It should be obvious that what I am trying to do here is draw attention to what can be gained from appreciating that there are different conceptions of love, at least of arriving at something people in different contexts refer to as love. It is when we can incorporate into our ways of thinking about love, at least how we initiate a love relationship, that we perhaps can imaginatively open ourselves to expand our own conceptions of love. Expanding how we conceive of love is perhaps a step toward expanding how we *do* love, how to make sense of how we are loved (or not shown love), and potentially how to fight with those who would love us (or not love us).

At this point, I would like to make detour.

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[1] Sesotho, which is the national language of Lesotho, is also one of the 12 official languages of South Africa. The home language of 7.8% of the population, speakers of the language are concentrated mainly in the provinces of Free State and Gauteng (Statistics South Africa, 2023. *Census 2022: Statistical Release P0301.4*. Pretoria: Statistics South Africa).

It will be evident for any reader of the book *Why Men Hurt Women* (Ratele, 2022) that it was essential to try to fathom ideas of love as it was to grapple with masculinity and violence. Working out the relations among these three key terms was also a significant objective.

Given the direction in which my thinking was developing when I was working on the book, I went back to read Abraham Maslow's theory of motivation because of his attention to love (Maslow, 1943a, 1943b, 1958). Although I take leave of him at some point, which is to indicate that there is an important difference in how he conceives of love and how I do, a key idea of the American psychologist who came up with the theory of hierarchy of needs, and one that I agree with, is that love is an essential human need. I do not wish to rehearse Maslow's theory. However, the idea of love – and its opposites such as fear, hate and lovelessness – as a *universal and fundamental human need* (although at times the word *desire*, because it signals agency, is the more apposite) one that motivates men's behaviour just as it motivates women's, is a vital one to bear in mind in thinking about violence in intimate life.

The motive to which we give the name love (or other names in other languages), it may be necessary to underline, is also important in thinking about political and cultural life. The motivation is not restricted to interpersonal relationships. It is observable in cultural and political life, in leaders and followers, authorities and ordinary members, as much as in psychological and intersubjective relations. A culture that fails to recognise the elemental desire (and uses) of love for its reproduction imperils its own future. Love can be used, and quite often abused, in the production and maintenance of a sense of ingroup belonging. Similarly, a political group that does not consider and 'exploit' the need for attachment and affiliation among its members, jeopardises its own survival.

In a country like South Africa, which was colonised by European nations and then ruled by white settler nationalists under the system of apartheid, individuals of a certain age grew up within a socio-political system that bred intergroup antagonism. Under apartheid, and prior to 1948, under colonial rule, the political (as well as cultural, business, and religious) leaders South Africa discouraged, via the law and social convention, mutual bonds and solidarity between people of different races, and, to another extent, different ethnicities. The state actively prohibited certain types of attachment and promoted other kinds of belonging through racist and ethnic segregation. In short, it appears that the white rulers of South Africa understood that love (alongside animosity) was useful for politics, can be seen in group life.

Whereas the apartheid and colonial states appear to have known, even if by proscribing some forms of it, that love is vital for cultural and political reproduction and not only interpersonal life, the fact of love as a basic human motivation that, according to Maslow, is only secondary to the need for oxygen, water and food, and the need for safety and shelter, seemed to have escaped the political leaders of post-apartheid South Africa. Apparently, in the political thought of the leaders of democratic country the human motivation for love has no place in socio-political life. For example, in the first national programme of the African National Congress (ANC) (1994), the Reconstruction and Development Programme, basic needs are defined as 'jobs, land, housing, water, electricity, telecommunications, transport, a clean and healthy environment, nutrition, health care and social welfare'. If this is read generously, it could be said that *a kind* of love was implied in some of the identified needs, because, for instance, the hunger to return to one's ancestral land that was stolen is a hunger to be culturally, spiritually, and psychologically reconnected, to re-member. However, it may also be the case that the ANC, not unlike other psychologically ignorant political formations, did not have confidence in love as cultural and political force – a force that is connected to basic human motivation. It could, then, simply be the case that the leaders of the ANC, like other political parties here and other countries, do not understand the idea of love beyond its interpersonal dimension and how it is politically and culturally usable.

It may make some readers uncomfortable to hear that love can be an instrument in the hands of cultural elites and political figures. However, the dynamics and exploitation of ingroup love – with ingroup membership under specific conditions associated with outgroup hate – is a commonplace in social psychology. There is a choice of contemporary real-life examples where this association is apparent. Apartheid was the prime example of this phenomenon. The war on Gaza that started in 2023 is another. The nationalistic and xenophobic responses against international migrants in the United States and Europe can also be understood as involving intergroup love and outgroup antipathy.

What is puzzling is that the apparent lack of confidence in (and understanding) of love as a fact of political and cultural life applies to Black people, even though, for example, they may recognise that violence, hate and fear underlie anti-Black racism. I am suggesting that while it may be comparatively easier for Black people to recognise that racist hate is a political phenomenon, it seems to be harder to appreciate that love can be political. While I am unable to spend as much time as I would like on what Black people might do differently in response to the claim that there is a lack of appreciation, or an underappreciation, of love as political and cultural matter (but see Ratele, 2022: 91-93), I would like to make three quick observations.

First, what we love and how we love begins in the imagination. While some of these already exists, Black people, especially in African countries, can produce more *images of Black political and cultural love* (but see Hayes and Minkley, 2019, in their collection on photography and visibility in African history). One way to define political and cultural love is as the extension of positive affect and acts such care and solidarity, concern and warmth to Black 'strangers'. Of course, these affects can and do go beyond race, but here I am concerned with political and cultural love among Black women, men and other genders. Faced with an uncaring racist, sexist, capitalist world, Black people can endeavour to make images of the loving world for which they yearn. These images of Black political and cultural love can be realised via stories, video, television dramas, poetry, photography, books, news features, film, fine art, and research. The power of images cannot be exaggerated. The easy part to this proposal is that the making and circulation of image has become much easier since the arrival and wide access to smartphones and social media.

Second, image cannot remain at the level of the discursive but must take material, three-dimensional form. This goal is harder to achieve. Even then, in order to realise love beyond intimate space, then, Black people must maintain, refurbish and create institutional and public spaces that nurture and project Black love. From building and maintaining places of worship to workplaces, from social clubs to public spaces, these can be made more sustaining, healthy, beautiful, and nourishing for Black lives.

Third, to help in realising Black political and cultural love there needs to be more widespread recognition of the fact that love is not only something that transpires between two people or within families, but rather that, as the opposite of anti-Black racism, outgroup hate, and xenophobia, love is indubitably a group affair. To enable such general recognition would need the help of those with political and cultural authority, but also anybody else who is an influencer (which is to say somebody who has some kind of influence). The difficult part of this proposal is whether such authorities and influencers have been educated in Black and African love, which I suggest, can be gleaned from reading the work of authors and political figures such as W.E.B du Bois, Frantz Fanon, Nelson Mandela, and Angela Davis, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, bell hooks, Steve Biko, Toni Morrison, Desmond Tutu, and Maya Angelou.

<div align="center">4</div>

To return to men, from the idea of love as a basic need I have arrived at two key hypotheses. I submit that many men suffer from a sense of lovelessness. Until they have achieved something, many men carry with them a feeling of dispensability. This could be why working and earning well is such a defining feature of dominant masculinity in racist capitalist patriarchy.

It is true that for a long time, like many a man in our society, I experienced myself as not quite lovable, as unnecessary – until I had achieved something. Under this sense of expendability experienced by many a man are interred various experiences and affects. What joins them together is that they are opposites, of one kind or another, of deep, consistent, nourishing, love for others and self-love. To experience oneself as nonessential is already to suffer. The hunger for love in men is generally refused admittance into cultural consciousness. If men's needs for love are noticed by the culture (including by men themselves), which appears to be rare, or confined to an earlier period of men's lives, the culture does not know how to process these love needs of adult heterosexual men and assimilate them into its institutions. As suggested in relation to image-making of Black love, men's needs for love appear to be inadequately symbolised or symbolically mediated by our dominant discursive traditions.[2]

Not all men suffer from a sense of lovelessness. It may be necessary, then, to observe that given the nature of our society, it is some men more than others who suffer this hunger for affection. The men whose chronic love hunger is most likely to be unappreciated, or dismissed, are the very ones who receive minimal dividends from patriarchal masculinity ideology, particularly where this ideology intersects with racism and capitalism. Those who have grown up with poor evidence of love, if there was any love at all, often endure other forms of wretchedness. (That said, it may be the case that even those men who have experienced periods in their lives when they have felt acutely unloved, may have had moments when their love needs were met, however inadequately.)

Men's sense of lovelessness opens up during boyhood. There is a time in a boy's life, it seems to me, when he begins to be touched less (if he ever did receive adequate touch), spoken to in a more peremptory tone, and, as it were, left to his own emotional devices. The intimacy education, if there ever was any, seems to suddenly slow down and may even come to a halt.

The ungratified or poorly gratified love needs of men are largely veiled, minimised, or displaced by conventional ideas of masculinity. The unrecognised hunger for love may be largely unconscious, even in men themselves. As such, the association of effect (deleterious male behaviour) and cause (psychic wounds) may not be readily obvious. It is necessary to make another detour at this point.

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[2] I thank the anonymous reviewer for pointing this out to me.

5

The foundation of how I regard love resides in what is referred to as *botho* in Sesotho. This idea can be understood to simply indicate being human. The core of *botho*, in my reading, is that '*I*' makes no sense without '*you*' and '*we*'. My individual well-being is dependent on our well-being.

Recognition of *botho* as a paradigmatic and social expression of love – indeed of any relationality – emerges from the recognition of my dependence on others, and of theirs on me. A man who comes to more fully recognise his irrevocable need for belonging, soon also recognises the invitation to treat others the way he wants to be treated; to regard another person the way they would like that person to regard them. Botho implies the need for mutual humanisation and acceptance.

Consider, for a moment, this particular form of love: passionate love. If it is correct that the need for others and to be needed by them is the foundation of being human, then the passionate form of love between sexual mates essentially specifies *botho* and intensifies it. I could even say that sexual passion plays with the secreted side of *botho*.

Or take parental love. Since *botho* always already entails connectedness, the intricate bond between parent and child simply *focuses* the essential belonging with others. Parent-adult love is the magnification of *botho*. The two are not separate phenomena.

Because love, whether in its sexual or its parental form, is what enables us to unfold our humanness, it would do us good to nourish it, simply because we are doing nothing more or less than realising our being human. We cannot then ignore love, as the affective action aspect of *botho*, in the work we do of trying to lead boys and men toward transformative gender relations.

6

In light of these propositions, the second key idea regarding love and lovelessness is that a sense of lovelessness appears to lie at the root of some of the violence of men against women. (The same holds for the violence of men against other men, against children, and against themselves, given that alcohol and drug abuse can be taken as examples of forms of self-directed harm, and given that, in a *botho* universe, when we harm those closest to us, we inevitably harm ourselves as well.) Lovelessness explains some, certainly not all, of the violence of men against women they love. Lovelessness does not justify violence. The experience and affects of lovelessness, I ought to stress, appear to be entombed within the experience and identity of being men in this society, within racist, patriarchal, zombifying capitalist structures – a nested relation one constantly tries to figure out so as to comprehend oneself and others as well as the secreted and unmistakeable effects of these structures. Racism can be taken as the expression of the systemic denial of *botho* of black people. Without *botho* there can never be any kind of sustaining love. Hence, a man's feelings of lovelessness, of being unloved, or even of being unworthy of being loved – which is to say the feeling he might have that he is not quite *motho* (meaning 'not quite human' in Sesotho) – must always be seen in relation to the influence of racist institutions, practices and ideas that shape and reshape his inner life and interactions. This implies that the continual necessity to probe why he feels the way he does is a lifelong activity.

Lovelessness, or feeling unworthy of being loved, usually develops early in our lives. In some cases, the satisfaction of our yearning for love in childhood is made conditional: 'I will show you love if you are a good child'; 'I give you this [a token of love], if you behave'. In Black life, this conditionality of love compounds the feelings of unworthiness as a result of deprivation and dehumanisation caused by racist structures. In other cases, love's gratification, but more distinctly, utterances concerning love from parents or caregivers, are interlaced with harsh discipline or punishment: 'I am doing this because I love you'. In either instance, the satiation of affective needs becomes enmeshed with hurts, or terms and conditions, leading to a picture being drawn in our interiors of love coiled around hurting. This picture of a wounding love may loom large in our later relations with others. For some of us, because of the depth of this hurting affect, and given that our inner lives tend to be left largely unexamined, we live with love and pain scrambled together. It is when our ways of loving are scrutinised and carefully unscrambled from the punishment that may have attended how our need for love was gratified, if it was at all, that we are enabled to enjoy (giving and receiving) less-wounding love.

Lovelessness among men shows itself in the childhood of many boys. It is a deficiency that begins at home, naturally, in acts of parental abandonment and child abuse. Ironically, the abandonment particularly of boys by their fathers is a significant factor in the unmet need for male love. The absence of adult men in the lives of young boys, specifically their biological fathers, is implicated in the relative dearth of models of engaged loving manhood in society.

We might ask, are girls not also abandoned by their fathers? Many girls also experience a deficiency of father-love. Girls need loving adult men as much as boys do. They need present, loving fathers to show them how to

relate to men healthily and authentically, whether in platonic or sexual ways, in their own adult lives. However, while girls are also abandoned by their fathers, they have mothers and other adult women with whom they can readily identify and who can show them how to be women without men. (The point that can be raised here is girls might well learn how to be women without men, but it could lead to them becoming unrealistic about relationships with men, and possibly even enduring more from men once they are adult. This is a real possibility, which seems to imply that changing masculinity, to work on nurturing more engaged fathers for girls as much as boys, is imperative.) In contrast, a boy who grows up without the presence of an involved, loving father might not have a readily available, constant, adult male with whom he can readily identify.

What I am advancing is no radical idea. I perceive a deep and dense hurt at the heart of why some men hurt others. Violence against boys and men, which is another way of speaking of the life-pervading experience of boys and men being unloved, is enmeshed with the violence of men against girls and women. And, once again, these different manifestations of violence are not separate from the violence of patriarchy and racism and economic exploitation.

7

It is true that when most people in our society hear the word love, what comes to mind may be parental or sexual love. For instance, while many people will declare their love of God, that tends to be reserved for specific situations or when their understanding of love is being probed. However, the point is what we call love can be and is used to refer to many feeling states, conditions, thoughts, and actions. Love, as I have argued, can also refer to political and cultural attachments.

It is important to note that one's understanding of love is not genetically determined. To say something is not genetic does not mean it is less central to human existence. Humans are, if you will, naturally social beings. Without others to look after us, especially at the beginning of our lives, we would not survive. As a result, to say that love is not inborn does not imply that it is a trifling concern. We might not come into the world with love coded into our genes or knowing what love is. Yet, we cannot live without some form of kindness, compassion, and care from others. We are taught (through caring attentiveness) how love feels, what it looks like, and what we are supposed to do about what we recognise as love. All of this implies that we need others to teach us. We think of love the way we do because of the beliefs, perceptions, feelings and acts of love (whatever forms these take) in the family into which we are born and the relationships we develop when we gain some autonomy and competence in social life. The family, peers and relationship partners in turn construct love from the cultural discourses and images that circulate in their family and social circles and from their life conditions. Vehicles that transport these discourses include religious institutions, radio stories, television soap operas, advertisements, magazines, books, newspapers, films and social media.

Several interesting consequences flow from this understanding. An unfavourable consequence is that because our parents loom large in our early life, they can implant distorted beliefs about and practices of love in us. But these beliefs and practices do not have be distorted to be unfavourable to us – it can simply be that they are our parents' beliefs and practices, not our own.

8

To speak of being taught and learning what love is on the other hand, has obvious encouraging consequences. Since we learn to love, it means we can change how we think of love. I gestured at the beginning that some people in a society are aware of and made have made use of two ways of getting to love: *ho shelana* and dating. If some people can change how they initiate love, I think it suggests that they do appreciate that their ideas of love shift, and are therefore place-, culturally- and historically-contingent. How we think of love is related to another point: we can change how we love. If it is reasonable to assume that we can change our ideas about love and in consequence, also our love actions. If it is also reasonable to assume that love can take different forms, changing how we think of love and do love as men may be necessary when what we call love hurts women. A change that might help, that could open both younger and older males toward different, healthy – meaning non-violent – ideas of manhood – is turning toward a different kind of love. That love is likely to emerge from a deliberate education on masculinity and vulnerability. In other words, men could benefit from an opportunity to think of the vulnerability that appears to inhere in loving unreservedly. To do love vulnerably requires, for those of us who have not had the benefit of these lessons, an education in intimacy. Men must learn to be able to love without fearing that we are making ourselves stupid, leaning into vulnerability – and that is a significant educational and psychological undertaking, as far as I can see. That endeavour involves, for example, learning to ask, learning to take rejection, learning to identify and name the shame inside us when we feel as if we are unworthy of love and disposable. Men must learn to speak of what we like and do not like, learning to reflect on the self, so that we may

become more understanding of anger and ourselves – anger as yet to be analysed part of masculinity, and learning to talk. In this education we unearth ideas and practices of a different love. At the simplest, these lessons might entail asking, for instance, 'would you please (add whatever it is you desire from another person)?'. You could say, 'I enjoy that very much', and so increase the likelihood of whatever it is that you enjoy happening. I hope these examples are not considered to be proposals for self-help strategies. I am simply trying to exemplify how we might get to fold vulnerability into how we love as men.

Changing the patterns set in the family of origin is not easy, though. It also means transforming how a group of people considers love, and that is even harder than changing the way an individual understands love. But, as every family is part of a culture – which is to say that, like any group, it absorbs cultural ideas of how to conceive of and do love – shifting prevalent cultural ideas about love usually takes time and may never happen in your lifetime. But it does not mean you do not have to try to do so.

In conclusion, it seems that when one desires to change how they relate to others, it can sometimes result in the ending of relationships. While there is the possibility of a more sustaining relationship, saying *no* to something when we have accepted or been silent about it for months or years can have undesirable consequences. Changing how we love or want to be loved may force changing the self itself. That can be hard. It can also mean the end of some of our most intimate relations. Even with all that, it does not mean we have to endure a love we do not want, because we now know that we can change.

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'Do You Think I Can Kill You?' Exploring Intimate Femicide in South Africa and Why Intimacy Hurts So Much

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ABSTRACT

This article draws on two South African books published recently dealing with violence against women, namely Nechama Brodie's *Femicide in South Africa* (2020), and Kopano Ratele's *Why Men Hurt Women and Other Reflections on Love, Violence and Masculinity* (2022). Both authors explore strategies for the prevention of violence against women and this article supplements their strategies with an idea put forth by Hannah Arendt in *The Life of the Mind* (1978). The article argues that intimate femicide persists in South Africa, to an extent as a result of the construction of a certain type of 'hard', 'patriarchal', 'traditional' masculinity that cannot admit its own frailty, dependence, impotence and powerlessness, and attempts to conceal its needs by becoming violent. Arendt argues that violence and power are opposites and that equating male violence with power is a lie that violence perpetuates about itself. Arendt proposes that the antidote to this false mastery and control is the activity of thinking, as distinguished from knowing. The article argues that the activity of thinking acts as a brake on the fantasy of masculine mastery and control and can perhaps minimise violence.

Keywords: thinking, masculinity, intimate femicide, mastery and control

INTRODUCTION

There are two important books about interpersonal violence in South Africa published in the past two years, that I draw on for this article: Nechama Brodie's *Femicide in South Africa* (2020) and Kopano Ratele's *Why Men Hurt Women and Other Reflections on Love, Violence and Masculinity* (2022). What both books clearly have in common, just from reading their titles, is that they deal with violence. But what interests me more specifically, is that they focus on violence *against women*. I want to take a common theme that runs through these books, namely strategies for the prevention of violence against women, and supplement these with an idea put forth by Hannah Arendt in her book *The Life of the Mind* (1978). The strategies suggested by Brodie, mostly relate to the media's portrayal of violence and how some crimes, perpetrators and victims are spectacularised and others invisibilised. Her message, (too) simply put, is that without the correct information, we will always fail at our strategies to prevent violence, and therefore an intervention at the level of media and reporting on violence is important. I agree with her diagnosis of the problem of media coverage of violence in South Africa, as well as her suggestions to correct this difficulty, but this particular problem and strategy is not the focus of my article. Rather, I use Brodie primarily to sketch the nature and extent of Intimate Femicide in South Africa by following her detailed analysis of it, as reported in the media. Ratele's main strategy (also too simply put here) is to address the dearth of love and care that boys and men experience in society as a possible intervention to prevent violence against women (and, presumably between men). He argues that this lack of love, experienced on both a personal and institutional level is, perhaps, one reason why violence against women persists to the degree that it does in South Africa. I agree that we need to pay attention to the ways in which we raise boys to become loving, caring men, and I agree that this love need is mostly unadmitted and therefore remains unconscious for many men in South Africa. I also agree that satiating this love and care need for men, might serve as an antidote to violence, but I am more interested in exploring how this need became invisibilised, unacceptable and unconscious in the first place. I argue that we can trace the origin story of the invisibilisation of this need, to a specific construction of what Ratele refers to interchangeably as a 'patriarchal', 'hard', 'traditional' or 'colonial' masculinity. Put differently, I argue that it is this construction of a 'hard' (rational) masculinity, that denies its embodiedness, emotionality and dependence (and in fact projects these onto femininity)

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that actively shapes masculinity as a construct that does not have this love need (is utterly, and unrealistically independent), that needs to be reassessed and rethought. I use Arendt's specific distinction between thinking and knowing, as a possible strategy to simultaneously expose the delusion of mastery and control baked into the construction of a patriarchal masculinity, as well as to subvert it.

INTIMATE FEMICIDE

Nechama Brodie writes that we have a femicide problem in South Africa. Femicide is broadly and simply when men kill women *because* they are women. In other words, the term describes those circumstances when women are murdered and their femaleness is *not* incidental to the crime (2020: 16). It is also obviously true that we have a homicide problem in South Africa – men who kill and are killed by men. Men as both perpetrators and victims. Who needs to take responsibility and spend time and resources on preventing this iteration of violence is not the focus of this article, but suffice it to say that I am broadly aligned with the view that since it affects us all, we should all worry, about all victims of violence, men included.[1] Instead, in keeping with the theme of intimacy, I am interested in Intimate Femicide and will shortly sketch the extent of this issue that we are all probably quite tired of hearing about, but that remains an urgent problem. What does it mean when Brodie states that in South Africa, we have a specific problem of violence against women, particularly sexual violence and fatal violence against women?

By drawing our attention to the difference and distinction between homicides and femicides, Brodie is situating violence against women firmly within the misogyny of society. Interpersonal violence between men is qualitatively and quantitatively different from the violence meted out by men against women. Studies of inter-personal violence, including studies on non-fatal injuries in South Africa have shown that most violent injuries between men arise from: 'everyday life, most often involving strangers and including poorly defined arguments and quarrels over money, women and drunkenness whereas most women are attacked by someone they know' (Brodie, 2020: 16). More than half of women who are killed, are murdered by partners or former partners.[2] This translates into the shocking statistic that every six hours, a woman is killed by her husband or boyfriend or partner or ex-husband or ex-boyfriend.[3] This is all the more shocking because women are generally led to believe and to buy into the 'stranger danger' trope, or the *Female Fear Factory*, as Pumla Dineo Gqola conceptualises it in her 2021 book with that title. With this description, Gqola draws our attention to the ubiquitous fear that women experience constantly and consistently, and she argues that this fear is a product that the patriarchy actively manufactures. The female fear factory thus refers to a public performance or trope promoted by patriarchal institutions, and men, to instil fear in women as a strategy to control women. This trope would have women believe that they are most in danger in public spaces, from monstrous men, who are unknown to them. But the statistics[4] tell us, and Brodie argues, that more than the risk of entering public spaces, entering into romantic type relationships with men, is a risk factor for violence against women.[5] This is a difficult reality to wrap our heads around and it brings me to the heart of my article, which is to ask and wonder how intimacy can be the birthplace of both: connection and belonging on the one hand, as well as of violence, aggression and death on the other. As is probably obvious by now, I am speaking specifically about heterosexual relationships between men and women[6] and other configurations of intimacy lie beyond the scope of this article.

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[1] See for instance Louise Du Toit's chapter Contesting the meaning/s of sexual violence in the South African postcolony: where are the male victims? in *Intimacy and Injury* (2022) and Du Toit, L. and Le Roux, E. (2020). A feminist reflection on male victims of conflict-related sexual violence. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 28(2), 115-128.

[2] See for instance Mathews, S., Abrahams, N., Jewkes R., Martin L. J., Lombard C. and Vetten L. (2008). Intimate femicide-suicide in South Africa: A cross-sectional study. *Bulletin of the World Health Organisation*, 86(7), 552-558.

[3] Men killing their daughters for not respecting patriarchal rules of behaviour, particularly around sexual agency, is also a major aspect of femicide. (See for example (dis)honour killing).

[4] To put the South African situation in perspective globally, the femicide rate (meaning the number of murders per 100,000 women) in South Africa is currently more than six times the global average (Brodie, 2020: 14). The World Health Organisation estimated that the global rate of 'female total homicide' was 2.3/100 000 women in 2017 (UNODC, Global Study on Homicide) (Vienna, 2018). Available at: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/GSH2018/GSH18_Gender-related_killing_of_women_and_girls.pdf). During the same period in South Africa, the femicide rate was 14/100, 000 (Brodie, 2020: 14).

[5] Lisa Vetten first made this observation in Vetten, L. (1996). Man Shoots Wife': Intimate Femicide in Gauteng, South Africa. *Crime and Conflict*, 6(Winter), 1-6.

[6] This is because I am specifically interested in violence, in intimate relationships and I want to argue that there is something about the construction of masculinity that makes this violence so possible and common. Feminine bodies obviously do not have to be female bodies as such and would include all gender non-conforming, 'feminised' bodies too.

DO YOU THINK I CAN KILL YOU?

That we even have such a term as intimate femicide, and not for instance intimate homicide, is interesting to me. The implication being that intimacy somehow evokes violence in men, towards women, but not in women towards men. The ubiquity of this gendered problem is neatly illustrated when Kopano Ratele writes in his book, that he asked his wife whether she thinks he will kill her. It is interesting to me, first, that he asks the question, second, that she answers that she cannot be sure and third, that *he* does not seem to worry that *she* will kill him.[7] Women as perpetrators of violence is another topic I am very interested in, but it is also not my focus here.

But let us stay for a moment with the question, and the underlying assumption of the question: that it is he, and not she, that might commit murder. To be clear, I am not disturbed by the question, I think it is a good question and appropriate for the times we live in. That we live in these times, where such a question should be asked, is what is odd and disturbing. It is, for me, emblematic of the intimate gender relations I am writing about. I want to try to understand this phenomenon of intimate femicide. Of this unanswerable question between a man and a woman, in an intimate relationship, about violence, as something that cannot be ruled out. Ratele writes:

> I ask, But you don't think I can hurt you, do you? That I can kill you?
>
> I don't know. You *never* know. She stresses the words, dragging out 'never'. Maybe there are circumstances we haven't tested you under.
>
> But the probabilities? I ask.
>
> The probability is low, she responds. But there is always –
>
> Ja, I know, I say.
>
> There is always a chance, she says. (2022: 11)

It may sound very strange, Ratele writes, but it is his view that talking like this, about almost everything, is the best guarantee, if ever there can be a guarantee, that there will be no murder in such a relationship. I argue later on that it is not only 'talking like this' that potentially prevents violence, but also *thinking* like this and about this. He writes:

> I can hurt you emotionally, yes, I say. Not kill you.
>
> I don't know, she says.
>
> I don't feel that I'm capable of killing you.
>
> You never know with perpetrators, she says.
>
> You never actually know, I say. But why is that? (2022: 12)

Why is the question Ratele asks so appropriate, and so relevant, and so important to ask – and to talk, and to think about? In other words, why would a man ask this of a woman he is in an intimate relationship with? Why does this question make sense to us? Is there something women inherently do in intimate relationships that invites murder, and hence the question? I think we can all agree that this is not the case. Is it that men are naturally violent and aggressive in ways that are so overwhelming that the urge to kill is sometimes simply too strong, even, and especially in an intimate relationship? No. I argue specifically against this type of essentialising, naturalising idea that there is something inherent about the biology and morphology of a man that leads him to commit murders. On that note: I also avoid, rather than argue against, the idea that environmental factors such as poverty, violent neighbourhoods, parentless upbringings, and the myriad other socio-economic-political factors, contribute to the prevalence of violence. I can say that my view is that these factors are not pervasively determining but that they surely can and do play a role. But these factors fall in other disciplines involved with empirical research and they are not my focus here. It is thus a limitation of this article that I do not focus on violences that are endemic at an institutional level and are reproduced through the logics of coloniality, patriarchy, capitalism, the Anthropocene, etc.

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[7] At one point in their conversation Ratele suggests that perhaps his wife *might* kill him under 'extreme conditions, like if [he] was about to throw [himself] and [their] son off the bridge, [she] would shoot [him]' (2022: 12). This idea, that women are only likely, or even 'allowed' to be violent when they are protecting their children, is explored in Sjoberg and Gentry's *Mothers, Monsters, Whores* (2007).

Instead, I approach masculinity from the sphere of social constructivism, or to follow Raewyn Connell in Ratele's book, 'configurations of practice'. Approaching masculinity in this way means to highlight the social and cultural construction of masculinity or what Judith Butler would call performativity. It contrasts with the biological essentialism mentioned above, that says there is something inherently violent to maleness. And importantly, this constructivist approach means that change is possible, whereas biological essentialism implies that masculine violence is inevitable and unalterable.

And so I wonder: What is it about masculinity, and the performative expectations it exerts on men that, not exactly causes, but perhaps triggers or induces them to be violent in intimate relationships with women?[8] One of the answers in Ratele's book, for mending what is broken, in a masculinity that leads to violence, is to focus on and replenish the care and love deficiency suffered by many men. He writes: 'At the risk of becoming tiresome, what I would like is for us to broaden our view in imagining love, in order that we may integrate men's affection needs into our society and into our conception of humanity' (2022: 54).[9] I agree that this is a problem and that it needs to be addressed. That we need to talk more about how boys can be raised to be emotionally attuned, empathetic, loving, caring men, and yet it is not where I want to focus my attention. Because although Ratele sometimes makes it explicitly clear that women are not to be held responsible for dispensing this emotional labour, and that it is men who, amongst themselves must do this work; my worry is that women will (continue to) be disproportionately burdened with this emotional labour; that a type of incel[10] logic might emerge: love us properly, or else. He writes at one point: 'It seems that to *be* unloved, or to experience the self as unloved or unlovable, may be a breeding ground for different forms of violence against others (…) that is to say, a deficiency of love can result in a variety of unfavourable consequences' (2022: 55; emphasis added). He wants to draw our attention to what can be gained from expanding the dominant conception and practice of love and how we might fold vulnerability into how men love.[11] Yet women and girls are unloved and neglected in myriad ways too,[12] and it does not lead to *them* acting violently, implying that there is something about the construction of masculinity specifically, that we need to pay attention to.

Therefore, what I want to focus on instead of (simply) the *existence* of this love need, is what Ratele refers to as the failure to recognise, admit or even acknowledge men's dependence on others and men's unadmitted need for love. He is concerned with working towards recognising and admitting this need, with the aim of getting the need met as a project that might help curb men's violence. And really, since we are fundamentally relational, we humans are such needy beings, we are, naturally, not self-sufficient. We need to ask for *so* much from each other: recognition, respect, sex, help, support, love, forgiveness, redemption, acceptance. What is it that makes expressing these multifaceted needs to the Other feel so impossible, to a socially constructed, hyper masculinity, or what Ratele also sometimes refers to as 'traditional' or 'hard' masculinity? Asking for these needs to be met implies our vulnerability and dependence, and we are faced with the uncertainty of whether they will be met.

That is why I want to take a step back. Instead of the goal being only to recognise, acknowledge and accept these needs, (difficult and worthy of our efforts as that may already be), with the goal of the needs being met, as an antidote to violence; I would suggest that we sit with the deeper work of understanding how this need is or became invisibilised in the first place, as something unacceptable or even shameful for a man to feel or to express. What is it about an 'acceptable' manly masculinity that rejects and refuses to acknowledge and admit this need for love and care, and leads to what Irigaray might call a symbolic matricide?[13] I would argue that it surely has something to do with how, the western enlightenment's prototypical 'reasonable man' as rational and self-sufficient - of independence, mastery and control - has at its heart, the agenda to hide and obscure any forms of attachment

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[8] Indeed this has been addressed by many scholars, feminists and critical masculinities scholars over many years and is not a new question. It remains, however, very urgent, important and worth asking repeatedly.

[9] Elsewhere he writes that love appears to him to be the most vital force against violence.

[10] 'Incel' is a concept that refers to men who are 'involuntary celibates'. These men occupy a space in the so-called 'manosphere' and simply put, they feel hard done by because they are not desired within the current sexual economy. For an excellent discussion on incels see Laura Bates *Men Who Hate Women* (2020) and Amia Srinivasan *The Right To Sex* (2021).

[11] Scholarly work has indeed emphasised vulnerability and masculinity and also proposed it as a key strategy in challenging problematic imperatives of masculinity for men. See for example Shefer T., Kruger, L-M. and Schepers, Y. (2015). Masculinity, sexuality and vulnerability in 'working' with young men in South African contexts: 'You feel like a fool and an idiot … a loser'. *Culture, Health and Sexuality*, 17 (sup2), 96-111.

[12] Ratele argues that men are not loved institutionally but I would argue that women experience an even greater dearth in institutional loving or care. I am thinking specifically of rape complainants who have historically been disbelieved (see Mirander Fricker's *Epistemic Injustice* (2007)) and male perpetrators being disproportionately exonerated. See also Kate Manne *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (2018) where she conceptualises 'Himpathy', one form of which is the 'excessive sympathy sometimes shown toward male perpetrators of sexual violence' (2018: 197).

[13] Irigaray conceptualises symbolic matricide to mean the denial and cancellation of the debt that Plato's intelligible (masculine) realm owes to the material (feminine) realm which is discarded in the Cave Myth as mere illusion and therefore falls outside the economy of truth. See Irigaray, L. (1985). *Speculum of the other Woman*. USA: Cornell University Press.

and dependence that undermines this construction.[14] This could entail the *threat* to mastery and control of masculinity and men as knowing, rational beings, potentially being provoked by entering intimate, dependent relationships. Because within these intimate relationships we can become so bound to an Other, that the loss of them makes us inscrutable (or unknowable) to ourselves.

Women have, historically been undermined as rational subjects with full *control* over their cognitions (and emotions), by casting them as emotional or hysterical. The 'rational' subject, culturally [15] symbolised and conceptualised as neutral, universal and objective, is however, covertly ultimately coded as masculine.[16] This construction of masculinity as *the* sex and subjectivity is well explicated by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (2011) where she describes 'the absolute human type' as masculine (2011: 5). She goes on to say that '[h]umanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being' (2011: 5-6). Some of the words she uses to describe the situation of women *vis-à-vis* men are: 'relative', 'particular', 'negative', 'inessential'. While 'he is the Absolute, she is the Other' (2011: 5-6). Since he is absolute, he is able to be rational and speak on behalf of everyone, because he is not tied to his body, sex and particularity, the way she is. De Beauvoir describes the situation as follows:

> I used to get annoyed in abstract discussions to hear men tell me: 'You think such and such a thing because you are a woman.' But I know my only defence is to answer, 'I think it because it is true,' thereby eliminating my subjectivity; it was out of the question to answer, 'And you think the contrary because you are a man,' because it is understood that being a man is not a particularity. (2011: 5)

Similarly, Irigaray argues that in this dominant realm of what is considered rational, women cannot speak *as* women, because women are partial, particular and therefore cannot speak the Truth on behalf of all humans. Whitford sums Irigaray's argument up as follows:

> When women attempt to speak in their own name, to speak *as* women, to speak their truth, as one might say, this is rejected in the name of truth; truth it is said, has a universal character, and women cannot speak for the universal. But as Irigaray sets out to show in *Speculum,* this is so *by definition,* and the economy of truth has been used to justify the exclusion of women. (1991: 102; emphasis added)

This dominant conception of western (masculine) rationality is based on exclusionary models wherein male/female symbolism is used to express binary, hierarchical[17] relations of domination and subordination. Thus, in contrast to this masculine (parading as neutral) subject, feminine subjectivity is burdened with all that the rational, neutral (but masculine) subject wishes to disavow – emotionality, embodiedness, immanence. Put differently, the cultural symbolisations ascribed to male and female, results in a generalisable difference in how men and women live their bodies and act/speak in the world. The damage this hierarchical binary does to women as epistemological subjects is well documented by feminist theory, and of course this damage is pernicious and severe. However, perhaps this more realistic expectation of women, as fleshy, emotional,[18] immanent beings (as, in actual fact, are men) is precisely why they resort to violence less frequently than men.[19] In other words, women perhaps do not have to 'achieve' the level of mastery and control to keep their femininity intact, where a certain type of masculinity perhaps

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[14] The western enlightenment project arguably also had a decisive impact on shaping larger systems of mastery and control namely coloniality, capitalism, human-centredness and the extractivism and violences embedded in these systems that result in violence not only against women, but also against many humans, other species and planetary resources. The focus of this article, however, remains limited to intimate femicide, as but one iteration of the myriad violences caused by systems of mastery and control.

[15] I am situating the cultural expectations around masculine and feminine within a western paradigm, given South Africa's colonial history and the still present influence of western cultural imperialism on South Africans' thinking and meaning making. Indeed, Ratele refers to himself as a 'westernised African', given the 'dominance of Western cultural ideas in our lives' (2022: 44).

[16] As well as a range of other definers such as white, western, middle class, heteronormative, etc.

[17] Ratele neatly illustrates this hierarchy when he writes that the belief in a certain ruling form of masculinity means that 'men do not want to show their vulnerabilities to women because that would supposedly *bring them down* to the level of the feminine. They do not want to be seen to be like women – hesitant, yielding, emotional, soft (…)' (2022: 32; emphasis in original).

[18] Ratele ponders why it took him, a scholar on masculinity, so much longer to write about love, than about violence. He writes: 'I have wondered why this was so: did I feel that love was an inappropriate subject, too soft, when placed against the hardness of violence?' (2022: 17). He points to the peculiarity of perceiving men as emotional creatures when he argues elsewhere that men need to (re-)educate themselves about the fact that their 'vulnerability as an *emotional being* – an animal with feelings – is a precondition for a different kind of intimacy' (2022: 20).

[19] As said, I am very interested in female perpetrators of violence although this is not the focus of this chapter. Although there is interesting scholarly work on this subject (see for instance the work of Lou-Marié Kruger) I am concerned here primarily with the question that Ratele asks his wife, but that she does not ask him, and why this makes sense to us.

does create the (unrealistic) expectation that men should be unemotional and 'in control' of themselves, and possibly others too. The expression of this masculine urge for mastery and control is described by Ratele when he writes about 'Men who want to control women and experience uncontrollable rage when they cannot do so' (2022: 101). He writes further that:

> although some researchers may feel that men pretend not to know – how to speak of their anger, express feelings of being unworthy of love or control themselves in order to not take responsibility for their actions - there are men who actually do not have the tools to analyse their own emotions and behaviour. They do not know – and violence gives them a sense of mastery. (2022: 101)

The point is, it might be harder for men to accept their limitations – both in terms of their need for others, as well as their status as knowing (rational) beings - given the unrealistic expectations and standards set for mastery and control, by patriarchal masculinity.

I would argue, and this really is the crux of this article, that for men to get to a point where they *can* admit the need for love and care, would mean to forsake the illusion of mastery and control that keeps them safe from having to admit, to themselves or others, their overwhelming dependence and non-mastery. And the loss of this mastery too often results in violence, in a (futile) effort to restore it. Admitting the need exposes a vulnerable space of non-mastery and what Ratele calls the: '"not-knowing" how to speak of [men's] inner lives, rage pain, frustration'.

FORSAKING MASTERY AND CONTROL

I turn now to Hannah Arendt to help me think through this quandary of the loss of mastery and control leading to violence. For Arendt, mastery is a delusion. At the centre of *On Violence* (1970), is her famous distinction between violence and power. Arendt insists that power can never grow from violence and that, politically speaking, power and violence are opposites since where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent. She writes that '(r)ule by sheer violence comes into play where power is being lost' (1970: 53). She argues that a decrease in power invites violence because those who hold power and 'feel it slipping from their hands (…) have always found it difficult to resist the temptation to substitute violence for it' (Arendt, 1970: 87). She also argues that 'impotence breeds violence and psychologically this is quite true' (1970: 54). So the equation of male *power* with violence is, for Arendt, a lie that violence perpetuates about itself, since '[violence] will do anything – destroy women and the world – rather than admit that its power is uncertain' (Rose, 2021: 179). Ratele seems to agree with this idea when he writes:

> Men's violence is always a reaction; a reassertion or deflection. Regardless of whether a person realises it, he uses violence to (re)assert power and to repel his sense of vulnerability, his own hurt and impotence, perhaps even a sense of hopelessness. (2022: 32)

Arendt would surely disagree that men *(re)assert power* through violence; however, the more general point, that violence often erupts from a sense of powerlessness, seems to be true for both thinkers. The precarity and fragility that violence seeks to conceal by parading as power is, amongst others, men's unconscious knowledge of his shared (with women), human frailty, dependence and neediness, i.e., non-mastery and uncertainty. Ratele writes that '(b)oys and men have an unmet affective need to care and be cared for. They need others, although this need for belonging may be unconscious or unadmitted' (2022: 35).[20] This idea of unconscious knowledge is an interesting one, because it reveals a gap between a knowing and not-knowing and it is on this gap that we can focus, to bring about change.

The antidote to this false mastery and control through violence is, for Arendt, the activity of thinking. Arendt understands thinking, as the product of reason, to be an interminable process which does not have an *end* that it can claim. She distinguishes between thinking and knowing, which she develops at the hand of Kant's distinction between, on the one hand, the faculty of thinking, which Kant called *Vernunft* (reason) and on the other hand, the faculty of cognition, which Kant called *Verstand* (intellect). The two faculties have, in Arendt's analysis, different natures, moods and purposes. On its most elementary level, the distinction lies in the fact that, in Kant's own words: 'concepts of reason [thinking] serve us to conceive [*begreifen*, comprehend], as concepts of the intellect [knowing] serve us to apprehend perceptions' (quoted in Arendt, 1971: 57). Arendt explains that the intellect (knowing) desires to grasp what is given to the senses, but that reason (thinking) wishes to understand its meaning. In contrast with the aim of the intellect and the (scientific) quest for knowledge, to arrive at Truth, Arendt proposes the pursuit of meaning as the ultimate aim of thinking. She argues that 'to expect truth to come from thinking signifies that we mistake the need to think with the urge to know' (1971: 61); which is the *end* that the intellect or cognition claims for itself: a knowing and truth, even of unanswerable questions. Arendt compares philosophers

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[20] He goes on to argue that 'lovelessness and absence of care may be sources of aggression' (2022: 37).

of this latter persuasion with 'children trying to catch smoke by closing their hands' (1971: 122). She says that '(c)ompared to an object of contemplation, meaning, which can be said and spoken about, is slippery; if the philosopher wants to see and grasp it, it "slips away"' (1971: 122).

Thus, futile grasping for mastery and control, as an impossible endeavour and overblown fantasy, is for her the impotent foundation of violence. And thinking is the other side of false mastery and knowledge. Thinking thus acts as a brake on the fantasy that the world is there to be mastered. Arendt asks whether '[t]he activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining whatever happens to come to pass or to attract attention, regardless of the specific content, could this activity be among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing or even actually "condition" them against it?' (1971: 5). She suggests that if the ability to tell right from wrong turns out to have anything to do with the ability to think, then we should demand its exercise from every sane person, regardless of intellect or ignorance. Thus when Arendt suggests, at the beginning of *The Human Condition* (1962)*,* that we should engage in the 'simple' task of 'nothing more than to think about what we are doing', she is, in fact, setting the rather difficult task of engaging in a process that is under threat from the certainty offered by a knowing that cannot bear to contemplate its own finitude and frailty.

CONCLUSION

The call for papers for the Slow Intimacy conference described intimacy as an interaction in which a person knows something and then shows what and that they know to an Other. It is this certainty of knowing and its implication of transparency – of self and other - that I wish to problematise by pointing to those unconscious knowings that we, by definition, *cannot* show. For intimacy to become a safer space for women 'we' (read 'men') might thus need to suspend somewhat the knowledge project, in favour of the activity of thinking in service of understanding, which is inherently uncertain precisely because it is tentative, interpretive and provisional. A letting be of what/who you try to understand, which is the opposite of mastery and control, of knowledge and truth. Therefore, I propose, in an effort to prevent violence against women, that we advocate for the activity of thinking that Arendt encourages. This would entail considering, but not locking into place, the meaning of masculinity, and its expectations of mastery and control; and that we unmake and remake the masculine subject more realistically as a frail, dependent being, just like the rest of us.

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Drawing as Intimation (or Infatuations with Lines, Contours and Shades)

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on drawing as gesture and bodily intervention – in specific moments where the process of drawing closer, drawing out, or drawing in has significance. While specific attention is paid to drawing as scopic-somatic practice (that is, as a visual tool for illustrating, marking and mapping out, plotting and delineating), this article also nurtures other etymological roots, such as drawing as that which impels someone or something to pull (move, stir, sweep), withdraw (drain, transfer, absorb, siphon, bleed) and attract (mesmerise, invite, desire). At the hand of select visual artists, including Katherine Bull, Tim Knowles, Yayoi Kusama, Hentie van der Merwe and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, this essay explores how closeness between different bodies (the self and the other, the human and non-human) and different substrates (be it parchment, pigment or skin) is facilitated through drawing. Particular attention is paid to drawings that dwell at the intersection of affection, sexuality and disease, while ideas surrounding unlicensed looking and unreciprocated intimacy are also explored.

THE FIRST LINE: AN INTRODUCTION TO DEVIL DRAWINGS AND USEFUL DEFINITIONS

Drawing is such an illicit affair. Despite its simplicity, or perhaps because of it, it nurtures those desires that often lie in excess of words.

I see, I dream, I desire, I draw.

I draw too much: I'm around 4, perhaps 5 years old, not in school yet, and I draw obsessively. I draw the devil, over and over, in blue, in black, in red. He carries a pitchfork, he has a pair of horns, he has a massive penis. He has everything you expect in a devil. I am drawn to him, I cannot stop myself. Upon discovery, my mother destroys all my devil drawings. She burns them. Draw flowers, she tells me, and I do. For a while. But there's a life in images, whether they come from my own hand or the world around me, that just wants to be explored and touched. I find an illustration of the male reproductive system with a cross-section view of the penis in an old version of the *Reader's Digest Family Health Guide*. I imagine a grown man sliced open from the groin up, carefully redrawn for the viewer's pleasure. And then there is a small photograph of a bodybuilder printed in a local newspaper. I remove the page that carries his image, fold it up, and keep it under my pillow.

Looking, drawing, burning, cutting, folding.

My attraction to drawing also springs from its deep and by now quite twisted etymological roots. These are roots I often turn to. Drawing is, first and foremost, a gesture – a process of drawing closer, drawing out, or drawing in by means of some bodily or technological intervention. We draw to represent – we illustrate, we mark, we map and we plot. But drawing can also be that which impels someone or something to pull (to move, stir, or sweep), to withdraw (to drain, transfer, absorb, siphon, or bleed) and to attract (to mesmerise, summon, or tempt). Drawing is a force that compels, it is the grounds for action, it sets the scene for desire. As Michael Taussig maintains:

> to draw is to apply pen to paper. But to draw is also to pull on some thread, pulling it out of its knotted tangle or skein, and we also speak of drawing water from a well. There is another meaning too, as when

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> I say 'I was drawn to him or her' (…) Drawing is thus a depicting, a hauling, an unravelling, and being impelled toward something or somebody. (Taussig, 2011: xii)

For John Berger (2005: 3), drawing is *discovery*, a point of entry into this and other worlds.[1] For Emma Dexter (2005), drawing is a *return*, a drive towards reconnection with personal and shared pasts. [2] Carrol Clarkson (2014: 1) takes a different course of action by emphasising drawing's capacity for creating boundaries – drawing, Clarkson argues, *marks a limit*.[3] Meanwhile, Jacques Derrida (1990) is taken with drawing's ability to make the human subject *lose sight* of the world,[4] while Michael Newman (2003: 95) posits drawing as a sign of *withdrawal* that, 'with each stroke, re-enacts desire and loss'.[5]

'When do we draw?', asks Hélène Cixous and Catherine MacGillivray (1993: 92). 'When we were little … As soon as we draw, (as soon as, following the pen, we advance into the unknown, hearts beating, mad with desire) we are little, we do not know, we start out avidly, *we're going to lose*' (*my emphasis*, 1993: 92). Drawing makes us little; it makes us small in the face of that which escapes us. Sometimes we draw things closer, sometimes we draw away. Grasping and losing are both part of our experience of drawing.

I am taken with the multiplicity these definitions offer, but also the weight that each carries in our everyday lives. I draw the face of someone I love. I draw blood from a vein. I draw my own breath. Every moment I am drawing in a world that is drawing with me. If I do not draw, I die.

When approaching this essay, I wanted to write as I draw, or as close to it as I could imagine; being attentive to the way that I move from one surface to another, my pen travels, my eyes wander. Some lines, be it of mark or argument, intersect and cross, while others fade as they move closer to some edge, be it of thought, concentration, or interest. Sometimes I press harder, sometimes I touch lightly. Among the arcs and trajectories, I look at the work of various artists, including Katherine Bull, Tim Knowles, Yayoi Kusama, Hentie van der Merwe and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who have all used drawing to think about the human body and the technologies and rituals that sustain it. I also turn to my own relationship with drawing and the way I have used it to think about intimacy, care, and illness.

The wider context, or expanded field,[6] within which I draw sets the scene for this paper. At the hand of my own art practice, as well as the work of other creative practitioners, I think about closeness between different bodies (the self and the other, the human and non-human) and different substrates (be it parchment, pigment, or membrane). Three important concepts guide my thinking and recur throughout this essay, namely drawing and its grasp of

time,   and   placement.

proximity,

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[1] Also see Anita Taylor (2008: 9), who thinks of drawing as a world-building exercise that, 'through signs and symbols, by mapping and labelling our experience (…) enable[s] us to discover through seeing – either through our own experience of seeing, observing and recording, or through the shared experience of looking at another's drawn record of an experience. Drawing may have a transitory and temporal relationship with the world or it may provide a record of lasting permanence. It may be propositional, preparatory, visionary, imaginative, associative, factual, generative, transformative or performative' (2008: 9).

[2] For Dexter (2005), the carnal desire to draw speaks to a return to some origin, be it our own childhood or our human ancestry. 'Drawing has a primal and elemental character: it enjoys a mythic status as the earliest and most immediate form of image making', with its roots being 'evidently archaic' (Dexter, 2005: 6, 8). Madelon Vriesendorp (2016: 10) echoes some of these sentiments in her definition of drawing as 'a universal, formal language. It's the hieroglyphs of communication'.

[3] Writing in the context of transitional justice, Clarkson (2014: 1) expands on G.K Chesterton's idea that art and morality share a desire to 'draw the line somewhere' by arguing that 'the act of drawing [a] … line is an art as much as it is a question of morality. A line drawn reconfigures space: It divides yet juxtaposes two entities: it connects two distant points. Figuratively, it includes some and excludes others; it marks a boundary between standing for and standing against, or it traces a path along which places are invested with significance, words are understood, and lives are lived'.

[4] Jacques Derrida (1990) claims that drawing leaves the artist blind – the very process has the psychological effect of rendering the human subject sightless, searching, and groping, Derrida maintains. As an intransitive act, drawing allows the human subject to find themselves lost in the act of drawing, to draw *a* world into being that is not *the* world. Drawing has the potential to suspend the tenuous claim to reality that representational media often make, exactly because of its immersive and idiosyncratic mark-making properties (also see Van Elphen, 2009: 60–61).

[5] Also see Pamela Lee (1999: 31), who argues that drawing is bound to a double time, being both a trace and a leftover, offering 'a clue as to its formation' and being 'a remainder left behind'.

[6] I use the term 'expanded field' to refer to the idea of practicing and reading a discipline, such as drawing, through the lens of another. I engage with the expanded field as an interdisciplinary practice that 'challenges, blends, reframes and expands conventional (…) disciplines and methodologies' (The Kiosk, 2010), which is a central tenet of the art practices I discuss in this paper.

Figure 1. Katherine Bull. *Drawing Breath*. 2020.

THE SECOND LINE: DRAWING WITH OTHERS

I start drawing the second line of this paper thinking about intimacy, specifically the intimacy shared by a group of strangers. They might be sitting together in a room while attending a conference, or waiting in line while doing their daily shopping. I imagine these strangers inevitably *drawing on each other*, each inhaling the exhalation of someone else. If their breath left any visible trace, they'd be ever-expanding drawings, with lines running from one pair of lungs to another.

There's a bodily democracy to this drawing, as humans breathe indiscriminately. But also not, as we make decisions on who gets to breathe and who fights for air. We restrain, we choke, we strangle. We all draw, but we do not draw the same. Our breath is invisible, but inevitably marked by, inter alia, race, gender and sexuality; by colour, by comportment, by relation. Our breath is regulated – this drawing has parameters and endings and repercussions.[7] As Achille Mbembe (*my emphasis*, 2020) holds, there's a universal right to breath, a fundamental right to existence that belongs to a global 'community of earthly inhabitants, humans *and other*'. This right should not be confiscated, Mbembe warns, neither should it be imagined as a purely human right. Hence, the need to reclaim and rethink the lungs of the world, to think about everyone and everything that breathes.

Inspire, respire, expire. Drawing on breath is a proposal towards continuity, but it also holds us accountable. The burden of contamination, the fear of what my own breath carries, made drawing difficult over the last two years. I kiss someone, I talk to my mother, she gets COVID – I cannot help but draw some conclusion. Another illicit drawing – this time not of a devil, but of a virus. I have a friend who drew breath in the same way, his mother dies. Be it with paper or air, these drawings carry the weight of substance and substrate. They are heavy.

The cathartic quality of drawing is poignantly demonstrated in the work of Katherine Bull, whose series Drawing Breath (2020) – see **Figure 1** – speaks about forging connections and celebrating life in the face of loss.

Dedicated to her grandmother whom she lost to COVID, Bull sees her drawings as a place of solace. As objects, they are the residue left after each concentric movement, each departure and return, each attempt to remember. As process, drawing becomes both commemorative act and meditation. This performance situates the drawing – of breath and of mark – as the nexus of presence. Armed with a pencil, each hand travels its own route, with two circles slowly emerging on the paper, growing stronger with each lap. These circles mark the outer reaches of her arms – this is as far as she can go. The resultant shapes remind me of eyes, seeds or lungs; of things that grow or belong together. Here, drawing is a slow, reiterative act that is dedicated to life. It testifies, it encircles, it embraces.[8]

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[7] I am reminded of George Floyd's last words, 'I can't breathe'. In Nigel Gibson's (2020) forceful interrogation of police brutality in America, he turns to breath as a coded signifier of inequality. At the hand of Frantz Fanon's concept of 'combat breathing', Gibson demonstrates how experiences of suffocation, imprisonment and smothering mark the lives of those living in fear of state-sanctioned violence.

[8] Jean-Luc Nancy's seminal *The Pleasure of Drawing* (2013) emphasises drawing as the formation and medium of desire. For Nancy, drawing activates the 'gestural body' (2013: 39) that performs and inscribes its own presence by means of rhythmic mark-making processes. Drawing often operates by means of somatic rhythms, Nancy maintains, which tap into a vast libidinal economy. This sentiment resonates with Bull's own drawing practice in which the rhythmic qualities of drawing facilitates a range of experiences and desires to come to the fore, ranging from grief to affection.

Bull's work reminds me that drawing can play an important role in sustaining the care and affection that we, by necessity or choice, often experience from some distance. We intimate – we state, disclose, share and show – by means of the image, which forms part of the larger circulation and consumption of affective media. Intimacy is not only the result of some productive coupling or serendipitous moment, but it is also a form of expression that has its own aesthetic qualities and performative expectations. Intimacy is crafted, be it for oneself or for the sake of someone or something else. As much as we'd like it to be spontaneous and direct, intimacy is often encountered in a repeated, rehearsed and/or represented format. It is geared towards the private *and* the public, and we draw on a wide range of media to explore and communicate our secret and shared affections.

As Lauren Berlant (*my emphasis*, 2021: 93) reminds us, '*the intimate is everywhere*: you bring it everywhere and it circulates everywhere. It registers as intensities of attachment and recognition, inferred and explicit, that pass across people, groups and movements'. Meanwhile, Emma Dexter (*my emphasis*, 2005: 6) claims that:

> *drawing is everywhere.* We are surrounded by it – it is sewn into the warp and weft of our lives (…) It is the means by which we can understand and map, decipher, and come to terms with our surroundings as we leave marks, tracks, or shadows to mark our passing (…) breath on the window, vapor trails of a plane across the sky, lines traced by a finger in the sand – we literally draw in and on the material world.

Intimacy moves, registers and marks. Drawing enfolds, traces and tracks. In both drive and outcome, the similarity between the two is striking.

I also see this circular, affective register in the work of Tony Orrico (2016), who treats drawing as a commitment to the human body as sensory instrument. In these performative drawing exercises, his body reads the surface of the paper, it motors and moves in response to what it feels, and its sensitivity to stimuli translates into marks that speak of movement and disco very.

This act of reaching out need not be limited to the human and its own corporeal delineations, but can also extend to non-human others. I recall Mbembe's invitation to think of both the human and non-human lungs of the world. I see this in the work of Tim Knowles, who draws with trees. By attaching pens to branches and then placing sheets of paper under these mark-making appendages, the life and motion of a tree, as well as moments of stillness and rest, are slowly recorded. 'Like signatures', Knowles explains, 'each drawing reveals something about the different qualities and characteristics of the various trees as they sway in the breeze: the relaxed, fluid line of an oak; the delicate, tentative touch of a larch; a hawthorn's stiff, slightly neurotic scratches' (Knowles, 2008).

I also think of Cameron Robbins, who created a solar-powered machine to draw the weather. The strength of the sun, the presence of a cloud, the fall of a shadow – this machine bears witness to the world around it. 'A bright day (…) makes the pen fly across the paper, forming dense shapes like flocks of starlings or ink-dot explosions. Overcast conditions tend to produce slower swirls and loops' (Robbins cited in Munro, 2017). He draws the world around him by drawing *on* the world around him. We see a machine facilitating a slow, intimate relationship between human and non-human actors. Drawing is the trace of this extension that reaches from the human to other environments, bodies or forces.

But drawing can also reach in to expose that which makes us human. I think of Chloe Piene's intimate drawings of masturbating women. Her work takes a pleasure that is mostly private, that belongs to (and is often geared to) the self, and brings it into public, or shared, fruition. The lines of her drawings share the 'jerky, compulsive rhythm' of the masturbator, 'urging herself towards release (…) There's a physical energy that's just on the edge of exploding, the tremor of a self in search of dissolution' (Schwabsky, 2005: 256). Piene's work shows the incredible intimacy of drawing, especially when complex private and public divides are being toyed with.

Yayoi Kusama's drawings also speak of such an expansion and dissolution, albeit in a radically different way. Kusama is well-known for her obsession with dots and for the way she slowly reproduces each of them by hand. In this instance, drawing is remedy, as every dot bears testimony to Kusama's will to survive; to understand and embrace her own mental illness (Davis, 2017). But these drawings are also remedial[9] in their capacity for connecting her to the world around her. 'Dots can't stay alone, like the communicative life of people', Kusama says.

> Two and three and more polka dots become movement. Our earth is only one polka dot among the million stars in the cosmos. Polka dots are a way to infinity. When we obliterate nature and our bodies with polka dots, we become part of the unity of our environment. (Kusama cited in *Christie's,* 2019)

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[9] While this essay is mostly oriented towards arts-based applications of drawing, it is important to acknowledge that drawing has long been used as both diagnostic and remedial device. The onset and severity of both Parkinson's and Alzheimer's disease, for example, are often screened by means of drawing exercises (Zham *et al.*, 2012; Wolf-Klein *et al.*, 1989; Kirk and Kertesz, 1991), while HIV/AIDS education and treatment campaigns have often turned to drawing as a pedagogic and therapeutic tool (Mutonyi *et al.*, 2011; Govender *et al.*, 2011), to name but a few examples of drawing's remedial application.

Again, we see how drawing encircles, accentuates, expands, and suspends.
Like breath, it connects us to lungs that are not our own.

THE THIRD LINE: DRAWING THE OTHER IN

We open up, we show ourselves, we invite the stranger in.

I'd like to spend some time with the drawings of Hentie van der Merwe, as his work speaks in interesting ways to his interpretation of intimacy, especially when it comes to the idea of being intimate with a stranger.

Exhibited under the exhibition title *Shooting Selves* in 2020, these drawings are inspired by photographs that Van der Merwe found on blogs and websites where men share images of themselves with a larger public audience. The original photographs were sent into the world as nude selfies, all taken with a cell phone camera. While the original photographs focus on the naked body, Van der Merwe is more interested in the face. As he explains,

> I am fascinated by the way that they look at themselves, the way their gaze is angled with their eyes slightly downcast. It almost seems as if they are looking *through* themselves, as they are looking at but also with a screen when they engage with their own bodies. It is as if they have become lost in the image and the process required to produce it. (Van der Merwe, 2022)

Van der Merwe's engagement with the medium shows how drawing can change and even subvert the time of the original, as it requires a form of mediation (or meditation, perhaps) that takes longer than photography to produce an image. It takes care and patience. *Untitled (selfshot #1)* – see **Figure 2** – slowly came into being over a period of ten years. Van der Merwe started working on this piece in 2010 and returned to it every now and then until it was finished in 2020. Drawing was at the root of this decade-long intimacy with a photographic image that was produced in a second. As Van der Merwe (2022) also explains,

> in my own reworking and redrawing of these images, photographic detail gets lost and it becomes impossible to identify them as individuals. These are not the same public documents anymore. My fixation on the eyes also means that I don't focus on the body, per se, or the sex of the subject. I want to spend time with their faces more than anything else – it's a slow process of intimacy. With their downcast eyes, it almost seems as if they are waiting for a lover. They are playing with themselves while playing with another.

It also takes time (the time of the collector, the archivist, the scavenger) to find the right image to draw. 'I work through a lot of photographs to find those that trigger some response of intimacy,' Van der Merwe explains. 'It's usually some vulnerability on the part of the subject. Sometimes I return to the same person, again and again. I redraw them when I'm compelled to do so' (2022). I'm reminded of Sara Ahmed's (2014: 145) view of the body 'as a congealed history of past approaches', as the cumulative (and ever-becoming) result of our orientation 'towards and away from others'. Van der Merwe's drawings are in many ways a slowly hatched and crafted return to a site of desire – here, a vulnerable, anticipating body – that has long sparked his interest.

This desire to spend time with a stranger's face also speaks of a complex engagement with proximity. The concept of 'stranger intimacy'[10] immediately resonates, especially in our contemporary environment where sharing economies, affective technologies and screen-based interactions are of growing importance. In Van der Merwe's work, overt reference is made to the process of sharing oneself with strangers by means of the image. We see some form of intimacy at play, albeit intimacy without proximity.[11] Being at hand but also stretching beyond our tactile world, the screen facilitates forms of desire and connection that allow for the suturing – the stitching and drawing – of self into the fabric of imagined communities and fantasy worlds (Bowen, 2008: 569–570). While overtones of

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[10] Here, I draw on Regan Koch and Sam Miles' (2020: 1) definition of stranger intimacy as 'a potentially generative form of encounter involving conditional relations of openness among the unacquainted, through which affective structures of knowing, providing, befriending or even loving are built'. As these authors maintain, online platforms and screen-based interactions allow for intimacy and trust to be negotiated between strangers in multiple ways, with 'digital technologies (…) multiplying and extending the times and spaces where people engage in dialogue and exchange' (Koch and Miles, 2020: 2; also see Bialski, 2011).

[11] I find Jacob Metcalf's (2008) usage of the term 'intimacy without proximity' helpful when thinking about certain human encounters with non-human species that occur across some distance. While I'm speaking to screen-based proximities in this particular context, the concept of intimacy without proximity has bearing on the visualising technologies we use to encounter human (or non-human) others, but it also relates to our interpretation of disease and infection – an idea I return to later.
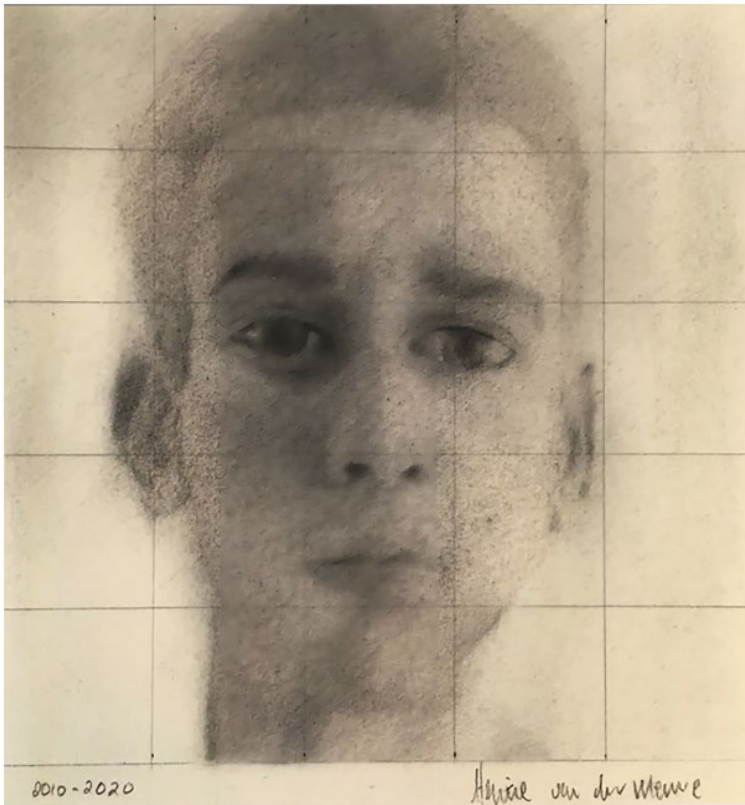
Figure 2. Hentie van der Merwe. *Untitled (selfshot #1).* 2010–2020.

predaciousness, lurking and voyeurism often mark screen-based sexual encounters (Bowen, 2008: 574), Van der Merwe's drawings seem to do (or *want* to do) something else. We see how a carnal encounter with digital and online technologies, which stand at the root of the photographic images that Van der Merwe collects, feeds into a different temporal and spatial existence. The frank immediacy of the original photograph is conveniently suspended in this translation, to such a degree that it seems as if the drawings bring into softer focus a reality that can seem quite harsh and glaring. Drawing as process trades the evidentiary value of photography for something hazy, ambiguous, perhaps less disposable and in some ways, more intimate.

We aren't photographs anymore, these drawings seem to whisper, as they simultaneously acknowledge and distance themselves from their photographic source.

In terms of placement, Van der Merwe uses an important device, namely the grid, as a means to plot the drawing, but also as a reference to the screen. As he explains,

> the grid is a visual placing mechanism that divides a surface into more manageable parts. The grid is also a means to initially place the image. Some transformation occurs in the drawing process when more organic marks react to and break with the grid. (2022)

The lingering presence of the grid in the final work seems to draw the viewer to the surface or the skin of the paper. It pulls you back to the surface, you can't lose yourself in the illusion. It is as if the grid is hanging between you and the subject, like a surrogate for the screen of the computer or the phone. In the words of Van der Merwe (2022),

> we live in an era in which people are constantly involved in the production and manipulation of images of themselves. Our images are shared on grid-like structures (be it through apps, websites and social media networks) where images are ordered according to and accessed via a grid. It's a scheme for plotting and lying out, but also a means to plug in and consume, to carve up and make something legible in a very specific manner.

At the same time, Van der Merwe also sees the grid as a highly personal and emotive device. As he explains, the grid

> is one of the first ways we engage with drawing. When I was young, I told my mother that I wanted to make art, and I asked her to show me how to do so. She took a photograph of Donald Duck, placed a grid over it, and used that to enlarge and redraw the original. And I thought, 'wow, that's amazing!'. So,

Figure 3. Ernst van der Wal. *Untitled.* 2015.

> to me, it also has that emotional connection to my mother who taught me how to use it (Van der Merwe, 2022).

There is an intimacy to the drawing process and a form of return that the grid facilitates.

It is interesting how the very grid that calls the memory of a mother to the fore also holds the image of a naked man staring into a screen.

THE FOURTH LINE: DRAWING MYSELF OUT

My own drawings share many of these concerns with time, proximity and placement, while I also find myself returning to my childhood obsessions with image-making when my experience of duration and closeness was somewhat different.

I am still drawn to photographs that appear in newspapers and medical textbooks, especially those printed in the mid-20th century – a time when they seemed to carry the most weight as indexical markers of 'truth'. I collect these images obsessively, waiting for some spark that triggers an affective response, or that thrills me. One such example is a drawing that was inspired by a photograph that appeared in a book on skin diseases – see **Figure 3**.

The original photograph, like most of those I use as reference, is about three centimetres in width, which makes for a small, intimate image. At first glance and from a distance, the dotscreen method that is used for printing such images gives the impression of a seamless image, of a smooth tone and an intact body. Images printed in this way don't immediately reveal their secrets. Yet, when taking a magnifying glass to such an image, the viewer will see thousands of dots of varying sizes running along a gridded network. It is upon this structure that the image is suspended like skin.

My own drawing practice relies on finding the grid in each original image. I study it, try and understand it, and then I blow it up. I enlarge the original by resizing the grid, and then slowly start populating it with dots, each drawn by hand, carefully positioned to give the appearance of something made by a machine. Inevitably, marks

and misalignments occur, so while the feeling of a printed interface is there, my own hand is always visible. One cannot escape being human, after all.

Van der Merwe and I share an interest in the potential of drawing to refigure the found image. We both use drawing to interpret and distort photographs we encounter in books or on the internet. In many ways, these drawings are vehicles for reshaping the time – the historical contingency – of the original photograph. This resonates with Laura Allen and Luke Caspar's (2016: 69) argument that 'drawing can become a site for deviating and challenging the historical, whether through imaginary flights away from the past or the methodological re-analysis of it. Drawing can serve as an analytical tool to reveal the real history of spaces, its inherent subjectivity offering a different means of inquiry to the photograph or text'. It is important to consider that photography and drawing are both marked by complex entanglements and conflicts, especially within scientific discourse where they have long served empiricist aspirations. Both media have been used in the search for and codification of 'knowledge', 'order' and 'truth', albeit in different ways.[12] While the original images that I study and interpret are steeped in this tradition, it is in their redrawing that fissures appear. They become fragile, I would argue, once they are exposed for the constructed things they are.

I find Michael Taussig's reflection on the relationship between photography and drawing especially compelling in this context. Drawing, Taussig (2011: 22) holds, 'is like a conversation with the thing drawn, likely to involve prolonged and total immersion'. Drawings *enclose*: while 'photography is a taking, the drawing is a making (…) a photograph stops time, while a drawing encompasses it' (Taussig, 2011: 21). Drawing solicits a corporeal engagement with the world, an 'intimacy (…) between the drawer and the drawn' (Taussig, 2011: 21), that *takes care* (commitment, engagement, time) in a way that photographs do not, or that they do differently.

Dot by dot, line by line, the drawing shown in **Figure 3** took three years to complete. I probably spent more time trying to understand this face than those of many people I've claimed to love.

Similar to Van der Merwe's work, these drawings take time – a time that isn't instant or easy. As Elsy Lahner (2015: 19) contends, the time that drawings often require sets them apart from the instantaneous and cursory, as they call for a commitment to the mark and its making. But the time at play is also of a different nature – this is a queer time, I would argue, a nonlinear time that resonates with José Esteban Muñoz's work on queer futurity.[13] As Muñoz (2009: 28) maintains, queer time is a temporal project that is sensitive towards those relational formations that refute the 'autonaturalising' trajectory of 'straight time'[14] by 'not settling for the present, of asking and looking beyond the here and now (…) the purpose of such temporal maneuvers is to wrest ourselves from the present's stupefying hold.' For Muñoz, queer time is anticipatory, a forward-dawning futurity that lies in a burning anticipation, a critical desire, to travel 'beyond the limited vista of the here and now', beyond the 'hopeless heterosexual maps of the present where futurity is indeed the province of normative reproduction' (2009: 22, 28). In many ways coming as a posttraumatic response to the AIDS crisis, Muñoz's work is a forceful reminder that time, like breath, is not shared equally.

An awareness of time – of the ways in which it is taken, claimed, and represented – is central to my own drawing process. In this regard, I find E. L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen (2011) engagement with queer time *as practice* particularly helpful. Queer time, they propose, speaks to the 'temporal complexities between life – as a becoming, as a dynamic process of an individual's vital and embodied engagement with the environment – and language – as reading and writing, narrating, or analysis – [which] have the power to *open up innovative forms of intimacy* that betoken not only new modes of becoming, but new ways of affiliation with others and alternative modes of transmission' (*my emphasis*, 2011: 13). In my own experience, drawing offers the possibility of a queer time that is intimately engaging with and refiguring a past whilst being attentive to the present (a present in which I am *here, now, drawing*), and hopeful for a future.

Intertwined with this experience of time is my awareness of proximity. While I was drawing the male subject seen in **Figure 3**, for example, I became aware of what felt like the slow erosion of distance and time. I was spending time with *him*, with 'him' being a man I was simultaneously observing in a photograph and slowly teasing into existence on a piece of paper. The drawing started with his face, from which his body spread like a slowly

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[12] See Ann Thomas (1997) on the art-science intersection of photography and drawing. As Thomas demonstrates, both media have been used in the quest for laying bare and copying the seen world, especially in the life sciences where botanical, zoological and anatomical reproductions are of great importance.

[13] Muñoz's seminal *Cruising Utopia* (2009) speaks of the need to develop a critical methodology of hope – in his words, a 'queer utopian hermeneutics' – that questions the heteronormative constraints of the past and the present by reimagining and reigniting the future.

[14] Muñoz specifically speaks of 'straight time' as the normative spectacle of reproductive heterosexuality that promises a future only for those who participate in its rituals. In their reading of Muñoz's work, Jack Halberstam (2005: 20) maintains that queer time offers a specific 'temporality that emerges (…) once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance (…) [of] straight time'. Also see Stephen Moore *et al.* (2018) on the conflict between queer and normative temporalities.
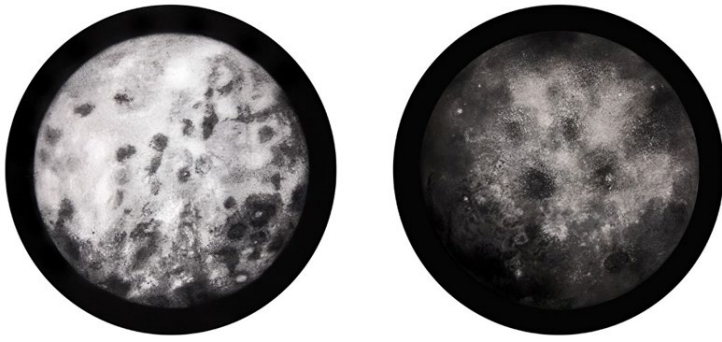
Figure 4. Ernst van der Wal. *Untitled*. 2020.

unfurled map. Eyes, nose, lips, ears, neck, nipples. However, as the drawing progressed I became increasingly aware of another presence, that of the doctor whose hands and starched white cuffs I was also drawing into existence. I was not alone – as I was drawing, I rested my hand on a hand that already rested. I have come upon a scene of intimacy that has, in fact, already begun.

I started to imagine myself being part of a complex triangulation where different characters were touching and being touched, where various skins – those of patient, doctor and artist – were rubbing against one another by means of a paper-based substrate. A feeling of unease also became pervasive as this drawing progressed, as I thought about the touch of a stranger whose hands rest uncomfortably on the skin, like the cold hands of a doctor who invites himself to touch on the basis of his own dispassionate, though caring, disposition. These are hands that touch to know. Subsequently, this drawing's allusion to skin-on-skin contact has taken me on other trajectories, leading, for example, to Sara Ahmed's (2014) work on the politics of comfort and care. In her poignant description of queer discomfort, Ahmed speaks of 'an acute awareness of the surface of one's body, which appears *as* surface, when one cannot inhabit the social skin, which is shaped by some bodies, and not others' (*author's emphasis*, 2014: 148). The skin is both a personal and a social substrate, Ahmed holds; it is a surface that is sometimes more visible *as such* and, as a result, can feel more disorienting.

From this, my drawings have turned to various other faces and surfaces, such as those of planets, moons, viruses and bacteria – see **Figure 4**. These are still intimate encounters with bodies, albeit non-human ones. An interest in proximity, specifically those forms of attachment that are non-reciprocal or sometimes even violent, lies at the centre of these drawings. While working on these images, I increasingly tortured the surface of the paper by means of erasure, cutting and scarring. At times, these faults and blemishes reminded me of a spreading disease, of something creeping by its own volition into and onto the human body. I also thought of invaded or colonised territories, which we often encounter in aerial representations where we see an environment in the wake of destruction. As I drew and scratched, redrew and re-scratched, these abrasions came to feel like violence. Sometimes, I worked so deeply into the surface of the paper with sanders and grinders that it disintegrated beyond repair. With time, I learned to notice the moment when the paper started losing its skin-like quality to offer support. At the point where I ran the danger of completely losing the drawing, I stopped.

These drawings also provided a key moment for contemplating ways in which I understand the concept of placement. They form part of a series in which I decided to reference the circular lenses of the telescope and microscope – two devices we use to understand the bewildering environments within which we find ourselves or we carry under our skin. These technologies have become entangled with our perception of self, so much so that they constitute a way of looking, or a lensing culture,[15] that in many ways exceed and challenge traditional ideas of embodiment and placement. One of these drawings shows a planet observed through a telescope, the other shows a virus seen under a microscope. Both share the same grid, the foundation of both images is the same, the way each is populated by dots and marks and scratches might differ, but when I look at them, the planet and the virus become almost indistinguishable.

Once drawn, I do not always know which is which.

It is in these later images that the grid as a placing and positioning device becomes particularly meaningful, especially when read in the context of larger art historical and socio-political frameworks. As Rosalind Krauss (1979) points out, the grid has long been treated as *the* formal and ideological apparatus of modernity that, in both its spatial and temporal dimensions, signifies a crystallisation of reality and order. The grid, holds Krauss, imagines

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[15] I'm drawn to Don Ihde's (2001) definition of 'lensing' as a form of scientific vision that is mediated through, inter alia, telescopes and microscopes. As Ihde maintains, these technologies have significantly altered our sense of time and space, insofar as they transformed 'ordinary', or direct, embodied vision into a more radical, instrumentalised scientific vision. Ihde proposes the term 'second sight' to speak of such imaging technologies and the way they challenge and augment embodied vision.

Figure 5. Felix Gonzalez-Torres. *"Untitled" (Bloodworks)*. 1989. Graphite, colored pencil, and tempera on paper, framed 12 1/4 x 19 1/2 inches. Two parts: 12 1/4 x 9 inches each © Estate Felix Gonzalez-Torres, courtesy Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation.

time along straight lines, as something that unfolds and expands from a demarcated, geometric foundation (1979: 50–52). As Margarita Tupitsyn (2009) also maintains, the grid has long been imagined as a checkpoint of modernity – as an imagined slice of 'the real', of 'the here and now', that is made manifest through science and logic.[16] As artistic implements, grids have often been used to call to order and justify delineation. At the same time, I cannot help but be reminded of GRID – or Gay-Related Immune Deficiency – as the first acronym that was used to describe HIV/AIDS. Colloquially, casually, it was referred to as 'gay cancer'. A virus that holds no preference for a particular gender or sexuality was long imagined as strategic and vengeful; a grid 'with a plan', where intimacy, identity and death intersected in a devastating way.

The artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres, better known for his installations of everyday objects, turned to drawing to speak of his experience with this particular grid. *"Untitled" (Bloodworks)* – see **Figure 5** – forms part of a larger series of works that Gonzalez-Torres referred to as 'graphs' or 'bloodworks'.[17] *"Untitled" (Bloodworks)* features two drawings showing the upward and downward curve of a diagonal line. This can be interpreted as a plummeting or rising T-cell count of an AIDS patient, for example, but it also offers larger commentary on issues ranging from the visual abstraction of illness to forms of medical discrimination. If read as a visual representation of an immune system, these drawings offer an abstracted record of a rapidly changing human body. These drawings speak to a context in which progress and decline, growth and destruction, was often measured at the hand of the grid – a device that has long been used to imagine order and control. These drawings rest on but also resist the authority of the grid – while each individual line runs its steady course along the gridded intersections, the starting point and end of each drawing differ significantly. As a pair, these drawings leave the viewer suspended, as they cannot be entirely sure about the outcome and implications of the softly pencilled lines.

As Nancy Spector (1995: 166–167) explains in her reading of Gonzalez-Torres's work:

> The diseased body is itself a representation; it is linguistically constructed through the rhetoric of medicine and science. It is defined, diagrammed, and controlled by a biomedical authority whose value system adheres to deeply entrenched cultural and historical precepts. This 'authority' treats the AIDS patient (…) as an abstraction, a compilation of symptoms where there is no place, or need, for an account of the human side of infirmary (…) The graphs, with their cool, neutral geometry – ever reminiscent of

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[16] Alternative art historical readings of the grid also abound, with even Krauss admitting that, despite its overwhelming association with materialism and logic, the grid can encompass both the secular *and* the sacred (1979: 54–55, 58). Also see Jennifer Scanlan (2015) on grids as ideological meeting points for opposing tendencies, and Damjan Jovanovic (2016) on the intersubjective potential of the grid in contemporary drawing practice.

[17] Gonzalez-Torres made twenty-two artworks that he referred to as 'graphs' (or occasionally as 'bloodworks'). These works consist of a range of materials, with some comprising of a single framed sheet of paper with graphite and gouache, and others consisting of multiple parts of painted and drawn canvases. For this article, I refer to two specific drawings from his 'graphs' collection, namely *"Untitled" (Bloodworks)*.

the Modernist grid – ironically emulate the hygienic dominion of the medical system, and yet they signify the mortality of the corporeal self.

Today, these drawings mark an encroaching destruction that proved to be impossible to escape – Gonzalez-Torres died of AIDS-related causes in 1996 following on the death of his long-term partner Ross Laycock in 1991.

Roland Barthes's reading of the photograph as *memento mori*, as 'anterior future of which death is at stake' (1981: 96), also comes to mind. Although executed in a different medium, I read a similar sense of dread and anxious anticipation in Gonzalez-Torres's *"Untitled" (Bloodworks)*. To me, these pieces show an awareness that the human subjects often don't outlast the marks that commemorate them. At the same time, I'm reminded of Sara Ahmed's (2014) writing on the politics of grief and the question of how the loss of queer lives is negotiated. As Ahmed (*my emphasis*, 2014: 156) maintains, 'queer lives have to be recognised *as lives* in order to be grieved'. Ahmed draws directly on Ann Cvetkovich's (2003: 427) argument that traumatic encounters with death, 'like the AIDS crisis (…) has challenged our strategies for remembering the dead, forcing the invention of new forms of mourning and commemoration'. Gonzalez-Torres's *"Untitled" (Bloodworks)* speak to these questions and challenges, as they can be interpreted as a way to mourn the loss of queer life – be it of friends and lovers, or even his own.

I think of his work, again and again, while I'm grappling with my own drawing practice. The artworks in the 'graphs/bloodworks' body of work haunt me. They remind me of the complex, sometimes devastating entanglement of drawing with technology, of the way both have developed in tandem with one another[18] while being in service of larger socio-political institutions. These images also compel me to return to an act of drawing that was mentioned at the start of this essay, namely the drawing of blood from a vein. Technology is central to this act and it carries significant weight in the conclusions drawn from it. As Keith Wailoo (1997) maintains, the drawing, reading and interpreting of blood was central to the monitoring of a 'sick' and 'infectious' homosexual subject in the late 20th century, with technology playing a seminal role in assigning a discreet identity to a spectrum of diseases, infections and deficiencies, all of which we now classify as HIV/AIDS.[19] The drawing, visual identification of this disease and the technologies that facilitated this process speak of a complex entanglement of interiority and exteriority, of the self and the social.

To me, Gonzalez-Torres's *"Untitled" (Bloodworks)* offers a complex answer to this entanglement by being a self- and a group portrait all at once.

THE FIFTH LINE: A BLIND RETURN
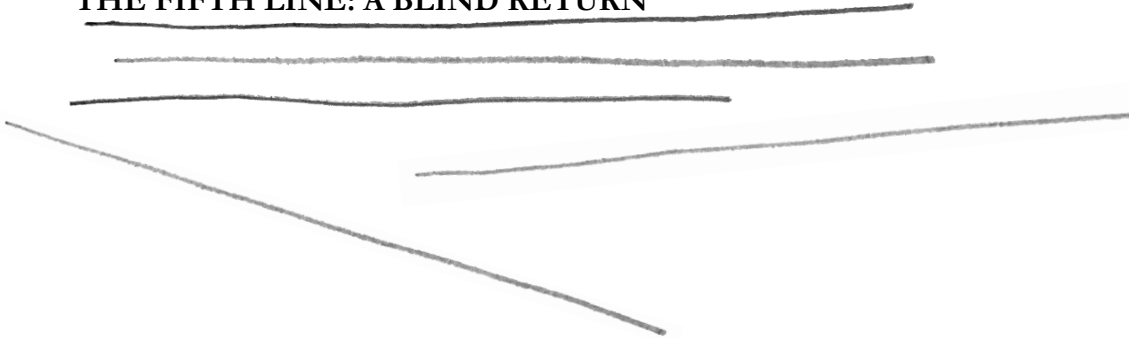
It's time to draw this essay to a close.

I've wandered far, admittedly digressed at times, and indulged various lines of thought. But if I look back at this drawing, this sketch made in word and image, I feel a sense of relief. It's time to set my pen down.

Looking back, I'm struck by the different ways in which drawing adds shade and contour to our world, the way it marks us as human. *Here you are*, it seems to suggest, or *there you were*. It places and locates us in ways that speak of our experience of time and proximity. Sometimes, drawing speaks of a desire for continuity. At times, it shows our own awareness that it, too, will stop. We draw lines to underscore, to connect, to separate. We draw them to cross out. We draw them to say that this is as far as we'll go.

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[18] As Laura Allen and Luke Caspar Pearson hold (2016: 7), 'drawing has always had an implicit relationship to technology. While drawing is often framed as an instinctive and intuitive act, we should not forget that many of the principles we take for granted today were developed through technologies as much as through the hand'.

[19] Wailoo demonstrates that, far from being neutral and uncontentious, diagnostic technologies, such as the HIV test, are marked by a range of social, political, moral and medical debates (1997: 1–2). Our understanding of HIV/AIDS is thus the result of 'a constellation of technologies, attitudes, and social relations', all of which 'inform how we define disease' and the subjects affected by it (Wailoo, 1997: 15).

Drawing is such an intimate affair. It nurtures those desires and fears that often lie in excess of words. I see, I desire, I lose, I draw.

And I draw.

And I draw.

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Dressing up the Self: Feminism and the Anomalous Art of Zanele Muholi and Cindy Sherman

Stella Viljoen [1*]

ABSTRACT

For Lauren Berlant (1998), intimacy begins with shared narratives or narratives about something shared. In other words, we desire our story as humans to be set within 'zones of familiarity and comfort' (Berlant, 1998: 281). How do we know we have achieved familiarity and comfort? Berlant says, that we know it is enough to intimate or gesture, to communicate with brevity because of a communal language (like the intimacy of a shared joke). But, says Berlant (1998: 281), 'the inwardness of the intimate is met by a corresponding publicness'. This 'public' side is related to what she terms the 'institutions of intimacy' that we create in the hope that these will give us 'a life' (by which she presumably means a life of intimacy). Might Berlant consider Art as an institution of intimacy, a means of creating a shared language by which we can enter into zones of familiarity and comfort but also by which we can point out the flaws in each other's thinking and laugh together at the ways in which we have failed at intimacy? Berlant describes a tension between desire and 'therapy' (or what one might think of as a response to immorality) and says this tension governs our 'modern, mass-mediated sense of intimacy'. The article explores whether one might think of feminism in the photographic self-portraits of Cindy Sherman and Zanele Muholi as a form of 'therapy', a means of correcting the violence we commit both knowingly and, as is often the case, out of a kind of willing ignorance.

Keywords: Zanele Muholi, Cindy Sherman, camp, queer, visual art

INTRODUCTION

I find the tension between the intimate and the public especially pertinent in feminist art which has especially in the last few years afforded me the opportunity to talk to students about the feminisms of earlier generations that suddenly seemed relevant after the #metoo movement. This essay reflects on the slow intimacy between feminisms, the progress out of and in reaction to each other, but secondly, the way these feminisms have responded to human intimacies, especially when these responses are facilitated by the camera.

The camera both engenders intimacy and is in violation of healthy intimacies, even those that govern our politics as feminists. If feminism is a house, then I'd like to spend time in the dressing room of this home, to explore the arts of theatricality, mimicry and dress-up as feminist strategies. I'm writing here about two artists, Cindy Sherman and Zanele Muholi, from radically different parts of the world and different phases of feminism and who may not even identify as feminist[1] but who are both interested in a form of photographic theatre that has meaning beyond being merely poignantly entertaining. Sherman dates from an era of radical feminism in America where the gendering of the gaze was especially important to those thinking through the violences inherent in much heteronormative media. Muholi, works in a far more intersectional way, and although also concerned with the gaze, is a more determined critic of particularly *white* heteronormativity. Their practice is a critique also of feminism that draws on Queer Theory and Black Consciousness discourses. Both artists, however, use their own bodies and identities in what feels like an act of political re-orientation but occurs in a way that is cheeky, cheesy and angrily

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[1] Muholi describes their empathy for those who are marginalised as emanating from their own experiences of being side-lined … for instance, at an African feminist forum in 2006 where some of the feminists felt uncomfortable at having to share the intellectual space with lesbians (Muholi in Baderoon, 2011: 409).

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joyous. For this reason, it seems fair, if not entirely intuitive, to compare their most Camp artistic expressions and to ask what the shared language between them is and whether this might constitute an inside joke.

The recent (2012–) self-portraits of South African artist, Zanele Muholi, dressed in Afro-Camp costumes, are both adamant in their critique of mainstream feminisms and ambivalent in their pastiche of earlier performances within the movement, especially those mediated by the camera. They refuse the easy moralism of the past but also reach back to the ethics of an older feminist tradition of the 1970s and 1980s in which for instance the American, Cindy Sherman, operated.

SHERMAN AND THE *FILM STILLS*

Cynthia Morris Sherman, the youngest of five children, was born in 1954 and grew up in Huntington Beach, Long Island, where she loved to play dress-up. In other words, she came of age at a time when American homes were beset with television screens and American dreams were moulded by the movies. She enrolled for an art degree at Buffalo State College, where she flunked a photography course and started dating fellow student and artist, Robert Longo. Around this time, she began dressing up in earnest and taking photographs of herself. These often-serialised self-portraits spoke of gendered becoming like that of the nerd-girl 'evolving' into the vamp or a 'real' magazine cover girl devolving into Sherman's goofy parody. After college Longo and Sherman became part of the Pictures Generation, a New York-based collective from the 1970s that included Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince, Barbara Kruger and other artists obsessed with the simulacral nature of the image-world. Douglas Crimp, writing in the *Pictures* exhibition catalogue of 1977 explained,

> To an ever-greater extent our experience is governed by pictures, pictures in newspapers and magazines, on television and in the cinema. Next to these pictures first-hand experience begins to retreat, to seem more and more trivial. While it once seemed that pictures had the function of interpreting reality, it now seems that they have usurped it (in Allen, 2021: 14).

Crimp argued that these artists approached the media glut with an astute criticality … but was this really true of Sherman, who was left out of the original *Pictures* exhibition but later included in Crimp's revised essay for the art journal *October* in 1979 (Allen, 2021: 16)?

Her *Untitled Film Stills*, for instance, are eight-by-ten-inch black-and-white photographs in which she herself acts as model, make-up artist, stylist and director with a relish for fancy-dress that borders on the narcissistic. These incredibly famous *Film Stills* – seventy in all – made between 1977 and 1980 feature her in a remarkable array of female tropes that mash-up the highbrow and lowbrow fantasies of Hollywood, the European avant-garde and B-grade cinema.[2] She is new to the city, fighting with her partner in the kitchen, leaning out of a doorframe in her underwear, posing in the bathroom mirror, a sorority sister reaching for a book, a jilted lover… all enacted with a pornographic self-interest…and this is the point. In every image she takes pleasure in *being* 'visual pleasure'. If there is a critique here, it is confused by her desire to be desirable, her complicity in a spectacle of promise. And yet this speculative future is bound to a nostalgia for a cinematic past.

It was Roland Barthes who in *Camera Lucida* (1981: 15) observed that cameras 'were clocks for seeing.' In the introduction to their book on time and photography, Jan Baetens, Alexander Streitberger and Hilde Van Gelder (2010: viii) assert that even current critical thinking about photography is generally guilty of a 'blindness to the complexity of photography's temporalities, for it is no longer possible to use the word "time" in singular'. Sherman seems deeply invested in the project of stopping or fixing time, capturing an elusive moment before it slips from memory (as happens with the moving image). But she presents a photographic 'record' (or 'still' like those used to promote feature films) that operates on the thin line between movement and stasis, the narrative and non-narrative, the fictional and the documentary and as such the temporality she relays is by no means singular. The *Film Stills* reverberate with the tension between the unitary photograph and celluloid film strip as a testimony to the multiplicity and complexity of time in her art and the very real idea that we are all living "life, the movie" (Gabler, 2000). Sherman reconciles her interest in feminine desirability with her notion of time-regained so that our perverse hunger for a past simplicity is gendered. In effect Sherman genders time.

In *Untitled Film Still #3*[3] (1977), for instance, a moment of womanly domesticity is recreated that simultaneously feels 'now' and 'then'. A woman with a blonde 'bob' (obviously a wig), stands at the kitchen sink wearing an apron and surrounded by dishes. She is beautiful and sexy. A coy glance is cast from the heroine to an off-camera other. Her chin rests on her shoulder in a gesture of femininity as she pauses to consider what the presumed 'he' is saying. Time slows down as we wait for him to finish what he is saying. Her right hand touches her waist and the belt of

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[2] See, for instance, at: https://artlead.net/journal/modern-classics-cindy-sherman-untitled-film-stills/.
[3] The image is available at: https://www.moma.org/collection/works/56520.

her apron while her left arm scaffolds her body against the edge of the kitchen sink as she too waits. On the countertop we see an empty jar, a bottle of dishwashing soap, a drying rack, mug and the end of a cooking pot (out of focus). There is a shelf above the sink but it is mostly cropped out of the image. The woman's body and pert breasts face the sink while she looks back, over her shoulder at the unseen antagonist. Her bodily reticence to face him, is the source of the drama as we, the viewer, contemplate her sexy boredom and longsuffering.

In a different image (*Untitled Film Still #13*, 1978),[4] Sherman appears as a 1950s student, reaching for a book in the library. This time she wears a virginal white blouse. Again, she looks back over her shoulder and again there is a passivity about her. Is she waiting for the viewer's gaze to turn away or the camera shutter? Either way, she is poised and appears to perform a kind of knowing-naiveté. The books in general, not just the one she is reaching for, seem like props in a schlock film, shot clandestinely in a university library because the movie is low-budget. She doesn't even look at the book she is extracting, as if the book itself is inconsequential. Her blonde bangs, peeking out beneath a headband, seem almost too perfect … but the viewer suspends their disbelief and refuses the hint at a wig. Her shapely breasts are pushed out and her back arched. She is young but not ignorant of her power. In such scenes, 'woman' is preserved in moments that, in real life, pass unnoticed but which have power when captured cinematically. The point is that they canonise gendered subjectivities and mannerisms in ways that pretend to offer an ironic parody but feel so seductive that they may well do the opposite and merely entrench our desire for a spectacular femininity (and whiteness).[5] And each persona reveals something of the interest Sherman herself has in the filmic stereotypes that one is supposed to disdain (especially as a feminist) but which seem even more poignant when representative of a period that is past and can only be brought back through the camera lens.

In terms of being feminist, these images complicate and unmask libidinal desire, a surrealism that feels weirdly honest or 'real.' Yet, this recognition of the signified real occurs even whilst the viewer begins to understand the problem with mimesis: 'an imitation of reality produces the desire to imitate' (Avgikos, 2003: 340). The question is whether Sherman's *Film Stills* interrupt 'automatic scopophilic consumption' (Avgikos, 2003: 339) and infuse the libidinal look of the viewer with a sufficient amount of 'dread and dis-ease' (Avgikos, 2003: 339) to deem them 'feminist'. They are obviously naïve in terms of race but do they even succeed in critiquing the construction of woman as Mulveyan visual pleasure?

Mary Anne Doane's (1988–1989: 46) famous consideration and reconsideration of femininity as masquerade is a means of creating a 'glitch' in a semiotic system that stipulates a claustrophobic closeness and immediacy for the feminine, a bodily proximity that situates the feminine outside language. Doane (1988–1989: 47) conceptualises masquerade as a feminist strategy but it still presupposes 'a logic dictated by masculine position' and as such is not 'a joyful or affirmative play but … an anxiety-ridden compensatory gesture,' a position that is 'psychically painful for the woman.' Are Sherman's images 'painful' enough? Do they cause us to question or do these mythic generalisations naturalise femininity-as-appearance and make it interesting via a technological spectatorship?

The *Film Stills* are thus emblematic of slow intimacy in two (counterintuitive) ways. First, she uses a camera, which has the effect of radically slowing down, even paralysing time. Second hers is a fashion system that is 'of the moment' but also refuses to disown its own past. Let me explain why these assertions are counterintuitive. In terms of the first assertion, Lutz Koepnick (2014: 57) explains that photography is historically cast as a means of 'rapid seeing' (not slow seeing). Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag all bemoaned the way the camera engendered 'fast seeing'. But Koepnick (2014: 57) argues that,

> photography's task was not simply to slice individual moments out of the continuum of time and embalm them for future generations. It was to capture critical contractions of temporality: instants pregnant with historical energies and meaning, sudden events rupturing the ordinary flow of time, extraordinary folds within the fabric of the everyday that had the power to speak for larger personal or political reconfigurations.

In other words, it has the potential to slow down our perception, unlock the 'optical unconscious, bless us with epiphanic insight, and serve as uncanny memory prosthesis. Yet it can only do so because photographers understand how to use their camera's speed as a medium to encounter and withstand the otherwise unstoppable rush of time' (Koepnick 2014: 59). Koepnick (2014: 59) proposes that when the twentieth-century street photographer, Henri Cartier-Bresson, renounced the camera for the paintbrush, he 'hoped to escape the camera's presumed complicity with modern acceleration, speed, and transitoriness, whereas the true challenge would have been to break away from a thinking about both modern temporality and the art of photographic seeing that cannot but envision slowness as merely a leftover from the past amid the velocity of modern culture' (Koepnick 2014:

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[4] The image is available at: https://www.moma.org/collection/works/56576.

[5] Although not the focus of this article, it is worth noting that Sherman seems, at the very least, naive about the whiteness she and her characters occupy, an assertion that is complicated by her subway series from the mid-1970s. This collection of caricatures includes Sherman problematically dressed and made-up as a black, woman commuter.

59). Where Cartier-Bresson failed, Sherman succeeds. Hers is an intuitive understanding of the 'logic of the camera', it's 'layering of different durations, the simultaneous copresence of dissimilar temporalities, as one of the key features of what defines modernity as modern' (2014: 60). As Koepnick (2014: 60) maintains, 'even photographers can go slow without violating the logic of their medium' and this is exactly what Sherman achieves, a

> revision of modern culture as a sight of pluralistic, frequently illegible, and often incompatible trajectories of change. There is not one time that is at play in modern culture but a whole panoply of different temporalities. And to slow down is, not to abandon the modern altogether, but to behold and probe the overlapping durations that structure modern time.

In terms of the second point, one might say that where fashion is concerned, 'the depreciation of the past in favour of the present is what keeps the wheels of the system turning' (Cronberg 2014: 10). Sherman's stills are so very current, so very 'fashionable' yet they also provide the sweet pleasure of cinematic delay. They are both 'of the moment' and richly timeless or nostalgic. As Eva Respini (2012: 20) points out, they mimic the feminine ideal held by the generation to which Sherman's mother belonged – 'women that had cinched-in waists and pointed bras, lots of make-up, stiff hair, high heels, and things like that'. The *mise-en-scène* of every still seems richly redolent of a different time, a former time, even if the exact moment is vague. Nostalgia is the means and the objective and retro styling is indexical of retro personas. Sherman co-opts a vague but temporally seductive otherness from the filmic genres that are the shared language between her and the viewer. There is comfort and familiarity here because this is a place of otherness that, whilst it mimics reality, also renders it undesirable.

This methodology of first slowness and second nostalgia attests to a feminism that refused *and* delivered instant gratification because it represented a self-conscious spoof of time. My sense is that Sherman's parodic stills play-act at feminism whilst indulging a game of dress-up that feels too enjoyable, too much like a guilty pleasure to be a real critique of the male-gaze.

CAMP

Susan Sontag's 1964 articulation of the sexual pastiche that is Camp is useful here. *Notes on Camp* is not a feminist text exactly but, of course, its emphasis on (dramatic) irony, its mockery of everything serious, signalled the end of the masculinist sanctimony of the (especially American) art scene of the time – most notably that of the Abstract Expressionists. Her broad assertions were that first, Camp involves 'the love of the exaggerated, the "off", of things-being-what-they-are-not,' (1964: 3) that 'Camp sees everything in quotation marks', most especially gender ('it's not a lamp, but a "lamp"; not a woman, but a "woman"') (1964: 4). Second, that Camp 'reveals self-parody [and] reeks of self-love' (1964: 6). It is a performance, a disinterested means of enacting the self as the object of affection. Third, that it is also 'something like a logic of taste', a means of 'seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon' (1964: 1–2). This means of aestheticism places the emphasis on a deliberate superficiality, a limitation in terms of what can be achieved politically through Camp. As Sontag (1964: 2) put it, '[t]o emphasize style is to slight content.' For Sontag (and Sherman) an 'essential element of the aesthetic distinction of Camp is precisely that it represents a seriousness that fails' (1964: 7). Camp poses as Art, yet falters when it has to provide the content required of Art. As such, Sontag (1964: 1) was completely right that we are 'strongly drawn to Camp, and almost as strongly offended by it.' Camp 'converts the serious into the frivolous' and, as such, 'requires a deep sympathy modified by revulsion.'[6]

Thus, feminists celebrate Sherman perhaps without understanding that through the *Film Stills* she was 'merely' offering a *Camp* Feminism – a feminism that was possibly too involved with itself, too enamoured with its own reflection … and thus today feels a little out of date.

But the fact that it is a Camp performance doesn't mean it isn't real or honest or truthful. Richard Avedon's famous essay on 'borrowed dogs' serves as a useful reminder of this tension.[7] Avedon explains his family's deep pleasure in creating family portraits when he was a child. They dressed up, posed in front of other people's houses and most importantly borrowed dogs. In looking at a family album he finds eleven different dogs in the photographs from one year. This fiction or more aptly deception seems to be the kind of Camp performance that invokes laughter or pity at the need for a lie. But, in fact, as Avedon argues it is far more revealing of the spirit of his family than any portrait in their real home could have been. As he explains, 'I can understand being troubled by this idea – that all portraits are performance – because it seems to imply some kind of artifice that conceals the truth about the sitter. But that's not it at all. The point is that you can't get at the thing itself, the real nature of the

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[6] This summary of Sontag's explanation of Camp is taken from Viljoen (2022).
[7] It is unclear when the essay was first written but it was republished in 2002 in *Richard Avedon Portraits*.

sitter, by stripping away the surface. The surface is all you've got. You can only get beyond the surface by working with the surface' (2002: n. p.).

Sherman is the master of surface, and this is what makes her *Film Stills* so difficult to assess politically, especially given that the discourses associated with feminism have shifted. What would contemporary artists, concerned with veneer and the power of the screen, make of Sherman's *Film Stills* and how might they develop concepts her work seemed unable to explore?

MUHOLI AND *SOMNYAMA NGONYAMA*

The artist I want to present as an answer to the question of a more contemporary interpretation of Camp (and feminism), is the internationally-acclaimed South African, Zanele Muholi, whose art was infamously described by the South African Minister of Arts and Culture (Lulu Xingwana in 2009) as 'immoral, offensive'.

The youngest of eight children, Muholi was born in 1972 in Umlazi, Durban and studied Advanced Photography at the famed Market Photo Workshop in Newtown, Johannesburg. In 2009 Muholi completed an MFA: Documentary Media at Ryerson University, Toronto. In 2002 Muholi, who describes themselves as a visual activist, co-founded the Forum for Empowerment of Women and in 2009 Inkanyiso, a forum for queer and visual (activist) media. They also facilitate access to art spaces for youth practitioners through various participatory projects and continue to provide photography workshops for young people through PhotoXP.[8]

Muholi's photography is a means of 'differencing the canon,' to use Griselda Pollock's phrase (Thomas, 2010: 422) or perhaps critiquing the feminist art that went before it, but failed to anticipate it. Feminist scholars like Desiree Lewis (2005) and Pumla Dineo Gqola (2006) have analysed Muholi's early work as a means of making visible the invisible lives of queer women. Muholi's work uses '"minor intimacies" to push tacit fantasies into being' (Berlant, 1998: 285, 287). In an article from 2010, Kylie Thomas uses Barthes' legendary notion of the 'punctum' as a device for what she terms 'queer reading'. Thomas (2010: 421) argues that Muholi's early work is indexical of their political strategy of 'passing' – 'passing *away*, passing *between* states of gendered being, and passing *through* the prohibitions against making lesbian experience visible and mourning lesbian loss' (emphasis in original). In this way, Muholi queers memorial photography (Thomas, 2010: 421) and renders it a means of both grieving the slow violence enacted upon queer women and the failures of a feminism that refused to see this.

But it is Muholi's more recent series that reconfigures or re-imagines queer activism. *Somnyama Ngonyama* is a series of self-portraits which started in 2012 and is ongoing.[9] Muholi appears with a tiara and Rapunzel-like hair knotted around their neck. They are photographed from the side with combs stacked as a titanic head-dress. They wear a wooden stool like a habit and in a different image, porcupine quills grow upwards like well-manicured extensions from their skull. Black rubber gloves are inflated and worn around Muholi's torso and head like an elaborate and regal cape. Sunglasses are piled on top of their head. Surgical masks are worn over their mouth and in their hair. Or they recline in a field, both wearing and disappearing into the grass around them.

In *Ngwane I, Oslo*[10] from 2018, wreath-like Peacock feathers are twisted before Muholi's naked form. The wreath is extravagant, opulent. The 'eyespots' or *ocilli* of certain feathers face forward as if deliberately arranged. Muholi's naked torso behind the wreath feels illicit – the viewers see too much. The coal-black feathers energetically flick outward. Beaded necklaces divide their body in two and accentuate the majesty of the portrait. An almost military head-piece comprises feathers spilling over a basket-like structure. Muholi gazes at the viewer with a challenging indifference. Here too the exaggerated blackness of the subject, costume and background are what shifts the image out of the realm of the benign and into the sphere of political or civil imagination. This is not merely a response to the feminist critics of the camera like Jane Gaines, Lola Young and bell hooks who bemoaned the looking relations of white spectators, this portrait is rather reminiscent of the films of Safi Faye, the Senegalese doyen of African film, who created fictional-ethnographic documentaries that were both poetic and militant but typically situated 'her work and gaze centrally within the communities whose voice she prioritizes' (Thackway, 2003: 151). Her films, and the photographs of Muholi, present the artist-director as the observer and observed, a remarkably personal casting, in other words (Riesco, 2011).

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[8] In the artist's statement of the exhibition of *Somnyama Ngonyama* at the Norval Foundation in 2022, Muholi describes themselves as a visual activist who wants to 're-write a Black queer and trans visual history of South Africa for the world to know of our resistance and existence at the height of hate crimes in SA and beyond.' For a full biography of Muholi see the webpage of the Stevenson Gallery (https://www.stevenson.info/artist/zanele-muholi/biography).

[9] Muholi won the 2019 'Best Photography Book Award' by the Kraszna-Krausz Foundation for *Somnyama Ngonyama: Hail, The Dark Lioness* (https://www.stevenson.info/artist/zanele-muholi/biography).

[10] Muholi juxtaposes isiZulu, their home language, in the titles with the often western names of the places where the photographs were taken. The image can be accessed at: https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/39041.

Somnyama Ngonyama has been exhibited in Norway, Hong Kong, America, England, Argentina, Sweden, Scotland, Germany and South Africa and Muholi credits a life of constant travel and displacement as part of the reason this series came into being. They explain:

> This shuttling around sometimes makes me feel disoriented, disconnected and almost homeless. The culturally dominant images of black women start to infiltrate my soul and function as a constant reminder that such images still inform how black women are perceived here and now. One way that I deal with this exoticised self/other is to exorcise those images through my photography (Muholi, https://www.stevenson.info/exhibition/1440).

In *Fisani, Parktown*,[11] from 2016, Muholi wears a necklace and headpiece made from giant safety-pins that form chains and networks around their head and neck. They look away from the camera and again merge with the pitch-black backdrop. Muholi uses household props to challenge racial stereotypes and create portraits that feel like a homage to their mother who was a domestic worker. Time stands still and the viewer is forced to pause, wait and ultimately resist the urge to move on. The work is an act of temporal activism that creates a space of safe (but not naïve) waiting. Exotic dreams become the strategy for revising memory, a revision that eroticises a refusal to forget.

Writing about temporality in this series, Ashraf Jamal (2017: 162) argues that photography is a-chronological, it refuses to be temporally fixed, preferring instead to operate somewhere between the 'then', the 'now' and the 'yet-to-come'. This a-historicity is self-evident in Sherman's *Film Stills* but is also apparent in *Somnyama Ngonyama*. Jamal (2017: 162) following Geoff Dyer (2012) argues that 'photographs actually speak more about other photographs', past photographs for instance, than about current reality and wonders why, if this is the case, we still expect photography to explain the world?

Somnyama Ngonyama is important because it signals what Jamal (2017: 161) calls 'a vital reconfiguration of blackness', it exposes *and* employs a 'raced optic' (Jamal, 2017: 161). As Muholi (https://www.stevenson.info/exhibition/1440) themselves explains, '[b]y exaggerating the darkness of my skin tone, I'm reclaiming my blackness, which I feel is continuously performed by the privileged other. My reality is that I do not mimic being black; it is my skin, and the experience of being black is deeply entrenched in me. Just like our ancestors, we live as black people 365 days a year, and we should speak without fear.' Although it's meaning is oblique, what the series tells us about the world, is that it is possible to evade the spectacle of race, the fiction of racial authenticity expected by the viewer, whether in terms of the past, present or future, whilst at the same time owning the 'experience of being black', claiming it, in other words. Jamal (2017: 173) comments, 'I see these photographs as having radically traduced shame: no afflicting shadow lingers in these images in which blackness, applied like any other accessory – black on black – further deflects the photographs from a pathological engine-room of meaning.'

Whilst it is important to acknowledge 'the manner in which [certain bodies have] been positioned and viewed as a site of numerous struggles in post-colonial African discourse' and we see this recognition in Muholi's early work (Matebeni, 2013: 405), Zethu Matebeni (2013: 405), writing about queer intimacy and race, points out that there are other ways of looking, that see beyond colonial constraints, that look in order to see 'pleasure, joy, beauty, intimacy and eroticism'. *Somnyama Ngonyama* drags (pun intended) the Camp performances of Sherman into the realm of racial politics in Africa in the 21st century, but, not unlike Sherman, does so in a way that permits *joyous* looking. The series provides a pastiche of the canonical self-portrait, a carnivalesque parody of the feminist mirror-image, recast for Africa. It alludes to the ethnographic photography (or more rightly pornography) of the colonial project but is somehow less sanctimonious than the portraits of even Sherman who is also trying to undo a way of looking.

Ariella Azoulay (2012: 3) uses the concept of 'civil imagination' to describe a photographic practice that exposes systemic injustice in creative and empowering ways. She believes photography can engender a kind of civil discourse that refuses to identify a community or population with the disaster or injustice inflicted on them. 'Civil discourse is not a fiction' says Azoulay (2012: 3), it is the process by which relations are cultivated within and between the citizens of a particular country and those denied citizenship, whether literally or figuratively. To overcome systemic injustice or oppression, especially that which took place in the past, 'requires an act of imagination' (2012: 3):

> This achievement – the fact of becoming a citizen in practice – sometimes obscures the enormous imaginative leap that was required in order to conceive of subjects as partners in the shaping of the regime who simultaneously possess the right to be protected from it. What is at stake is not the simple exercise of imagining something in one's mind's eye, for example. Rather, I am concerned with the capacity known as 'political imagination,' that is to say, the ability to imagine a political state of being that deviates significantly from the prevailing state of affairs (2012: 3).

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[11] Access image at: https://www.stevenson.info/exhibition/1440/work/70.

Muholi's series is a powerful example of the way political or civil imagination can erode a regime that dehumanises through its failures to recognise and affirm the dignity of its subjects. It also addresses a more universal bigotry, both past and present, via parodic exaggeration that feels decolonial because it mocks and arrogates a stereotypical imaginary of 'Africa'. This observation is perhaps too sweeping to be really helpful, but *Somnyama Ngonyama* is a fairy tale that is necessarily as generalisable as mythology whilst addressing problems that feel especially relevant to and articulate on the South African situation. As Mark Sealy (2022: 6) puts it, '[w]hen photographs knead on colonial meanings and disturb our sense of humanity, reminding us of the pains people have endured and the gains they have made, they can help us to acknowledge that we must hold all the world's memories as precious.' The point is that the imaginative creativity of each portrait is empowering because it is both 'political' in Azoulay's sense *and* playful (meaning it challenges the status quo without voicing overt political arguments). One possibly smiles but it is a smile filled with pathos since one is also moved by the righteous anger behind each image.

In her important work on Black women's satire as a representational strategy and site of political inversion, Jessyka Finley (2016: 236–237), remembers the acerbic wit of stalwart feminist, Florence, 'Flo' Kennedy:

> One of her most quotable jabs targeted a man who was questioning her while she was on the lecture circuit with Gloria Steinem in the 1970s. Addressing Kennedy directly at a lecture in the South, the man stood and asked if she was a lesbian, to which she responded, 'Are you my alternative?'

Finley (2016: 237) points out that 'Kennedy's satiric humor delegitimizes [the audience member's] manhood, by calling into question *his* desirability as a sexual object.' Not unlike Kennedy's retort, Muholi's performances silence the racial and gendered delegitimisation of the art historical canon. Their gaze inverts the authority of the kind of onlooker whose haughty eyes need to be met with dramatic ridicule. Muholi's camera serves as the mirror that draws the 'outlaw position' (Thomas, 2010: 421) into the realm of representation. The images are deeply personal or 'erotic' but they also offer 'spectacles of promise and disappointment' (Strauss, 2014: 471) in so far as they visualise 'corporeal disciplining, violence, and gendered' performativity (Strauss, 2014: 472). I use the term 'erotic' in the way Audre Lorde (1978) used it. For Lorde, 'The fear that we cannot grow beyond whatever distortions we may find within ourselves keeps us docile and loyal and obedient, externally defined' (1978: n. p.) but 'our erotic knowledge empowers us' because it is 'a reminder of [our] capacity for feeling' (1978: n. p.).

Somnyama Ngonyama – isiZulu for 'Hail the Dark Lioness' – represents a 'lightness at the heart of blackness, a refusal, through self-objectification, of being objectified in turn' (Jamal, 2017: 172). Muholi provides a playful parody of the performance-driven modes of self-portraiture in which Cindy Sherman operated but, unlike Sherman, employs what bell hooks described as the 'oppositional gaze'. The double consciousness of Du Bois, who recognised the problem of seeing yourself through the eyes of an other, is picked up by Fanon for whom 'this "look," from – so to speak – the place of the Other, fixes us, not only in its violence, hostility and aggression, but in the ambivalence of its desire' (in hooks, 1992: 116). hooks, however, remembers the way her family and community laughed when encountering television programmes that so artlessly and earnestly represented or misrepresented race in her youth. She thinks of the visual contestation and ridicule they felt as viewers as initiating 'critical, interrogating black looks' (1992: 117). 'The private realm of television screens or dark theatres could unleash the repressed gaze' or 'oppositional gaze' (1992: 118) hoped for by Du Bois and Fanon. Here, specifically black, women spectators of the 1960s could return the gaze, could look 'without a structure of domination overseeing the gaze' (1992: 118). For hooks this was an important step in her understanding of her own right to look. Where Sherman feigns ignorance of the camera and seems to earnestly desire that her viewers will suspend their disbelief, Muholi looks directly at the camera-viewer with an indifference that not only feels oppositional but therefore also queer.

QUEER

For Sara Ahmed (2006: 2), at the most basic level, a queer phenomenology is a means of disorienting us. It directs us toward and away from objects, experiences and ideas. Ahmed (2006: 2) says 'it matters how we arrive at the places we do' and it is this genealogy of ideas or process of arrival that interests me in terms of these disparate artists. Muholi disorients in ways that Sherman did not. Both seem to enjoy the game of dress-up. Both use the camera as an implement of *jouissance*, but where Sherman's *Film Stills* feel like they are endorsing (or, at the very least, indulging) the mechanism they pretend to critique, Muholi's arguments are less emollient. Theirs is a gratifyingly obvious satire, by which I mean exposure or naming of the minstrel show that is demanded by contemporary Art.

Sokari Ekine (2013: 78) identifies two lines of argumentation regarding the politicising of queer identities in Africa. The first is a fundamentalist belief that various religious texts dictate that queer sexualities are un-African

(see also Baderoon, 2011: 392). The second, emanates from the Global North and specifically a colonial interpretation of African sexuality as perverse, and pathologises Africa as the source of violent homophobia (Ekine, 2013: 78). Muholi responds to both of these narratives via a visuality that is both 'African' and queer. It is a deeply ethical practice, in part, because it is their body that is on display. It presents an optical solution to the problems identified by Ekine and succeeds in creating 'characters' that are aspirational even whilst or because they are acerbic, witty. This fumerism (Willett, Willett and Sherman, 2012: 226) or furious humour is less obvious in the commercial art that seems to reference *Somnyama Ngonyama*. Mehita Iqani (2023: 72–73), for instance, describes fashion designer Rich Mnisi's insta-campaign for his expensive black handbags as indicative of a kind of queer luxury not only because Mnisi is proudly gay or because the advertisements present a naked, muscular, masculine man as the potential user of the handbag but because 'the bold over-emphasis of black tones, in background, body, and the leather of the bag, speaks to a sensibility in which Black pride in the form of a luxurious, minimalist celebration of ebony skin tones is merged with celebratory queer consumerism.' And yet, the campaign takes itself so seriously that it is hard to discern the same undertone of parodic irony that is so powerful in *Somnyama Ngonyama*. In Muholi's photographs, the allusion to historical violence bubbles to the surface to complicate the almost-humour which leads to a feeling of affective dis-ease in the viewer, but is nevertheless irreverent.

The series is also not an example of what Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò (2022) terms 'elite capture'. In other words, it does not co-opt the rhetoric of queer precarity whilst indulging capitalist aspirations of class or a racial reductionism. It does not reveal one kind of erasure whilst allowing another. Jasbir Puar (2007, 2013: 336) has criticised the contradictions of liberalism in America, where a tolerance of queer politics is used to excuse other kinds of oppression and violence. Homonationalism, as she calls it, is a hermeneutic whereby racialised discourses on security are instrumentalised in the service of anti-blackness even by those who champion the rights of LBGTQIA+ communities. Muholi's *Somnyama Ngonyama* is not a snapshot of neoliberal multiculturalism. It does not represent the homonationalism of Puar or the elite capture of Táíwò in South African terms. Rather, it is a powerful counterpoint to the anti-blackness, classism and other exclusionary practises of these discourses. Muholi's series reinforces queer, black subjectivities as agentic and able to repeal the soft power that ratifies, for instance, gay-friendly racism. It provides a fantastical and radical alterity from the settler colonialism that is an ally to queer, liberal subject-hood. Muholi's work does not make racism less intelligible in the name of a queer visibility or vice-versa. Instead, their work provides a truly intersectional politics that simultaneously destabilises transphobia and anti-blackness. But unlike their early work, they do not only turn the debate inward in this series but also turn it outward, to include others; the series invites outsiders into the fable. It welcomes an audience to the theatre. In other words, the portraits do not police gender and race but provide a kind of theatre that feels radical because it is both angry and jubilant, both private and public. Even whilst employing an acerbic wit, the discourse is hospitable. Muholi places 'African' and 'Black' in quotation marks by exaggeration but as with the borrowed dogs, this performance is not just about 'passing' or asserting a pseudo-realness, it actually points to something very real, what they have termed a 'gender within gender' (in Baderoon, 2011: 390). The intimate reality of these works is that they re-orient us toward, they humanise a subjectivity and political identity rendered invisible not only by the 'epistemic coloniality' (Ratele, 2020: 3) of the art-world but also that of feminism.

CONCLUSION

Is it fair to compare these photographers as feminists? Does this make sense when they refuse this terminology themselves and regardless of this does the ornery-ness of the photographic medium – its constant need for attention and refusal to know its place (Malcolm, 1997: i) imply that their art cannot really do the political work of feminism? I have argued that the artworks of both these artists prick or wound (like *punctum*), but also stitch these artists and the viewers of this art together through an 'ideal of publicness' (Berlant, 1998: 284) that celebrates *and* critiques the too easy construction of race and gender in the media and Arts. This is the function of not just feminist labour, but all good art. It binds us even as it exposes our prejudices, failures and short-comings. Perhaps this is what public intimacy looks like.

But, it is also important to ask whether their art really involves a leap of the imagination, a rupture of intellectual boundaries? It is surely plausible that that which is intended to fracture a mode of representation, in fact, reinforces it. What, then, in the words of Ariella Azoulay (2012: 3), is political imagination and does it require a shift in the way we see reality or is it enough that the imaginary is representative of or iconic of reality? An iconic image is one that is culturally produced and becomes mythic because of its religious, political or social significance and recognisability. People who are the subjects of icons can themselves become stereotypes and lose their personal individuality. The icon can be affective and transformative or it can blunt the viewer, desensitise them. My analyses of both artists involved a kind of over-seeing and under-seeing but the point was that Sherman's *Film Stills* are still iconic – they make a certain culture of looking more visible – but they also visualise her own infatuation with the iconography of Hollywood. They do not simply critique or call out, they further the project of filmic scopophilia.

Somnyama Ngonyama on the other hand is critical in a way that exposes current and past tropes of bigotry and leaves one changed by this recognition. Both artists created work that is powerful in its naming of visual mythology, but Muholi succeeds in providing the reader with a call to arms, an invitation to political imagination.

Berlant says it is important to recognise the extent to which 'intimacy' (and the tension between desire and therapy at its core) is world-building. The world-building of Sherman, as this article has argued, is illustrative of desire, and this is immensely helpful, but the world built by Muholi is therapeutic because it reveals the ways desire can pervert reality. In both cases, life writing has succeeded in slowing us down, prompting the thought that pace is also a *feminist* or, more rightly, a political concern. Finally, the self-portraits of Sherman and Muholi demonstrate that our aptitude for ethical world-building can progress over time and become better at producing slow intimacies.

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Intimate Things, Remembrance, Elegiac Remnants

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ABSTRACT

The embodied afterlife of the slow intimacy between wearer and worn is what makes the left-behind clothing of the beloved dead the memory-scented remnants of their life that we hold on to, wear, and wrap around ourselves for solace in an attempt to bring them back to us. It is not surprising, then, that the poetry of mourning or elegy, which is the focus of this article, is often shaped around such a mnemonic and metonymic intimate thing. But, as the poems discussed here intimate, the clothing of the dead also stirs less straightforward emotions and the conundrum of what to do with these remains sometimes surfaces love's hidden ambivalence. Tracing the afterlives of these remnants in examples from life and literature, this article offers a feminist reflection on the variable textures and textualities of slow intimacy as wearing, mourning, and reading practice.

Keywords: elegy, intimate things, memory, mourning, remnants

For my mother, whose too brief life left few material remnants.

We imbue some of the things we accrue and carry with us and sometimes lose with memories and use them as prompts for the stories we tell about our lives. Portable personal memorials, they materialise emotions and sensations from the past, vividly calling to mind a particular time, beloved person, animal companion, place. They make us remember ourselves as we once were or wanted to be. Most intimate of such intimately evocative things are the clothes worn over time by someone we had loved and lost. Peter Stallybrass movingly describes how his attempts at invoking the presence of his friend Allon White after his death had failed until he had worn the handmade jacket that had belonged to him to a conference and had been undone by emotion while reading his paper:

> And then, as I began to read, I was inhabited by his presence, taken over. If I wore the jacket, Allon wore me. He was there in the wrinkles of the elbows, wrinkles which in the technical jargon of sewing are called 'memory'; he was there in the stains at the very bottom of the jacket; he was there in the smell of the armpits. Above all, he was there in the smell. (Stallybrass, 1993: 36)

Mnemonic and metonymic, the clothes of the beloved dead are the reliquaries of their embodied presence in the persistence of smells, stains, creases, as much as of the unbearable absence their empty lifelessness confirms. Yes, we murmur, it was there … then … when … fingering memories like prayer beads in the ritual of remembering, scenting out faint traces of their dear body's familiar incense. 'When someone dies, the clothes are so sad. They have outlived / their usefulness and cannot get warm and full', says the speaker in an Emily Fragos poem, as she 'explain[s] death' to the personified clothes of the 'spouse' who 'is not coming back', consoling herself by consoling them (2015: n. p.). It is not surprising that we often find these mysterious, memory-saturated remnants of a life at the heart of the poetry of mourning or elegy, a genre Diane Fuss valorises for the 'considerable reparative powers' there are in its 'earnest attempt to buoy the living by holding on to the dead', prompting her to describe elegy as 'the poetic equivalent of a human life preserver' (2013: 6, 7).

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INTIMATE THINGS

A memory from my childhood, partly true, partly fabricated, as memories tend to be. I must have been five or six, and made curious by my young aunts' excited whispers, my grandmother's stern disapproval, I discovered, by eavesdropping outside my grandmother's bedroom, the latest small-town scandal of a man caught in adultery because he had kept the 'intimate things' of his lover in the cubby-hole of his car. The barely stifled wild hilarity of my recently married aunts' breathless riffing on the theme of things in holes and my grandmother's fierce admonishments were what drew me in then and delight me still. They were scandalised and fascinated too, turned-on by the intensity of his desire that would risk discovery by keeping the panties – as I discovered the 'intimate things' were – of his lover with him on his daily drives, perhaps even to the place where we lived. Its sexiness was breath-taking. What did it all mean, I wondered, this man driving around with the panties of a woman not his wife in his car, why were they there, had she lost them, how and where, was she looking for them, how did he find them, was he returning them to her, why were my aunts and grandmother so worked up about them, laughing and cross at the same time, and why did it all make me feel strangely feverish, enthralled, confused?

Prompted from the unconscious, my memory vignette materialises around the enigmatic 'intimate thing' at the centre of this scene of women's secret talking about secret, bodily things, underneath which tugs the undertow of an often awkward, shaming knowledge of embarrassing stains and smells. 'Intimate things' – that useful doubled euphemism for women's underwear and the 'private parts' 'down there' they touch and hide. Writing about secrets and hiding places, Gaston Bachelard notes that 'all intimacy hides from view' because intimacy is equated with what is private and associated with the sexual (in Hunt, 2014: 226). My aunts' charged metonymic play with the cubby-hole as vagina – a word that would have triggered wilder hilarity still, I imagine, but one they would not have used despite being nurses – registers the ambivalence triggered by the panties' public circulation, actual in the car's traversal of the neighbourhood and discursive in the gossip that spread like wildfire as the secret, female, sexual, shameful thing became, in Foucault's terms, 'an incitement to discourse' (1990: 34). The panties had, of course, been worn and were not clean as panties ought to be, as my young self knew then by taking her cue from the grandmother's especial indignation at this reiterated detail of the story. I believe now that what stirred my aunts' desire as much as it did their disquiet was the intimation that for the lovers the panties had not been a thing of shame but a treasured erotic mnemonic.

MOMENTS OF BEING

Preparing to write this paper a lifetime later, the memory unexpectedly surfaces as one of those 'moments of being' Virginia Woolf describes in her brief memoir 'A Sketch of the Past' written near the end of her life (1939–1940). These 'exceptional moments', she writes, stand out from 'the cotton wool of daily life', revealing a 'hidden pattern' which 'is or will become a revelation of some order' because 'it is a token of some real thing behind appearances'; 'make[ing it] real by putting it into words' is a process she describes as 'a great delight', 'the strongest pleasure', and 'rapture' (Woolf, 1985: 72). As Jeanne Schulkind explains in her introduction to these autobiographical sketches, 'memory is the means by which the individual builds up patterns of personal significance to which to anchor his or her life and secure it against the "lash of the random unheeding flail"', an image Woolf uses to describe the emotional devastation her parents' death caused her (1985: 21). These intense, revelatory, and enduring memories that are an impetus to writing are almost without fail imbricated with loss, as the 'first memory' of the patterned cloth of her mother's dress in the memoir shows. Recollected as her infant self's sense of physical intimacy with her mother's body, of sitting 'on her lap' and seeing 'the flowers [of the dress] she was wearing very close', the memory endures in the immediacy of sensory detail qualified by the uncertainties of recall when the adult woman 'can still see purple and red and blue, I think, against the black; they must have been anemones, I suppose' (Woolf, 1985: 64).

It is only later in the sketch that the significance of this memory and its substitution of the mother's dress for her body emerges in Woolf's reflection on 'the influence of [her] mother' who was 'in the very centre of that great Cathedral space which was childhood' and who after her early death 'obsessed' Woolf until she wrote *To the Lighthouse* when she was forty-four (Woolf, 1985: 81). She initiates this extended meditation on memory, loss, and writing by considering,

> How immense must be the force of life which turns a baby, who can just distinguish a great blot of blue and purple on a black background, into the child who thirteen years later can feel all that I felt on May 5th 1895 – now almost exactly to a day, forty-four years ago – when my mother died. (Woolf, 1985: 79)

The sensory details of the recollection are reiterated and elaborated again in relation to the mother's dress when a few pages later she writes, '[m]y first memory is of her lap; the scratch of some beads on her dress comes back to

me as I pressed my cheek against it', with the interruption 'comes back to me' creating a syntactical entanglement of past and present that is typical of bodily remembering.

VIBRANT MATERIALITY

My memory's retrieval of a piece of clothing as a complex marker of intimacy carries a very different emotional charge than Woolf's memory does, although similarly entangled with maternal loss and its long-term consequences. Both experiences however show in their different ways how '[o]bjects become mnemonic *things* when they become part of a meaningful assemblage', as Linsey A. Freeman, Benjamin Nienass, and Rachel Daniel argue (2016: 4, original emphasis), which also accounts for the narrativising impulse they inspire. These authors suggestively convey the peculiar intimacies of the human-clo/thing assemblage when they point out that it is 'when they have rubbed up against the human in a memorable way (or when the human has rubbed up against them)' that 'traces of past experiences have been created with and held within them' (2016: 4), thus explaining the density of associative memory clothes continue to carry. Drawing on Jane Bennett's theory of 'vital materiality' or 'vibrant matter', they see 'objects as vibrating with history and memory, objects resonating in shared vibrations with persons' (Freeman, Nienass and Daniel, 2016: 6; Bennett, 2010). Of such memory-freighted vibrant things, it is, perhaps, an item of worn clothing that best embodies the 'energetic substantiality' that Bennett associates with 'thing-power' as it 'commands attention, exudes a kind of dignity, provokes poetry' or even 'inspires fear' (Bennett, 2004: 350).

Here, the seventeenth-century poet Robert Herrick's 'Upon Julia's Clothes' immediately comes to mind:

> When as in silks my *Julia* goes,
> Then, then (me thinks) how sweetly flowes
> That liquefaction of her clothes.
>
> Next, when I cast mine eyes, and see
> That brave Vibration each way free;
> O how that glittering taketh me! (1968: 261)

The poem appears to have nothing to do with memory or loss or history beyond the immediate enthralment of the lover to whom, as the critic John Roe points out, 'an unyielding, free Julia appeals […] more than an obliging, complaisant one' (1999: 354). While it might lack Herrick's overt use of the *carpe diem* theme evident in his 'To Virgins, to Make Much of Time', the poem's celebration of Julia's erotic playfulness in which her body and clothes merge in a swirl of *jouissance* implicitly conveys her vitality and unselfconscious abandon as 'brave' in the face of life's uncertainty and brevity, the fact of her mortality as much as his. Rather than fear, however, Julia's silk dress inspires awe in the speaker, and it would retain in the folds of its delicate fabric the memory of this 'glittering' moment of being for him if she should die.

Something of the same delighted celebration – and cerebration – of the 'vital materiality' of clothes appears in Woolf's novel *Orlando: A Biography* written for and about Vita Sackville-West. Described by Sackville-West's son Nigel Nicolson as 'the longest and most charming love-letter in literature', in it:

> Virginia explores Vita, weaves her in and out of the centuries, tosses her from one sex to the other, plays with her, dresses her in furs, lace and emeralds, teases her, flirts with her, drops a veil of mist around her, and ends by photographing her in the mud at Long Barn, with dogs, awaiting Virginia's arrival next day. (1973: 209)

The novel is configured as the biography of its protagonist who lives for 350 years and changes sex during the narrative, a conceit that prompts the narrator of this love-letter novel into a disquisition on the adage that clothes maketh the man and, of course, the woman, thus anticipating Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity by almost a century. 'Vain trifles as they seem, clothes have […] more important offices than merely to keep us warm', the narrator avers (Woolf, 1942: 108). 'They change our view of the world and the world's view of us', and, he continues, 'there is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them' because, although 'we may make them take the mould of arm or breast', clothes 'would mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking' (Woolf, [1928] 1942: 108). There is an echo of these words behind Stallybrass's often-quoted description of his friend's jacket in the essay referred to above in which he reminds us that '[b]odies come and go; the clothes which have received those bodies survive' and continue 'to carry the absent body, memory' (1993: 45, 37).

This embodied afterlife of the intimacy between wearer and worn is what makes clothes the memory-scented remnants of a life that we often hold on to, wear, and wrap around ourselves for solace in an attempt to bring the longed-for dead back to life, welcoming, like Stallybrass does, their haunting touch. Reflecting on her partner's illness and death in 'Darning Mark's Jumper: Wearing Love and Sorrow', Karin De Perthuis finds consolation in Stallybrass's essay when she recognises that:

> *This* is the embodiment of grief, of mourning. Unexpected garments – a ragged jumper, an old jacket – are not what you wear to mourn; rather, the wearing is the mourning itself, the materialisation of the absent body. To believe in the possibility of such haunting is to banish the notion that clothes are empty of the person who once wore them. Instead of inanimate, ghostly and empty, they are poetic, vital and alive; the dress, the jacket, the jumper, a body remembered. Maybe even (why not?), its soul. (De Perthuis, 2016: 68, original emphasis)

Sleeping in her partner's jumper after his death, she is 'wrapped in arms that once wrapped him', the scratch of its 'prickly wool' on her skin 'consoling [her] deeply', which in turn prompts 'vivid, potent dreams' of him (De Perthuis, 2016: 61). In her essay on clothing as archives of memory, Carole Hunt singles out this 'suggestive power of textiles to communicate memory and meaning through properties other than the purely visual [such as] evocations of sound, touch, smell and warmth' (Hunt, 2014: 226). These are the ephemeral languages of the private, the near, the slow, the intimate that we associate with being connected to another body (and, yes, soul), the loss of which we feel on the skin, in the gut, in the heart's ache, on the tongue. If these are the senses of loss and severance for which the poetry of mourning or elegy attempts to find words, then it often similarly drapes itself in the worn garments of the beloved dead, whether lover, parent, or child.

ELEGIAC REMNANTS

'[F]rom its inception', Fuss writes in *Dying Modern*, the elegy was defined by 'the dance of eros and Thanatos' because 'elegiac utterances were provoked by the loss of what one desired and the desire for what one lost' (Fuss, 2013: 6). This dance is at the heart of Donald Hall's collection of poems titled *Without* published after the death at 47 of his wife the poet Jane Kenyon. One gets a vivid sense of the character of the companion, collaborator, and lover he grieves and celebrates from Kenyon's own clever, delightfully sexy clothes-poem 'The Shirt':

> The shirt touches his neck
> and smooths over his back.
> It slides down his sides.
> It even goes down below his belt –
> down into his pants.
> Lucky shirt. (Kenyon, 2020: 7)

In 'Last Days' and 'Letter in Autumn', references to Kenyon's clothing recur in the speaker's attempts to come to terms with her death and his failure to do so as he must contrive to live without her. In these memorialising threnodies, the domestic details of their everyday life together at Eagle Pond Farm during their 23-year-long marriage are anchored in the erotic, in their 'painted Victorian bed' (Hall, 1999: 62). 'Last Days' catalogues their meticulously practical, rational preparation for her inevitable death following the 'terrible news' that '[t]he leukemia is back' and that '[t]here's nothing to do' as she returns to 'die at home' in this marriage bed which she had at an earlier time decorated with festive lights for his recovery after hospitalisation (Hall, 1999: 35), both of them expecting her to outlive him because of the nineteen-year age difference, as he noted in an interview (Hall in Cramer and Hall, 1998/1999: 496). Taking refuge in the distancing use of third-person pronouns, Hall's speaker recounts how the couple prepared poems for her new collection and 'picked / hymns for her funeral, and supplied each / other words as they wrote / and revised her obituary' (Hall, 1999: 37). Later, as if compelled into an even harsher realism by the imminent ravages of bereavement, he asked, 'What clothes / should we dress you in, when we bury you?' and together they decided on 'her favorite Indian silk they bought / in Pondicherry a year /and a half before, which she wore for best / or prettiest afterward' (Hall, 1999: 38). This prompted recollections of 'their / adventures – driving through England / when they first married, and excursions to China and India', and '[a]lso they remembered / ordinary days – pond summers, working /on poems / together, / walking the dog, reading Chekhov / aloud' (Hall, 1999: 38). These are the bearable memories with which their life together is surveyed as a continuum of shared experience, habit, routine, and ritual that can be spoken of with humour and a degree of equilibrium as they approach the abyss of separation. It is a retreat from its devastation that cannot be sustained, however, and '[w]hen he praised / thousands of afternoon assignations / that carried them into / bliss and repose

on this painted bed, / Jane burst into tears / and cried, "No more fucking. No more fucking!'" (Hall, 1999: 40). Throughout the poem, Hall archives Kenyon's voice in direct speech, a calm, charming participant in a final conversation up to this point of crisis, here, when her control at last gives way at the realisation that such bodily pleasures, such vital intimacies are at an end.

Written six months after Kenyon's death, 'Letter in Autumn' eschews distance for the immediacy of the speaker's grief as the direct address of the epistolary form is used to tell her what his life is like without her. Their bed recurs as symbolic of their marriage and of her death, which Hall as speaker implies was also the death of what comprised the 'we' of their relationship and consequently the death of who he was with her when he writes,

> I sleep where we lived and died / in the painted Victorian bed / under the tiny lights / you strung on the headboard / when you brought me home / from the hospital four years ago. / The lights still burned last April / early on a Saturday morning / while you died. (Hall, 1999: 62)

Her absence permeates their home as an irrefutable presence in what she has left behind, the intimate things of her life that remain undisturbed as if waiting for her return: her 'jeans or lotions or T-shirts' which he 'cannot discard'; her 'tumbles / of scarves and floppy hats' which he 'cannot disturb' (Hall, 1999: 62). Enumerating the rituals of perpetual mourning in his letter-poem, he tells her that their dog Gus, who 'no longer searches for you', retrieved 'one of your white slippers / from the bedroom' when guests visited, reminding them of Kenyon's absence and the urgency of finding her with this Cinderella-like slipper. In both elegies, Hall's grieving is textured by the everyday details of what being without Kenyon feels like as he mourns a marriage in which, he once explained in an interview, '[w]e found that we could be kind to each other, virtually all the time' because '[w]e were determined to be happy in our relationship' (in Cramer and Hall, 1998/1999: 509).

In 'Four Years' by Pamela Johnson Gillian, a longer period of mourning had passed, as the title suggests, and the speaker's retrospective reflection on her partner's death is narrowly inflected through the memory of his clothes and specifically the process of discarding rather than keeping them. The first line's almost blunt refusal of sentimentality asserts that '[t]he smell of him went soon / from all his shirts', recusing the speaker from what she might have implicitly rejected as a cliché of romanticised mourning by opting for a more realistic account which nevertheless still conveys the devastating loss entailed in the disappearance of that last bodily trace (Gillian, 2002: 387). As if angered by this second abandonment, this failure to comply with promise or expectation, she 'sent them for jumble, /and the sweaters and suits', but because '[t]he shoes / held more of him; he was printed / into his shoes', she 'did not burn / or throw or give them away' (Gillian, 2002: 387). In contrast to the overt personification of the clothes in Fragos's poem referred to earlier, here it is by implication in the language of punishment enacted or withheld. The shoes are saved from destruction because they retain 'more' of the essence of the man who died and are therefore uncannily alive in themselves, and, as the idiom activated here implies, difficult to step into or fill. Yet, unworn for four years, 'Time has denatured them now' and there is '[n]othing left' of the man she had loved in them (Gillian, 2002: 387, 388). The poem's tenor hinges on this brief line, in which emotion so strictly controlled in the first section starts to seep through in the second section where clothing disappears altogether to make way for the 'minute' ephemera of bodily shedding as a register of absolute absence:

> But I want to believe / that in the shifting housedust / minute presences still drift: / an eyelash, / a hard crescent cut from a fingernail, / that sometimes / between the folds of a curtain / or the covers of a book / I touch / a flake of his skin. (Gillian, 2002: 388)

As is hinted at in Gillian's poem, love's ambivalence is often surfaced or intensified by the left-behind clothes of the dead and the conundrum of what to do with them, at least partially because of the difficult emotions they stir in us. In Alison Townsend's 'My Mother's Clothes', the focus shifts from the bereaved lover's perspective in the previous poems to the daughter's as she contends with not only her own loss but her father's when, '[a]fter the party / that came after the funeral, / when the last neighbors had gone home / with their sympathy, empty casserole / dishes and promises to call soon', he 'asked her [mother's] sisters / if they wanted her clothes' (Townsend, 2002: 111). Like an awkward magician, he 'threw the closet door open', pulling out 'her fake fur coat / with the pink satin lining, / a pair of silver party shoes / she'd worn twice' and 'homemade dresses she'd sewn' like tawdry treasures or costumes for a fancy-dress party to the consternation of the aunts who 'stepped back as if / he'd struck them, or they could / catch cancer from touching / what once touched her' (Townsend, 2002: 111). The daughter, witness to her father's clumsy, well-meant act of adamant generosity and kindness, and her aunts' stubborn refusals tainted with shame and disapproval, 'wanted to hurl [her]self at their feet / and beg them to take something / even if they only threw it away / when they got home', desperate to do '[a]nything / to stop [her] father standing there, / her dresses draped in his arms / like the photographs of him / carrying her over the threshold' (Townsend, 2002: 111). This claustrophobic family scenario appears to be a world away from Stallybrass's embrace of the worn, dirty, smelly loveliness of his friend's old jacket and its 'vibrant materiality'. Yet,

here, too, a recuperation is achieved through the daughter's compassion for her father which causes the visual conflation – a kind of double-exposure effect – of the present moment of loss they find themselves in, figured in the mother's empty dresses the father holds in his arms, and the fullness of the past moment in all its potentiality captured in the photograph which had most likely been taken on the day of her parents' wedding. She remembers *for* him, one might say, when he is overwhelmed by grief into a stubborn pragmatism as he faces this other 'threshold', death, over which in a metonymic transposition he carries his wife's dresses. As Margaret Gibson explains, '[w]hile getting rid of objects quickly is a response to grief, even an act of grief, it is also a way of blocking emotion and a contemplative process' (2008: 17).

But what of the daughter's grief? This image of her young parents is the pivot on which the elegy tilts into a deeper interiority, precipitated by the speaker's sense of failure to intervene in the stalled exchange between her father and aunts:

> But all I could do was stand / in the closet later for hours, / shutting the door, and wrapping / myself in the shape and scent / of what remained of her, / until the pain left and I slept, / and my father found me, / curled under the fur coat, / with the pink satin lining, / my cheek pillowed against / the sparkling silver shoes / he took to Goodwill / the next morning (Townsend, 2008: 111).

Her act of retreat in which she shuts herself into the wardrobe with her mother's clothes constitutes a juxtapositional corrective of the father's earlier throwing open of its door that reclaims the private intimacies of mourning the mother's body – 'the shape and scent / of what remained of her'. It is also a burrowing back to the intensely physical, animal intimacies between mother and daughter that adulthood precludes and for which the feral comfort of 'the fur coat, / with the pink satin lining' under which she falls asleep is a surrogate. As the final line of the poem confirms, the clothes were given away, but there is a reassuring gentleness, a suggestion of caring and respectful passing on and the promise of an afterlife for these clothes in the word 'Goodwill' which differs markedly from 'sen[ding] them for jumble' as Gillian's speaker does with her husband's clothes.

I conclude my discussion of this narrowly specific sample of poems with an excerpt from Paula Meehan's beautiful elegy 'Child Burial' in which the grieving mother speaks to the dead child as she prepares his body for burial as if preparing him for a long journey. 'I chose your grave clothes with care', she tells him, having selected his 'favourite stripey shirt' and 'blue cotton trousers' in an honouring of the child's preferences that the mother carries with her as sure knowledge and perpetual memory (Meehan, 1991: 29). That this is also a giving up of something essential of his that could have been held on to is implicit because '[t]hey smelt of woodsmoke, of October, / your own smell there too' (Meehan, 1991: 29). Carefully, caringly she 'chose a gansy of handspun wool, / warm and fleecy' because '[i]t is so cold down in the dark', as if the child were still alive and vulnerable to the harsh elements (Meehan, 1991: 29). Anne Fogarty describes this aspect of the poem as 'the mother's feverish attempt to perpetuate her child's existence' but notes that 'the tactile nature of these garments serves ultimately only to underline his absence' (Fogarty, 2009: 219). The transition into a realisation of loss and the finality of separation is apparent in this line which leads to the mother's more explicit readying of the child for this other life beyond life that he enters without her in which, she forewarns him, 'No light can reach you and teach you / the paths of wild birds, / the names of the flowers, / the fishes, the creatures. / Ignorant you must remain / of the sun and its work' (Meehan, 1991: 29). The reiterated 'you' of her address keeps the child present in the ambit of the poem's interlocutory scene as the mother rehearses the instructions of and in nature the child would as a matter of course have learnt had he lived, which both he and she must now forego. There is in this mourning turn to nature something of the myth of Persephone and her mother Demeter's devastating anguish at her loss to Hades that haunts the elegy. This maternal anguish, though contained in her initial lessoning of her small child in death's deprivations, erupts in a pitiful keening of endearments that emphasise his smallness and vulnerability: 'my lamb, my calf, my eaglet, / my cub, my kid, my nestling, / my suckling, my colt' (Meehan, 1991: 29).

READING INTIMATELY

As I have endeavoured to show in this article, mourning – in life and literature – is often mediated by the left-behind clothing of the dead which carries in folds, stains, scent their 'human imprint' (Stallybrass, 1993: 57) imparted by what I have here described as the slow intimacy between wearer and worn. The reading of elegy instantiates a similar slow intimacy between reader and poem because it is premised on our unhurried, vulnerable opening of ourselves to the bereavement of others. In her introduction to the collection of essays in *Scenes of Intimacy: Reading, Writing and Theorizing Contemporary Literature*, Jennifer Cooke notes how 'different types of reading are productive of different textual intimacies' and she suggests that '[a]cademically attentive close reading is one form of intimate engagement with a text' (Cooke, 2013: 4). This essay and others written for the original conference and this special issue are in their different ways responses to the implicit invitation extended to us not only to think

about slow intimacy but to think slowly and to read the world and the word intimately. This is a kind of deep reading that is transformative, as the poet Jane Hirshfield avers, because 'attentiveness only deepens what it regards' and 'we are altered only by what can touch us', registering in the word "touch" the texturing of intimacy I have traced in my reflections in this article (1998: vii). For her, it is specifically poetry's 'transforming intimacy' that is singular since it 'enters awareness [and] is experienced as part of, as continuous with, the self' (Hirshfield, 1998: vii). As Ted Cohen has argued, in poetry and in language generally, this "achievement of intimacy" is mediated by metaphor, because '[t]here is a unique way in which the maker and the appreciator of a metaphor are drawn closer to one another' (1978: 8). In this three-step dance, he explains, 'the speaker issues a kind of concealed invitation' which 'the hearer expends a special effort to accept', which in turn 'constitutes the acknowledgment of a community' (Cohen, 1978: 8). In elegy, I have attempted to show, a piece of worn clothing can convey such a resonant invitation which we recognise and respond to with empathy, thus becoming through this softening of the boundaries of the self a part of what Fuss calls 'a community of mourners' (2013: 109). In Fuss's writing on elegy, the ambit of the communicative conviviality of metaphor suggested by Hirshfield and Cohen is enlarged to include the company of the dead, because elegies, she argues, when '[s]tripped down to their most basic impulse are answers to a call – responses to those beyond our reach, yet responses all the same', while 'they are also themselves calls – attempts to restore the bonds of communication' (2013: 109). In the few examples discussed here, a loved worn garment mediates this reciprocal calling to and from the bereaved, constituting mourning itself as a perpetual slow intimacy with the dead.

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Eating (With) You: Exploring Slow Intimacy in the Book of Song of Songs and *Written on The Body* by Jeannette Winterson, Through the Lens of Food

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the link between sex and food imagery to cultivate a sense of slow intimacy in an ancient and contemporary ode to love. The delicious, nutritious, and indulgent nature of food used in both the Hebrew Bible book Song of Songs and Jeannette Winterson's novel, *Written on the Body*, helps us consider the sheer delight of communion between partners. Not only are the bodies of the lovers described in terms of food imagery but also the very act of eating together serves as a way to capture the intimacy and the ecstasy associated with the sexual union. However, it will also be shown how food and eating point to the fleetingness of bodies that live, love, and decay, contemplating the significance of slow intimacy through all of life's stages.

Keywords: Song of Songs, *Written on the Body*, feminist biblical interpretation, intimacy, food imagery

INTRODUCTION

> When she lifted the soup spoon to her lips how I longed to be that innocent piece of stainless steel. I would gladly have traded the blood in my body for half a pint of vegetable stock. Let me be diced carrot, vermicelli, just so that you will take me in your mouth. I envied the French stick. I watched her break and butter each piece, soak it slowly in her bowl, let it float, grow heavy and fat, sink under the deep red weight and then be resurrected to the glorious pleasure of her teeth. (Winterson, 2001: 36)

Food, particularly oysters, chocolate, strawberries, figs, honey, and red wine, has long since been known and celebrated for its aphrodisiac properties. Candlelit dinners and picnics on the beach are all hailed for their romantic quality and for their ability to forge a sense of intimacy as lovers eat together.[1] However, as evident in the succulent quote cited above from Jeannette Winterson's moving novel, *Written on the Body* (2001 [1992]), food imagery in all of its dimensions, including preparing food and eating together, offers rich possibilities to denote desire, intimacy, and sexual union. And in a world long ago, two lovers in a garden of delights that provides a return to the Garden of Eden in the Christian Scriptures[2] praise one another's bodies in the Song of Songs in terms of food imagery when we, for instance, read in Song of Songs 7:7-9:

> [7] You are stately as a palm tree,
>   and your breasts are like its clusters.
> [8] I said, "I will climb the palm tree
>   and lay hold of its branches."
>   O may your breasts be like clusters of the vine,

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[1] There is a rich line of inquiry regarding the link between food and relationality and in particular how the act of eating together can forge intimacy, but also how such engagements create boundaries of whom is included and whom not. Cf. e.g., Alice Julier's doctoral work on 'Feeding friends and others: Boundaries of intimacy and distance in sociable meals' (2002) that later would feed into her monograph *Eating Together* (2013).

[2] Song of Songs is one of the 66 books that form part of the Christian Scriptures which consists of two sections – 39 books of the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible that is also shared with Jewish believers – and 27 books of the New Testament that constitute the Sacred Scripture for Christians worldwide.

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and the scent of your breath like apples,
⁹ and your kisses like the best wine
that goes down smoothly,
gliding over lips and teeth (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition).

The lover is portrayed as a palm tree, with her breasts being sweet dates. In the next verse, she becomes a vine, and her breasts, luscious grapes. Her breath smells like apples, and kissing is likened to consuming smooth wine that draws a connection between the act of kissing and sexual union with sipping fine wine. In this ancient Ode to Love, one once more finds that the desire for food and the desire for the partner becomes one, as evident in the title of this article, 'Eating (with) You.'

This article will explore the link between sex and food imagery to cultivate a sense of slow intimacy in these ancient and contemporary odes to love. The delicious, nutritious, and indulgent nature of food used in both Song of Songs and Jeannette Winterson's novel, *Written on the Body,* helps us consider the sheer delight of communion between partners. Not only are the lovers' bodies described in terms of food imagery, but the act of eating together serves as a way to capture the intimacy and the ecstasy associated with the sexual union. In particular, the notion of slow food that, as seasoned cooks know, over time and careful tending, allows layer upon layer of flavour to develop and reveals itself over time is a fascinating avenue to explore the theme of slow intimacy. However, there is also a dark side to intimacy evident in the veiled or overt references to violence in both *Written on the Body* and Song of Songs. And finally, it will be shown how food and eating also point to the fleeting nature of bodies that live, love and decay, contemplating the significance of slow intimacy through all life's stages. But before we start this conversation of food and relationality as evident in intimate food encounters, first, some reflection on the conceptual and methodological framework that informs this article that is part of the special volume on Slow Intimacy.

INTIMATE EATING AND INTIMATE READING

In this reflection on the portrayal of food and eating together to facilitate intimate encounters in ancient and contemporary literature, this article brings together two unlikely conversation partners. In the first instance, the biblical book of Song of Songs, which had been penned by some anonymous author(s) more than 2,200 years ago and constitutes a collection of love songs corresponding to love songs elsewhere in the Ancient Near East, notably Egyptian and Sumerian love poetry (James, 2017: 57 Cf. also Exum, 2005: 49-63).

The dating of this biblical book is uncertain. Most scholars, however, place it in the Hellenistic period, even as late as the 2nd century BCE, as evidenced by the numerous Persian and Greek loan words utilised (Landy, 2011: 7-8; Exum, 2005: 66-67). Song of Songs is unique because it is one of the few places in the Hebrew Bible where one hears a woman's voice. The female lover's voice begins and concludes the book and is alternated by her beloved's voice, acknowledging both man and woman's desire (Exum, 2005: 25. Cf. also Walsh, 2000: 34-35 and James, 2017: 82).

The portrayal of food imagery in the context of sexuality and desires is central in the odes to love found in Song of Songs is brought into conversation with a contemporary novel, *Written on the Body* (1993)*,* written by the acclaimed British author Jeanette Winterson whose semi-autobiographical novel, *Orange is Not the Only Fruit* (1985) of a young lesbian woman's coming out story, established Winterson as an important voice in LGBTIQ+ circles. *Written on the Body* is described on its back cover as a 'beguilingly seductive novel' that 'chronicles the consuming affair between the narrator, who is given neither name nor gender, and the beloved, a complex and confused married woman.'

Methodologically, reading biblical and contemporary literature together around a common theme is a novel approach that has gained traction in recent years. For instance, in my monograph *Writing and Reading to Survive* (2020), I cultivate several creative conversations between biblical and contemporary trauma narratives that explore common themes such as reproductive loss, gender-based violence, insidious and intergenerational trauma.[3] Also Rhiannon Graybill invokes a range of contemporary literary works in contemplating how a rape story is told in her recent monograph *Texts after Terror* (2021), arguing that by reading biblical stories of rape 'with and through other

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[3] For instance, in one of the chapters in *Writing and Reading to Survive,* I show how the novel *The Light Between the Oceans* (M. L. Stedman, 2012) helps to fill in the gaps regarding the absence of any detailed description of reproductive loss in the Hebrew Bible, giving new significance to Rachel's struggles with infertility that is exemplified in her anguished cry in Gen 30:1, 'Give me children or I'll die!' And in another chapter, bringing together the story of the original handmaids' tales of Rachel, Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah as told in Genesis 29-35 with Margaret Atwood's iconic *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986 [1985]) helps to bring into sharper relief the ongoing effects of systemic violation in terms of gender, race and class in both biblical and contemporary literature that can be described in terms of the category of insidious trauma.

literary works,' helping the reader to contemplate 'alternative ways of narrating sexual violence, rape, consent, harm, desire, and ambivalence.' As she argues, '…Texts crack open when they are made to talk to other texts' (Graybill, 2021: 24-25).

Regarding the conversation on food, desire, and relationality, there is a natural connection between these two divergent narratives that are read together in this article. For instance, I first discovered Jeanette Winterson's beautifully written novel in the work of Fiona Black, who reflects on *Written on the Body* in her exposition of Song of Songs (Black, 2009: 12-13). *Written on the Body* indeed is steeped in the language and the feel of the ancient love poems contained in Song of Songs that stem from more than 2,000 years ago. For instance, one finds biblical imagery in the narrator's reflection: 'I felt like a seed in a pomegranate. Some say that the pomegranate was the real apple of Eve, fruit of the womb, I would eat my way into perdition to taste you' (Winterson, 2001: 91).

Reminiscent of what Anita Mannur describes in her monograph *Intimate Eating* as 'queer curating,' these discourses on intimate eating are brought together in an act of intimate reading. According to Mannur (2022: 7), 'queer curation is embedded…in practices of care and aims to find connections among texts and cultural pasts that might seem discontinuous.' Through careful, slow reading of these two disparate texts, the conversation between Song of Songs and *Written on the Body* reveals new layers of meaning regarding food's ability to facilitate intimate encounters.

Finally, there is a rich body of work regarding the way food and eating correspond to what Lauren Berlant (1998: 282) has described as the 'worldbuilding' aspect of intimacy in which social worlds are 'formed, mediated, and sustained' through cooking and eating together (cf. also Anita Mannur's thought-provoking monograph, *Intimate Eating,* in which she argues that each act of eating together with others or by oneself constitutes a kind of intimacy (2022: 5) as well as her earlier work on *Culinary Fiction* (2009).[4]

As we consider in this article how biblical and contemporary odes to love present discourses of intimacy through food and eating, it is good to keep in mind Berlant's reflection on what story is told regarding intimacy, which she elsewhere describes as a 'cruel optimism' (Berlant, 2011), i.e., the ideal and the promise of happiness that all too often falls short of the reality (Berlant, 1998: 282). In addition, Berlant (1998: 286) warns about the decidedly heteronormative vision of intimacy portrayed in many discourses on intimacy that exclude 'those who don't or can't find their way in that story—the queers, the single, the something else—can become so easily unimaginable, even often to themselves.'

With these conceptual parameters in mind, we now turn to an exploration of food, desire, and sexual imagery as presented to us in *Written on the Body* as well as in Song of Songs, exploring the many different aspects of intimacy that are facilitated through discourses of food and eating.

I WANT TO TASTE YOU THROUGH YOUR COOKING

Written on the Body is teeming with the narrator's fascination with Louise. She enters the narrator's life amidst a long list of failed and rather toxic relationships, narrated in flashbacks juxtaposed with the descriptions of sexual desire as evident in the opening quote. Even though the narrator's relationship with Louise is also fleeting, a mere five months, their union is experienced and remembered vividly as an example of genuine and, one could say, slow intimacy.

For instance, eating an ordinary Greek salad with Louise becomes a wedding feast (Winterson, 2001: 19). And even when they are not together, the act of eating a piece of fruit bread reminds him of her. 'It's the food that's doing it,' he muses as he describes how 'the yeasty smell of raisins and rye' is more arousing than any *Playboy* ever could be (Winterson, 2001: 39).

> 'Eat of me and let me be sweet …. We consume each other and went hungry again' (Winterson, 2001: 20). Throughout their brief time together, the two lovers' insatiable hunger for each other is expressed through food. After a meal of seafood lasagna and a bottle of champagne, acknowledged by the narrator to be the food of love, the couple 'make love so vigorously that the Lady's Occasional was driven across the floor by the turbine of [their] lust'. (Winterson, 2001: 89)

Probably the most vivid description of intimacy in terms of food is in the scene where they cook and eat soup together, cited above. Soup is slow food per excellence and requires cutting, dicing, adding spices, and simmering over low heat, which allows the flavours to develop over a long time and culminate in a comforting, nutritious

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[4] Beyond the scope of this article, though offering important avenues for further exploration pertains to Mannur's main focus in *Intimate Eating* (2022) of drawing our attention to the multiplicity of meanings associated with race, class, and gender in terms of discourses that employ food and eating in forging intimate encounters. Cf. also David Goldstein and Amy Tigner's collection of essays in *Culinary Shakespeare* (2016) and Amy Tigner and Alison Carruth's volume, *Literature and Food Studies* (2018).

meal. As evident in the quote at the beginning of this article, *eating with her* is transposed into *eating her* as desire is encapsulated in eating. The narrator longs to become the carrots, the vermicelli, the bread so that he may enter her body and become part of her. He reminisces:

> The potatoes, the celery, the tomatoes, all had been under her hands. When I ate my own soup, I strained to taste her skin. She had been here, there must be something of her left. I would find her in the oil and onions, detect her through the garlic. (Winterson, 2001: 36-37)

As he eats the soup she prepared, he also ingests her, as he knows 'that she spat in the frying pan to determine the readiness of the oil. It's an old trick, every chef does it, or did.' And so, he muses: 'I will taste you if only through your cooking' (Winterson, 2001: 37).

The vivid descriptions of food and intimacy are coupled with acts of being together – of being friends that like to spend time together, 'to pass the day [together] in serious and inconsequential chatter.' As the narrator expresses his desire for slow intimacy, defined as togetherness that knows no time, he ruminates that he 'wouldn't mind washing up beside you, dusting beside you, reading the back half of the essay while you read the front' (Winterson, 2001: 38). Slow intimacy is thus created in the bond between two lovers sharing a meal and sharing one another. This notion of slow intimacy in terms of time spent together is illustrated well in Louise's act of handing half of a pear, and parmesan to the narrator. Beyond this alluring combination, this gesture also signals the passing of time in terms of the observation that the pear came from Louise's own garden from a 220-year-old tree. According to the narrator, these pears 'have seen the world, that is they have stayed still and the world has seen them. At each bite burst war and passion. History was rolled in the pips and the frog-coloured skin' (Winterson, 2001: 37).

In the beautiful songs found in Song of Songs, lovers who are long gone express their love for one another through detailed, itemised descriptions of the other's body, often using agricultural imagery and specific descriptions of food and eating to express their yearning for intimacy, similar to what we have seen in terms of *Written on the Body*. For instance, the male lover sings in Song of Songs 5:1:

> I come to my garden, my sister, my bride;
>   I gather my myrrh with my spice;
>   I eat my honeycomb with my honey;
>   I drink my wine with my milk.
> Eat, friends, drink,
>   and be drunk with love.
> (Song 5:1 *NRSVUE*)

And in contrast to *Written on the Body*, in which we only hear the narrator's ruminations regarding his love for Louise, in Song of Songs, one finds how food and eating imagery is also introduced to denote the woman's yearning for intimacy. This reciprocal celebration of love and intimacy is striking in a largely patriarchal world. For instance, the female partner's voice initiates the dialogue in Song 1:2 when she exclaims: 'Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! / For your love is better than wine.' Also, in Song of Songs 2, it is the young woman who, in a remarkable expression of (sexual) agency, shares that her partner's 'fruit was sweet to my taste' (Song 2:3; cf. 4:10, 11; 5:16; 7:10) (James, 2017: 82).[5] She sings the following ode to her lover:

> **3** As an apple tree among the trees of the wood,
>   so is my beloved among young men.
>   With great delight I sat in his shadow,
>   and his fruit was sweet to my taste.
> **4** He brought me to the banqueting house,
>   and his intention toward me was love.
> **5** Sustain me with raisins,
>   refresh me with apples,
>   for I am faint with love. (Song 2:3-5 *NRSVUE*)

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[5] Renita Weems (2004: 2-3) describes the woman of Song of as Songs as 'a woman who takes responsibility for her own happiness.' As she argues: 'She is headstrong, passionate, gutsy, and willing to risk the disapproval of those around her in order to pursue her own happiness' (cf. also McCall, 2008: 419).

Elaine James (2017: 52), who considers the role of agricultural imagery in Song of Songs, argues that 'fruit – and eating – are a kind of agricultural consummation' and hence well suited to symbolise 'sexual consummation.'[6] In both these songs, one could say that food and wine offer 'sustenance and satisfaction' and serve as 'the visible connection between human labor and flourishing.' Significant for our consideration of slow intimacy, one should note that a garden, as also an intimate relationship, requires acts of devotion and care over a long period to yield fruit. As James asks:

> How could a vineyard, or love, flourish? The only way the vines will flourish, the only way that mutual desire will be realized, the poetry suggests, is by attentive long-term cultivation. (James, 2017: 54)

Reminiscent also of the imagery of eating soup in *Written on the Body* that offered a most poignant example of slow intimacy, James (2017: 83) considers the way smell and taste function in Song of Songs 5 cited above: 'First, by smell, and then by taste, the distinction between the garden and the [young man] begin to dissolve,' as 'the young man enters the garden, the garden will also enter the young man.' One finds in this Song how, similar to the soup scene, boundaries between self and other are erased, creating the epitome of intimacy; however, as will be evident later in this article, it is not without its complications.

What is interesting in reading Song of Songs through the lens of *Written on the Body* and vice versa is that food and eating imagery serves the function of creating an almost magical moment in which time and space suspended, a sacred space in which the two lovers come together in the intimate act of eating together. In the counter-world created in both Song of Songs and *Written on the Body*, there is no mention of domesticity or the trappings of patriarchy, including marriage, childbirth, or childrearing.[7] Instead, as Phyllis Trible (1978: 120), in her seminal work on Song of Songs, writes, the garden offers a safe space for the 'lovers to romp and roam in the joys of eroticism,' 'keep[ing] out those who lust, moralize, legislate, or exploit.' And yet, this glorious portrayal of slow intimacy in terms of the luscious food and eating imagery that we have seen thus far should not be romanticised. In the rest of the article, we will explore aspects of this theme that bring quite a bit of reality to the portrayal of lovers eating (with) one another.

THE GRAPES HAVE WITHERED ON THE VINE

> Why is the measure of love loss?.... The grapes have withered on the vine. What should be plump and firm, resisting the touch to give itself in the mouth, is spongy and blistered. Not this year the pleasure of rolling blue grapes between finger and thumb juicing my palm with musk. Even the wasps avoid the thin brown dribble. Even the wasps this year. It was not always so. (Winterson, 2001: 9)

So read the first lines of *Written on the Body*, which already should have given the reader some inclination that even though this novel is about love and intimacy, it is also, perhaps even more so, about loss as the reader, halfway through the novel, is confronted with the harsh truth that Louise has cancer (Winterson, 2001: 100). The narrator, and the reader, are told about this by Louise's soon-to-be ex-husband, Elmer, an oncologist who convinces the narrator that Louise's only hope for survival is to go with him to a clinic in Switzerland for specialised gene therapy (Winterson, 2001: 102). Because of his love for Louise, the narrator acquiesces and leaves her in the hands of her cancer specialist husband.

After having fled London for a cottage in the countryside where he mourns his lost lover, actually twice lost, regarding her impending demise, he rummages through anatomy books that serve as a *lieux de mémoire* of his lost lover's body (Winterson, 2001: 111). For instance, the decay of his lover's body is foreshadowed already in an image early in the book when the narrator expresses how he fed Louise plums the colour of bruises – an image that will return later in the book when he thinks of the effects of leukaemia on her body in terms of leaving bruises the colour of crushed figs (Winterson, 2001: 124).

Once again, food imagery plays a central role in capturing the narrator's memory of her now decaying body, which is all the more touching now that he/one knows this is a body ravaged by a disease that attacks the body from within. So we read in a section called 'The Skin:'

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[6] Feminist biblical scholars like Cheryl Exum (2005: 116, 175) and Athalya Brenner (2001) have done important work in considering the gendered nature of the food imagery used to explicate the lovers' burning desire and longing for intimacy.

[7] It is also worth noting that there is never any mention of the woman's role as mother or wife. In a community where women are mostly understood in terms of their relationship with their husbands and children, Song of Songs' focus on love for the purpose of love is unique (Carr, 2000: 140).

> Your skin tastes salty and slightly citrus. When I run my tongue in a long wet line across your breasts I can feel the tiny hair, the puckering of the aureole, the cone of your nipple. Your breasts are beehives pouring honey. (Winterson, 2001: 123)

The beautiful quote that uses food imagery in an ode to Louise's body appears in a section that meditates on the skin, dead cells that 'fall and flake away, fodder to dust mites and bed bugs.' Food imagery thus is not only used to denote the budding of desire or the heights of sexual intimacy but also to capture the decay and the ephemerality of the human body. The deterioration in the living body leads the narrator to muse: 'Odd to think that the piece of you I know best is already dead' (Winterson, 2001: 123).

Food imagery and fruit are well suited to speak about what it means to be alive, including the relentless march toward decay and death. James (2017: 86) writes that 'decay, destruction, and decomposition' are central to the natural world's fruitfulness. In Song of Songs 8:6, one is reminded that 'love is strong like death,' which, according to James (2017: 86), might be read as just such a *memento mori*, the reminder that amid abundance, death is not only present but the ever-present source of regeneration, of life' (cf. also Meredith, 2018: 19).[8]

In his article on food and eating imagery in the Song of Songs, Christopher Meredith (2018: 16) draws on DH Lawrence's poem 'Medlars and Sorb-Apples' to make the point that certain fruits like medlars, or the more well-known persimmons, it only is when the fruit has become overripe, or one could say, has entered the first stages of decay, that it becomes edible. Another example of the decay process evident in our food is in mature steak, which only becomes appetizing after being aged for 28 days or more. The fact that decomposition, decay, and destruction form a natural part of the natural world also draws our attention to the fact that we, ourselves, grow and eat to live, are subjective degeneration and decay, only to eventually die ourselves. As the narrator in *Written on the Body* laments: 'Time that withers you will wither me. We will fall like ripe fruit and roll down the grass together' (Winterson, 2001: 90). No matter how abundant the harvest is, it is also limited and ends when the season passes. And yet the memory lingers, making the absent real.

The culinary feast prepared for us in *Written on the Body* and Song of Songs, which in the case of the narrator's love for Louise, is tied to the short-lived nature of their relationship, reminds us that life is short. Love is fleeting. Time together is all too brief, mere moments. As the narrator charges his lover at the height of their love affair: 'You act as though we will be together forever. You act as though there is infinite pleasure and time without end. How can I know that? My experience has been that time always ends' (Winterson, 2001: 18).

Also, in Song of Songs, even though the book ends midsentence, suspended in time and space, and the lovers are spared the sorrow of aging, deteriorating bodies, as well as certain death, there is a keen awareness that the lovers' time in this garden of delight is limited. And that in the spirit of the book of Ecclesiastes, that all one can do is to eat your bread with joy, drink your wine with a happy heart, and enjoy life with the love of your life (Eccles, 9: 7) before the time comes that the pitcher will break and the chord snaps (Eccles, 12: 6).[9]

PLUMS THE COLOUR OF BRUISES

> We lay on our bed in the rented room and I fed you plums the colour of bruises. Nature is fecund but fickle. One year she leaves you to starve, the next year she kills you with love. That year the branches were torn beneath the weight, this year they sing in the wind. (Winterson, 2001: 17)

There also is a dark side to the rich metaphors regarding food and eating used to portray (slow) intimacy in *Written on the Body* and Song of Songs. Lurking below the sumptuous descriptions of food and eating (with) her, one finds undercurrents of power, control, and violence that characterise both ancient and contemporary sexual relations. Violence is already evident in the reference, 'plums the color of bruises,' that the narrator breaks over his lover's body (Winterson, 2001: 17), as well as in descriptions of 'torn branches' and nature one year 'leav[ing] you to starve,' and the following 'kill[ing] you with love.'

Moreover, there are numerous references to exploring and invading the lover's body, attesting to unequal power relations and the urge to dominate. As the narrator contemplates:

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[8] Meredith (2018: 19) cites Cheryl Exum (2005: 3) who writes poignantly that even 'though death is mentioned only once, and that near the poem's end, everything in the poem converges upon and serves to illustrate the affirmation that love is as strong as death. The proof is the poem. Perhaps all literature is a defense against mortality; certainly the Song of Songs is.'

[9] Walsh (2000: 35) argues that 'Ecclesiastes grasped that common wisdom when he equated the end of desire with the very end of life. It is all over when one stops desiring (Eccles, 12: 5), for life is defined by desires.'

> …I will find a map as likely as any treasure hunt. I will explore you and mine you and you will redraw me according to your will. We shall cross one another's boundaries and make ourselves one nation. Scoop me in your hands for I am good soil. (Winterson, 2001: 20)

Food metaphors are also invoked in the quest to colonise fertile land. As noted above, there is at least some evidence of reciprocity with the female partner playing an active role in cultivating intimacy, e.g., in the reference to crossing into each other's boundaries and becoming one country. And yet, the presumably male narrator appears to be the dominant partner throughout the novel. He likens himself to Christopher Columbus entering new territories (Winterson, 2001: 52), or a 'big game hunter' with his lover 'the game' (Winterson, 2001: 10). And elsewhere, the narrator remembers that '[s]he has the scent of her prey on her' (Winterson, 2001: 136), which one could say validates Louise's concern earlier in the novel that she does not merely want to be a trophy, 'another scalp on your pole' (Winterson, 2001: 53).

Also, in the male lover's song in Song of Songs 5 cited above, the 'I' looms large, employing four action-driven verbs 'I enter,' 'I pluck,' 'I eat,' 'I drink' (bāʾtî … ʾārîtî … ʾākaltî … šātîtî). According to James these verbs turn this song into one of 'greedy exploitation, of masculine triumph, expressive of satiety. As James puts it: 'The keynote of the verse is "I" … the ego, the possessive, divisive centre of consciousness, can only be selfish' (James, 2017: 81. Cf. also Landy, 2011: 103).[10]

The portrayal of the female body in Song of Songs and *Written on the Body* may also be viewed as an act of violence. So Fiona Black has been interested in the over-the-top descriptions of the narrator's lover in *Written on the Body.* Similar to Song of Songs, the body in this novel is itemized in 'a piece-by-piece dissection, a laboratory eroticization of the body for the lover' (Black, 2009: 13). Drawing on a range of metaphors that fuse various parts of his lover's body with parts of the natural world (plants, spices, smells, weapons), 'The beloved's body,' according to Black (2009: 13-14) 'is revered like the dead, hunted like game, consumed. It is dismembered and fetishized.'

For Black (2009: 150), the 'incredible, edible [young] woman' is the target of male exploitation, as the woman/garden, as noted above, is wholly taken up or absorbed into the man (Cf. also James, 2017: 82). In *Written on the Body*, one similarly finds this theme of the female partner/fruit being ingested or absorbed by her male lover when the narrator imagines Louise's body to be an olive tree, with 'pungent and green fruit' that he devours, using language reminiscent of penetration and destruction in terms of the choice of the verb that signals eating: As he declares: 'Our private grove is heavy with fruit. I shall worm you to the stone, the rough swaddle stone' (Winterson, 2001: 137).

Christopher Meredith (2018: 12) rightly warns of the worrying connotations such a line of thinking may hold as the male partner is sustained and flourishes because of the 'edible female body' – her male lover's 'strength, vigour, growth and energy are entirely provided for by the nourishing qualities of the woman's apparently limitless form.' As Meredith describes this almost vampiric relationship between the lovers: 'She is absorbed and translated into male action by virtue of his diet of lovemaking.'

It is further disconcerting to note that a very real context of violence informs both Song of Songs and *Written on the Body.* A direct reference to violence is found in the description of the narrator of *Written on the Body* resorting to physical violence, hitting his former partner who had ransacked his apartment in the presence of Louise (Winterson, 2001: 70, 86). This act of violence is a grim reminder of the dark side of intimacy, which as evident in the very high occurrence of intimate partner violence as well as the shocking statistics of women being killed by their partners.[11]

The propensity of violence that threatens to undo the lovers' bliss also offers a point of connection to Song of Songs, where all is not always well in paradise. One sees, for instance, how the female lover in Song of Songs goes out at night, roaming the city, fraught with danger, in search of her elusive lover (James, 2017: 23). In Song 5:7, the watchmen (sentinels or guards), who are gendered male, and according to James, serve as the epitome of a manifestation of power and social control, found the young woman, and in first person speech, we hear her complaint: 'they beat me; they wounded me; they lifted up my garment' – clear signs of gender-based violence, including rape in the euphemism of lifting up the skirts' (James, 2017: 100).

This notion of the city-as-woman as a vulnerable entity, prone to be invaded and besieged by military forces, has a long tradition in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East (James, 2017: 104-105). Particularly in the Prophetic books, metaphors of sexual violence and rape are used to capture the invasion, penetration, and destruction of the city during a time of war. This symbolic use of sexual violence also corresponds to the actual

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[10] Francis Landy (2011: 103) argues: 'It is a song of greedy exploitation, of masculine triumph, expressive of satiety. This catalogue of satisfactions is the culmination of the process, the consummation of the enclosed garden. … The powerful verbs (…) represent a phallic thrust' (cf. also James, 2017: 81).

[11] The narrator's former lover, Jacqueline, in great anger not only ransacks his/her apartment but also writes in excrement, 'SHIT,' on the bathroom wall (Winterson, 2001: 70).

rape of women (and men), as rape, then as also now, has been instrumentalised as a tactic of war (Lamentations 1; Jeremiah 13).[12]

And yet, in both Song of Songs and *Written on the Body*, one finds how the female partner goes out into public spaces to find love. The surprising confession by Louise in *Written on the Body* that she had pursued the narrator for two years, following him in the park and seeing him in the library, is reminiscent of the female protagonist in Song of Songs, searching throughout the city for her lover. James (2017: 97) writes that in Song of Songs 3, the communal spaces associated with the city also harbour positive connotations concerning the 'gathering and movement of people' which makes it possible to develop social relationships.' In Song 3:2, the woman goes from her bedroom into the city, but in this instance, the cityscape is according to James (2017: 96), 'salve and not wound for loneliness,' which underscores on the one hand female subjectivity and agency, but also the ambiguity associated with searching and finding love, which is and always has been complicated.[13]

REAL AND UNREAL

> '…I couldn't find her. I couldn't even get near finding her. It's as if Louise never existed, like a character in a book. Did I invent her?' 'No, but you tried to,' said Gail. 'She wasn't yours for the making.' (Winterson, 2001: 189)

A final aspect regarding the theme of (slow) intimacy and food imagery concerns whether all these glorious depictions of sexual desire in terms of food that have graced our table are rooted in reality. This question informs *Written on the Body* as the narrator, towards the end of the novel, realizes he made a terrible mistake by leaving Louise before she could leave him by dying. He frantically searches for her, only to discover that her now ex-husband has duped him all along. Long since divorced by Louise, Elmer now had moved on, engaged to be married to another woman. Despite the narrator fervently searching all the places they had been, including cancer wards and even the graveyard, there is no sign of Louise. Absent yet present, the reader is suspended with the narrator in the space where Louise is alive and not alive simultaneously. By the end of the novel, the narrator even wonders whether what he had experienced in terms of Louise has not been a figment of his imagination all along. As he reminisces: 'There are no ripe plums in August. Have I got it wrong, this hesitant chronology? …. I don't know' (Winterson, 2001: 17).

This question of what is real and unreal is likewise evident in the way the narrator's extravagant descriptions of his desire for Louise are juxtaposed with the lack of intimacy he had experienced with his previous partner, Jacqueline – also by using food imagery. He and Jacqueline would also eat spaghetti together, but with none of the passion we saw in the descriptions of eating with Louise.

> We were eating our spaghetti. …. Let the clock go faster. Let me get out of here. At 9 o'clock I told Jacqueline I was exhausted. She reached over and took my hand. I felt nothing. (Winterson, 2001: 41)

The narrator also looks back to his life with Jacqueline and bemoans life in 'the little semi in the suburbs,' in which the appearance of romance has worn off and all that is left is 'the expanding waistline,' 'late-night TV and snoring side by side into the millennium. Till death us do part' (Winterson, 2001: 26).

The narrator's inability to connect with Gail in life after Louise raises the question of whether what the narrator imagined regarding Louise is preventing him from having a meaningful relationship with a flesh-and-blood woman. His friend tells the narrator that '[a]t least [his] relationship with Louise didn't fail. It was the perfect romance' (Winterson, 2001: 187). But was it? The reality is that no real woman can measure up to the glorious Louise, who becomes even more enigmatic and fabulous in her absence (looming death), as evident in the narrator's ode to Louise that elevates her to something beyond what is real:

> Louise, stars in your eyes, my own constellation. I was following you faithfully but I looked down. You took me out beyond the house, over the roofs, way past commonsense and good behaviour. (Winterson, 2001: 187)

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[12] Much work has been done showing how the Hebrew Bible prophetic literature, military invasion regular is portrayed in terms of sexual violence as the devastation experienced by the people and their city is expressed in terms of the metaphor of the city as a violated woman (Cf. e.g., O'Connor, 2011: 87; Claassens, 2020, 19-20; Kelle, 2008; Guest, 1999).

[13] Cf. James (2017: 108) who argues that the metaphor of City-as-woman in the Song of Songs not merely harbors connotations of sexual conquest, but also denotes reciprocity and incorporation that is important for the portrayal in Song of Songs of the female protagonist welcoming her lover (113).

This notion of what is real and what is imagined is also important in Song of Songs. In her seminal article, 'Ten Things Every Feminist Should Know,' Cheryl Exum (2000: 27) makes the point that one finds no real women in Song of Songs. Rather one finds a composite image of an imaginary woman, built by edible goods (and also agricultural and military imagery), which tap into what is considered beautiful at the time. Fiona Black (2000: 312) also highlights the unreal, or grotesque, nature of this portrayal of the female lover conjured up by the male speaker, which she likens to a kind of 'Biblical Barbie.' Indeed, this portrayal of the female lover might be no more than a figment of the male imagination. The example of a contemporary photograph, constructed by taking the facial features of several celebrity women, which, respectively, a group of men (and women), found to be most beautiful, comes to mind. The result is a surreal photo of a woman propounding to be beautiful, but which clearly does not exist. [14]

CONCLUSION

> Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights: the accumulations of a lifetime gather there. (Winterson, 2001: 89)

In this article, we have seen how food imagery and, specifically, the act of eating has been used in a contemporary novel as well as an ancient text to denote (slow) intimacy – the act of eating, offering a particularly fitting way to illustrate closeness, of becoming one. The daily bread, the regular meals marking each day, festive food when we celebrate, and comfort food when we mourn; indeed, food is an integral part of the human journey from mother's milk to funeral food. Food also offers a powerful way to speak about (slow) intimacy, given that, similar to food cultivation and preparation, fostering love takes time, requiring daily work. Slow intimacy, as exemplified in slow food, develops over time.

Neither food nor intimacy ought to be taken for granted. Bodies need touch. Intimacy and sex are as necessary to the human body/psyche as water and food. In this article, we have seen how food can just be food. But eating with a particular person, one finds, as evident in the quote above, that a secret code is revealed in a certain light that elevates both food and intimacy written on the body.

However, this article also shows the dark side of slow intimacy in terms of food, showing how decay and death are part of both *Written on the Body* and Song of Songs' portrayal of desire. And the propensity for violence always lingers in the background when we speak of sexual relations, both real and imagined.

Questions of what is real and what is not are essential for how we think about (slow) intimacy in our own context, specifically our relationships. Does the ideal make it impossible to commit to what is real? Are we resigned to living on an 'island with hot and cold running water and regular visits from the milkman,' as the narrator in *Written on the Body*, who dubs himself 'an apostle of ordinariness' describes his old life with Jacqueline? As he contends:

> I lectured my friends on the virtues of the humdrum, praised the gentle bands of my existence and felt that for the first time I had come to know what everyone told me I would know; that passion is for holidays, not homecoming. (Winterson, 2001: 27)

Lauren Berlant (1998: 286) has argued that to critically 'rethink intimacy' as we have done also in this article that read a contemporary novel, *Written on the Body*, together with the biblical ode to love in Song of Songs, is important because as Berlant argues it helps us 'to appraise how we have been and how we live and how we might imagine lives that make more sense than the ones so many are living.'

Perhaps the passionate descriptions of food, eating, and desire central to *Written on the Body* and Song of Songs remind us that desire is an indelible part of human life. As Cary Walsh (2000: 22) so beautifully has reminded us in her book on Song of Songs, desire becomes even more critical if one has been deprived of it for a while. It is the prior experience of pleasure and the very absence of that pleasure that serves as the fuse to ignite desire once more. Thus, one could say that the ideal breaks into the real to infuse, enrich, and spice up our daily grind.

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[14] See also the online article by Megan Blalock (2013), 'Here's What the Perfect Woman Looks Like, According to Both Women and Men,' that compares what men and women respectively consider to be the most beautiful woman. Available at: https://stylecaster.com/beauty/perfect-woman/ (Accessed 28 January 2023).

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Wild Sea Swimming as a Slow Intimacy: Towards Reconfiguring Scholarship

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ABSTRACT

Our oceanic swimming-writing-reading together practice coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak and subsequent lockdown in South Africa. Awash with vulnerability, precarity, and isolation, oceanic swimming-writing-reading became one of the few ways in which we, as three academics from different higher education institutions, found respite in a practice of care for ourselves and others. Curious as to whether swimming and free writing could materialise alternative creative scholarly practices, we began to meet regularly to swim, write, read and think together with theoretical perspectives that subscribe to a feminist relational ontology. This article turns to visual and written narratives generated during this period and building on them, considers health and wellbeing at both subjective and planetary levels. Our global southern location articulates with these themes in very particular ways – access, risk and embodiment in relation to seas, beaches and littoral zones. South Africa remains haunted by the continuing geopolitical effects of its slave, colonial, apartheid, and neoliberal past and current contexts of global capitalism that seep into encounters with the ocean. Our swimming-writing-thinking is a reminder of our relationalities with and response-abilities for the hydrocommons as the measure of human, other species and the planet's capacity to survive and flourish.

Keywords: oceanic swimming, ethics of care, relationality, slow intimacy, health and well-being, hydrofeminism, decolonising higher education

INTRODUCTION

Our oceanic swimming-writing-thinking together emerged out of our watery engagements with reconceptualising higher education in the context of South African post-apartheid challenges and within the larger project of justice and decolonial scholarship globally (Shefer, Bozalek and Romano, 2024; Romano, Bozalek and Shefer, 2023). Deeply aware of how normative practices in the neoliberal capitalist, masculinist academy repeat colonial, patriarchal and humanist logics, we have been working with imaginative, creative, embodied, processual, relational and affective practices to question and re-think conventional ways of doing academia. In this article, we share some of our narratives and images from this project which foreground the Slow[1] intimacies that we have been involved with, in and through our oceanic hydrofeminist[2] (Neimanis, 2012, 2013, 2017a, 2017b) swimming-thinking-writing together. Encrusted with ocean bacteria, shivering with cold, and awash with images of luminescent underwater spaces, our writings and images speak of the poignant intimacies of 'taking a thought to water'[3]. We appreciate our visceral affective engagements with marine creatures, plants and rocks, of delighting in their exquisite colours and forms. Our narratives speak to our awe of a methodology of encounter (Probyn, 2016),

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[1] *Slow* is written with a capital letter as it does not connote doing things slowly in terms of time but rather is concerned with the depth and quality of engagement as is proposed by the Slow movement (see Bozalek, 2017, 2021).

[2] Hydrofeminism is a concept created by Astrida Neimanis to convey a form of 'aqueous body-writing' (Neimanis, 2012: 112) with water deployed as a feminist figuration that allows for a re-imagining of human entanglements with all species and the planet and the acknowledgment of a hydrocommons that we are all responsible for and response-able to.

[3] 'Taking a thought to water' is similar to Hannah Arendt's idea that to think with an enlarged mentality is to cultivate the ability to take one's imagination visiting – as cited in Donna Haraway's (2016: 126) *Staying with the Trouble*.

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Figure 1. [5]African kelp sea forest. Screenshot from Oceanic Swimming | writing | thinking for justice-to-come scholarship. © Nike Romano, Vivienne Bozalek and Tamara Shefer

an intimate encounter, where we feel our shared vitalities and entanglements as poignantly as the kelp that winds around us and that offers a moment of stability in wild seas.

Through our embodied sensibilities, porous to fluid temporalities, we confront, in affective ways, the hauntings of apartheid and colonial violences so saturated in the oceans and beaches. We also share our intimate and troubling engagements and complicities with these place-space-time-matterings that we encounter in meeting the oceanic narratives and our own situatedness. We consider how this past of violence by and through sea and beaches bleeds into the present (and future). So too, we meet the disasters of human impact on environment, polluted and violated seas. Our embodied relational encounters with water and more-than-human species sharpens our response-ability[4] to (our ability to respond) and our responsibility for (accountability) the anthropocentric damages to the ocean and planet.

Since much of our early work with oceanic swimming happened over the years spanning the start of the COVID-19 virus, we also swam with the precarities of pandemic times, while also taking some succour from our swimmings together in those times of isolation. The intimacy of our shared vulnerabilities in the ocean, (and elsewhere) and our care-full[6] attention to each other while swimming keeps us afloat in the sea and perhaps also in other spaces of precarity, like the toxic university.

In this article we trace cross-cutting currents of Slow intimacy that shape and emerge from our swimming-thinking-writing together, including the intimacies of: 'taking a thought to water'; confrontations with other species and oceanic materialities; engagements and complicities with colonial, anthropocentric ghosts of past, present, future; and human relationalities, care and response-ability. We see Slow intimacy as not only about a deep and affecting/affective engagement with and recognition of the other, but further as a care-full, care-ing appreciation and acknowledgement at an embodied and affective level of our entanglements and therefore response-ability to and responsibility for others, including other species and the planet itself.

PRACTICES OF OCEANIC SWIMMING-WRITING-THINKING

We are three academics from different higher education institutions whose collaborative oceanic swimming-writing-thinking process emerged out of our engagements with reconceptualising higher education in the context of South African post-apartheid challenges and within the larger project of justice and decolonial scholarship globally. As participants of three research projects[7], we embraced experimental, alternative practices to question

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[4] For more on the difference between response-ability (ability to respond) and responsibility (accountability for) see Bozalek and Zembylas (2023).

[5] Romano, Bozalek and Shefer (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMDu1YTKDhw&t=1425s). (Accessed 18 December 2023).

[6] In line with Shefer, Zembylas and Bozalek (2023: 23-24), we use the term care-full 'to speak of both a caring practice for the author and their work, but also as a vigilant practice which is located within an alternative ethical, ontological and epistemological project'. The use of full also refers to a generosity and capaciousness of such practices.

[7] The three projects include: NRF (South African National Research Fund) funded project (2020-2022) *Reconfiguring Higher Education: Doing Academia Differently* (Grant No. 120845) based at the University of the Western Cape; SASUF (South Africa Sweden University Forum (grant (2019-2022) (Re)configuring scholarship in higher education at Stockholm University and University of the Western Cape); and Andrew W. Mellon Foundation funded project (2018-2022), *New imaginaries for an intersectional critical humanities project on gender and sexual justice* (Grant number G-31700714) at University of the Western Cape.

and re-think conventional ways of doing academia. In order to develop alternative practices to those who are normative and taken-for-granted in academia, we began to meet on a regular basis to swim, write, read and think together with theoretical and methodological perspectives that subscribe to a feminist relational ontology.

Vanessa Daws, a visual artist and open water swimmer, based in Dublin, describes her art with swimming as 'research, process and live event' in watery spaces (Daws, n. d.; http://www.cratespace.co.uk/listening-waters). Our point of departure for our swimming-writing-thinking has resonances with the way in which Daws describes her starting point for her art projects – '[c]hance encounter, swimming, journey, conversation, cups of tea and shivering' (Mentz, 2020: 135; https://dadonline.uk/updates/sea-swimming-project). She calls this process 'psychoswimography' which refers to 'a watery drifting and re-imagining of place' (Mentz, 2020: 135) which she built from Psychogeography, which focuses instead on terrestrial drifting. Like our project, Daws uses experimental practices of walking, swimming, reading, writing to explore alternative embodied pedagogies. The narratives that we draw on in this article are based on and contribute to such embodied pedagogies and scholarly practices.

We meet at various tidal pools, as well as beaches along the False Bay Coast and Walker Bay, in the Western Cape, South Africa. We usually swim with goggles and snorkels and some of us wear free-diving equipment like fins and weights. Our sessions begin with a swim before moving to a nearby coffee shop where we free-write together on a shared google document, allowing the words to flow until our thoughts run dry. We start by selecting a text colour that resonates with the particular experience in the water. We also share photographs taken during the swim on the Google Doc. Some days we write with prompts, whereas on others our writings draw from our experiences in the water. When finished, we read our narratives to each other, all reading on the same Google Doc and examine the photographs which were uploaded.

Swimming in the ocean and then engaging in collaborative free-writing directly afterwards provides us with a different imaginative space (as Hannah Arendt puts it, 'an enlarged mentality', cited in Haraway, 2016: 126) to contemplate various issues that matter to us. Melody Jue (2020: 3) regards the ocean as a dynamic milieu for those humans and sea creatures moving through it – as puts it: 'the ocean is a material and imaginative space for the conditions of perception that we have taken for granted'. This wild milieu enables us to test 'our most habitual concepts and categories' (Jue, 2020: xii), it is 'a kind of anti-environment to the desk, repositioning critics in the ocean in order to prompt them to rethink the efficacy of their most habitual concepts and vocabularies' (Jue, 2020: 7). The narratives we dip into in this article take such familiar concepts to oceanic waters through swimming, providing fresh insights into issues of concern.

Since a key part of this venture is to challenge the erasure of bodies and affect, as well as to overturn the imaginary of what counts as authoritative knowledge, we have found it particularly productive to draw on poets, artists, activists and other creative engagements in water-centred practices such as Elizabeth-Jane Burnett's poetry (Burnett, 2017, 2021; https://www.pennedinthemargins.co.uk/index.php/2021/04/of-sea/), amongst others (for example Bailey-Charteris, 2020; Boon et al., 2018; Gumbs, 2020; Hessler, 2018; Hamilton Faris, 2019; Probyn, 2023). There is also a growing body of queer literature that argues the value of thinking with ocean and ocean critters, both human figurations like mermaids and more-than-human species, for disrupting binary gender and other binaries (see Braidwood, 2023 for an overview of such works, including, Armfield, 2022; Imbler, 2022; Mohulatsi, 2023).

Mindful of Vinciane Despret's concern that observers practice an attuned 'virtue of politeness' when visiting hosts (2016: 19), swimming-writing-reading has become a careful practice in which we find ourselves lured by wonder, curiosity and surprise (Barad, 2014). In our practice, we use snorkelling equipment to better engage a 'methodology of encounter' as Elspeth Probyn (2016: 82) calls it, as we observe and think with other species, as well as experience the affective and tactile experience of being in/with the sea and its shifting moods. Fins, masks and snorkels are prostheses that become part of our bodies, not experienced as separate, as Karen Barad (2007) notes in their description of a white cane for a non-sighted person or a wheelchair for someone who cannot walk without an apparatus (Pratt et al., 2020). Nike describes the dependence on the snorkel as a life-line, as it allows her to temporarily feel 'acutely *part of* or *one with* the environment'. However, they can also be experienced as separate rather than being a seamless part of the swimming body:

> During the swim I was very aware of the encumbrances I had on me – the huge gawky fins which I am adjusting to as they require a new type of movement from the legs. I couldn't find my sea socks so swam without them and noticed they are slightly big for my feet. This was a dilemma in the shop where I bought them as the one size was too small and the other too big. The man assisting me advised to go with the too big and to wear sea socks with them. Then my belt which is very heavy to carry and which fell off me this time. Fortunately the tide was low so it was quite easy to retrieve and quite a mission to rebel in the sea where one can't stand. The third encumbrance was the camera which was tied around my wrist but worthwhile having, to be able to share the strange world of colours on that rock. (Viv)
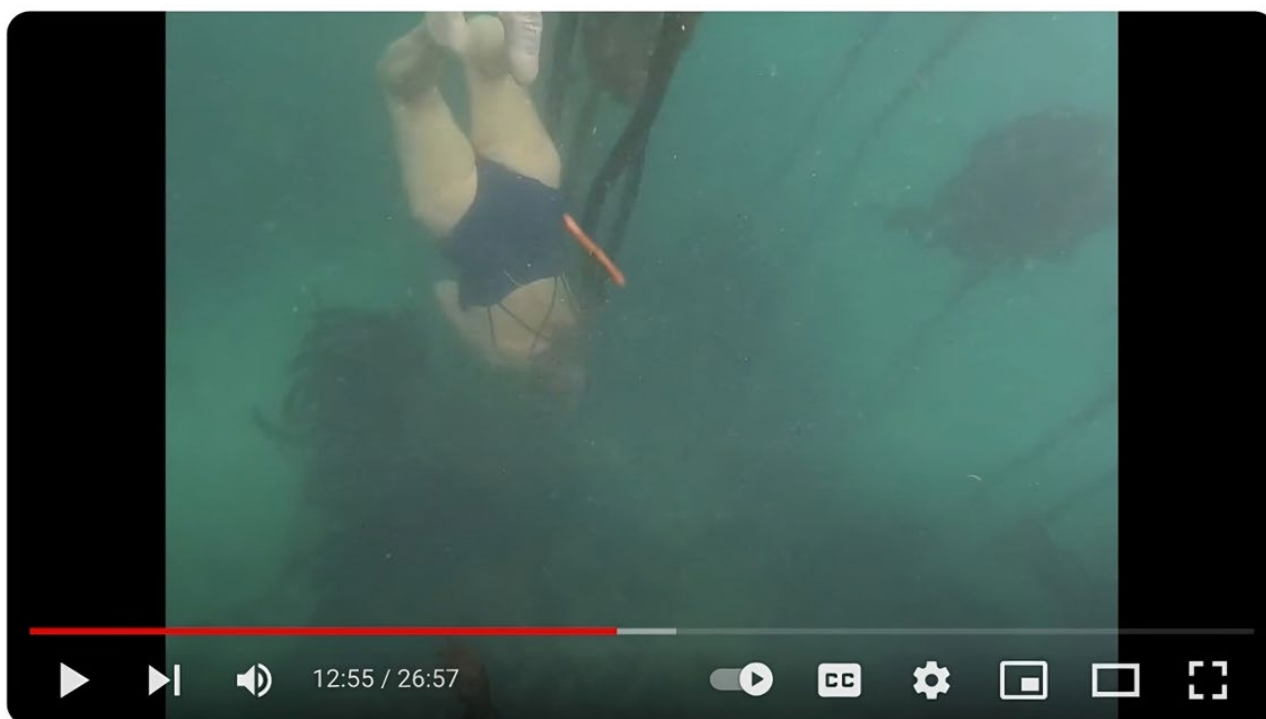
Figure 2. Viv diving. Screenshot from video Oceanic Swimming | writing | thinking for justice-to-come scholarship. © Nike Romano, Vivienne Bozalek and Tamara Shefer

Some of us have found it inspiring to engage in underwater photography, which we share on virtual fora. Sometimes we take photos to study the sea critters' detailed forms and structures more closely and understand this life better by identifying and reading about them later. As Viv writes:

> I was surprised to read in the Slow intimacy conference call for papers that intimacy can mean showing what you know to others. I have felt so enthusiastic about seaswimming and sharing our embodied collective thinking-with our oceanic experience afterwards. The photos and videos I take of the multiple sea creatures I have come to love and the shimmering colours in and of the ocean are partly motivated by my desire to share these through social media with those who do not have access to this world of psychedelic oceanic colours.

Tamara, on the other hand, expresses an ambivalence about photographing the sea creatures. While she feels excited by what she and others see, she also expresses concern that these 'capturings' may be repeating the logics of that which we recoil against:

> Are we playing another human game of representation and mining the deeps for our own gain, performance for others and in pursuit of the individualised project of the wild swimmer?

Building community extends beyond sharing images as we read together and separately and share resources, including both those that are critical, feminist and decolonial works on the oceans and swimming and those related to the place-space-time in which we are swimming.

The iterative process has developed slowly, over time. As Donna Haraway (2016) notes, Vinciane Despret's 'visiting' is both a material and imaginative process for which she trains with her whole being. Our narratives also refer to such material and imaginative processes of explicit and implicit intimacies and relationalities, revealing the subtle complexities that surface through these watery encounters.

THE INTIMACY OF 'TAKING A THOUGHT TO WATER'

As mentioned, we began the practice of swimming-writing as part of the project of reconceptualising higher education and doing our scholarship differently. In diverse ways the practice of swimming in the ocean and writing has opened up alternative ways of making knowledge for us. In this respect, as we have argued elsewhere,

[w]e propose swimming as a way of refusing everyday practices of the academy that assume or insist on disembodied, disaffect/ive/ed, speeded-up, instrumentalist, consumerist, extractive scholarship, ignoring and erasing relationality and response-ability. (see Shefer and Bozalek, 2022)

Since all of us had experienced swimming as a space for clarity in our own academic work, we were deeply aware of the way in which cultivating the art of swimming-writing practice enriched our curiosity and our thinking. As Bonnie Tsui (2020: 7) argues about swimming:

> To find rhythm in the water is to discover a new way of being in the world, through flow. This is about our human relationship to water and *how immersion can open our imaginations* (our emphasis).

Thoughts we took to water were opened up and expanded for us, often in unexpected ways, in and through the water.

We see what we do as Slow Swimming, as deepening, attending, engaging and changing us and others we engage with in unforeseeable ways. Similarly, Vanessa Daws talks about feeling intimacy with the ocean through the practice of swimming and the unexpected gains it offers:

> Swimming is an activity that connects humans directly to water. A swimmer is 'in' this substance of immense power and unknown, swimming is a lived in, embodied experience. Swimming allows us through acclimatization and adaptation *to surprise ourselves and go beyond our expectations* (Daws in Metz, 2020: 135). (our emphasis)

Tamara writes about how such Slow Swimming also opens up a sense of other knowledges and our relationalities on the planet:

> We swim slow because there is so much to see and then we swim faster because we are cold. It is all Slow. Being with, engaging with, attending to the visual beauty, being with, engaging with, attending to the sensate mobility, being with, engaging with, attending to the liquid knowledges of the sea, the planet, the all and the illusion of unitary individual selves slips off in watery ways, melts, floats away.

But it is through the intimate sense of our bodies in water that greater and different attention and thinking is enabled. Viv emphasises the vitality of thought that is made possible through the embodied and sensate nature of swimming:

> The disorientation, vulnerability, the acute awareness of aching bones in the body only begin to register the cold about fifteen minutes after the swim. All create a sense of aliveness to the world and a heightened attention to the surrounds, disarming and displacing habitual thoughts and categories and allowing specific thought and affective responses to emerge.

Stacy Alaimo wrote this about an oceanic swim at a conference entitled 'On the Beach: Precariousness, Risk, Forms of Life, Affinity, and Play at the Edge of the World', held in Santa Barbara, USA in October 2014:

> It felt like an experiment with becoming a medium for art. To be ourselves in the interchange with the ocean, to be aesthetically overcome by the blues and greens of the water. I won't say the event 'elevated' swimming to an art, because elevation would place us above the practice and what is most beautiful to me is to think of how swimming—the immersion of the human in water— releases us from transcendent perspectives, unmoors us as terrestrial creatures, allows us to hover in other ways of being that are, perhaps, less separate from the substances of the world. (Alaimo in Mentz, 2020: 134)

Sea swimming is not dependent on oral or written language[8]; instead, it gives one a sense of unmediated access to the material world, moving with and through it. As Viv elaborates:

> This practice of swimming is a Slow process in that it is enduring – it has been happening every day for a few years now and it is one of relaxed but intense attentiveness and pleasure in seeing and feeling through immersion and buoyancy of salty water.

For Nike, Slow Swimming requires slow careful attention which opens up a range of intimacies as well as careful reading of scholarly work:

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[8] Although as Sally Munt, chief editor of this journal points out in reviewing this article 'There is lots of language in swimming – gesture, exclamation, body comportment, cultural differences in swimming styles etc.'

> Our swimmings/writing together have been attentive and careful, bringing us into a close intimacy both in the water and out. Reading Barad this week who talks about desire as a being pulled towards … drawn towards … I was aware of this in the pool being pulled towards some creatures, colours, textures, shimmers. Intimacy is shared, between us writing together, between us and the water and the forms of life in the water, between us around the table in the coffee shop … leaning towards the warmth of the fire.

Slow swimming also opens up our awareness of the temporal regimes that the academy has imposed on us and its damaging and reductive neoliberal emphasis on fast and superficial outputs, which is clearly exposed as a form of constraint, as Tamara writes:

> Different temporalities and space, our usual clock time suspended, we are surprised when so many minutes have passed. And we surface questioning the regulated lives we take as normal. And somewhere in the moments between rocks and kelp and freer liquid spaces of magnificent blues and greens, I feel myself moving between my spaces of entrapment and freedom. They unfold before me and threaten this beautiful capacious freedom I glide in.

This resonates powerfully with Elizabeth-Jane Burnett's poem, 'Grasmere':

> A difficult swim. A snatched one, a clipped one, from a timetable too regulated. A timetable takes something from you that is hard to recover. It believes you can be reduced to a model of yourself that is flat, made from paper or plastic, or that an online version of you can be downloaded. It believes it can work with an outline of you, with all the guts emptied out, all the mess, all human circuitry.

> And so to swim is to explode column width of day's databases, expand with joy in the margins, find and replace total with ethic with heart … (Burnett, 2017: 39-40)

AN INTIMATE 'METHODOLOGY OF ENCOUNTER'

We have been inspired by Elspeth Probyn's (2016) work on swimming as a 'methodology of encounter', mentioned earlier, in which she foregrounds entanglements of human and non-human in the oceans while researching the politics of the fish industry. Swimming in the ocean brings one into intimate encounters with other species, with flora such as kelp, and with the ocean and its multiplicities. Our relationalities with other species and the living and non-living, are exposed and appreciated. While Probyn argues the political value of encounter, Burnett (2019), in her poetic narratives, also appreciates 'swimming as encounter of surprise and fascination, which facilitates 'a sense of unity' across species' (Shefer and Bozalek, 2022: 38).

In our writings after swimming, we share the poignancy of affecting/ive engagements with underwater creatures and plants, of delighting in their exquisite colours and forms. Viv writes:

> Visceral immersion fueled by a desire for contact and being held in the element of salty water and the ability to dwell intimately with the wild milieu underneath the sea, using goggles, has opened up an intimacy with an unknown new world to me. I have been aesthetically overcome by surprising encounters with creatures and life hitherto unknown to me as they had not shown themselves to me.

As Donna Haraway (2016) notes, visiting in the form of swimming can be seen as a subject-object making dance,

> holding open the possibility that surprises are in store, that something interesting is about to happen, but only if one cultivates the virtue of letting those one visits intra-actively shape what occurs. They are not who/what we expected to visit, and we are not who/what were anticipated either (127).

In other words, there are no pre-existing scripts and all are coming into being through encounter with the other, in dynamic and indeterminate actions of attunement. Yet we also shared some concerns about the possibilities of human surveillance of more-than-human species in such swimming encounters:

> The images of the octopus we spotted and watched moving onto the rock and then magically disappearing, at sunset swim last night, merges into the incredible images of this morning sunrise swim as we find and watch two, Viv and Nike, another two after I had to leave due to cold. I am astounded by the rapid changes of colour, the strange dance of tentacles and fish – who are the fish to the octopus: a potential meal or an enemy predator or simply a playmate? Being so close, observing so closely, I have moments of concern that I am abusing the octopus' privacy, harassing them, stalking them?

Figure 3. Octopus pursuing cormorant. Screenshot from Oceanic Swimming | writing | thinking for justice-to-come scholarship. © Nike Romano, Vivienne Bozalek and Tamara Shefer

Unlike on *terra firma* where she occasionally experiences a sense of connection 'in nature', Nike expressed feelings of interconnectedness with-in water that she describes as an 'immersive experience that pushes up against my body, into the orifices of my body':

> Watching the fish, so close to my feet, I tried to imagine what we have in common … life … matter … we are made up of the same elements in different configurations … we are alive. Different forms of life, I wonder whether humans will develop more empathy (feels like the wrong word) 'connection' feels better with other species now? How would we respond?

Tamara also reflects on these intimate watery encounters and the capabilities they make possible:

> The slow intimacies of engaging with lives of species unknown to those on the surface. Watching the tendrils entangling and disentangling, the kelp weaving in and out, the flows of tide pulling and pushing, an endless spiraling in and out of energies and matters. We confront the sea creatures, the sea energies and for precious moments can feel our interwovenness, the blurring of the boundaries, a floating in space and time, and a part of. Before we move apart and back into bounded selves and minds.

For Viv too, swimming extends her 'relationship with water, sand, rocks, anemones, seastars' as she learns to 'avoid the prickles and negotiate my way through and around creatures in the water'. Engagement with particular oceanic creatures open up alternative imaginaries of how to engage with others and a questioning of human normativities:

> I am grey[9] today after the octopus I was observing for so long. Grey makes one more imperceptible on the page – an octopus move. Although grey is misleading as the four octopuses we saw were all such different colours and shapes becoming-with anything it moved towards or what flowed into its path. At one time it was green and indistinguishable from the kelp which wrapped around its body, then the colour of sand with its tentacles reaching-reaching one and then two towards a sandy-coloured fish. Fish-octopus intra-action coming and going reaching and darting away. As humans we always try and make sense or interpret – what is happening here? How will we ever be sure whether the octopus was hunting the fish, playing with the fish or engaging in some sort of mutual communication. I got a really good view of how the tentacles work separately stretching and curling and also saw the one octopus moving its head as if it was eating something. I wonder what they make of these big hulkish humans

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[9] As mentioned earlier, when we write after swimming, we choose a font colour that differentiates our narrative and speaks to our affective sensibility at the time.

Figure 4. Camps Bay beach with apartheid fence. Screenshot from Oceanic Swimming | writing | thinking for justice-to-come scholarship. © Nike Romano, Vivienne Bozalek and Tamara Shefer

> circling them like sharks. Whether it is just a mild irritation or when the humans come too close whether they are seen as a threat, Here am I trying to interpret or anthropomorphise the feelings of the octopus just after castigating that type of behaviour. But we humans are full of contradictions swaying this way and that, justifying our moves along the way.

INTIMATE ENCOUNTERS WITH HAUNTINGS OF THE PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

Our oceanic swimming has also been a project of witnessing past, present and future hauntings. Swimming in particular oceans, launching from particular beaches, has made us aware of the many human crimes of slavery and colonisation sedimented in the ocean. Porous to fluid temporalities, we confront the hauntings of apartheid and colonial violences so saturated in the oceans and beaches. As Tamara writes:

> In the oceans, the slow intimacy of confronting the ruins of other oceanic passings, so many lives lost, lost on ocean voyages or lost in slavery or lost in violent confrontation or lost in resisting or lost in trying to make a difference.

Karen Eva Carr comments on how, since colonial times, the ability to swim is largely linked to social identity and power. In other words, swimming is dependent on one's race, income and education (2022: 7). Nike reflects on how these effects are felt in South Africa where beaches were racially segregated from as early as 1888 (Carr, 2022: 320); when thinking about how apartheid shaped experiences with, and in relation to, swimming and access to beach spaces. She writes:

> Swimming is a life skill that white South African children learned at school, the beaches were spaces of privileged open access. I grew up in Camps Bay, a little seaside village back then, a white suburb on the Atlantic Ocean that is now a trendy tourist spot in Cape Town. I remember the fences that were erected overnight … whites only beaches … markers of apartheid violences, of structural enforcement of segregation. Back then the only people of colour were the ice cream vendors trudging up and down in the baking sun, trying to entice parents to buy. There are remnants of those fences now, eroded, salty bones, weathered rusty fragments, ghosts. What do we do with these irrevocable damages, these haunting violences that continue to wash up with the tides sometimes high, sometimes low?

We often write about our intimate and troubling engagements with these place-space-time matterings that we encounter in meeting the oceanic narratives and our own situatedness, and how this past of violence by, and through, sea and beaches shapes the present (and future). Tamara writes:

Figure 5. Jewish refugee voyages to the South. Screenshot from Oceanic Swimming | writing | thinking for justice-to-come scholarship. © Nike Romano, Vivienne Bozalek and Tamara Shefer

> When Viv and I wrote the paper on swimming, there was a line that Viv wrote about us 'as settlers' and my body and heart rebelled and resisted… 'no, this is not me'. My defensive narrative spills out of me: I am only second generation and I am Jewish, just emerged from a holocaust that wiped out any of my family who were not safely in another land than Europe. I carry around the sharp image of my great grandmother and great aunt, the latter only about 16 years old, standing briefly breathing hard, with sobs of fear, around a mass grave, before being shot into it. Me, a settler? No, I am of refugee stock, my grandmother came out on a boat between the two wars. And yet Jews became white in many parts of the world and perpetrate the unresolved violences on others and share in the fruits of colonial exploitation and bolster an entire nation-state founded on violence. And yes, I need to face the shivering after emerging from the cold sea, the discomforting and uncomfortable bodily quivers that are the result of the threshold encounter, facing myself as SETTLER. A pedagogy of discomfort. Daily I succumb to the powerful urge to swim out into the wideness/wildness of freedom, also of death, and return to life and discomfort of my comfort and privilege.

Our hauntological project transgresses human temporalities and we think also with present and future ghosts. Reckoning with the devastating effects of global warming on the oceans is a feminist mode of ethical and political engagement that exposes us to an 'empathetic, rather than safely ensconced' act of 'dwelling in the dissolve … [as we] … connect with vulnerable creaturely life and with the inhuman, unfathomable expanses of the seas' (Alaimo, 2015: 168). We meet the disasters of present and the future, the polluted and violated seas, and our embodied relational encounters with water and more-than-human species sharpens our response-ability to and responsibility for the anthropocentric damages to the ocean and planet. Tamara reflects on discomforting confrontations with how humans have damaged the planet when she realises that 'a shiny reflection of sun that catches my eye, [is] not a mother of pearl but a sweet wrapper. Just a small gesture to far greater damages. The Slow intimacies of sea and ocean play, an optics for alternative visions of how to live with others'. Similarly, Viv expresses her distress about the sewage leaks resulting from chronic loadshedding when she asks, 'what is happening to the sea and how humans think they can get rid of their debris and shit into the sea and it will just disappear without consequences'.

THE INTIMACY OF OCEANIC SWIMMING FOR HUMAN PRECARITIES, RELATIONALITIES AND CARE

The affective tonality[10] of oceanic swimming with its undulating surges, currents and tides has multilayered affordances of watery embodiment both immediate and lasting, particularly in cold waters. Watery immersions dissolve the separation of body and water, as Nike explains 'the space between my body and the water melts away and the water becomes the matrix (as in binder or glue) of connection. Or is the water the body of which my body becomes a part?' Tamara expands on this in her observation that when in the sea, 'we cannot *not* be embodied, we

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[10] Affective tonality is something we find ourselves in, rather than finding in ourselves. It's an embracing atmosphere that is also at the very heart of what happens because it qualifies the overall feel. Affective tonality is what we normally call a 'mood' (Massumi, 2008: 21).

are in our body, floating, moving and vibrantly sensate, both deeply aware of our self in the sea, yet also melting, seeping into the surrounds, both a body and an entanglement'.

Shapton similarly elaborates on the intimacy of the body in oceanic waters and how it opens up a relational ontology: 'It's a knowledge of watery space, being able to sense exactly where my body is and what it's affecting, an animal empathy for contact with an element' (Shapton in Mentz, 2020: 129).

When we swim in the ocean, we are also deeply aware of our vulnerability to the tides, our physical limitations such as the capacity to deal with cold, and other possible dangers to survival. The ocean is compelling to us, yet also a terrain of fear and unknowability. As Mentz so succinctly writes:

> Poised on the sea's edge, we balance between kinship with and alienation from the watery part of the world. Ocean insinuates its salty fingers into that division and wedges meaning out of both the longing that draws us to the great waters and the fear that drives us away. (Mentz, 2020: 4)

Relationality and care thus become vital when swimming in oceans. We find ourselves always aware of each other, even as we are captivated by what we are seeing and feeling, always keeping an eye out for the other. In this way, swimming together also brings to the surface our shared vulnerabilities, larger than our subjective ones, and our responsibility for and response-ability to each other and all others. As Nike writes:

> Even though I free-write together with others … this particular assemblage … does something profound, primary? I think this is because we are vulnerable together, curious together, we have fun together, we share thoughts, photos, observations, we stay together which leads to cooking, eating, reading, walking etc … like the sea, the practice spills, flows, ebbs and flows. What about time? Intimacy takes time but is not dependent on time.

The cold temperatures take their toll on Tamara, but the pull of the ocean is more powerful than her discomfort and the fear of her vulnerability to hypothermia. This very experience of vulnerability seems to deepen the sense of shared vulnerabilities and melt away the prescribed separations between self and others. After a particularly icy swim that 'haunted' her for days as it took her so long to get warm afterwards, she thinks about the precarity of embodiment that,

> like a deep swirling energy that is both irresistible and yet dangerously close to bringing loss of self. The pull of life, the magnetic call to atrophy. The desire to be and the wish not to be. Or is it really the desire to be more fully a part of, of the all, embraced in the everything, beyond the ugly divides and violences, beyond the individualised and lonely self.

This intimacy with our shared vulnerabilities and response-abilities to each other was particularly heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our narratives are permeated with the precarious experience of the pandemic when our swimming together became a balm for the extraordinariness of isolation and the entrapment in home, city, nation-state. Tamara found comfort in the way 'the swimming and the writing dissolves the alienation, accesses a moment of freedom and community, if only for a stolen moment'.

Whereas for Nike the sea became 'a refuge, another world that was virus free' and a space where she could make sense of the virus, her mind drifting back to the fish '… so aligned with each other, so in sync. I am not sure why this image is so pressing for me … what can we learn from the fish? Maybe it is because they were moving as one but were distinctly separate, some kind of social distancing seemed to be in operation … they kept their distance but moved in sync'.

These sentiments are echoed by Viv who felt that while every day with COVID-19 became 'more and more surreal', she was 'grateful for very small things like us being able to get together in this group … I cannot believe the pace of what is happening around the world and it is very difficult to keep calm'.

Through our experiences of precarity in the ocean, we also became aware of how swimming helps us to think about our relations in the university and in scholarly spaces differently, both exposing the challenges while opening up spaces of refuge. Viv writes about how swimming shows up the toxicity of normative academic practices, offering alternative imaginaries of how we can do justice scholarship differently,

> Swimming everyday (more than I did when I was going into work at the university) and being away from those tedious toxic rule-obsessed meetings, I feel more and more impatient with things that I was coerced to do but should feel liberated from but don't always. I thought I also want to do less of what I don't want to do. I want to swim and do the academia I love – finding new ways to think and be in the world.

Similarly, Tamara writes:

> I am at a low ebb, my waters of energy receded like the tides, my flesh feels peeled back and the vulnerable bones exposed. There is no deck to go below to hide this vulnerability in a nurturing space. This time exposes both the miraculous parts of what we have here, but also the deeply veined ugliness. The university and people with power there are increasingly revealed to me in all their pettiness, their clawing desire for power, their hungry need to assert their control and self-aggrandisement, their lack of care and efforts, all cloaked in a politically correct language …

And yet, as the narrative below reveals, swimming may 'settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places' (Haraway, 2016: 1), offering a space of refuge and care:

> I feel suddenly energised and grateful for the wonderful care we have created in pockets of spaces like this, in and out of the university and the momentary utopias that speak to different ways of being and doing and making. (Tamara)

CONCLUDING AND CONTINUING EDDIES OF THOUGHTS

Through this practice, we have come to understand intimacy differently but also to understand the value of Slow intimacies for making justice knowledge. The Slow intimacies of oceanic swimming-thinking-writing is one way of practicing a Slow scholarship as we have tried to share here, both with our theoretical arguments and our personal free-writing narratives. We have explored these multi-layered realms of intimacy, with each other and other humans, with more-than-human species and the planet, with our haunted pasts, presents and futures, with our shared vulnerabilities and with knowledge-making and thinking differently towards alternative imaginaries of living. We have tried to show how these entangled intimacies open up a deep sense of our relationalities and therefore our responsibility *for* making and our response-ability *to* make a difference. We also argue that such embodied, relational practices of intimacy with other humans, other species, the planet, temporalities and ghosts, is a *justice-to-come* scholarship, in that it is ongoing and will never be reached. And so we swim on…

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Shared Skin: The Slow Intimacy of Horse and Rider

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the co-constructed sensory experiences between two species over time, offering a deeper understanding both of the multi-sensory nature and different scales of inter-species intimacy. A five millennia long intimate sensory conversation between humans and horses was integral to hunting, domesticating, taming, training, sacrificing, harnessing and – eventually – riding the once-wild horses of the steppeland. Domesticating the horse may be seen as slow intimacy and taming as faster intimacy. Horses have evolved to be more empathetic *to us* than most animals, including most domesticated animals, because of the close reading of our intentionality they have needed to develop since domestication. The historian's window into past sensory experiences is usually mediated by language. *But, this essay asks, what if it does not have to be?* It shows how a feminist interspecies historian learns by listening, watching, touching and being with the subject. Feminist thinking can help challenge stereotyping by thinking about the intimacy at the heart of horse-human relationships.

Keywords: horse, intimacy, taming, domestication, sensory, affective, animal history

> There is no secret so close as that between a rider and his horse. (Robert Smith Surtees)
>
> No one can teach riding so well as a horse. (C. S. Lewis, *The Horse and His Boy*)

INTRODUCTION

Domesticating, taming and riding are all slow intimacies in action. A long and close sensory negotiation between human and horse was necessary in the making of the historical horse-human dyad. It was integral to first hunting, then domesticating, taming, training, milking, eating, sacrificing, harnessing and – eventually – riding the once-wild horses of the Eurasian steppeland. This slow intimacy of a relationship older than five millennia created a shared embodied conversation. Our two species have become enmeshed in an array of affiliations: a continuum from oppression to collaboration, to (an admittedly uneven) mutualism and partnership. Arguably, horses have evolved in the last few millennia to be more empathetic *to us* than most animals are, including most domesticated animals, because of the close reading of our intentionality they have needed to develop since domestication. We imposed 'anthropogenic selection' (as opposed to 'natural selection') on horses, breeding those who appeared tameable and trainable. But those two traits can be described another way: we selected for horses who were *able to survive intimacy with our species*.

All this brings us to rethink how we relate to horses, especially in terms of feminist thinking from an historical perspective. As Corbin contended, the historian's gateway into past sensory experiences is usually mediated by language. *But what if it does not have to be?* This essay shows how a feminist interspecies historian learns by listening, watching, touching and being with the subject. The exchange between the bodies of the horse and human: the kinetic methodology is part of zooethnography, riding a strange horse and in a strange place, learning new languages of the body from horses in different contexts helps us glimpse their histories with humans to help us understand our species' long-entangled and gendered pasts. This essay explores how we may foreground the sense long considered the least worthy of attention: *touch*. It draws on reading of touch as the 'double sensation' – because to touch is to be touched. Learning to ride and learning to be ridden involve kinaesthetic perception, to create a

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shared multi-species culture in which both bodies can be in intimacy with one another. The riding experience creates a new tactile frontier – the shared skin.

Touch is the neglected sense.[1] But some historians have started (Das, 2005). The history of touch has drawn 'the closest engagement with questions about gender out of all the senses' and provides 'some good examples of the relationship between power and sensory proscription' (Tullett, 2021: 816). Tentative new histories reveal that touch has always been political, embedded in power hierarchies of who could be touched by whom and how (Gowing, 2003). Such sensory history exists within the broader framework of interdisciplinary sensory studies, which delves into how humans perceive and experience the world through their senses.[2] This field raises fresh methodological demands and challenges one to both locate and interpret sensory experiences from old and new historical archives. Historians are currently engaging with the potential of attending to the senses as part of decolonising historical archives and methods. Such decolonisation involves challenging and dismantling the patriarchal, Eurocentric biases that have often dominated historical narratives. By paying attention to sensory experiences, historians can adopt a more inclusive and diverse approach to interpreting the past, ensuring that multiple perspectives are acknowledged – crossing frontiers in the gendered and species order. The archive, while a valuable resource, may not fully capture the richness of sensory experiences, leading to the need for alternative approaches, such as zooethnography, to understand the sensory past. I want to argue for the horse and human body and shared kinaesthetic experience as a new kind of archive – a repository of shared inter-species communication.

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE HERD

One is not born, but rather becomes, a horse.[3] Out of all the domesticated animals, horses are perhaps the only creatures born too wild for us: they need to be remade with each generation. Each foal must be tamed. Each filly must be trained. Each mare must obey. Each step involves inter-species intimacy, both slow and fast. To understand this, my essay embraces the most famous feminist sentence ever written, Simone de Beauvoir's '*On ne naît pas femme: on le devient*' and refashions it as '*On ne naît pas jument: on le devient.*' (De Beauvoir, [1949] 1956: 273). Translated into English: one is not born but rather becomes woman. De Beauvoir (1908–1986) wrote this line in her 1949 classic *The Second Sex*.[4] She meant that 'woman' is a construct: not born, but determined, and 'womanhood' is learned through socialisation and is not 'natural.'[5] Equally, one is certainly born an equine. Yet it takes an enduring process to render one a 'horse'. Variously 'taming', 'breaking', 'bringing on', 'educating', 'training', or 'gentling' is required to make a horse an acceptable member of the horse-human herd. These are efforts predicated on a range of relationships from total domination to attempts at partnership. In De Beauvoir we hear the echoes of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's concern for the constraint of individual freedom, how we are born free but everywhere we are in chains (Rousseau, 1762, 1953). In a way, each horse is born a paradox. They are ambulatory ambiguities, cantering contradictions. Wild and tame. Vulnerable and self-sufficient; ready and unready; made and unmade. We love them for their wildness, then we bind them in leather and chains. So horses are born free, but are everywhere in reins.

PET(ER) PAN CREATURES? THE ANIMALS THAT REFUSED TO GROW UP

It was not always so. During the Pleistocene era, wild equids proliferated in Asia, the Americas and Africa. In the modern world, however, only a few of these species survive: the wild ass, Kiang, zebra and, perhaps, the *takhi*.[6] Most of these are endangered, but horses as a species flourish, with probably as many as 60 million globally, most living closely with people and some living feral as mustangs, brumbies and so on. Although they thrive as a species, individually they are vulnerable creatures, prone to injury, inclined to overheating and overeating, and much given to perishing in a variety of bewildering ways. They are easily our most susceptible domesticated animal.

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[1] This essay draws from Swart (2021) and, especially in this section, from Swart (2022).

[2] Historians first examined the shifting sensory worlds of the past from the early twentieth century. From early forbears (like Freud) commenting on the sensory in society, we may trace the lineage to post-structural feminism on the historical association between the maternal, patriarchal and the sensory. For gendered sensory history, see Harvey (2003).

[3] To misquote Simone De Beauvoir.

[4] Simone De Beauvoir lives on as a Standardbred New Zealand-born mare of the same name, currently racing with a few wins to her credit.

[5] In contrast, the term female is intended to describe a stable set of natural physical facts (a presumption that is increasingly challenged by the existence of more fluidity and a continuum of chromosomal variations and psycho-social identities).

[6] *Takhi* or Przewalski's horse no longer exists in a pure state, having been diluted with the genes of our horses or donkeys. The wild horses of the Americas and brumbies of Australia, too, are really feral escapees.

Horsestorians can only shake their heads in wonder at how horses, who have been instruments of vast socio-political and economic change in human society, can themselves die from a trivial shift in routine or food. As their breathing and eating systems merge, they cannot vomit, so even simple indigestion can mean death. Any disruption to normality compromises their immune system. Once an old desert farmer, gesturing at his herds with his pipe in wry despair, said to me, 'All of God's creatures are perfect. But the Big Man in the sky might want to take another run at inventing the horse'.

The old man was right and wrong. Horses are riddled with design flaws, but blaming a deity or even the invisible hand of evolution is quite wrong. Evolution produced equids but we invented modern horses by domesticating them at least five millennia ago on the steppelands: this invention reflects the flaws of its creator. Our invisible and visible hands are evident in the three processes in our longstanding relationship: domestication, taming and riding. Of course, this trifecta of processes are very different things. But all are integral to the construction of horses – their biologies and cultures, nature and nurture, bodies and minds, but very, very different in terms of scale. Essentially, a rogue primate took a herbivore and made it something new (Swart, 2010). And then this strange mix-matched pair together changed the face of the world. They changed the land itself and the landscape of power. Their relationship pivoted on domesticating and taming and riding.

Domestication meant the very slow intimacy of five thousand years of modifying the horse's body and their temperament through anthropogenic artificial selection. At the end of the Pleistocene era, rapid climatic changes that disrupted habitats and food supplies favoured animals that were the animal equivalent of 'weeds': opportunistic, adaptive generalists. The rapidly changing environment created a selective pressure that favoured neoteny (the retention of juvenile traits into adulthood for horses: physically, longer-legged; and behaviourally, more curious, more controllable). Evolution favoured some animals with juvenile ('Peter Pan') traits that made them appealing to *Homo sapiens*. Horse domestication probably depended on chance genetic changes that would have predisposed some horses to breed in captivity. Humans then selected horses displaying neotenic variations because they were more tractable and unafraid of new experiences (and could therefore survive inter-species intimacy). Those animals who became adult enough to breed but remained 'childlike' enough to play and to tolerate us and our strange companion species, carved out a niche for themselves. We helped these forever-young animals succeed by feeding, sheltering and breeding them. Thus, we need to challenge an opening premise in this essay: so-called 'artificial' selection by humans was arguably partly 'natural' or at least permitted by attributes of reduced neophobia in some horses, for example.

With domestication, a kind of perpetual childhood fell upon them: the proportions of our adult horses are more like those of the long-legged, slender-necked foals of the once-wild horse than of their adult ancestors. We have radically altered these creatures over the past millennia, by collapsing their genetic diversity through inbreeding as we moved towards using only a small number of stallions – so that now, almost all horses carry identical, or near identical, Y-chromosomes causing an accretion of harmful mutations in their genomes. This was the 'cost of domestication', leading to congenital disorders, and in some breeds, dangerously fragile legs and hooves. This was the price of the first and 'slowest intimacy' we imposed on this species: domestication.

The cost of faster intimacy – using horses – can be high too. Because we expect so much from horses – because their bodies and ours have to work together, because mutual misunderstanding easily mean injury or death to ourselves, because their job is complicated and changing – equines have to receive an education in 'how to be a horse for humans' *from humans*. We thus tame them to suit our shifting needs. This brings us to the second process of enforcing intimacy: it is 'faster intimacy' and imposed on each individual horse, rather than a species. In other words, a foreign species teaches them at least part of their 'culture': their etiquette, language, and expression. Strangers stamp their own ways upon them. Taming shapes the young foal how to accommodate another, dominant species. Each foal thus re-enacts, in microcosm, the ancient process of domestication.

History has held a certain vision of our equestrian past: horse and man appear as dyad integral to great narratives of times gone by, of the rise of kingdoms and states, of the making and unmaking of nations and empires, of the emergence of politics and war. The conventional narrative is mainly of conquest: dominance over the horse first, then their immediate and obvious use of this instrument of dominance over other humans. We see it in thousands of equestrian statues dating back to sixth-century Greece. These statues are an atomised army, raised high above the ordinary people: kings and generals on their mounts. Great deeds and great steeds. Big Men on Big Horses. Yet taking intimacy and feminist history seriously figuratively topples such statues, dethroning the centrality of war and violence as the only engines of change. Feminist history, like feminism itself, is about choice. This essay adopts the feminist lessons of reclaiming, decentring, layering, rethinking, and incredulity towards meta-narrative (Swart, 2022). It explores the slow intimacy of domestication, of taming and riding. In telling this story, I foreground the women and the mares of the past, and, in this way, offer notes for a future feminist history of horses and humans. I will show you that intimacy is at the heart of this project.

Figure 1. Foaling in love-1 (Source: Sandra Swart)

Figure 2. Rearing baby (Source: Sandra Swart)

TRUE INTIMACY

This intimacy is more than merely academic for me. There is another kind of closeness at work here (on the classic feminist principle of the personal being political). When I bought my young Appaloosa mare, Aztec, I had no idea she carried inside her another horse as yet unborn. Aztec is a gentle, long-legged mare of melancholy loveliness – but her daughter, Voodoo (she arrived here, after all, by the strange alchemy of chance and desire), is a stubby and stout pony of strong opinions. Both mares, both of the same bloodline – but both very different. From delivering her on the night of her birth to now eight years later, raising her has been an education – mainly for me. I realise how much they have both taught about the realities and stereotypes about females of both our species (**Figure 1** and **Figure 2**).

Figure 3. Intimacy is reciprocal (Source: Sandra Swart)

WHAT IS INTIMACY?

Intimacy can be confused for romance and fantasy. There are certainly moments of horse ownership that are Instagram intimacy. Airbrushed closeness between woman and horse, our manes flowing in the wind, both liberated by the other to gallop freely from the usual constraints of horse or human herd.[7] But real intimacy is something different. Horses love to browse the urine and faeces of other horses. They are olfactory calling cards, revealing much about the identity of their producer (think of it as peemail). But this is not limited to horses, their humans peer into their horse's dung every day, like Roman Soothsayers staring into the entrails to predict the future of their horse's health. Horse dung tells one so much about the overall health of your charge. That is real intimacy. Moreover, every single day, horses need to have their hooves cleaned and to be groomed. It becomes as natural as breathing to run my hands down her legs, along her back. I open her mouth. I look in her gums, I look in her eyes. I reach between her udders because that is where the ticks cluster. This is all extremely intimate stuff. Sometimes she does it back: I get nibbled as I groom in a mutualistic bonding session (**Figure 3**).

But intimacy is a strange thing. It was because I know Aztec's body so well that I was able to see the first lesions. Tiny, almost-invisible lacerations appeared on her pink fanny – the early stages of skin cancer. It is a not uncommon fate for creatures who evolved far from the African sky: her petal-pink skin of her vulva became riddled with squamous cell carcinoma. A veterinary specialist diagnosed her, but I had to administer the chemotherapy every week. It was an incredibly toxic process. I had to dab the cancerous sores with chemotherapy poison. I once spilled a little bit on my arm that burned right through my skin. It was unbelievably painful. I had to do this to her every week. Remember, that she had no understanding why I suddenly inflicted this agony upon her. Moreover, she is an animal who could kill me with a single kick. Yet she did not once raise a hoof to me over the long weeks of treatment. You will share my joy that Aztec survived cancer, chemo and received a clean bill of health, for now. I remain vigilant – the cancer will return, and I scan her pink skin anxiously every day. This is authentic – not airbrushed – intimacy. *Such intimacy is ugly and beautiful in that ugliness* (**Figure 4**).

THE MARTYRDOM OF SAINT BOY

Now, we will move on to a different kind of ugliness: the *absence* of intimacy. Here we will encounter a very clear illustration of the importance of slow intimacy and the dramatic results of its failure may be seen in horse-human interactions, from the quotidian to the Olympic level. Modern pentathlon, for example, has always included horses. In the sporting arena, that held true too: a feminist history of sport would discuss the inclusion of women in Olympic dressage in 1952, jumping in 1956 and eventing in 1964; and in each of these debuts, at least one woman came home with a medal. At the recent Tokyo Games, in August 2021, one horse called Saint Boy was

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[7] Such moments photograph well, but they have ersatz quality – the gaze disrupts the dyad. There is perhaps a posed quality that prohibits truly being in the moment with each other: a porn version, if you will, from the human side.

Figure 4. True intimacy can be ugly (Source: Sandra Swart)

martyred because of the failure to realise the importance of establishing intimacy between horse and rider. In Modern Pentathlon events, the humans and horses only meet each other just before the event starts. (The horses are borrowed locally from private owners or riding schools.) There are selectors that choose suitable horses: these go into a common pool: the competitor then draws a horse, has twenty minutes to ride, with a mere five warmup jumps. Then this dangerous partnership – strangers to each other – go and jump a 1.20 m course. The pairs only have a short warm up, and then the competition begins, whereas in Olympic dressage, eventing and show jumping, the horse and human partners normally train together for years. One cannot just jump on and go as though a horse were a bicycle, and this led to crashing failure to perform. Intimacy – trust, connection, understanding, affiliation – must be established (Wipper, 2000; Hausberger *et al.*, 2008; Krueger, 2008: 195–206). Partnership is not too strong a term, as compatibility coupled to mutual confidence and communication are all vital constituents of the relationship: perhaps we could call it *functional intimacy*.

Lacking intimacy – even 'fast intimacy' – doomed them to failure. His rider could not read him at all. For millions watching the televised broadcast, it was like watching a slow-motion car crash. Horse and rider both seemed to become frustrated and started losing control of the course (Crooks, 2021). To quote *Cool Hand Luke*: What they had was a failure to communicate (Rosenberg, 1967). The horse bucked and seemed reluctant to trot around the course. The rider did not soothe or touch the horse on the neck or withers. Instead, she seemed to stiffen (closing the door to tactile communication) and then burst into tears, repeatedly striking Saint Boy with her crop and using spurs digging into his sides. In exasperation, which illustrates again for us the relationship between intimacy and violence, her coach urged the athlete to really hit Saint Boy and then punched him herself.[8]

Public outrage ensued and the Olympic committee has realised that this was not working and voted to replace horses in this event, because intimacy cannot be built in such a brief moment and, without it, the event becomes dangerous for horse and human.[9] So Modern Pentathlon will replace riding with an obstacle course. Intimacy matters and it takes time.

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[8] In fact, there is a link between violence towards animals and intimate partner or domestic violence (Wuerch, 2021).

[9] The German equestrian federation commented: As a professional association for equestrian sports, we adopt a critical view of the riding in the Modern Pentathlon. According to our understanding of equestrianism, *it is the partnership between the rider and the horse that counts* and not to consider the horse as a piece of sports equipment [translated, my emphasis]. Cuckson, 2021.

Time is a factor. As discussed earlier, for most of our closely-shared past, horses were instruments and symbols of power for men. Horsemen were more than men and more than horses: a horseman was a supraspecies creature. The orthodox narrative is of conquest: dominance over the horse followed by the immediate and obvious use of this 'horse power' for dominating other humans. But even in the grand sweep of History, it was intimacy that made it all possible. Horses and humans can survive the intimacy it requires to ride them into battle because of a shared understanding of sensory capacity. Equine brains have evolved sensitive 'touch recognition'. Horses were able to be the partners humans needed because their somatosensory cortex could interpret the signals of these sensitive receptor cells in their skin and convert pressures exerted by the rider's shifting bodily movements to neural impulses that the horse's brain could understand. Moreover, horses adapted to the imposition of human body language because they were already adept at using subtle but learnable body language as their main language with each other (a horse has only to tighten her nostrils or twitch her ear for another to back off). Nuanced signals create a lexicon of intent – people can also learn to read the horse's intentionality. We watch their eyes, ears, nostrils, mouth and tail, we hear their snorts and farts and whinnies and nickers: but we *feel* their muscle tension or even just shifting weight. They are all acts of communication. The conversations pivot on applying touch to various parts of the horse's body: in its crudest form, humans shout and wave their arms and horses move away. At the higher level the conversation is almost invisible to an outsider observer. Dressage rider-horse combinations who have worked together over many years seem to communicate invisibly: both horse and rider are 'whispering' to each other in a conversation based on the intimacy of touch. Shared inter-species synchronicity is made up of slow and fast intimacy: it takes millennia for the evolutionary process of domestication and months or years for the taming and riding. We could call it kinaesthetic empathy (Meyer and Wedelstaedt, 2017). Or we could call it 'intimacy' – slow and fast, ancient and in the moment. It requires an embodied and empathetic dialogue.

In these interspecies pairs, communication is accomplished through the tactile language of shared contact. It is easily misunderstood by the uninitiated of either species. Pressure signals from each animal are sensed and diffused through peripheral nerves leading through each of the two species' spinal cords. These signals are construed in each animal's brain and a learned reaction is then sent back through the spinal cord and nerves: these subtle signals make up interspecies neurobiological conversations. Humans rely on their prefrontal cortex for strategising, but horses have a rather restricted frontal lobe, relying more on memory and sensory feedback. Horses' watchful alertness and humans' ability to hyper-focus to make a stronger, faster combination including the sensory capacities of both creatures. So 'mounting the horse' became an act of dominance over others (Bronowski, 1973: 80).

In the conquest of the Americas, indigenous groups confronted by the horsemen led by Hernando Cortés were said to perceive horse and rider as one and the same: a monstrous chimera in the shape of a mounted Spanish conquistador. The dyad of horse and man was a new creature far greater than the sum of its parts: supra-human and superhuman in one shared skin. Some humans were suddenly lifted high, while literally and figuratively looking down on other humans. A warrior on a horse had the lead over those on foot owing to their increased height and speed. People could suddenly move at an astonishing 30 kilometres per hour.[10] The world became smaller and human control greater.[11] This dominance was gendered. History remembers it in the thousands of equestrian statues all around the globe. These gendered ideals are literally held up above society on pedestals. As Birke and Brandt explain, '[u]sually, it is quite clear that [the horse in an equestrian statue] is a stallion, its very maleness befitting the glory of the man above, and the tales of conquest in their combined story' (Birke and Brandt, 2009: 193). This general point, as it were, is illustrated by the statue of General Winfield Scott, a war hero who served almost five decades from the War of 1812 to the start of the Civil War (Jacob, 1998). The general was known as 'Old Fuss and Feathers' because of his devotion to pomp and pageantry. After his death in 1866, Congress decided to erect a bronze equestrian statue of him in the nation's capital. The sculptor they chose was Henry Kirke Brown. Henry cherished an appetite for authenticity. The family were happy when the sculptor used bronze from the very cannons the general had captured in battle. They were somewhat less delighted when the sculptor refused to slim down the rotund general. But they were plain outraged when he depicted the general astride not a huge stallion but a little mare – just as he had ridden in real life. The general's family begged for a more masculine statue. Eventually, the sculptor – dare we say a trifle defiantly? – affixed a tiny penis to the mare. Yet almost everywhere else, in the rearing rigidity of statues, the maleness of rider and horse is exaggerated priapically.

For millennia, the horse was a labourer, a form of transportation and a weapon. With the development of the engine, horses' roles and socio-historical significance shifted. Now horses are also used to conquer new enemies of humankind, like trauma and ailments, rather than empires. It is the sensitivity of horses to us and ours to them that undergirds initiatives like Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy, Equine-Assisted Learning Therapy (to develop life-skills like self/other-awareness) and Hippotherapy (occupational therapy/physical therapy using horses) (Yorke *et*

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[10] The average top speed of a horse is 40 to 48 km/h when carrying a rider. The fastest horses can run up to 70 km/h for short stretches.

[11] This elegant description of the dance between horse and human comes from Jones (2020); also explored and drawn from Swart (2021).

al., 2013; Sánchez *et al.*, 2014). Trauma-focused therapeutic riding helps humans who have survived violence, abuse or abandonment. Most revolve around physical intimacy: for physically-challenged and autistic children: working with horses improves muscle tone, self-control and proprioception. In cases of trauma (for veterans or survivors of domestic violence), the feel-good hormone oxytocin (often dubbed 'the love drug' because of its increase during sex) is released during communication with horses, inducing a restorative effect. When we groom, brush or even touch horses, oxytocin is released and we (and sometimes the horse) are flooded with oxytocin. When we ride, the close bodily contact with another being and the rocking motion simulates being hugged. The movement of the horse and the soothing sensory input it provides can also help calm the amygdala and reduce stress, which is measurable with reduced cortisol coursing through the body. The horses do not seem to suffer stress, and, indeed, sometimes mirror the human effects of lowered cortisol and increased oxytocin in their bodies: a possible reciprocal benefit from the shared intimacy of bodies (Malinowski *et al.*, 2018).

This is recognised in new studies of psychophysiological indicators of emotional responses. Studies show that horses certainly seem to feel more peaceful when people groomed (brushed) them, especially humans they already knew rather than strangers. The sympathovagal balance shifted toward a vagal predominance, which means they were less stressed when pleasurably touched by someone with whom they were familiar (Scopa *et al.*, 2020). These scientific studies are valuable – but many ordinary horsepeople know this too. As cowboy Buck Brannaman (2001: 124) describes it:

> One little wrong move on my part, and [Biff, an untrained colt] would have pawed my head off or kicked me in the belly. But I had to touch him, because that established the vital physical and emotional connection between horse and human. I rubbed him with my hand and with my coiled rope along his neck, rubbing him affectionately, the way horses nuzzle each other out in a pasture and especially the reassuring, maternal way a mare bonds with her foal.

TOUCHING MOMENTS? FLESHING IT OUT

Such intimacy of touch is curiously neglected by scholars. Feminist scholars Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa contend that 'a theory in the flesh' includes corporeal realities and embodied knowledge (Moraga and Anzaldúa, 2015). Despite its being the primary means of communication between rider and horse, there are vanishingly few peer-reviewed scientific studies focusing on this from equitation science: but there are new important works coming from feminist theory, sociology, anthropology and ethnography (Birke and Thompson, 2017; Blokhuis and Lundgren, 2017; Brandt, 2004; Maurstad, Davis and Cowles, 2013). This is a welcome development as the tactile frontier between species is a vital instrument of closer understanding. Horses' skin is their largest bodily organ, just as for us. Like us, the horse prefers a gentle but rhythmical touch and to be massaged (rubbed and stroked) rather than patted. We know that the horse's skin is almost the same as our skin in basic structure and feels pain as we do. So it is shocking that one is permitted to whip the horse in otherwise well-regulated horse sports like racing, show jumping and so on. The whiskers (or the lovely word: '*vibrissae*') around the eyes and muzzle alert the horse to the proximity of other beings and of objects. Through their whiskers and lips, horses gather a tremendous amount of tactile information. It is equally astonishing that it is permissible to cut these off to produce 'prettier' horses for showing.

Touch is integral to a horse's sensory world. A horse can sense a fly land on their body and twitch that specific area of skin. Touch transcends the individual: it helps cement social bonds and patrol behaviour by biting, sniffing, nibbling, nudging, playing, and grooming. Such intimacy is key to emotional well-being and the horse's sense of self within the herd. This sensorium transfers to the act of riding: a sense of touch is important between a rider and the horse. Indeed, it is the key communication tool. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's notion of touch as the 'double sensation' – because to touch is to be touched – is most useful in thinking about horse riding (Merleau-Ponty, 1982). The touch receptors help with proprioception or kinaesthesia: the body's ability to sense movement and place. It is a kind of 'sixth sense' that tells you where your body ends and the world begins. Equine proprioception permits a horse to sense the pressures within her own body and within ours. As she carries you, the horse knows not only where her feet are, but also what your feet, thighs, calves, hands are doing, the pressure of your back and pelvis, the alignment of your torso and which direction your head is facing. Touch is the foundation of the human-horse relationship.

TOUCHY FEELY?

In equestrianism, an attuned and attentive relationship between the horse and rider is vital to ensure communication. This is an effort towards a shared closeness or understanding between bodies. This is described

as having 'feel' and is perhaps most simply defined as possessing an awareness of you own body and that of your horse. Feel (sometimes called 'tact') emerges only over time, when a rider establishes a conversation and connection with their horse that allows them to sense the horse's position at every step, as the horse accepts and responds to the rider's seat, leg, and rein aids through this channel. Beyond the corporeal aspect of this connection, *feel* also entails an emotional bond between the horse and rider. The rider must be attuned and attentive to the horse's needs, the reasons behind those needs, and precisely when to apply the aids (different signals for the horse to change their course of action). One can develop feel but it cannot be learned from a book: it requires an equine teacher. Moreover, in learning, the rider needs to deploy all of their senses – especially touch – and not rely exclusively or even primarily on the visual. As Petitt and Brandt-Off observe, both species must be socialised, or zoocialised, to learn to engage in a shared community of communication where they develop a sense of timing and feel of the others to enable their directed movement together (Petitt and Brandt-Off, 2022). *Feel* is earned. It is only through slow inter-species intimacy that a rider acquires feel.

SADDLED WITH HISTORY?

We may feel intimate, but we are never entirely alone. The horse-human dyad has received much attention, but I argue that we should challenge the very idea of dyad. It really is a multi-species ecosystem. Every romantic 'solitary' gallop when one is 'alone with one's horse' actually carries a legion of fellow travellers: flies, worms, ticks and parasites, flies, and gut biota, which all come along for the ride. Moreover, even when it seems like just horse and rider, we do not ride alone. Behind us on the saddle, skeletal arms around our waists, we carry the unseen passenger of History.

Our horses carry the burden not only of ourselves but of the past. This is gendered by a military and highly masculinised memory of history. An example is the very way most people mount a horse: from the left side. Some assume that horses simply prefer to be worked from the left. So the left is the 'near' side, while the right side is the 'off' side. These terms reinscribe this unbalanced approach, which, in fact, has nothing to do with what horses prefer. Instead, we involuntarily re-enact history every time we ride. We still mount from the left because of swords we no longer carry. It is an historical legacy: most people are right-handed so men carried swords on their left sides so they could easily reach them with their right hands. With a long blade suspended from a rider's left it was impractical, if not impracticable, to mount the horse from the right side, because they would then sit on their swords.[12] Horses' right and left-brain hemispheres do not automatically swop information; so if you train on the left, it feels new on the right. Really, we should be mounting from both sides for the sake of the horse's brain and back. There are risks associated with mounting your horse from the same side every time (Geutjens *et al.*, 2008). It places unnecessary unequal pressure on the horse's withers, resulting in bruising, repetitive wear and tear and pain. Ideally horses should be mounted from both sides on a rotating basis to help equalise the pressure and keep them more balanced. So we actively harm the horse by always mounting from the same side. Is History doing our bodies damage?

GENDER MATTERS?

Historically, gendering the practice of riding may do damage. In other work, I have shown how gender stereotyping imposed on the riders does harm. Ersatz Freudian stereotyping has been deployed to explain the global North's predominantly female equestrian world. Claiming the horse as phallus-substitute and riding as a form of penis envy crudely caricatures and does damage to the human-horse relationship (Swart, 2022). We also harm through gender stereotyping imposed on the horses. Our own cultures' histories shape how we respond to mares. So we see the word 'mare' take on a life of its own, elided with another meaning from *mære*, an Old English term for an evil spirit that was supposed to settle on a sleeper's chest and cause a feeling of suffocation. At other times it meant a bad woman or a 'slut'. The very elision of mare and nightmare entrenches the prejudice in quotidian idiom, meaning a 'frustrating experience' or (in sport) 'a poor performance' – as in 'what a *mare* of a round!' Anti-mare sentiment has varied in a non-linear fashion with shifts in society and historical periods.

When we think 'horse culture', we might think of Scythians, Sauromatae, Saka, and Sarmatians, nomads of Mongolia and Kazakhstan (Borisenko and Hudiakov, 2018), Bedouins (Lange, 2019), Yakuts of Northern Siberia, Boer commandos (Swart, 2003), gauchos, vaqueros, buckaroos (Clayton, Hoy and Underwood, 2001; Slatta, 1991), the urban cowboys of Compton (Rabitsch and Salisbury, 2021), the Blackfoot of the Western Plains, Spanish Riding School of Vienna, we might think of globalised racing (Cassidy, 2007), eventing, dressage, polo, or we might think of tough little pony-mad 'horsey gels' who have to stand on buckets to groom. These cultures are obviously

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[12] Napoleon, who was left-handed, was an exception and had to mount from the right.

contoured by prevailing societal norms and concomitantly gendered (as well as classed and raced). But not only *humans* experience being gendered in these cultures: so do horses. Humans ascribe identity to the sexed bodies of equines and treat them differently because of it. Birke and Brandt make the good point that: 'The presence of horses enables a subversion of dominant gender practices particularly at the localized (private) level, while at the same time enables a reinscription of traditional gender ideals at the global (public) level' (Birke and Brandt, 2009: 189). It is significant that almost all equestrian competitions are, in stark contrast to other sports except pistol shooting, open to both women and men on equal playing fields, as the horse (like the gun) makes up for the physical differences between them. That is subversive of the stark gendered order of most competitive sports. Moreover, gendered norms can be disrupted by equestrianism: some women riders, in some contexts, find themselves laying claim to more masculinised identities than non-riders in the same communities (Traeen and Wang, 2006). However, in other ways perceived gender identities are actually fetishised in the horse world.

Prejudices extend not only to female humans but also to the female horses, as noted above. In today's riding world (at least in the West), riders openly declare their preference for geldings over mares. Yet other cultures see the bodies and behaviours of horses differently, proving these are gendered rather than sexed differences. (Among the Bedouin, for example, mares were most highly valued as war horses.) The horse industry abounds with sexist stereotypes. Happily, feminist history alerts us to the dangers of such stereotypes and recent scientific studies are beginning to explode them too. Tentative findings suggest there may be some very minor sex-related differences in behaviour (like geldings will perhaps more readily chew on rugs).[13] But the majority of scientific studies found no significant difference between mares, geldings or stallions in the variables that actually matter in horse-human intimacy: the ability to understand and operationalise that understanding (Wolff and Hausberger, 1995). A significant study found <5% difference in behaviours in total scoring between mares and geldings (Aune *et al.*, 2020). Even when bias is involved, the results were telling: in one study that criticised fillies as more volatile than geldings, the fillies actually achieved the same measurable goals (Duberstein and Gilkeson, 2010). So it might simply have been the (socialised) human eye seeing what our culture encourages it to see: 'hysterical females over-reacting'.

There is a cruel corollary to these stereotypes. Equestrians (both trainers and riders) have historically-inflected prejudices in how they understand their intimacy with horses that is contoured by a gendered understanding of the horse. To put it bluntly: mares suffer misogyny. Overwhelmingly, riders favoured geldings over mares. Disturbing traits repeatedly ascribed to mares include 'touchy', hysterical, dramatic, diva, over-sensitive, bitchy, and bossy. History teaches us that stereotypes do matter. In an important study, Dashper *et al.* surveyed over a thousand riders to ascertain their choice of horse premised exclusively on the sex: selecting either mares, geldings, or stallions for dressage, show-jumping, and trail-riding. Geldings came out on top by an overwhelming majority (valued as trustworthy and dependable), followed by stallions (esteemed for purported magnificence and 'presence'). Mares came out last. This was justified with familiar gender typecasting portraying females as 'moody, flighty, and unpredictable' (Dashper *et al.*, 2018: 673).

Moreover, the ethological the dominance paradigm is still widely applied. Many subscribe to a very simple ethological model, thinking that 'wild' ('feral') herds are led by a 'boss' mare. Thus stigmatised, the so-called 'bossy mare' faces the prospect of having any unwanted conduct misunderstood as a 'hierarchical challenge' to her human trainer and rider (the true boss?) rather than ascribe it (correctly) to fear, pain or confusion (Dashper *et al.*, 2018). The consequences of such bias are significant. Mares might be overlooked or underestimated due to assumptions about their sex (and perceived gender), leading to missed opportunities for them to showcase their potential or, worse, being abandoned as biologically irredeemable. Instead of attributing problems (like squealing or biting when being saddled, kicking out at the aids, and so on) to pain or confusion, there is a strong risk of erroneously connecting them with the sex of the horse. When a gelding, considered a team-player, reliable and laid-back, disobeys a signal, the rider is more likely to think that he has misunderstood and try different ways to establish it with reinforcement. But a mare will not get that second chance. When riders ascribe undesirable behaviours in mares to biological or character flaws, important signs of pain[14] or fear are simply overlooked. This can precipitate punishment rather than a more thoughtful diagnosis of the unwanted behaviour (like an ill-fitting saddle).

Of course, feminism does not reject the biological, but rather seeks to understand its 'interimplication' in the social (Roberts, 2001). Mares are seasonally polyoestrous, so they actively cycle for part of the year, during which time they may urinate or 'wink' their external reproductive organs, and be perceived as more sensitive or bad tempered. Riders may blame a mare's 'cycle' or her hormones making her 'hysterical' rather than searching for underlying discomfort from injury or ill-fitting tack. In another cross-species stereotype: when a stallion shows sexual interest in mares, his 'studdiness' is forgiven or even admired! But a mare in season, showing the signs of squatting, squirting and winking at a passing horse, is often branded (in jocular or more judgemental terms) a

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[13] While the study did show that mares and gelding showed minor differences on the ground, they did not under saddle. The mares were slightly more likely to evade capture on the ground.

[14] Studies have found connections between pain (from back or ulcers, for example) and perceived belligerence.

'hussy' or a 'slut' by their owners. This is a dual-edged sword of gender prejudice that cuts both mares and sex-positive women.

Stereotyping shapes perception and therefore shapes human relationships with horses. A trifecta of takeaways come from this: overall, research findings suggest that horse behaviour under saddle is 'not sexually dimorphic'. In other words, it is not affected by whether a horse is a mare or a gelding (Aune *et al.*, 2020). Second, sex-based stereotyping damages the ability of mares to attain their full performance potential as baseless bias misdiagnoses real problems by ascribing these issues to the sex of the horse rather than the personal history of horse and rider, and 'legacies of training and prior learning'. Finally, mares may be more easily given up on, discarded, sold (or even euthanised) because of such culturally-inscribed and historical entrenched beliefs. Gender plays a role in the quality of life of horses, just as it does among humans. It impacts on how they are handled and how their behaviour is interpreted. In short, it affects the kind of intimacies they are permitted.

CONCLUSION: GETTING UNDER THE SKIN?

This essay has explored the co-created sensory experiences between two species over time, offering a deeper understanding of the multi-sensory nature and different scales of inter-species intimacy. Feminist thinking can help challenge stereotyping by thinking about the intimacy at the heart of horse-human relationships. It can demonstrate the simple but powerfully hopeful truth that *if it has changed before it can be changed again* (Swart, 2016). As De Beauvoir ([1949] 1956: 61) once said, echoing Merleau-Ponty '… man is not a natural species; he is a historical idea. Woman is not a completed reality, but rather a becoming…'. Horses are also not a natural species. They were a shared historical invention, an idea five millennia in the making – more our idea than theirs – and at times, a terrible idea. De Beauvoir's point was that ideas could change. Horses, like 'women', are not a completed 'reality' but rather a fluid 'becoming', along with us in our soft shared skins.

The bodies of history are remembered in stone and bronze. We saw how statues remember the gendered history of horsemen. But we live in age of toppling statues. One by one, Big Men on Big Horses are unseated and come crashing down, the old paradigms crack, the old gender orders disintegrate, the old histories crumble, and the old heroes fall. Some suggest that when the effigies fall, we simply keep the statues of horses – alone on the plinths. A world of riderless horses… free at last.

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'And Losing Thus the Boundary / Of the Finite Me, / Diffusing Outward, I Approach / The Edges of Infinity' (Plath, 2020: 133) – The Two Dimensions of Extimacy in Contemporary Psychoanalytic Thought

Jaco Barnard-Naudé [1*]

ABSTRACT

The article investigates the meaning and value of Jacques Lacan's term 'extimacy'. It argues that there are two competing notions of extimacy at work in the literature, a negative one (which dominates the literature) and a positive (nascent) one, which is not yet fully worked out in the literature and to which this contribution offers a form of development through the recourse to the instance of the (love) letter in the unconscious. The author associates the positive 'valence' of extimacy with what Paul Cilliers calls 'a certain slowness' which is inextricably tied up with reflection as one of the fundamental features of any successful psychoanalysis, namely an analysis that passes through the Act. The author shows how the writing of a love letter – as an instance of slow reflection – not only exposes a (repressed) positive dimension to extimacy, but also (and perhaps because of this) qualifies as an instance of more or less successful self-analysis – what the author associates with a psychic progression of sorts.

Keywords: extimacy, slowness, revolution, violence, love

INTRODUCTION

British legal academic, Maria Aristodemou (2016), in a paper titled 'Freedom in the free world: The extimate becomes the law' begins by recalling what she calls the 'well-known and oft-repeated' anecdote according to which, when Sigmund Freud travelled to the United States in 1909, he remarked to his then friend and confidante, Carl Jung, that the warm reception they were being given was premised on a fundamental confusion: 'They don't understand', Freud is said to have remarked, 'that we are bringing them the plague' (Aristodemou, 2016: 85).

Elisabeth Rottenberg (2021: 115) argues that this remark was meant as a kind of serious joke. She writes that she has always imagined the remark as being delivered by Freud with something of the 'impish grin'. Yet, as Rottenberg (115) suggests, we cannot understand the significant reach of the remark without attending to the view Freud held about America: 'a land Freud loved to hate. Americans were uncultured, shallow, prudish, enamored of money, and covertly antisemitic'. Rottenberg (115) suggests that against the backdrop of this view, Freud with the reference to the 'plague', meant to convey the hope that the 'subversive, rebellious, irruptive, *outbreak* quality of psychoanalysis would spell the end of a certain "American way of life."'

Now, Rottenberg (2021: 115), quite correctly, tells her readers that in actual fact these words were never uttered by Freud – the words are the 'pure invention' of Jacques Lacan, 'who attributed them to Freud in order to sound the death knell of American ego psychology'. So, in Rottenberg's correction, the target of the remark, put in Freud's mouth by Lacan, is not so much a certain deplorable American 'way of life', but rather becomes the predominant form of psychodynamic 'treatment' in the then existing American clinic – a treatment which Lacan abhorred. Rottenberg (115), however, acknowledges that the remark – precisely because we can impose (in the manner of Rottenberg) a kind of external justification for it if it *was* made by Freud – acquires the status of pure myth in contemporary psychoanalytic literature, so much so that no one dares to believe today that Freud didn't actually utter these words.

Aristodemou (2016: 85) elaborates that this kind of deliberate misconstrual, a misconstrual that cannot be accounted for without recourse to the way in which it is always mediated by signification (what Aristodemou (2016: 85) calls the 'circulation of the signifier'), was for Jacques Lacan, 'at the heart of all human communication'. The best we can hope for, Aristodemou writes, 'is a successful, and hopefully bloodless, misunderstanding' (85), in the

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midst of being foundationally thrown into, delivered over to, a system of signification – the symbolic order – which consists of an arbitrary array of signifiers that always more or less fail to capture 'meaning', sense and representation. For Aristodemou's part, she goes on to take Lacan at face value as regards the plague remark and argues that psychoanalysis is like a plague because it exposes us to that which we most shy away from, that which we most deny, that which we are most ashamed of, that which we 'avoid like the plague' – thus, psychoanalysis is like a plague because like a plague it exposes (and exploits, one could even say 'feeds on') the weaknesses of our psychic constitution, the negative dimensions thereof.

Why, after all, Aristodemou asks, 'would we embrace a discourse whose likely outcome is to show us our own ugliness, confront us with the self who, even if we suspected we harbored, hoped no one else would realize we had' (85). In doing this plague-like work, psychoanalysis is what Lacan called an 'extimate' discourse, a discourse, in other words, that exposes to us an Other that hides in the very core of our intimacy, an exterior (an Other) that lies in wait in our most intimate thoughts. My contention in this article is that there are, as is the case with Freud's / Lacan's remark about 'the plague', two equally valid but bifurcating approaches to extimacy, one – the dominant one – is negative, the other is positive and affirmative and views extimacy as an indelible source of transformation and progress in the world and in our psyche.

Like Aristodemou, I do not deny that the exposure of extimacy can be upsetting and indeed subversive of a *status quo* whether individual or collective – in that sense it is always connected to the plague-ish nature of psychoanalysis. But I do not regard such subversiveness, upset and revolt as necessarily a bad thing, as necessarily 'ugly', to put it in Aristodemou's idiom. After all, and as brutal as it may sound, psychoanalysis is a plague with a very specific purpose, namely to bring about transformation and rebirth if not exactly a full and final healing, at least not in the way in which Lacan rethought psychoanalysis. For in Lacan to successfully 'pass' in an analysis, is to be fully identified with the symptom (what Lacan called the 'sinthome') that operates as the core of enjoyment of our being and that makes each of us unique.

To illustrate the positive valence of extimacy, it will be necessary to confront, first of all, its ugliness, the ways in which it indeed causes misunderstanding that is not, as Aristodemou would have it, 'hopefully bloodless' but rather the ways in which it spills so many forms of blood in the world.

But first, something about the origin of the term. The notion of extimacy was coined by Lacan (1992) on 10 February 1960 in his seminar on the ethics of psychoanalysis. There Lacan referred to extimacy in relation to what he intriguingly called 'the Thing', when he referred to 'the central place, this intimate exteriority, this extimacy, which is the Thing' (171). So we have in Lacan a direct correspondence between the Thing and extimacy. Thus, to appreciate extimacy better, we have to know what Lacan meant with the Thing or what is left untranslated in the Routledge edition of the Seminar as *das Ding*. What does Lacan have in mind with *das Ding*? To put it simply, *das Ding* is merely the, or that which is, Other to the subject, but it is an Other with a particular character for it represents that Other which is at the same time interior and with whom we have an affective relation – it is an Other whom we desire and, specifically, desire above and beyond all Law – it is, as Lacan says, the 'beyond of the signified' (54).[1] Dylan Evans (1996: 207) remarks that *das Ding* is for Lacan an Otherness that lies beyond our imagination, an 'unknowable x, beyond symbolization', an object of desire that we certainly do not know that we desire at the level of consciousness and the ordinary law. Accordingly, *das Ding* stands for the ultimate object of our *unconscious* desire. At its heart, *das Ding* is nothing more than a void around which our desire circulates in an eternal restlessness. Evans says that it is the original lost object that is continuously refound in our unconscious (Evans, 1996: 207). To put it at its phenomenological level, *das Ding* is none other than the 'mythical' maternal thing (Lacan, 1992: 81) – the mother's body as the original lost object and thus subject of our original *incestuous* desire (Lacan, 1992: 82). In this regard, Lacan (1992: 82) remarks as follows: 'The desire for the mother cannot be satisfied because it is the end, the terminal point, the abolition of the whole world of demand, which is the one that at its deepest level structures man's unconscious.'

Now, since this (m)Other is originally lost, our experience of *das Ding* can only be an experience of a fundamental emptiness that lies at the core of our being and, in fact, propels it. Lacan (1992: 150) therefore refers to *das Ding* as the 'emptiness' inherent in the signifier and 'the emptiness in the centre of the real' (150). As the ultimate object of desire, *das Ding* therefore stands also for unattainable desire, for that which sets desire in motion[2] – a dimension which the later Lacan explored via his recourse to the so-called *objet petit a*, the object-cause of our

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[1] Elvio Fachinelli (2021) has teased out the origins of *das Ding* in Lacan by tracing it back to Freud. In Freud there is a splitting of the perception of the *Nebenmensh* (the neighbour) into their familiar and conceivable part, their part which is 'like us' and their unfamiliar and strange aspect which Fachinelli describes as their 'unchanging apparatus' which Freud coded as *das Ding*. *Das Ding* thus originates in the aura of a strangeness, an alien part of the neighbour which renders the neighbour at the same time as close but also as far, as alien or *Fremde*. Thus, the neighbour is at the same time both close and far, both intimate and strange, both 'interior' and 'exterior'.

[2] Fachinelli (2021) remarks that 'Lacan seemingly proposes through the Thing a general form of desire, valid as a universal law of action.'

desire. It is, therefore, safe to say that Lacan's reflections on the extimacy of *das Ding* completely eschews the conventional psychological idea that our psyche is constituted in a bipartite structure of interior and exterior world – extimacy names the instability between the interior and the exterior, how the interior is folded into the exterior and vice versa, how the border is fundamentally unstable.

Lacan's cursory remarks about extimacy in the seminar on ethics, however, in no way represents a fully developed version of the concept. For an interpretation that sheds light we must turn to those who have come in Lacan's wake. In this regard, Jacques-Alain Miller (1988) has offered the leading interpretation of extimacy. Miller (1988: 122) takes up extimacy from the very point where Lacan left it by remarking that in the analytic experience extimacy means that 'the most interior', the most 'intimate', 'has a quality of exteriority'. Miller illustrates this with reference to the psychoanalytic relationship itself: the patient shares their most intimate thoughts on the couch with another, external person – the analyst – about whom they know next to nothing (123). Thus, the psychoanalytic relationship is by its very nature a relationship of intimate exteriority or exterior intimacy – extimacy. Miller then goes on to make an interesting move that is totally congruent with Lacan's teaching on the extimacy of *das Ding*: he says that the most interior, the most intimate is *not* what is most well-known by the subject (122). Rather, the interior, the most intimate, in fact exists in a state of opacity (122).

Extimacy, then, means as I have already intimated, that the interior is Other, unknown, indeed beyond conscious knowledge as *savoir*. Miller writes, further, that the extimate is not simply benignly opaque. Rather, it is like 'a parasite, a foreign body' (123). Miller then suggests that it is *jouissance*, that is, enjoyment beyond the pleasure principle, that grounds the alterity of this extimate Other. 'It is', Miller writes, 'in its relation to jouissance that the Other is really Other' (125). The reason why it is specifically in terms of its relation to jouissance that the Other is really Other, is because Lacanian psychoanalysis takes the view that each of us have / suffer an unconscious enjoyment beyond the pleasure principle – a jouissance – which is completely unique and singular. While all of us are universally subjected to the law of the signifier, the ways in which that subjection to the laws of the signifier displace and sediments an enjoyment in our unconscious is as personal as its occurrence is universal – there is no subject without jouissance and there is no jouissance that is not particular and due to contingent factors in our unique psychic constitution.

It is at this point that Miller makes the negative (in the sense that it negates an established structure or essence), or negative (as opposed to 'positive') move in relation to extimacy on which his dominant interpretation turns: he says that we find 'war' where we find this Other who is only really Other in her relation to *jouissance* (125). Miller's example of such a war is racism. He writes as follows:

> racism calls into play a hatred which goes precisely toward what grounds the Other's alterity, in other words, its jouissance. If no decision, no will, no amount of reasoning is sufficient to wipe out racism, it is indeed because it is founded on the point of extimacy of the Other (125).

Miller reasons that racism is founded on the extimacy of the Other precisely because of the proximity, the closeness, the intimacy of the neighbour Other. It is easy to love the neighbour as yourself when they are far away, distant, over there and thus not really a neighbour (when they are a domesticated Other and thus not really Other). However, when the neighbour is close to us, intimately related, yet an Other, when the neighbour Other is proximate in their alterity, hatred rears its ugly head. And this hatred in racism is always a hatred of the particular way in which the Other enjoys, whether it is by playing her music too loudly or cooking smelly food or talking too loudly in the street or, indeed, by sleeping with (and thus desiring) those who 'we' think are undesirable – a notion which J. M. Coetzee (1991) has shown to lie at the very heart of apartheid.[3]

Sheldon George (2014: 362) uses the example of the shooting of Jordan Davis in the USA who was shot at ten times and killed by a white man, Michael Dunn, because Dunn said that 'this gangster-rap, ghetto talking thug "culture" that certain segments of society flock to is intolerable' and that the way in which Davis and his friends behaved towards Dunn after he asked them to turn down their music, was 'obnoxious,' causing him to conclude that 'everybody in the car was a thug or a gangster' (362). Closer to home, we can cite the infamous Penny Sparrow[4] example – again a racism grounded in a subliminal but no less hateful fantasy about how the Other is taking their enjoyment, a fantasy that there is something wrong and dangerous about the Other's enjoyment, a fantasy that arises because of the intimate proximity, a too-nearness of the Other, and, therefore, founded, as Miller says, on the extimate aspect of being.

Aristodemou (2016: 89) also relies on this negative reading of extimacy in her paper about how the extimate becomes the law, at least according to her reading of the documentary cinematic representation of Indonesian

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[3] Coetzee (1991: 11) has shown that '[a]n inability to face the desire of black for white or white for black manifests itself in motions of evasion […] or of revulsion and denial' in the mind of apartheid.

[4] See Mutiga (2016). Sparrow likened Black South African beach goers to 'monkeys' when she complained in a social media post about the litter that was ruining a South African beach.

genocide of communists in 1965-66. According to Aristodemou, Joshua Oppenheimer's documentary, *The Act of Killing*, exposes the law as an extimate that is a 'raw and obscene excess' (86) that only once in a while rises to the surface of our discourse in an 'obscene and traumatic horror' (89). Aristodemou concludes that an extimate exposure in relation to law enables us to see not law's greatness, but its 'obscene ugliness' as founded in violent crime that perpetuates itself beyond the constitutional moment (89).

Aristodemou's argument invites reflection, in our context, on the obscene and horrific violences that attended the founding of the South African Constitution in 1993 while the country was on the brink of a race war – a situation that has been vividly portrayed in another important documentary, *1994: The Bloody Miracle,* by Bert Haitsma and Meg Rickards which is described as follows: 'it's hard to believe that the "Mandela Miracle" nearly didn't happen. In an *orgy of countrywide violence*, some were intent on derailing the first free elections. Now for the first time, those responsible for countless deaths and widespread mayhem explain how they nearly brought South Africa to its knees' (IMDB, n. d.), emphasis added). This ('memorial' [Snyman, 1998]) dimension of the Constitution's founding is often overlooked or covered over in favour of the celebratory, monumental narrative that sees the Constitution in terms of a neoliberal triumphalism.

So, from Miller and Aristodemou we have a distinctly negative reading of the extimate as really the core of the plague that psychoanalysis brings to light and this negative reading of extimacy dominates the literature. As my example of the violence and violations that attended the founding of the South African Constitution illustrates, and as is illustrated in Aristodemou's own reading of the Indonesian genocide, there is a lot of critical purchase to this negative reading of extimacy, since it can expose to us the often hidden, horrific violences that lie at the core of foundings and constitutions, however broadly conceived.

In what follows, I am by no means at pains to disavow the negative readings of extimacy along with its critical potentials. However, I am not convinced that this distinctly negative reading of the extimate is all that there is to it. For there is a different tradition of the exposure of the extimate which is founded in an altogether different reading of what I would call the 'valency' of the extimate. This different reading of the extimate is intimately bounded up with extimacy's relation to *das Ding* as something that vacillates between the 'Good' and the 'Evil'.[5] As Evans (1996: 207) indicates in his discussion of *das Ding*, the Thing is presented to the subject as at the same time their 'sovereign Good' whilst its attainment is strictly also associated with the subject's dissolution in evil. In extimacy, there thus lies a fundamental ambivalence and eternal oscillation between negative and positive, bad and good, evil and virtue and, I argue, it is because of this border of undecidability in the concept that it (also) opens on to the positive, good, affirmative and even emancipatory.

What I would wager is that Miller and Aristodemou fail to reckon with their own unconscious when it comes to their negative reading of the extimate as grounded in hatred, obscenity and horror. One political example of the different, affirmative tradition of the extimate can be found in Nathan Gorelick's (2013) reading of the Haitian Revolution. But before we come to this reading, let me say in advance that this other reading of the extimate on which I will rely from hereon, is no less devastating for an established *status quo* whether individual or collective, than the 'obscene', 'horrific' version of the extimate that we find in Miller and Aristodemou. But this version of the extimate is devastating precisely because it is positive and positing, precisely because it is grounded in a true psychoanalytic Act – an Act which introduces the law anew through a refounding.

As all Lacanians know, the outcome of a successful psychoanalysis is the acquisition of what Lacan in Seminar XVII calls a different, 'another', 'style' (Lacan 2007: 176) of the master-signifier (the law), a style which Bracher (1988: 46) describes as 'less absolute, exclusive, and rigid in its establishment of the subject's identity, and more open, fluid, processual, constituted, in a word, by relativity and textuality'. Similarly, Slavoj Žižek (2008: 309) writes that the Act occurs on account of 'ontological non-closure, inconsistency, gaps, in a situation'. The Act occurs when the subject becomes finally able to 'traverse the phantasy' and 'confronts the void, the gap, filled up by the fantasmatic object'. My sense is that the positive dimension of extimacy becomes legible precisely on account of the psychoanalytic Act in that it is the Act that both exposes and fundamentally relies upon the 'ontological non-closure' of extimacy – that it is not all obscenity, trauma and horror, that there is a beyond to trauma, horror and obscenity which becomes available through the traversal of the phantasy and the confrontation with the fantasmatic object that fills the void or gap of our desire.

So, to come to a political reading of the positive dimension of extimacy. Gorelick (2013: 115) reads the Haitian Revolution as what he calls an 'extimate revolt'. Why is it an *extimate* revolt precisely? Because, as Gorelick shows, the Haitian revolution was at least in great part instigated at a psycho-dynamic level in the practice of creole mesmerism, which is really the intimate exterior of psychoanalysis, its extimate core as antecedent (125).

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[5] In this regard, Fachinelli (2021) quotes from Seminar VII that part where Lacan, in linking *das Ding* to Kantian ethics, explicitly links *das Ding* with the Good in Kant, as follows: 'On the horizon, beyond the pleasure principle, there rises up the *Gute, das Ding*, thus introducing at the level of the unconscious something that ought to oblige us to ask once again the Kantian question of the *causa noumenon*'.

Mesmerism came to Haiti from the European metropole via the work and practice of Anton Frantz Mesmer who first used magnetised water to bring about altered states of consciousness in his patients (115). Whilst this is not well known today, before psychoanalysis Mesmerism was in fact all the craze in Europe (118). Gorelick describes what he calls the 'inaugural importance' of Mesmerism for psychoanalysis and posits that this importance lies in Mesmer's, 'insistence on his discoveries' conformity to the spirit of the Enlightenment' (this, at least, according to the seminal work of Ellenberger (1970) on who Gorelick relies throughout his analysis. According to Gorelick (116), Mesmer succeeded in inviting critical clinical discussion in scientific terms about the human mind, partly because of his successes and also partly because of his failings. This emergence of clinical discussion amongst informed commentators at the time, Gorelick argues, 'founded the scientific approach to the psyche out of which psychoanalysis later developed' (116). For instance, the so-called 'magnetic rapport' which Mesmer developed with his patients, is an early instantiation of what psychoanalysis would later develop as transference (116). In fact, Gorelick goes as far as advancing the notion that Mesmerism constituted the 'key to the Freudian discovery more than a century later' (116).

Yet Gorelick complicates the assertion that psychoanalysis simply developed out of the Mesmerism that was practiced in the metropolitan centre at the time. Rather, Gorelick is interested in the role of the colonial periphery, Saint Domingue specifically, in the evolution of psychoanalysis. Saint Domingue was particularly characterised by a seldom mentioned 'mania for mesmerism' (Gorelick, 2013: 117) which, upon closer investigation, turns out to provide an instance of 'analytic refraction' which locates the origin of psychoanalysis in this 'truly revolutionary dimension' of the 'nascent dynamic psychology' that emerged 'along the margins of late eighteenth-century empire' (117). Through a careful and thoughtful analysis, Gorelick shows how mesmerism was outlawed by the French colonial authorities in relation to black slaves, because of the potentially revolutionary / emancipatory dimension that the practice could unleash amongst the slave population.

Inspired by the practices and revelations of mesmerism, Haitian culture incorporated mesmerism into the practice of *voudou* (Regourd, 2007)[6] and so the mental aspect of the Haitian Revolution became extimate precisely because it represented an undoing of Europe from within its very heart – it was, as such, an intimate Other of Europe that undid it from within, at least to the extent of the revolution at that point in world history. In this regard, Gorelick (2013: 134) writes of the 'revolutionary dimension of the unconscious' that erupted at the end of the eighteenth century, long before Freud coined the term psychoanalysis. It is this positive, emancipatory, assertive and no less disruptive dimension of extimacy – a dimension that introduces a new law and a new constitution – that I want to conclude with by telling you a story about love and intimacy.

I do this because I want to highlight a dimension of extimacy that I think can be aligned to revolution, recovery and perhaps, emancipation. To highlight this dimension, I hope that the story will show perhaps a glimpse of what it would take to overcome the negative dimension of extimacy at the level of love and intimacy. Before I tell this story, let me say that I think that the positive valency of extimacy can only truly become available to us through what Paul Cilliers (n. d.) calls 'a certain slowness'. This 'certain slowness' is fundamentally grounded in the notion of reflection of which Cilliers writes that it, in turn, fundamentally involves the idea of delay or hesitation. Cilliers quotes Wittgenstein as the epigraph to his paper: 'In philosophy the winner of the race is the one who can run most slowly. Or: the one who gets there last' (1). Thus, when it comes to the hard work of truly thinking (philosophy), delay or hesitation (slowness) is an ally rather than an adversary. Before we hear more of what Cilliers has to say, let me interject here the voice of Henrik Enckell (2010) for whom psychoanalysis is the very art of reflection. As Enckell (2010: 1094) writes:

> We reflect on human productions to get hold of something imperceptible to direct introspection (something 'lost', or something we do not yet experientially 'own'), at the same time as mediated consciousness is more reliable than the immediate. To a great extent the human sciences (like history, art theory and literature) have their motivation here. Psychoanalysis can be seen as part of this culture.

For Enckell, psychoanalysis is either teleologically reflective or it is archeologically reflective, but it is reflective through and through. In fact, there is little sense to a psychoanalytic enquiry at all without immediately positing that it is and must be grounded in reflection. After all, it is only through reflection that the patient can recover themselves as part of the goal of the psychoanalytic cure.

To come, now, to Cilliers (n. d.: 2) who writes: '[t]he argument is against *unreflective* speed, speed at all cost, or more precisely, against speed as a virtue in itself'. From this quotation we can come to learn that reflection is

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[6] Regourd (2007) carefully traces the incorporation of 'animal magnetism' into the practices of Voudou through a reading of two judgments given by the Conseil supérieur du Cap 'in reaction to repeated nocturnal meetings of black people' during which a *Voudou* ceremony was performed with the incorporation of elements of animal magnetism. Regourd concludes in his reading that the judgments were given in terms of a 'trial against Vodou, in which Le Cap judges saw, or feigned to see, a mere manifestation of the familiar […] "animal magnetism"'.

necessarily and intimately bounded up with a view of speed as ineffective, even harmful, when it comes to thought. And if you think about it, racism and the horrors of crime becoming the law is always already grounded in a certain quickness, a certain visceral speed and, above all and consequently, a certain lack of thought as reflection. It was Hannah Arendt (1963: 252) who wrote about the 'banality' of evil as a kind of thoughtlessness, an inability to put oneself in the position of the Other. This placing of oneself in the position of the Other as the basis of radical empathy, in fact, relies on the positive version of extimacy that I am interested in here, for empathy demands that we momentarily make of ourselves an Other, an exterior stranger, and then think from the vantage point of this othered positioning. This positioning is, at the same time, intimate as it occurs entirely through the interior mental apparatus. The context of Cilliers's argument against unreflective speed and for the delay of reflection is, of course, complex systems and I think that it goes without saying that the unconscious is, precisely, such a complex system. Therefore, the notion of reflection must be brought to bear on the unconscious if we are to have any chance of apprehending an extimacy from which we can draw, let us say an emancipatory version of community (grounded in radical empathy) if not of intimacy.

Jean-Luc Nancy (1991: 42), in his essay on the inoperative community, which is replete with references to the intimate, writes, in what seems to be an echo of Arendt, that '[r]eflection is the resistance and the insistence of community'. Reflection, then, on Nancy's account is what draws the Other (and all the Other Others as 'community') into thought. And we can extrapolate this back into Lacan's system of thought for the big Other as socio-symbolic authority is, in Lacan, always present with the subject on the scene of any existence. As Louis Althusser (1969: 59) was fond of remarking: the Other as socio-symbolic system of authority, as the great 'order of language' or 'Law of Culture' lies in wait for every infant before their birth and before their first cry. One is thus, in Nancy and Lacan, never without the other, never without 'community' and reflection is the way in which the external Others of community become represented and peopled in the psyche to the point, as Jacqueline Rose (2004: i) has suggested, that the psyche is a fundamentally social space ('without the presence of the other, there can be no mental life'. So, the argument for a slow approach to the unconscious by way of the delayed route of reflection is, at the same time, an argument for a certain kind of community, one which no longer buckles under the violent forces of communitarianism (which is a reduction of the Other to the same) while also working against the vicissitudes of a no less violent individualism (which denies the notion of alterity altogether). It is no coincidence that Nancy, through a careful reading of Bataille, finds the idea of an inoperative community in the community and communism of lovers, on condition that we comprehend love as the confluence without fusion of the absolute irreplaceability of singular finitudes, the cutting across each other of two or more hearts.

This, then, brings me to my story. Once upon a time there was a man who killed his father. It was not that his father was dead but nonetheless it was the case that he had decidedly killed his father in the realm of the symbolic. The man thought that his father deserved this murder, because his father was, as he recalled, a horrible, abusive, indeed obscene and horrific father. So the man killed his father although his father remained alive. Then the man started falling in love and, it has to be said, unreflectively so. He repeatedly and inexplicably to him fell in love with the 'wrong' kind of man, namely the man that was by definition and in advance unavailable to him. In other words, the man repeatedly fell in love with what our culture calls 'straight' men. At first, the man thought, because he had read a lot of queer theory, that these men he fell in love with were not necessarily and ineluctably straight, that 'straight' was a cultural construction. In his states of being in love, he thus desperately clung to the thought, encouraged by all stripes of confidantes, that it takes two to tango. But he was also repeatedly gravely disappointed because it so happened that the 'straight' men that the man fell in love with, when it came to it, pointedly refused to tango.

This left the man in a state of painful perplexity and indeed with a surfeit of shame. Inevitably, when the relationship with the straight man broke up, the man would find himself in a state of self-reviling depression – a depression so vast that he had to be admitted to the clinic several times. At the heart of his searing depressions was the incomprehensible question as to why, why on earth indeed, he repeatedly fell in love with men he could not have. For the life of him, he couldn't figure it out. Not once did he think to himself that the symbolic murder of the father and the subsequent love he developed for straight men, could have been intimately related in his psyche.

One day, the man again, as had become his habit, formed a friendship with a younger, straight man. This straight man, let's call him M, was everything that the man desired in another man. Leaving aside the difference between desire and love, let's just say that there is no need to dwell here on the exemplary qualities of M, there is only the need to believe the narrator when he says that M soon became everything for the man – the subject of an all-consuming 'love'. This M was as straight as they come, but he was also a decent and indeed loving friend and this only complicated the situation for the man even further, for M responded to the man's acts of love with a caring sensitivity and thoughtful appreciation which, at the same time, stopped short of reciprocity.

So, one day, after again facing grave disappointment by M who told the man that he was in love with a beautiful woman, the man sat down finally to reflect for himself and this reflection brought him to the act of writing. And

so he began to compose a letter to M (which he entitled *Shattered Love*, after the essay by Jean-Luc Nancy) in which he confessed that he was in love with M but also stipulated that he realised that this love could never be reciprocated. Thus the letter became not just a love letter, but indeed a confessional farewell letter which, by necessity, also dissolved the friendship.

Reading the letter today, the man is struck by the emotion in the letter, but he is also struck by something else, namely that in the revelation that constitutes the letter, a revelation of love, he slowly confronted himself with an intimate Other, an indeed shameful Other who was hidden deep within, until he finally came to some sort of half-light in the form of the love letter – this Other was one who was deeply affected, I guess one could say 'plagued', by love for something shameful and by definition unavailable. Whether one could describe the extimate Other that was confronted in the letter as ugly, as a 'plague', I do not know. Suffice it to say that the confrontation with extimacy that the letter represents, has caused what Sylvia Plath in her poem 'Black Rook in Rainy Weather' called a 'content of sorts' to take hold in the man's life and this he calls progress if not exactly transformation and revolution. The love letter, in other words, allowed the man to reconcile himself with an Other that, until the instance of the letter, could not be productively apprehended – it was an Other that indeed wreaked havoc in the man's life.

I can't read you the full letter, but I will tell you how it ends and say that I think that perhaps we should all be writing letters to our lost loves if there is to be any chance of the inoperative community of love of which Nancy speaks, for in the end and upon reflection, we need perhaps to realise anew how love, as the song has it, hurts. Love, as Lacan (2015: 129) had it, is giving what you do not have to someone who does not want it. What will the world be if we were prepared to instantiate this version of love, if we were prepared to confess our unrequited love to our extimate others? Could it come to stand in some tentative and incomplete way, against the place of the hatred, obscenity and horror which the extimate so often seems to bring into the world? The extimate, in this positive iteration, is everywhere if we are prepared to open our eyes. It is in poetry, in prose, in music and in art, in dating sites and in spaces, and, as in my case, in a love letter composed slowly, with reflection.

So here is how the letter ends. After wishing M everything that he wishes for and after making it clear that I understand that there can be no reciprocation from M for the love I have confessed in the letter, the letter reverts to the words of others, namely, first W. H. Auden (1945: 136), writing in October of 1940:

> There are no fortunes to be told, although,
> Because I love you more than I can say,
> If I could tell you I would let you know […]
> Will Time say nothing but I told you so?
> If I could tell you I would let you know.

And second, still further back in time, with the words of Denis Diderot, writing on the 10th of June 1759 to his friend, Sophie Volland, with whom he was in love:

> 'where there is nothing, read that I love you' (Derrida, 1993: 1).

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When the Rainbow is Bittersweet: Reflections on Being Queer and Indian in Durban

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ABSTRACT

South Africa is one of the few countries in Africa that no longer criminalises same-sex sexual activity, and the only one to recognise same-sex marriage under the legal system. Yet, at the same time, several groups in the country practice a conservatism that discourages people from being themselves, be it in professing their gender or their sexuality. This article explores the trials and tribulations of making a documentary film with a minority population within one such minority population – Queer and Indian – in Durban, the site of the largest number of Indians outside India. Written in a reflective style that frames the positioning of the authors, a key question posed is: what are the daily issues that queer South African people deal with? Battling with conservatism while trying to find one's queer voice is just one of them. The film engages with a few people who were generous to allow us to use their experiences with the state, the society, and healthcare. How does one reconcile the Rainbow Nation, the promise of constitutional equality with the insularity that people face on a regular basis? This article aims to be the start of a much larger conversation that needs to be had.

Keywords: Durban, Indian, queer, LGBTQI+, conservatism, intimacy

INTRODUCTION – LOOKING FOR THE RAINBOW IN THE RAINBOW NATION

It was July 2022, and we were preparing for the launch of a 26-minute documentary, 'When the Rainbow is Bittersweet'[1], at a conference, *Transnational Contact Zones*, hosted by the University of Pretoria[2]. The remit of this conference was the subject of sexualities, specifically of 'African and South Asian sexualities and genders'. Beyond their rich diversity and differences, there is a dialectic relationship between South Asia and Africa (as a consequence of the often overlooked 'shared histories' of politics, political economy, migration, colonialism, apartheid, postcolonialism and decoloniality).

We maintain that the two geopolitics open up epistemic opportunities for intellectual and political enquiry in transnational ways that further address the idea of 'mediated encounters' even if the film we produced only tangentially covered these mediated encounters. To navigate an approach to this documentary we zoomed in on the neglected 'contact zone' between the various geocultural / geopolitical domains (South Asia and Africa) and took them as a reference point, rather than as an end point. We thought this would enable us to identify different patterns, architecture and taxonomies of pluriversal knowledge systems aligned to the project of being queer and Indian in Durban.

While the documentary featured in one format highlighting the visual, voice and testimony (beyond the research paper-driven sessions), we approached this project with a full recognition that sexualities and genders direct us in multifarious ways to meaningful entry points. More specifically, if gender[3] is a system of classification based on sex that valorises male power, and if sexuality[4] is the total expression (entailing for example, body image, gender

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[1] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7bYUonr_C5Y.

[2] More details on the conference can be found here: https://www.up.ac.za/faculty-of-humanities/calendar/event-info/3089137/transnational-contact-zones-african-and-south-asian-sexualities-and-genders.

[3] See for example, Aiken (1998) and Connell (1987).

[4] See for example, Bell and Valentine (1995), Bell and Binnie (2000), Bersani (2001), Blasius (2001), Butler (1999) and Califia-Rice (2001).

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identity, gender role, sexual orientation, eroticism, relationships, love, and affection), then we are also logically engaging the domain of the intimate[5].

Sexualities and genders are therefore inextricably bound up with the project of the intimate. 'Intimacy' as a word inspires thoughts of closeness, warmth, and shared affection in spatial and temporal terms. Mediated by multifaceted elements, intimacy may indeed be what Pratt (1991) labels a 'contact zone' and the entanglement (or relationality) of various things that induce social attachments. Intimacy is, as Stoler (2006: 15-16) describes a site of constant enquiry and usually is associated with affection, love, bodily closeness, proximity of personhood, and nearness of others. Berlant (1998: 285), for her part, reminds us that intimacy is found in unpredictable places and forms, emphasising that it is a closeness that demands to be opened up, and that it encodes the power of shared knowledge and experience. We find intimacy in humans, objects, spaces, affects, texts, practices, and, indeed, ideas too. It is also fundamentally about materialising relationships. If intimacy refers to nearness as 'something that can be measured by (…) the degree of involvement, engagement, concern, and attention one gives to it' (Stoler, 2006: 15), sexualities also provide an interesting opportunity for comparison that espouses modalities of relationships, associations, and entanglements.

Our approach in co-designing 'When the Rainbow is Bittersweet' induced several questions shaped by many thoughts and doubts. Did we do enough to let people know that this film will only be a sampling of the community concerned and will be merely the tip of the iceberg? Will queer people from all the communities spoken about react well to it? Will this film add value to the lives of so many queer people of colour in South Africa who feel invisibilised because of a lack of representation, on top of managing widespread community conservatism?

As the screening finished, we were humbled by the applause. The panel that followed was equally moving and left many of us quite emotional. It had not been the easiest journey, grappling with the social obstacles, the fears of our interlocutors, the gaps we had identified ourselves in the work, and realising how much more needs to be done.

We struggled for weeks to settle on a title for this film, as nothing seemed appropriate or encompassing enough to headline an introduction to the documentary that was so deeply personal to everyone involved, not least of those who appear in the film. Being LGBTQI+ and Indian in Durban comes to represent much of what is flawed in democratic South Africa: the inability to accept difference, the reverberations of a colonial, imperial, and apartheid past, and the violence of a country that continues to exact devastating personal and collective costs, especially on those who live on the margins and in the shadows (Riley, 2021; du Toit, 2008; Gevisser and Cameron, 1994; Msibi, 2018; Munro, 2020; Carolin, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

This article examines the documentary and offers a chance to raise questions about some of the fault lines that besets South Africa almost thirty years after democracy. Since the focus is on what it means to be a member of the LQBTQI+[6] community in this South African port city, Durban, that looks to the east, the film gestures towards larger questions of yet-to-be-realised freedom in South Africa and how the lessons of an oppressive past have not yet taken root. What are the ways to think about freedom and justice when political freedom without equality falls short of the promise made to us in the transition to state democracy of 1994?

The documentary draws from interviews that were conducted in Durban and Cape Town with people from the South African LGBTQI+ community – who were willing to talk to us – and their allies following ethical protocols which were approved by the University of Pretoria. At all points of the interviews, and even before embarking on this article, we made sure our interlocutors had the option of backing out from being a part of this project in any manner. The article uses the documentary as a backdrop for delving into different issues, and as starting point for a much larger discussion.

Throughout this work, we use the term 'queer' as an umbrella term for all marginalised sexual and gender identities, a reclaimed term that perhaps is a more comfortable fit and allows for gender and sexual fluidity within its reclaimed spaces. We have mixed feelings about it, given that language and nomenclature is context-bound and situated, but we feel it encompasses many more global south sexual and gender experiences than many other words that have emanated from the global north[7].

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[5] See for example, Bobker (2020), Hines (2007), Padilla *et al.* (2000), Sciuto (2021), Simpson, Reynolds and Hafford-Letchfield (2021) and Stoler (2006).

[6] An acronym commonly used for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans*/Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex and others. We are not engaging with specific South Asian gender identities or their invisibility in the South African Indian population, but they will be a part of future endeavours.

[7] See for example, Jagose (1996) and Kirsch (2001).

TAKING THE MUCH-TRODDEN ROUTE FROM STANGERS TO DURBAN

It was a small crew that went to Durban in 2022 to film, arriving at the beginning of the floods that resulted in hundreds of deaths and the displacement of thousands, particularly those who live out of sight of this city's tourist imagination of beaches, surf, and sun. In hindsight, this backdrop was telling, as we struggled in the rain to find our way and meet our film shoot schedule. Relating just one sliver of the lives of Durbanites through the theme of the film meant that the team started in the town of KwaDukuza (formerly Stanger), an important site in the history of the province and the place where many indentured Indians and passenger Indians made a new home. Today, the town appears like many others – tired, potholed, and abandoned, left in the tall shadows of the wealth generated by those who controlled the sugar industry in Natal and who profited off the backs of those who came on the ships from India.

The escape from the new is epitomised in Durban's northern areas, such as Umhlanga and Ballito, playgrounds of the wealthy, that sit in sharp contrast to the overcrowded city centre, with its renamed and gridlocked roads struggling to contain the masses of informal traders and pedestrians on the sidewalks. Durban's inner city is testimony to an exodus of another kind, an extraction of wealth and privilege to the north. The city has responded to the new in ways much like other South African cities (Chutel, 2019).

Post 1994 – the moment of liberation for South Africa – has seen a burgeoning of gated suburbs and a proliferation of private schools that speak of yet more lines that separate (Scott, 2019). Class, race, colour, and sexuality in Durban tell of a 'closing up' – providing a tenacious armature for the negation of lives and realities that sit outside of what is seen as 'normal' (see for example more detailed explications on the topic of the politics of gender and sexuality in Hassim, 2014 and Posel, 2004). 'When the Rainbow is Bittersweet' offers an opportunity to home in on these divisions, asking questions of South Africa as to what freedom can yet look like in the aftermath of histories of oppression and violence, and the measures that can be taken that secure a different way of being.

This project has been challenging, finding people who'd be willing to share such a vulnerable part of their lives while living in the context of the conservatism of Indian Durban was a difficult task. Through word of mouth, we managed to enlist several people for the interviews. However, one by one, they started taking themselves off the list, fearing repercussions. What was even more interesting was the fact that some people – straight, cis-gender, South African Indians – were upset about the project as it would, according to them, take away from the monolithic portrayal of Indian culture in South Africa. Indeed, several people who have often been seen as allies of the LGBTQI+ community distanced themselves from this project.

Cultural minorities, as such, are a hugely complex group to navigate. Indeed, taking the words 'culture' and 'minority' separately, they can often be at loggerheads with each other. Particularly when one looks at groups within these cultural minorities, studies have shown that LGBTQI+ people of colour often face multiple forms of marginalisation, racism from ethnic outsiders, and heterosexism from everyone (Balsam et al., 2011).

While the literature on minority stress focuses on larger discriminatory events, such as forced migration, uprooting, and ousting from places due to colour, gender, and sexuality, microaggressions often go unmapped. Indeed, perpetrators may not even understand the discriminatory aspects of their comments or actions. This leads to both poor mental and physical health. Often, the discrimination comes from within the queer community as well – with rejection from queer people of other ethnic groups, or the desirability of someone due to a skin colour fetish. Indeed, many people who are in mixed-race relationships at times wonder if they are feeding a fetish or are genuinely desired for the person they are.

What is often invisibilised in South Africa's case is the intersection of the Indian and 'Coloured' populations – the clashes of cultures in a way, and the notions of desirability, the overlap of love, affection, social relations between the two groups are swept under the carpet too. The historical separation created by the Apartheid state, and the insularity that remains today within these groups breeds an 'othering' where it becomes rare to see bi-racial couples in public. Socio-cultural acceptance often becomes a matter of concern.

This documentary, and indeed, this article as well, does not try to encompass the queer Indian Durbanite's experience as a whole. As we motivate, the story in this film counters the narrative of a singular narrative (see our next section on positionality). It is instead an effort in trying to open up a much-needed conversation on breaking barriers of caste, class, and conservatism and exploring thoughts on how to achieve the almost-utopic dream of equality and freedom for all.

POSITIONALITY STATEMENTS

In keeping with the principles of feminist research and praxis, we would like to summarise the backgrounds of the filmmakers and the authors of this article:

Siona O'Connell

I have been described as a humanist, a filmmaker, a writer, and a curator. I think it is to my advantage that I don't fit neatly into any disciplinary box, echoing my experience as a 'coloured' woman who grew up on the edge of District Six in Cape Town. Fittingly, our house, originally owned by my maternal grandfather, Bareyam Singh – a 'passenger' Indian from Punjab – was called '*Vryheid*' ('Freedom'). Like so many others in South Africa, I come from a complex heritage of the journey of an immigrant Indian, his rags-to-riches story, and his need for being the perfect brown sahib. A Sikh from Punjab, my grandfather, like so many other passenger Indians, managed to live up to the prosperity promised by life in the British colonies until he lost almost everything when the National Party took over in 1948.

I was raised in my grandfather's home with all the trappings of white gentrification, but without the same status due to him not only for being Indian but to his marriage to my grandmother, Aletta – 'Letty' – van Schalkwyk, a Coloured woman who was the descendant of a slave. My earliest and fondest memories are of our annual holidays to Durban, spent with Aunty Suchita – 'Suchi' – and Uncle Hermendra – 'Essay' – and their five children in their home in Kismet Arcade in Grey Street in the city centre. I remember going to a favourite hang-out spot, the Blue Lagoon, a recreational space historically demarcated for Indians.

We were regulars at the Island Hotel in Isipingo Beach, another designated Indian area. Besides my mother and, to some extent, me, having some 'Indian resemblance', my father and siblings didn't have the same 'look'. However, we were always included as part of the larger Indian family and friendship network, a repudiation perhaps of Apartheid lines in small but significant ways. I am shaped by the food cooked in the kitchen in Kismet Arcade, through annual celebrations of fireworks and sweetmeats, and watching my mother glow in a red and gold sari when my parents went to weddings. This was my experience of Durban – feeling secure in a space that had ties to my grandfather, a home that was rich in traditions, of being held and loved by a past that came from elsewhere.

These memories and my lived experience as a woman with mixed heritage in no way prepared me for the making of this film, sitting uneasily when I was confronted with the experiences of a group of people who I interviewed. Their story was not mine to tell as I liked it as it was not an experience to which I could wholly relate. As a storyteller, I required constant updating, a series of personal checks and balances, and catching myself when I was emotionally floored by the heart-wrenching description of brutality inflicted on young people who were 'outed' and ousted by their families.

As a filmmaker, I work dialogically; I have never used a script, relying on conversation and free-flowing talk. Given the sensitive nature of the interviews, it was a small team, with only the Director of Photography, Adam Asmal (son of anti-apartheid stalwart, Professor Kader Asmal), the interviewee, and me in the space, allowing for an intimacy that is difficult to achieve in productions of this nature.

Significantly, what was made clear, was that, notwithstanding consent forms, I would share the edited version with everyone before the film was launched, and each had the right to change or remove their contributions. In editing, my point of departure was clear: this is only a film. We could not compromise lives, no matter how compelling the interview was. I omitted footage that could have catastrophic effects on the participants and their families. What I drew from this self-censorship was how far South Africa has strayed from the values of a constitution that seeks to safeguard all its citizens, and how quickly we have forgotten the price paid for by millions of ordinary South Africans in the struggle against apartheid.

Debjyoti Ghosh

Much like South Africa, India too is a rainbow nation. The birthplace of multiple ancient cultures and religions, home to several minorities, the Indian subcontinent is steeped in traditions and conservatism while eschewing multiculturalism, democratic values and constitutional equality in the various countries that were formed after the subcontinent ceased to be a part of the British Empire. Since its independence in 1947, India has seen countless rights-based movements, and one by one, several constitutional guarantees have been made stronger. This has often happened in the face of a rising right-wing Hindu fundamentalist trend. The Hindus (a catch-all term which doesn't do justice to the extremely diverse practices of those who identify as Hindu) are a political and numerical majority. However, within the group, the Hindus remain severely divided on the basis of worship, caste, class, and political belonging.

I grew up in Kolkata (then, and even now, for some of us, still Calcutta), India, in an upper-middle class, primarily Hindu family. At the time, 'coming out' in India was almost entirely unheard of. I had much privilege in my upbringing. Yet, at the same time, the precarity of growing up queer in a largely openly un-queer environment was an uphill battle. A boys' school, where I was bullied endlessly for not conforming to the mathematically gifted, science-studying, cricket-playing boy, led to some extremely dark moments in my life, but having a supportive family allowed me to escape the daily drudgery into the world of books and art and culture. Affluence also allowed for the advent of computers and the internet within the domestic walls of my home. All of this gave me exposure to a world filled with non-normative sexualities, genders, and desires, paving the way for me to find myself, and

gradually, I connected with others like me. At that time though, few people in Kolkata had access to the internet, but it was a start. It was comforting to know that I wasn't alone. It was empowering to know that there was already a movement around sexuality and gender minorities' recognition.

While I was navigating my growing pains and my sexuality, I was also made aware of the pros and cons of coming from a mixed heritage. What was interesting were the attitudinal changes that I witnessed with my background. My mother, being half Anglo-Indian, used to recall being called a 'mixed breed' and other pejoratives when growing up or even as an adult. Casteist slurs were not reserved just for the downtrodden castes, but also for those who had dared cross social borders, like my grandfather had. Indeed, had it not been for his immense success as a doctor, his daughters – the youngest being my mother – wouldn't have had much social capital.

Bizarrely, by the time I become a teenager, the same mixed-ness was considered to be exotic. Having White relatives added to my social capital if nothing else. Indeed, my coming out was informed by all of this – the education, the relative affluence, and the assurance of support from my family. This is what also allowed me to go into work related to human rights and LGBTQI+ activism, and later, academia. My work with transgender people in India, Brazil, and South Africa stemmed from the work I started in India on HIV, sexual, and gender minorities. As a lawyer, I focused on constitutional rights and access to rights. I have been involved, directly and indirectly, in the LGBTQI+ identity rights battles ensuing in India.

Being queer and Indian, I understand some of the identity battles of South African Indians. While some of the (mis)understandings of being Indian and the subcontinental culture have been replicated several thousand miles away from the land of their origin, the evolution of the cultural traits that were brought over by firstly the enslaved people from the subcontinent in the 1600s and later, the indentured labourers and passenger Indians brought over on the waves of the British empire has somewhat moved on a different path from the lands of their origin.

As an 'Indian Indian', as the likes of me are sometimes 'fondly' referred to, I recall my confusion on whether to categorise myself as the given Indian category or to tick 'coloured' because of my mixed heritage. Or should I categorise myself as 'other' – a foreigner, an alien in this space because I don't fit into the boxes provided?

When Professor O'Connell first started reaching out to people to talk about the documentary project and their views on South African Indian queerness, she was met with a lot of opposition. In fact, she was categorically told that she had no right to write about it as 'she wasn't Indian' and didn't understand the culture.' The defenders of the myth of the monolithic Indian culture were probably afraid that she might point at a few fissures in their ideas of 'Indianness'.

However, this is not unique to the Indians in South Africa. Where particular minorities have been oppressed, many a time, in their narratives of rights, revolution, and claiming of national identity and space, queer identities are invisibilised as they are seen as a threat to these claims.

Vasu Reddy

Identity formation is contingent on the experiential, the spatial, the personal (including the private), and the political (see for example, Castells, 1997; Duby, 1988; Du Gay, Evans and Redman, 2000). Identity in fact crosscuts with multiple factors; it weaves the textures of so much more (history, class, prejudice, and indeed intimacy for example). I was born in Durban at the St. Aidan's Mission Regional Hospital, a Catholic hospital. However, my formative years were spent in Verulam, a town approximately twenty-four kilometres from Durban. Established by Methodists in 1850, the town was named after the Earl of Verulam, patron of the British who settled there. Growing up in a closely-knit family of working-class parentage, and a fourth generation of Indian descent from South India, triggers many memories and experiences that contour my identity and positioning.

I grew up in an environment surrounded by sugar cane plantations, a town mainly inhabited by people of Indian descent while other racial groups lived adjacent to the town in designated areas. I lived in a small working-class township called Mountview – made up of semi-detached homes where neighbours were also close-knit. Given apartheid spatial planning we barely interacted with people of other ethnicities, so much so that, given the segregation at the time, my first real and meaningful interactions with other races only happened when I entered university in the mid to late 1980s.

My domestic environment was shaped by living with an extended family (my parents, my two sisters, my paternal grandparents and an unmarried paternal aunt). My dad worked at the Experimental Station (part of the South African Sugar Association laboratory located in Mount Edgecombe) where he tested soil samples, including cane leaves, research that ultimately helped improved cane crops and improved yield. With just a Grade 8 education, he knew all the chemistry formulas which came in handy when I studied chemistry in high school. My mother (also with only a Grade 8 education) worked in a clothing factory in Tongaat. My paternal grandfather, having worked as a vegetable hawker whose clients were mainly whites, retired during my teenage years.

My paternal grandmother and my aunt were probably some of the last batches of Indian domestics for white people, mainly undertaking washing, ironing, caregiving and menial garden work. While mum worked during the day, as my primary caregiver, my grandmother's cooking, combined with her deep nurture and care provided much

comfort. She was a strict taskmaster. Illiterate, she was a woman of small demeanour and yet powerful, strong, and decisive. My grandmother was a great storyteller and spoke to us mainly in Telegu (although interspersed with basic English), recounting many folktales and stories that induced my interest in narrative and storytelling. It was my grandmother who got me also stuck into books and reading.

In all of this, my 'coming out' in the 1980s was no easy task. Growing up in a working-class and conservative, deeply patriarchal family, school presented with deep bullying, intimidation, and intense homophobia. Labelled a sissy, moffie, faggot and many more labels, I retreated into silence about my awakening sexuality. I had no idea how to label and describe my attraction to men, except by escaping into my inner closet. I recall in the mid-eighties an animated conversation amongst my peers at high school (I was sixteen and in what is now known as Grade 11). The conversation was about a previous night's television drama where a character was described as 'gay'. I recall how the pupils were recounting the story and describing the person who came out. Entering the conversation, I asked, 'what is gay?' and one of my classmates recounted it is 'a moffie, a homosexual, a faggot'. At that moment, as I look back (with the knowledge I have now), it was a perfect encapsulation of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1994) described as the 'epistemology of the closet'.

From that point onwards, I had a sense of what my developing sexuality might be, that despite the privacy and loneliness of the closet, I could not be the only one who self-identified as such. And this was the beginning of my own project of coming into identity (first to myself), and then gradually as I entered university, the interactions with a rich diversity of people (Black, White, women, lesbian, gay) and simultaneously participating in student activism in the Black students' society and the Young Communists League at University as we made a small dent in the dying days of formal apartheid.

Beyond that, life changed dramatically through supportive networks of friends and activists. I was exposed to active LGBT organising, with the shaping influence of Zackie Achmat[8], and together with many activist comrades we established the KwaZulu-Natal Chapter of the National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality (part of the parent body, the National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality that successfully lobbied the Constitutional Assembly to include the sexual orientation clause in the South African Constitution). While taking up a lectureship at the former University of Natal, simultaneously my activism intensified. I was elected to the National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality[9], then we transformed the KwaZulu-Natal Coalition into what is now known as the Durban Lesbian and Gay Community Centre (with support from the Treatment Action Campaign and later the AIDS Foundation of South Africa).

Coming out is a process and not an event. An effect of my activism focused on social justice was the deep ethical responsibility to inform my family about my sexuality. I was completely surprised with the level of acceptance and love displayed by my parents and siblings to my coming out process that it left with me deeper desire to play a more active role to visibilise being queer. I participated openly in several coming out television documentaries in the 1990s to demonstrate how it is possible to overcome the burdens of stigma, discrimination and ultimately to promote the normalisation of sexuality (particularly homosexuality) rather than to exceptionalise it as abject, negative and to be silenced. My role as co-director of this documentary is yet another entry point, not simply to describe the complexities of sexuality, but also to give credence to what Adichie (2009) labels 'the dangers of a single story' that forecloses discussion, debate and change[10].

CONSTRUCTING THE SOUTH AFRICAN INDIAN

South Africa as a country was constructed out of the lands of many indigenous groups (Simpson, 2022; Thompson, 2014). Through centuries of colonial occupation, a systematic process of erasure ensued, invisibilising practices, murder, and decimation of life for hundreds of thousands of original people. Along with those who survived are the descendants of the people brought in by the colonisers – whether it was those brought in to settle, those brought in to till the soil, dig the mines, or serve as household slaves. The Indians in South Africa are mostly descendants of such people, brought in as indentured labourers or those who came as 'passenger' Indians (see for

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[8] Abdurrazack 'Zackie' Achmat is a South African activist and film director. He co-founded the Treatment Action Campaign which was instrumental in ensuring access to anti-retroviral medication for all HIV infected people in South Africa, and he also co-founded the National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality (NCGLE).

[9] A group of organisations representing gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people in South Africa.

[10] While this film was a collaborative process, this was the brainchild of the directors, Vasu Reddy and Siona O'Connell. Siona's extensive experience in filmmaking, along with Vasu's personal experience of growing up and coming out on the shores of the Indian Ocean allowed them a particular vantage point. Debjyoti Ghosh joined as a producer to add his viewpoints around being queer and Indian, growing up in India, and how the LGBTQIA+ activism in India has shaped recent narratives around rights, inclusion and narratives with diasporic/immigrant Indians.

example, Bhana and Pachai, 1984; Desai and Vahed, 2007, 2010, 2019; Meer, 1969; Vahed, 1997; Vahed and Desai, 2010).

A question that has come up time and again in our research of the documentary is, what exactly is Indian? Given the South African Government's continuation of quasi-apartheid categorification of Blacks, Whites, 'Coloureds', and Indians, this catch-all category of 'Indian' puts together people who have extremely varied histories, and while it may be seen as a way of putting affirmative action in place in post-apartheid South Africa, it has also created harsher divisions in society. Also, as the country becomes home to several immigrant populations, with each person carrying different identities from their home countries, these categories are all at once dumbfounding and confusing.

The South African Asian/Indian population makes up the smallest group in South Africa. As of 2022, there are 1,555,000 people of such descent. Many of them are descendants of the 'passenger' Indians and indentured labourers who were brought over from the British colonies in Asia. Some of them arrived in South Africa from various parts of South Asia as economic migrants after the fall of Apartheid. To understand where the conservatism within the South African Indian population stems from, it is imperative to look at the history of their arrival, their history of cultural displacement, and their history of loss.

EARLY ARRIVALS

Since its establishment in 1602, the Dutch East India Company (*Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* or VOC) captured an estimated 1.1 million people from countries along the Indian Ocean spice route. Several of them were from the Indian subcontinent. Ships were sent to places such as Bengal, Madagascar, and Bali. They bought people and shipped them off as slaves to several trading posts including Cape Town (South African History Online, n. d.).

From 1860 onwards, immigrants from the Indian sub-continent arrived in South Africa in one of two ways: either as 'indentured labour', or as free or 'passenger' Indians. It is estimated that by 1911, approximately 150 000 Indians were living in South Africa, and most of them were resident in Natal. The reference to 'Indians' in South Africa implies a measure of cohesiveness and suggests a single geographic place of origin. However, immigrants to the British colony of Natal who were referred to as Indians were also from different parts of the sub-continent. At the time, they were often reductively referred to as 'Natal Indians', having arrived at the port of Natal, the Durban of today (Mistry, 1965). Indentured labour was a result of the abolishing of slavery internationally, which was fuelled by the fact that the British Empire found a cheap source of labour in its colonies in the Indian subcontinent (Gregoire, 2018).

'Brahmin by Birth' or 'Brahmin by Boat' – Recasting Caste Through Indenture

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands in India house what was officially known as the Cellular Jail, but more 'fondly' it was known as *Kala Pani* (black waters). To be sent there, across the sea, across the black waters of the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic meant a loss of caste or *varna* for Hindus because it would cause a rupture from their belonging with the holy river, the Ganges. However, the same dreaded water-crossing got associated with going towards new lands, lands of promises, of economic freedom for many, and at times, freedom from the social oppression of caste, colour, and creed faced in their hometowns (Barak, 2017).

Getting on a boat, whether by voluntary or forced indenture, for a three-month-long journey to one of the colonies led to two things – one is a mingling of all castes, and even those beneath the caste system, formerly known as 'untouchables'. What this also led to was the chance for a new beginning – to rise the caste ladder. Brinsley Samaroo (Dabydeen, Morley, Samaroo, Wahab and Wells, 2010: 20) coins the phrase 'Brahmin by birth' or 'by boat' and found in his research that

> Men and women from the villages of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, looking around in the receiving depot and seeing no one who could attest to their true origins, gave themselves new names which indicated the upward direction which they now wished to pursue. They were now Singh (lion), Sher (tiger), raj Kumari (princess), Maha raj (Great King), or Maha Bir (Great Warrior). there were now many new Brahmins by boat rather than by birth.

The indentured contracts lasted for five years. 'Indentured labour' is defined as a form of labour in which persons are contracted for a fixed number of years in exchange for a very low wage, accommodation, and food. Such labourers generally had no choice in the matter and were at the mercy of their employers who treated them appallingly and often had no regard for the terms of the contract. They came to South Africa as a result of the British Empire using India to resolve the issue of a labour shortage on the sugar-cane fields of Natal. The Indian subcontinent formed part of the British Empire, and the Colonies of the Cape and Natal in Africa were also under

British rule at the time. Labour became another form of 'raw material' to be exported at the behest of the Empire and importing indentured labour between the colonies had become an established practice in the 1800s to resolve labour shortages.

Conditions of labour exploitation were widespread. Women received half of the remuneration given to men. Often, contracts were not honoured in terms of working hours and food rations, and the labourers had no rights which would allow them to object. Over two-thirds of the indentured labourers came from South India while the others came from North India. For the most part, they were from rural areas, and they were mainly low-caste Hindus from then Madras, now Chennai, in Southern India. One-third of the indentured labourers were women. It seems that class consciousness lessened in the new environment because of the need for solidarity and also, possibly, because of the absence of the village system which had undergirded divisions.

When the period of indenture had ended, a small percentage of people returned to India while most remained. Some entered subsequent indenture contracts because of the lack of options that they had to earn a living. Some were able to obtain other work in the coal mines, on the railroads, and in other emerging industries. As indentured labourers in industry, their working conditions were much better than on the farms, but they were still discriminated against and received lower wages than the non-indentured workers. There were several unsuccessful attempts to intervene in the ill-treatment of indentured Indian labourers in Africa. Finally, in 1911, a bill presented by Gopal Krishna Gokhale, an Indian social reformer, to the Viceroy of India saw the British Indian government banning any further indenture to this country (Vahed, 2020).

As African labour was being more frequently used on sugarcane farms and industry, the South African government started offering incentives to Indians to return to their home country. This was in 1914, and the incentives included free passage, and when not many people took up this offer, cash was added to the incentivised package. It was still not a popular option for many who had started thinking of South Africa as their home. For many, it may have been about going back to life in a different caste, a life of social oppression and relative poverty.

Along with the indentured labourers, many 'passenger' Indians arrived in South Africa. This term refers to those traveling from India, who came of their own volition and who were able to pay their passage. They came to take up economic opportunities in South Africa and were mainly Muslim traders from Gujarat. They set up businesses in the then-Natal, Transvaal and Free State. Some went to Cape Town. White shopkeepers felt threatened and treated them with hostility. Overtures were made to the Colonial Office in London to try to restrict the number of free Indians coming to South Africa.

Resistance, Solidarity, and the Role in the Anti-Apartheid Struggle

In 1894 a man called Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi - more famously known as Mahatma Gandhi later on - formed the Natal Indian Congress (or the NIC), which was aimed at uniting diverse cultural and religious immigrants from the Indian sub-continent into one organisation. 'Indianness' (Bhana, 1997) came into being, and was aimed at winning rights for the immigrants.

Natal's white population felt threatened by the Indian immigrants organising politically and proceeded to deal with them legislatively. For example, the 1891 Immigration Act banned all land grants to former indentured labourers, and a few years later, a tax was imposed on all indentured and former indentured labourers and their families. Opponents such as Gandhi advocated for the formation of a unifying identity and organisation. Gandhi used the imperial framework to advocate particularly for the rights of Indians as British subjects.

Most of the support received by Gandhi in the last phases of the *Satyagraha* (seeking truth) campaign (1907-1914)[11] came mainly from poorer classes who were not members of the NIC. This showed up the contradictions in the artificial unity created by 'Indianness'. Upper-class Indians often preferred to refer to themselves as 'Arabs' (with many of them being Muslim) to distinguish themselves from the lower-class 'coolies', a word that is a pejorative in the English language today but is still used for burden-bearers in many languages of the Indian subcontinent. It is no coincidence that many of the upper-class Indians were descendants of passenger Indians[12].

Ironically, the NIC, while first being a thorn in the side of the colonial authorities, was seen as a useful tool to keep Indians separated from Africans, thus, to break their solidarity. This suited the middle-class elite of the NIC

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[11] Gandhi spent 21 years living in South Africa, from 1893-1914.

[12] What is interesting is that, in my (Debjyoti Ghosh's) personal experience, even on dating apps like Grindr and Tinder, many South African Indian Muslims put their ethnicity as Middle Eastern, which works in different ways. For one, there is a stereotyping of Indianness in South Africa, and this sets them apart; for another, it differentiates them from those who identify as Hindu. There is also the element of colourism that plagues not only the South African Indian community but the Indian diaspora and the subcontinent as well. This colourism also creeps into queer Indian people's lives and their perceptions of beauty in South Africa. We are not going into that aspect, as its outside the scope of this article. See Anjari, S. (2022) From Black Consciousness to Black Lives Matter: Confronting the colonial legacy of colourism in South Africa, *Agenda*, 36 (4), 158-169.

who formed the leadership of the organisation. However, over time, it became apparent that Indian oppression could not be seen in isolation from the oppression of all Black people in South Africa. This was particularly true during the time of apartheid, and the focus of the NIC became much broader.

The 1940s were particularly significant years for the various Indian Congresses. 'Indianness' was redefined to make alliances possible with other Black political groups in South Africa. This was linked to an emerging multi-racial vision of South Africa. It was an acknowledgement that various approaches were needed to stop the growth of white supremacy.

Before 1945, the NIC was dominated by the merchant elite. Its new leadership elected on 14 October 1945 signalled the start of a new direction for the NIC. The new leadership included radical young students, physicians trained abroad, trade unionists, and members of the Communist Party. A common Indian identity was forged, in solidarity with other oppressed people in South Africa. Dr G. M. ('Monty') Naicker (1920-1978) served as president of the NIC from 1945-1961. His expanded notion of 'Indianness' translated into a multi-racial approach. He led the thinking about forming cross-ethnic alliances. In the post-World War 2 period in particular, anti-colonial movements in India and Africa were keen to point out contradictions in the Allied nations' commitment to freedom for all while still exploiting colonial territories.

It was during this time that a growing number of third generation young Indians emerged, who were keen to claim their South African heritage and identity. Having been South African-born, they were more comfortable with claiming that space than the previous two generations had been. While they were somewhat distant from the traditional religious and cultural practices of India, they were not completely disconnected from it. Many were involved in the secular political movement in addition to being connected to religious and cultural organisations.

These interactions, and many more, laid the basis for ongoing cooperation with the African National Congress in the last phases of the struggle, particularly from the 1970s to the 1990s. The takeaway from this history is that Indians in South Africa were part of the vision of a free country. They paid with their lives and sacrificed their youth in the broader anti-apartheid struggle for the liberation of the unfree. What, then, happened after 1994? How did the commitment to liberation end up in the silencing of queer Indian lives? Thus unfolds the tale of the unfulfilled promise of equality and freedom to queer South African Indians.

The South African Constitution was inclusive from its inception. The Bill of Rights' Equality Clause reads as follows:

> **Equality**
>
> 9. (1) Everyone is equal before the law and has the right to equal protection and benefit of the law.
>
> (2) Equality includes the full and equal enjoyment of all rights and freedoms. To promote the achievement of equality, legislative and other measures designed to protect or advance persons, or categories of persons, disadvantaged by unfair discrimination may be taken.
>
> (3) The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language, and birth.
>
> (…)

With the fall of the apartheid regime, the new Constitution was seen as the steppingstone of a new legacy of equality. Over the next two decades, matters like LGBTQI+ recognition and LGBTQI+ marriage came up and were included within the ambit of the rights.

DURBAN – WHERE TRADITION BECOMES A BARRIER TO ACCEPTANCE

Despite people of Indian origin being in South Africa for centuries, they are viewed with a certain suspicion in the rainbow nation. This is fed further by some of them engaging with linking themselves to India and claiming space in the diasporic context, borrowing in part from the Jewish experience. With many people claiming that Indianness connected to an ancient culture the way Gandhi envisaged it, with the rise of right-wing Hindu nationalism in India, many Hindu South African Indian people are aligning themselves with the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (VHP) and the current ruling party of India, the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP). Parallel to this, many South African Indian Muslims are re-centring on Mecca and an Arab identity (as mentioned earlier). These turns have also fed the conservatism around a culture that was already a product of the apartheid-produced insularity. Yet, many others disown their 'Indianness' to declare their one-ness with Africa – as African people. As Parvathi Raman (2003) says:

> If some Indians have yet again been driven to look beyond the borders of South Africa to make sense of who they are, this time around, they have different political affiliations and are negotiating with very different forms of Indian nationalism than those articulated in the first half of the twentieth century. The India that currently provides a 'resting place for the imagination' is not the India envisaged in 1947. Would it be legitimate to argue that one form of Indian nationalism is more 'authentic' than the other, or is it more relevant to ask what are the material consequences of certain types of political action under the umbrella of nationalism as a political project? In this context, the politics of the post-colonial world seems 'to be spawning (its) own neo-nationalist responses' which are increasingly embedded in the politics of the right.

This notion of neo-nationalism seldom encompasses queer people – in fact, for the most part, there is a rejection of non-normative sexualities and genders as they don't help the national project, nor drive forth the patriarchy within which such projects are entrenched. So what happens to those who are stuck between communities becoming more conservative because of an understanding of their ancientness and a different sense of belonging and a state that ostensibly accepts every person as they are?

Seeing Queer Durban Through Our Interviewees

Our first interview for the film was with Nonhlanhla Mkhize, director of the Durban Lesbian and Gay Health Centre. Her quiet demeanour is in sharp contrast to her describing the violence and risks to Indian LGBTQI+ bodies and lives in Durban, saying:

> Indian Durban has two sides to it – one is the rich tapestry of culture and colour that is woven into the society, and the other is about communities where the concept of accepting, loving and supporting an individual that might identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, yeah, when you think about, is there a gay Indian Durban? Not really…

She makes the point that despite Indian Durban playing a role in the fight against racial oppression, struggle stalwarts have been mute in the face of violence against LGBTQI+. She details what happened in an incident in Pietermaritzburg in KwaZulu Natal:

> two young men, beautiful, vibrant, exciting, love life, got found out by the parent of the one partner that these are not just two best friends, but they are actually in a relationship. What does the dad do? In full view, everybody in the neighbourhood beats them both to the pulse on the pavement outside their own home… So a space that is supposed to be home is supposed to be safe, a parent that is supposed to be loving does this to you, and in full view of your community… now if a young person calls, and that's their experience, it makes it so difficult because we know, we can't tell you, be proud of who you are, because you are within a space where you are likely to be disowned all the liberties that you had, gone, and at best, kicked out of home, and at worst, given that, uh, you are not going to even use our surname anymore… it's impractical to advise a young person at 19 about the concept of, you know what, you are beautiful, you're a young beautiful Indian lad, you've finished your matric, you've got your whole life ahead, it makes it impossible…

Mkhize also spoke about the demographics of those who came to the centre, saying that while Black and 'coloured' people visited the premises for support, Indian visibility was online, the virtual space offering sanctuary in a climate that is inhospitable to Indian LGBTQIA+ people in Durban. Before the launch of the film, we produced a series of TikTok videos with the idea of generating interest in the film launch. It was astonishing to see the reactions on this online platform, with the clips reaching over 44,000 views. More encouraging were the comments that included 'I felt the same'; 'Don't be afraid'; 'Please share more', 'Thank you for sharing and educating', and 'OMG we have to watch'. Looking at the profiles of those who viewed the clips and who commented, it was clear that the overwhelming majority were Indian.

One of the interviewees for the documentary, Suntosh Pillay, a psychologist asked,

> What does it mean to be South African and Indian and LGBTQI+? One of the difficulties we see, just at the general level, is this kind of homogenisation of the Indian community and then, when they intersect, this kind of homogenisation of the Indian, LGBTQI+ community happens.

Living in the shadows and only coming out when it is safe to do so was attested to by all but one of the interviewees. Despite having led a much more emancipated life than most other queer Indian people from Durban, Duke Sarevejo remains pretty grounded in the surrounding reality. 'I am not naive to think it's all "kumbaya"…'. He further said:

> Durban is harder to come out to for LGBTQI+ Indian Folk. I have lived in Johannesburg and Durban, it's, it's chalk and cheese, there is no comparison… it is purely a function of our history… the majority of Indian folk are based in Durban… it's [...] your family, it's your community members, it's your neighbours, the people you have a concern of judging you are around you, so if you move to another city, there's less judgment, you can be yourself, you can express yourself more, it's easier to be yourself in front of somebody that doesn't know you as opposed to somebody who knows you.

He cautioned any young queer person against revealing their sexual identities until it was safe to do so, understanding 'safe' to mean when the person had completed their education, was employed, and self-supporting.

Like the others, Sarajevo made the point about moving to Johannesburg and Cape Town, seemingly LGBTQI+ safe cities, where people could just be. The challenge is significant therefore for young, poor LGBTQI+ I people who do not have the means to have tertiary education or leave the family home. Many are destined to remain on the margins, in fear, and undercover. As Suntosh Pillay puts it:

> I think class is key. In South Africa, class is linked to location. And when we think of identity, I like to look at place identity, you know, and looking at how place identity can be pivoted on how we think about queer identity, so questions of who we are linked to questions of where we are, and I think it is very different inhabiting a queer identity while being in Phoenix in Durban versus being in Glenwood in Durban, and although they might be 13 kilometres away, that 13 kilometres might as well be an entire universe away.

The Roadblocks Along the Way

Getting interviewees, as mentioned earlier, wasn't the easiest matter. While we tried to be as inclusive in our research as possible, the people who we had access to, for the most part, were cis-gendered people, middle class and upwards. To try and get a glimpse into the experiences of Indian transgender people, we scoured our sources. However, in our search for interviewees, this proved to be difficult, with people agreeing and then not turning up at the last minute.

Being transgender in Durban and choosing surgery is a fraught exercise, as the health system in KwaZulu Natal does not offer surgeries. In the film, well-respected Capetonian plastic surgeon Dr Kevin Adams, who is at the forefront of gender alignment surgery, makes the point that the Groote Schuur Hospital in Cape Town, the primary clinic for gender alignment surgery in South Africa, has more than 300 people on the waiting list, some of whom started going to the transgender clinic there in 2009 when it opened.

Given the number of people overall across the country who are waiting for gender alignment procedures, the waiting list is endless as there is a lack of units providing end-to-end services. It is only recently that transgender people got the hope of being able to receive gender-affirming healthcare in KwaZulu Natal.

The Silence That Leads to Invisibility

At a speed-dating event that Duke Sarajevo had gone to, while he was told in a very apologetic manner that the event wasn't LGBTQIA+ inclusive, the organiser also told him that he wouldn't find any gay people in Durban. Her ignorance was telling of the larger symptoms in place. Nirvana and Lisa Louton spoke of being stared at by strangers when holding hands in public in Durban (which wasn't their experience in Johannesburg), elaborating further about the challenges of being a mixed-race lesbian couple. Lisa pointed to the resistance to change, recalling their puzzlement when completing forms at schools for their children – where the blank areas for parents stubbornly remain 'mother' and 'father'. Salesh Jagber grew up thinking he was the only gay person around. These observations point to a situation of ignorance that is a product of people not wanting to acknowledge the presence of non-normative sexualities and genders around them. Furthermore, the product of the invisibilisation of queer people feeds into the lack of acknowledgment of the majority populace. This invisibility is further fuelled when political parties want to tap into the conservative Indian vote, but don't want to talk about queerness at all.

Talking about the intersections of, politics of diversity and class, Mkhize says:

> We have people who every year during the Gandhi peace walk are leading the pack, chanting messages of equality, dignity, freedom for all, saying that peace in our time, not in the future, peace in our time, equality in our time, and yet, when young persons are violated, news articles like *The Post* would hardly report on the violation of a young Indian child… […] when it comes to the Indian community, they have not stood up, because specific political parties in this province and city that have specifically said we are here to fight for the Indian vote, and the question is, what happens to the diversity of the Indian community, are you talking about a particular gender expression and sexual orientation, or are you talking about everyone who is Indian in their totality, in their different expressions of sexual orientation and gender identity, and even when it comes to issues around class. If you are poor and Indian in Durban,

you have no rights... If you come from a poor family, and you happen to be gay and are violated, accessing justice is almost non-existence… the powers that be are mum.

CONCLUSION

> 'When we talk about equality, when we talk about dignity until we are all free, no one is free' (Mkhize)

It had been a gruelling few days in Durban in 2022 when filming took place. The rain was relentless and dodging potholes was insignificant compared with the emotional toll felt by the production team as a result of some harrowing interviews – not because of our interviewees, but because of their experiences. There seemed to be no way out of the Durban shadows until Salesh Jagber sat down in front of the camera, buoying our flagging spirits with his sense of self and confidence that was visible, wearing pride. Born to a working-class family in Estcourt, a town in the uThekela District in KwaZulu Natal, he displayed none of the unease and caution we had come to expect.

Jagber did not have the security afforded by his middle or upper-class childhood. He didn't move to another city to live as a gay man, nor did he hide his sexuality. He regaled us with tales of his telling his cousins that he was gay, of going to gay nightclubs in Durban frequented by mostly 'coloured' patrons and living his life to the fullest. He spoke about having children. He imagined a rainbow-'coloured' future, drawing us into a space that was illuminating.

It would be easy to think of Jagber as naïve. It would also be wrong. On the contrary, his grounding, sense of his place in the world, and his consciousness are all due, according to Jagber, to his mother and the strong women around him,

> a lot of women, cheeky women, nice women, polite women, caring… they all have their different personalities, but when you put them together […] they protect you until you can protect yourself… that's the kind of women we had in our family, or have….

On his 'coming out', Salesh Jagber recalls his mother saying, 'you will always be my baby'. His experience of 'coming out' was of love and acceptance, even in his extended family. It is his optimism, self-assuredness, and empowerment that give hope. A hope that acceptance – an arguably simple act – of difference can shift the needle towards actualised freedom.

It is telling that it is the mother figure who charts the way forward out of the shadows and towards the fulfilment of a life that is free. Jagber's mother secures not only her son's liberation but also responds to the call by indentured Indians in the sugarcane fields in Natal in the 19th century who dreamed of freedom, of a better future. Her unambiguous acceptance of her son is a reminder to the rest of South Africa who are still due the promise made in April 1994, that we are owed another way of being.

As motivated in our reflective article, the project of being queer in Durban, following a shoot riddled with deep rain, aptly resulted in a rainbow. It was, for all of us, a project of mediated encounters with people willing to share their inner secrets, trials, tribulations and personal hurdles with deep resilience. If sexualities and genders represent the project of intimacies, replete with deep complexity and contestations, then we also hope that the viewer sees this documentary as scratching through the frames of our film on the surface of lives that subsequently beckons further questioning and thinking about being queer within a particular ethnoscape. In our view, there is no singular queer Indian Durban experience, but rather a developing sense of what being queer and Indian might evolve into. Indeed, genders and sexualities, like intimacy, are a mode of inquiry and practice, a set of beliefs, and praxis. We are in the realm of identity, experience, and all of their ongoing entanglements.

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The Intimacy of Held Solidarity: A Joint Memoir of Activism

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ABSTRACT

This work reflects the slow intimacy of solidarity over time. We uncover some of what we know and have known with examples from anti-apartheid activism and the women's health movement in South Africa. Solidarity is an expression of knowing trust. Knowing that you are often on each other's side and leaning towards justice, demanding a relationship of knowing in instances of vulnerability. Being held in solidarity is a gesture of engaging in a shared humanity that at times gives the comfort of familiarity. In spaces where there are shared feminist and political goals and objectives, we assume safety and belonging only to find this is not to be true. Acting in solidarity demands consideration and risk. In moving towards solidarity, one turns one's body and face towards the other. Solidarity at times demands resistance and speaking truths to power. An engagement of solidarity is conscious and intentional. We reflect engaging with each other over four decades, lessons on listening deeply, hearing seasons of life's celebrations, joys, questions, and struggles. In this process, questions surface, asking for more on consideration. Our reflection is of collective experiences of slow intimacy, of soft and hard boundaries, remembering and longing as we hold each other in solidarity. We use our individual voices to show specific angles to these collective experiences.

Keywords: sexual and reproductive health and rights, solidarity, women's health, abortion

INTRODUCTION

This work reflects the slow intimacy of solidarity over time, linking to some of the ideas of Berlant (1998) and Mountz *et al.* (2015). We uncover some of what we know and have known with examples from our anti-apartheid activism and the women's health movement as a means of documenting histories. The enduring apartheid categories of Xaba being black and Stevens white have meant reaching out across imposed and complex differences. This has been a journey over four decades of slow time. During this process of writing, we are aware that forgetting or silenced histories is an unfortunate reality. Our work and personal lives in South Africa have intertwined in a feminist ethic of care and relationality.

Laitinen and Pessi (2014: 14) describe basic solidarity as cooperating, sharing and helping. They extend this to additional solidarity norms as efforts to understand and be understood, trustworthiness and considerateness. We have known that we are on each other's side and leaning towards justice. This demands a relationship of knowing in instances of vulnerability. Being held in solidarity is a gesture of engaging in a shared humanity that at times gives the comfort of familiarity. At times, in many spaces we know we assume safety and belonging only to find this not to be true. Acting in solidarity demands consideration and risk as it assumes upholding of shared goals and objectives when the hows of upholding may differ. 'Increased abstractness of solidarity norms means that there is increasing leeway in interpreting what cooperation, sharing and helping would require' (Laitinen and Pessi, 2014: 42). In moving towards solidarity, we face our bodies towards each other. Solidarity can be acts of resistance and speaking unpopular truths to power. An engagement of solidarity is conscious and intentional. In this essay we reflect on engaging with each other over four decades. We share lessons on listening deeply, hearing the changing seasons of life's celebrations, joys, questions and struggles. In this process, questions surface, asking for more consideration. We reflect on collective experiences of slow intimacy, of soft and hard boundaries and of remembering and longing. We surface the opportunity to call each other in, as we have, in reflection of what we know, our standpoints (Harding, 2008) and hold each other in solidarity.

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T-SHIRTS CONNECTED US BEFORE WE KNEW EACH OTHER

During the 1980s, Stevens, was the media officer for the Anglican Student Federation (ASF) a student organisation that was part of the United Democratic Front (UDF) in South Africa. In one of the actions, the 'Standing for the Truth campaign', Stevens drew a design that was screen printed onto 30 T-Shirts, The T-shirt bore the slogan 'Women standing for the Truth', it depicted a woman raising her clenched fist. These T-Shirts were given to comrades at our meeting that was held during the recently reimposed 1990 specific KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) State of Emergency in Imbali, one of the townships of Pietermaritzburg. It was a black T-shirt with yellow writing linked to the Freedom Charter ideology of the banned African National Congress (ANC), and we recall the design as unusual and unique given the limited expression for women in patriarchal struggle organisations. It was provocative. Archbishop Desmond Tutu had come to the conference and was livid and reprimanded conference participants for supporting political parties. This was after Rev Victor Vivian Sipho Africander had been assassinated, believed to be because he openly sided with the ANC in a war with the state and Inkatha. Over the past four years, an estimated 4,000 people had been killed in KZN during this devastating conflict. The following week, Stevens wore the T-shirt, whilst holding Rev Africander's six-year-old, grandniece, Thandekile Khumalo, on her lap. Thandekile's hair was burnt on the right side above her ear where a bullet had passed and hit her 'grandfather' killing him. These were times of enormous risk and vulnerability. Tens of thousands had been detained without trial, given the draconian police powers it was impossible to know the exact number of detainees. The press and meetings were banned, churches were a site of struggle, solidarity and organising.

Some four years later Stevens and Xaba, met in person for the first time in January 1994 when Xaba and colleagues interviewed Stevens for the position of resource centre coordinator at the offices of the Women's Health Project (WHP)[1] at the medical school in York Road in Parktown. Stevens was successful and joined at their offices at the National Health Laboratory Services in De Korte Street in Braamfontein arriving in Johannesburg from Cape Town at the end of March 1994. WHP was a project of the Centre for Health Policy (CHP) within then Department of Community Health and later became an independent entity in 1996. During the interview, Stevens was asked by the team, why she wanted the job, she recalls:

'Being 28, I remember saying that I had a lot to learn and would be grateful for the opportunity to be mentored by team members. Khosi smiled at me.' The smile was received as a gesture of kindness and extending an invitation to engage and trust.

Xaba had returned to South Africa on 8 June 1990 as a member of the African National Congress' Women Section Task Team with the mission to re-establish branches of the ANC and organise the first ANC Women's Section Conference in April 1991. The ANCWS head offices were on the same Sauer Street as the ANC's office in the Lisbon building in the Johannesburg CBD. Xaba resigned from the ANCWS at the end of June in 1991 to return to the University of Zululand also known as Ongoye, to complete a degree she had had to abandon when she was expelled in 1984. She returned to Johannesburg in December 1991 and joined Barbara Klugman and Emelda Boikanyo at WHP which in that year was one of the projects of the CHP.

A few months after Stevens had joined WHP, Xaba arrived at work dressed in one of the T-shirts Stevens had made. This was remarkable coincidence given the limited print run and circulation of these items. During those times there was a practice of sharing and trading struggle T-Shirts by comrades. T Shirts were shared and sometimes traded amongst comrades. The T-shirts embodied precious memories and meaning and were passed on with trust. Our circles had intersected with t-shirts travelling from Imbali to Parktown. Xaba had participated actively within the students' movement at the University of Zululand and the UDF.

The T-shirt signified a pushback in the patriarchal organisations we were organising in and now we had landed up together at the Women's Health Project. The T-shirt symbolised solidarity and familiarity. It was still bold in speaking to women's power in the context of patriarchy amongst civil society at the birth of our democracy. We realised then that we had met through the T-shirts before we met in person. We realised that our political solidarity had been the foundation of what would become a slow intimacy, building over time.

THE WOMEN'S HEALTH CONFERENCE OF 1994

Founded in 1991 as an NGO based at the University of Witwatersrand, WHP was planning the Women's Health Policy Conference (Budlender, 1995) scheduled for 1 to 4 December 1994. On joining the WHP, Stevens was tasked with being responsible for the Resource Centre, she was also given the responsibility of facilitating the policy process. Xaba was responsible for the policy sub-group called Women's Health and the Nursing Curricula working with Nontsha Ncinza and Gail Andrews. While Boikanyo and Xaba also engaged grassroots organisations in the preparatory work towards the conference Boikanyo was part of the Abortion policy sub-group. Preparing for the 1994 Women's Health Conference became a uniting activity for Stevens, Xaba and Boikanyo who were the

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[1] http://historicalpapers-atom.wits.ac.za/womens-health-project-records. (Accessed January 2023.)

three members of staff within WHP with training and experience in nursing. They spoke a shared language, a familial knowledge and forged an early intimacy as a resistance to the pervasive patriarchal and hierarchical culture of medicine.

The watershed Women's Health conference was limited to around 400 participants the large majority of whom were women. A national consultative process involving over 4,000 women was held in the months leading up to the meeting engaging women in the different policy arenas and garnering feedback. Held at the Protea Gardens Hotel in Berea Johannesburg, the conference charted new ground in this specific area of South African feminist activism, with 13 policies on women's health including: Ageing; Cancers; Contraception; Lesbian health issues; Maternal and neonatal care; Mental health; Occupational health; Sexually transmitted diseases; AIDS and infertility; Teenage pregnancy and sexuality education; Women, development and the environment; Women's health and the nursing curricula; and, Women's health issues and the medical school curricula.

ACTIVISM TOWARDS THE CHOICE ON TERMINATION OF PREGNANCY ACT (CTOP) OF 1996

In 1995 Stevens and Xaba flew down to Cape Town to attend meetings in Parliament. As previously mentioned, WHP had successfully facilitated the Women's Health Policy conference in December 1994 with the development of 13 different policies relating to women's health (Budlender, 1995). One of these dealt with the issue of abortion and provided the foundation for the Abortion and Sterilization Committee discussions. Xaba had come to specifically introduce Stevens to the ANC Standing Committee on Health in Parliament. Stevens had previously met Mavivi Manzini (ANC MP) at a group meeting around abortion issues, taking place in Yeoville, Johannesburg at her home that Xaba had invited her to, but this was an intentional political introduction. Xaba had worked with Mavivi Manzini in Lusaka, Zambia on the *Voice of Women* (VOW) at the ANC Women's Section offices in Libala. Makhosazana Njobe was also working in the same office on different projects. Upon reflection it was to build trust and to be in solidarity with new members of parliament working to liberalise and transform apartheid law. Stevens fondly recounts her experience of intimate solidarity where those newly in leadership were very open and welcoming, when they did not have to be. She recalls:

> I watched how they interacted with each other, how the committees worked, how they asked questions, resolved contestations and the dynamics between comrades. Khosi physically introduced me to Dr Nkomo and relevant parliamentarians like Makhosazana Njobe who was warm, gentle and yet attentive and critically engaged. I was there to assist and advise as technical support for the Choice on Termination of Pregnancy Act processes. Here doors opened and I was invited to assist in briefings, develop agendas and be in meetings.

Stevens (2000) writes about this in her master's thesis as and describes this as being the space of soft boundaries, where meaningful exchanges and traction on transformative work took place in liberalising our abortion law. *I sat with parliamentarians, drank tea and discussed research and how this should translate into policy. We strategised, I worked on reports, did more research and the law was liberalised.*

Xaba on the other hand was delighted to be working with her comrades on such a politically sensitive topic. Having worked with Makhosazana Njobe in the ANC WS section in Lusaka, this continuity made logical sense. Xaba recalls:

> Doing this work with former comrades who were now parliamentarians was very exciting to me. During each of our encounters we recalled our conversations in the Lusaka and Lisbon building offices, when we dreamed and planned for a democratic country. A women-centred abortion policy and law was one of the dreams that were grounded on the constitution we had participated in drafting. In the late 1980s the Women's Section had held a conference that was focussed on adding women-centred content to the then draft constitution that the ANC was proposing for the future democratic South Africa.

The story of just how long, multi-layered and detailed the processes of the ANC's work towards a draft of the constitution for a future South Africa was and in particular how the Women's Section of the ANC contributed to it, needs mapping and telling.

THE PERSONAL BLENDED INTO OUR ACTIVIST LIVES

Our work lives also extended into the personal as we learned from each other and shared our families. Stevens remembers learning from Xaba when it came to parenting:

> Besides work, I remember babysitting for Nala, Khosi's daughter. I learnt to strap her car seat in my car. Khosi also shaped my ideas and knowledge about parenting. I would listen to her talk about the realities of being a single parent, needing to get to creche before 5 pm otherwise being charged extra. This meant we needed to make meetings run efficiently and on time. I listened to her talk about feeding her child, about managing her child's hair whether managing it or the comments people made. This listening made me learn and think.

Stevens got married in 1997, Xaba remembers how she and her toddler daughter planned for the wedding. Xaba recollects:

> I explained to Nala what a wedding is because I was not married to her father. She became very excited when I said she could choose a new outfit so she could look great the wedding. Little did I know that she would want to add a necklace to her wedding outfit. It was colourful and child appropriate, so I let her have one. I didn't tell her then that I had stopped wearing necklaces because of her; how difficult was to continue breastfeeding her as she enjoyed playing and pulling my necklace, her eyes fixed on mine as she suckled.

We listened to each other talk about our mothers. We listened to each other talk about our fathers, how they worked and treated our mothers and families. And then we met each other's mothers. Stevens reminisces:

> Khosi's mother came to visit, and I remember meeting her and having tea in the tearoom. She had come up from Ashdown to visit. My mother came to visit too when I was finishing off my master's thesis. I was anxious but I remember them meeting and them being very warm with each other. I meet Khosi's sisters too over time.

Xaba recalls:

> Meeting Marion's mother added a layer to my growing friendship with her. In my mind's eye I can still see her in our office. Marion and I were no longer just colleagues, we were friends. I remember some WHP colleagues asking me how I had managed to get an invitation to Marion's wedding when they had not been invited. The baby sitting, the wedding and our mothers became special connecting points between us. I remember being worried, albeit privately, about whether Marion had chosen a man who would indeed be an appropriate husband, non-sexist, non-racist, supporting and affirming of Marion.

These have been moments and signposts over time of building familiarity and trust.

SOLIDARITY AND ACTIVISM ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CTOP ACT, POST WHP

In early 2000, Stevens and Xaba left the Women's Health Project. Stevens joined a US International Non-Governmental Organisation (INGO) where she was tasked with similar work on abortion in the United Nations. It was the end of the Clinton era and American NGO cultures were vastly different to South Africa. Stevens experienced enormous prejudice that she was not used to. Stevens worked remotely from Johannesburg at first then relocated to Washington DC and commuted between the offices in Washington DC and the United Nations in New York for the year she worked in the United States. Reflecting upon her time, Stevens describes that she was criticised for opening her blinds halfway in her office and not either open or closed and told she was giving the impression of being an immigrant. She was told off for having a toilet roll in her office having not procured a box of tissues. She was also instructed to decrease the per diems of her international team as she was told they use them for their children's school fees. These micro aggressions were strange having worked in a context of solidarity.

In 2001, Stevens returned to South Africa where she began working at the Centre for Health Policy where she took on a project on HIV in the workplace. This coincided with her getting pregnant and having her first child. While working in HIV in the workplace, Stevens observed the splitting of progressive movements where HIV and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) separated. HIV positive women who needed abortions were neglected and essentially sent to services providing the 'prevention of mother to child transmission'. Litigation concerning HIV and SRHR persisted against the state for provisions in the Choice on Termination of Pregnancy Act and to enable the provision of ARVs (antiretrovirals) by the state (Albertyn, 2019).

In October 2000 Xaba became the founding Country Director of Ipas, an international NGO headquartered in Chapel Hill, in the USA. She had to set up the office from scratch, finding office space, recruiting staff and setting up policies. The programme and mission of this office was to train midwives to do Manual Vacuum Aspirations (MVA), the technique for abortion provision in the implementation of the Choice on Termination of

Pregnancy Act. Health workers had not been trained in these techniques historically and still today this training remains a challenge. Xaba recalls:

> While attending a meeting of the Gender Advisory Panel (GAP) of the Human Reproduction Programme (HRP) of the World Health Organisation (WHO), in Geneva in January of 2000 I was approached by a Kenya based medical doctor who sat on the board of Ipas with the question: 'Would you be interested in working at Ipas, we are planning to open an office there now that your country has a progressive law on abortion?' My answer was a simple, 'of course'. Again, this was a seamless continuity to the feminist activist work in which I had participated.

While it was apparent that the legislation was a success and a global model of progressive law, it had not been matched with implementation. In the first flush of implementation, maternal mortality rates decreased and services for surgical abortion became more accessible. In the early 2000s Ipas took over implementing training on abortion and the implementation of our new liberalised law. Xaba led the development of the first Clinical Guidelines for Abortion (National Department of Health, 2001) as the country director of Ipas for the National Department of Health. Working with Prof Roland Edgar (Eddie) Mhlanga who was then the Chief Director within the Maternal and Child Health and Women's Health (MCWH) Directorate of the National Department of Health made the work manageable. Prof Mhlanga was an advocate for women's health rights, and he was not conflicted by what the implementation of the Termination of Pregnancy Act meant for the health services. He pioneered its implementation among his colleagues within the health services because he understood the significance of women's sexual and reproductive rights. As a senior manager it was however challenging to oversee the administrative work that was needed to accompany implementation. Xaba recalls:

> Prof Eddie and I ended up at numerous meetings together within South Africa and internationally where I watched him speak with passion for the rights of women to choose to have an abortion and thus take control over their bodies. He was a skilled clinician and a challenged administrator with little support in the National Department of Health, so he was very happy to delegate the project management to Ipas whilst ensuring that the clinical work was grounded in evidence that informed practice.

Xaba had resigned from the Country Director position at Ipas at the end of 2003 after she was accepted into the MA in Creative Writing (MACW) at Wits University. She wanted to give her return to formal studying a good chance. Having realised in 1997 that she needed to rethink her life's mission, the resignation was her way of committing to the two year-long part-time MACW which she started in 2004. Xaba reminisces:

> I was excited, I wanted to succeed. I took the risk. During those two years of the MACW, I worked as a consultant for no longer than three days a week, so I could dedicate the rest of my time to the demands of the creative writing programme.

Over a decade later, the international NGO, Ipas, that Xaba had set up in South Africa was leaving South Africa. In 2014, they had a final big splash meeting at the Birchwood Conference Centre in Johannesburg. It was at this Gala event in a concrete faceless maze that Xaba and Stevens met up again. The Minister of Social Development Bathabile Dlamini arrived with much pomp and ceremony and gave the keynote address (Davis, 2014). She was being supported by Zane Dangor and his team whom Stevens had briefed on the concept of Reproductive Justice. Dlamini gave a remarkable speech giving meaning to the choice to parent in safe and enabling conditions or the choice to not parent and have an abortion. It was the first time a South African government had articulated the shift from population control to reproductive justice thus centring women's rights to control their bodies. Stevens remembers:

> After she finished and was leaving, she suddenly saw Khosi and was startled and walked up to her. She gave her a warm hug and then grabbed the microphone again and started explaining how Comrade Khosi was a legendary leader to be respected and appreciated for her role in UMkhonto WeSizwe (MK) the military wing of the ANC. The Minister asked people to take pictures, I have a few of them together. Khosi has a way of looking that I think I can read. She had a look that was of 'you have got to be joking, but I will entertain you.' In today's entangled positions and vantages with proximity to power being social currency, Khosi stood resolute and neutral. I watched, seeing resistance yet dignified engagement.

Xaba and Dlamini first met in 1990 when Xaba was deployed in the ANC office in Pietermaritzburg for three months, under the leadership of Harry Gwala who was the Chairperson. Dlamini was a young activist then and over the years Xaba watched her development and growth within the ANC. Minister Bathabile Dlamini was charged with corruption in relation to the provision of child support grants, a direct contradiction in taking away women's ability to parent thus undermining reproductive justice. This chance encounter at the Gala event in 2014

was the first face to face meeting between Xaba and Dlamini since the initial contact at the ANC office in Pietermaritzburg. Xaba recalls:

> I was very disturbed in 2006 when I when I first heard that Bathabile was one of the 30 people who were found guilty of fraud and theft during what would be known as The Travelgate Scandal[2]. And then she and others pleaded guilty. I knew then that something was rotten in Mzansi's democracy.

The implementation of abortion services receded during the first decade of the 2000s when the US Gag rule[3] took hold following its first imposition since the advent of democracy in South Africa. The National Department of Health buckled and moved away from implementation, and consistent with neoliberal processes of shrinking government capacity, INGOs took centre stage in taking up these functions with often little concern for local conditions, contextual challenges or to explore sustainability. Over the years Stevens (2021) has written and spoken out about these issues, calling the government to account and demanding accountability. Stevens (2019a) has written:

> We're also beholden to donors, mostly US donors representing public and private foundations, who gag and prescribe what health services can be provided in a research project or clinic – and these services are often at odds with South Africa's legal and policy frameworks. For instance, the Gates Foundation will fund 'family planning', but will have nothing to do with abortion. As such, health services don't talk to each other.'

And in relation to feminist movement building in South Africa she continues:

> Following the election of Donald Trump as the US president and the further tightening of the global gag rule, other donors filled the void and supported a large number of international NGOs to do abortion work. Yet there was little investment in South African NGOs led by women to build movements for sexual and reproductive justice.

CONNECTING THROUGH THE WRITTEN WORD: BOOK LAUNCHES, WRITERS AND READERS

In 2014 Xaba came to Cape Town to attend a meeting about Women's Day. Her collection titled *Running and other Stories* had just been published. The title story 'Running' is about the ubiquity of violence against women and how triggers for women are simultaneously ubiquitous. It resonates with so much of South African struggle history, how women have had to endure and still endure systemic patriarchal violences and how these come after struggles concerning race or class. The enduring seriousness of the epidemic of gender-based violence is contrasted with the ANCWL calling on women to wear *doeks*[4] and cover their heads as a mechanism of organising. We had misheard *doeks* for ducks; it did not make sense. In our exasperation we laughed. Stevens recalls:

> Being Women's Day weekend the ANC Women's League of which Bathabile Dlamini was chair had named the day, Doek day, and requested women to cover their heads in scarfs/doeks. Being ridiculous, I gathered some toy ducks around our house, and we jokingly talked about getting our ducks in a row.

Stevens invited Xaba hold a book launch at her home in Muizenberg and we had a wonderful reading on a warm Spring afternoon in the back yard. Stevens remembers:

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[2] https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/bathabile-dlamini-travelgate-smallanyana-skeletons-and-no_uk_5c7e9c85e4b078abc6c1773d. (Accessed May 2023.)

[3] The US Gag rule refers to the policy that was developed at the UN Women's Conference in Mexico in 1985. This ruling coincided with a sharp conservative turn in the US government, whose delegates at the Conference announced that all funding for abortion services and counselling around the world by US NGOs was to be cut. The 'Mexico City Policy', as it came to be known, had profoundly negative impacts on family planning programmes and organisations around the world. The global gag rule prohibits foreign nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) who receive U.S. global health assistance from providing legal abortion services or referrals, while also barring advocacy for abortion law reform—even if it is done with the NGO's own, non-US. funds. President Ronald Reagan first enacted the global gag rule and every president since Reagan has decided whether to enact or revoke the policy, making NGO funding vulnerable to political changes happening in the United States. The rule forces organisations to choose whether to provide comprehensive sexual and reproductive health care and education without U.S. funding or comply with the policy in order to continue accepting U.S. funds.

[4] https://lowvelder.co.za/215781/wear-doek-fridays-celebrate-women/. (Accessed May 2023.) '*Doek*' is an Afrikaans word for a woman's scarf worn over the head to cover one's hair and knotted at the back of the neck.

> Our garden on a warm afternoon was filled and nurtured by friends and poetry where words and her voice were a balm facilitating circles of connection through intimate phrases and stanzas read by Khosi.

Some years later in July 2019 *Our Words, Our Worlds: Writing on Black South African Women Poets, 2000-2018* compiled and edited by Xaba (2019) was released and one of the launches took place at the Sexual and Reproductive Justice Coalition (SRJC) hub, also organised by Stevens.

The SRJC would host monthly meet ups for members as an intentional space to learn, listen to each other and organise. Members are diverse including sex workers, students, health workers who may not easily get to book launches held in the evenings. There is often not opportunity to listen, meet authors, freely ask questions in glitzy influencer publisher spaces. The hub was packed and the poetry flowed as those present – including Cape Town based contributors to the anthology, Malika Ndlovu, Toni Stuart and Maganthrie Pillay - were nourished as words washed in and held the space.

ABORTION AND OUR FAMILIES

Stevens remembers an instance:

> Some years later I had a call from Khosi asking for me to help with a family member who was living in Cape Town away from their family. They were a student and had had an abortion at Marie Stopes a few days before. She was ill and I was asked to go and visit. She was living in an apartment in the suburbs, and I went around later that day on my way home with [my kids] in the car collecting them from school. This meant I had to explain to my children to be kind and to not ask too many probing questions, they knew what an abortion was. Her apartment door was open, she was weak sitting on the edge of her bed in pain and with a temperature. We locked up her apartment, got her in the car and back home into bed. [My children] picked lavender from the garden and put it in her room and made her cups of tea. I got her a hot water bottle and pain relief. After checking if she had an infection and monitoring her bleeding she recovered.

Xaba remembers this story so well, observing:

> When I received a call asking me to intervene, I knew exactly who to call for help. I knew that Marion would go out of her way to give the appropriate professional attention with the personal touch of care I knew her to be capable of. I knew I could rest in my Johannesburg home with complete confidence and trust.

Most of us know women[5] who have abortions, Xaba and Stevens have cared for women who have had abortions and we had worked to liberalise our law to provide better access to care. Stevens's children had witnessed that even apparently good private access to care is not of a good quality and that women can endure pain and illness alone.

Xaba's family member experienced poor quality of abortion care even though Xaba had worked so hard to change this. Similarly, Stevens had to handle consequences of poor abortion care when she had worked tirelessly for improved quality services. The intimacy of the collegiality among service providers, researchers and activists within abortion services is heightened by the worldwide controversies on this topic. This case of Xaba's family member became yet another intensifier of the intimacy within this solidarity in a friendship.

HOLDING SOLIDARITY

To be held is an ongoing process. It is about doing and about holding that implies reaching and engaging and requires each to show up, be patient, be present, give to each other. Stevens and Xaba have been positioned differently and come from different vantage points. While both women, nurses, educated, and coming from families that endured gender-based violence, there are also clear differences. Our expressions of solidarity and activism over time have forged fundamental and foundational pillars. This intimacy has taken time to nurture. Trust takes time. We recall what we might have forgotten with care, humour and patience.

The intention of solidarity is about holding a space, it is about being held and engaging with each other. We do the work, knowing contestations and divisions. We know that there may be differences and respect that, asking for clarity and accepting these opinions.

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[5] Note on language. Most of the people we have assisted have defined as women, yet we acknowledge the continuum of genders including trans men who may seek abortions.

This leaves both Stevens and Xaba to reflect personally and together on why and to consider the pain of the current context of injustices. The pain is personal. We have both laboured and worked for improved women's health services. The pain pulsates as the deterioration within the public health services has continued. We have both continued to labour in ways that dull this pain.

Over time Stevens has worked as part of a collective to found and lead the Sexual and Reproductive Justice Coalition continuing with this work. Xaba has turned her attention to writing where she has focused on surfacing the voices of Black women in relation to a range of issues using the genres of poetry and short stories. She continues to use methodologies designed to be inclusive and empowering for women who wish to tell their stories through writing. The booklet *Start a Writing Group and Make it Work* is a 2008 example wherein Xaba shares lessons from writing groups in which she had participated over years. The 2016 edited books, *Like the Untouchable Wind: An Anthology of Poems* and *Proudly Malawian: Life Stories from Lesbians and Gender Nonconforming Individuals* are products of writing workshops that Xaba designed and used writing exercises that empower women to write and edit their writing after the workshops. Xaba's most recent poetry collection *The Art of Waiting for Tales: Found Poetry from Grace – a novel* (2021) is based on Barbara Boswell's novel, thus building a feminist bond of creativity. Xaba's literary activism is women-focussed.

Stevens is in a reflective space writing up the social construction of sexual and reproductive health and rights post-apartheid for her PhD. By both being in writing modes now this has enabled deep reflection and focus our commitment to writing this article slowly is an action to document a shared history of solidarity and activism. Connections and circles continue, as Boswell has invited her to be part of a writing group that meets weekly as she finished her PhD. Stevens is now a member of the Gender Advisory Panel at the WHO two decades later following on Xaba's term and part of a group working globally towards improving women's health and holding the WHO to account for their research and programming in this area of work.

CONCLUSION

Reflecting together, we conclude that this is an age of hard boundaries with corruption, greater inequalities, vulnerability and little accountability. There is not much movement building in relation to women's health and most work in these spaces continues to be led and theorised through an American lens leading to the dilution and disorganisation of local movement building and solidarity. These days feel busy, fast and extend to a digital world where substantial communication and work takes place online, there is calling out and cancelling at great speed. Grounded engagements with seeing each other's faces, talking, listening, smiles, laughs or frowns with greater intimacy is rare, and this feels like a loss. We are older now and removed from the younger generation as new work modalities and ways of being are employed. There is a yearning and disappointment in both of us - we wanted things to be different and we feel unsure and vulnerable at times. We have each other to call in, to remember, to question, to clarify and to offer solidarity. This feels like slow intimacy.

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Some Melancholic Musings About the Slow Intimacy of Grief: '(M)y Story Always Arrives Late'

Lou-Marié Kruger [1]*

ABSTRACT

In this article I argue that while intimacy has to do with getting to know the other and showing what you know, the acknowledgment of not knowing and the insistence on forever wondering about the other, their impact on you, and your connection with them, is crucial. Intimacy then is about continuous processes of paying attention and getting to know as there always is more to know. This knowing may be impossible to show. I argue that during the process of grieving the elegy is an example of showing the not-knowing. I discuss this argument by presenting three individual elegies. In a postscript, the work of Judith Butler and Diana Fuss is used to argue that as social scientists, our work is to write elegies for the so-called ungrievables, those who typically are not known and not shown.

Keywords: intimacy, grief, mourning, melancholia, elegy

INTRODUCTION

Some Melancholic Musings About the Slow Intimacy of Grief:
'(M)y Story Always Arrives Late' [1]

It was my first autopsy . . .

Then he took out the large and heavy heart, with its right side hypertrophied, and documented its weight in grams. I found myself strangely disappointed. There was nothing else to see. No hidden place, unexplored and unexplorable, no impenetrable small black box, hidden in all these wiggly intestines. It was undeniable, Mr. Baker had completely disappeared. Autopsied, his body was nothing more than a suit of clothes lying disregarded in the corner… I did tuck away in the back of my mind the image of his body as a crumpled suit of clothes, abandoned in the corner of the white room. (Sweet, 2013: 10)

Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And finally, what makes for a grievable life? (Butler, 2004: 20)

'You put together two things that have not been put together before,' it begins, 'and the world is changed.' (Barnes, 2013: 8)

'The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference.' (Wiesel, 1986)

THREE ELEGIES

One way of posing the question of who 'we' are in these times of war is by asking whose lives are considered valuable, whose lives are mourned, and whose lives are considered ungrievable…An ungrievable life is one that cannot be mourned because it has never been lived, that is, it has never counted as life at all. (Butler, 2010: 38)

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[1] Butler (2005: 27).

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The Grievable Life of Mr. X

> Why does the earth grieve
> When violets appear? (Neruda, 1970)
>
> I want to give thanks . . .
> . . . For Frances Haslam, who begged her children's pardon
> For dying so slowly,
> For the minutes that precede sleep,
> For sleep and death,
> Those two hidden treasures. (Borges, 1998)

I am waiting for a patient. The waiting room smells like Dettol and sweat and Cup-a-Soup. There are twelve people waiting with me. Some people are watching the TV in the right-hand corner. Others are staring at the walls. The walls are covered in posters and notices. Recipes for *toe neus* (blocked nose) and *rehidrasie* (rehydration). Big, black, handmade signs with arrows indicate *Rehidrasiehoekie* (Rehydration corner). Against the wall is a pine table with a plastic cloth and plastic flowers. Infant scale. Another table with three wooden boxes: *Kondome. Pos. Voorstelle* (Condoms. Mail. Suggestions). A white cardboard doctor's jacket, which serves as a brochure stand. The brochures are all about TB.

A man in the fourth row gets up slowly. He coughs violently and stumbles over the green plastic chair next to him. In the process, he knocks over a few more chairs. He lands on the green melamine floor and lies still. The other patients watch him. The cardboard doctor's jacket does not move. The nurses laugh in the kitchen where they are having tea. The man stirs. I get up and fetch a nurse.

The nurse kneels at the man's side and feels his pulse. She puts her hand over her mouth. 'Dead,' she says. 'He just died.'

My patient never turns up.

It is spring in the valley.

The Grievable Life of Lettie

Lettie, sick with AIDS, is referred to me by the clinic nurse. My clinical notes start with the poem 'Report from the Hospital' by Wisława Szymborska (1998: 95):

> We used matches to draw lots: who would visit him
> And I lost. I got up from our table.
> Visiting hours were just about to start.
> When I said hello he didn't say a word.
> I tried to take his hand – he pulled it back
> Like a hungry dog that won't give up its bone
> He seemed embarrassed about dying.
> What do you say to someone like that?
> Our eyes never met, like in a faked photograph.
> He didn't care if I stayed or left.
> He didn't ask about anyone from our table.
> Not you, Barry. Or you, Larry. Or you, Harry.
> My head started aching. Who's dying on whom?
> I went on about modern medicine and three violets in a jar.
> I talked about the sun and faded out.
> It's a good thing they have stairs to run down.
> It's a good thing they have gates to let you out.
> It's a good thing you're all waiting at our table.
> The hospital smell makes me sick.

Lettie is 42 years old. She carries her head low, mouth slightly open, white tongue, body visibly shivering, big jacket, slippers, small, bare, brown ankles, sweatpants that are too short and too red and too bright for everything else. I ask her why she is here. She says that she is cold and tired. She cannot eat, has not been able to keep food down for almost a month. I say to her that she looks sick. Is she sick? 'I came with a lift. I stay in Factory Street.' Is she in bed all the time? 'I get up a little. If the sun shines, I get up. Then I sit in the front room. The lying down works on my sides.'

She does not look at me. Her head stays low. I open her file. The last inscription in her files reads:

> Make appointment with Lou-Marié.
> 1. Prepare client for death.
> 2. Talk to her about gratitude. She has a supportive family.
> 3. Repentance about promiscuous life.

Before that the list of most recent physical symptoms:

> Complaint of bad cough. Vomiting. Productive cough. Yellow bile. No appetite. Temperature: 39.4 °C. Weight: 50 kg. Respiration: bilateral crepitasis. Candidas in mouth. Referred to hospital with pneumonia. Admitted Emergency Unit.

I ask to be excused and go next door to find the sister. I tell her that the client referred to me seems very ill, too ill to do a session with me. 'Oh yes, Lettie,' she says. 'Her count is 92, too low for treatment. It went down overnight. Such a pity. She comes from such a good family. There is always a *vrot kolletjie* [rotten spot]. I will come and look at her; we probably will have to hospitalise her again.' Behind the nurse's desk, beneath a poster advertising female condoms, a handmade poster with a picture of a nurse's cap and a stethoscope: 'Save one life, you're a hero, save a 100 lives, you're a nurse.'

I go back to Lettie. '*Vrot kolletjie*'. I put one of the clinic blankets around her shoulders. I wait for the nurse. In the meantime, I do what I usually do – I ask questions. History. Her father was a builder and her mother a housewife. She is the youngest of nine children, seven brothers and one sister. It is the sister she is staying with in Factory Street. Her own children are 25, 12, and 8. The younger two live with their father in Worcester. The oldest son is a cabinet maker and 'my girl works at Kekkel en Kraai. They take care of me, the children.'

She struggles to talk, I struggle to listen. I watch the movements of her white tongue. She says she got divorced four years ago. Her ex-husband initiated the divorce. 'And Lettie, do you have someone new?'

'I now have a boy, Koos Swart. He is also positive'. Her sentences are short. She is not interested in the conversation.

Three violets in a jar.

She is still trembling. 'I am just tired and I can't get warm.'

So much for the history.

'To get a history is to get the longitudinal information,' I teach my university psychology students. 'The Mental Status Exam is the cross-sectional picture. Both kinds of information inform the diagnosis and the formulation, and ultimately the treatment plan.' I think about what I will write down for Lettie's mental status exam:

> Affect: Blunted (disturbance in affect manifested by severe reduction in the intensity of externalised feeling tone).
>
> Motor behaviour: Anergia.
>
> Disturbances in speech: Poverty of speech (restriction in the amount of speech used; replies may be monosyllabic). Non-spontaneous speech (verbal responses given only when asked or spoken to directly, no self-initiation of speech).
>
> Levels of memory: Immediate, recent and remote intact. Cruelly so, it seems.
>
> Insight (ability to understand the true cause and meaning of a situation – such as a set of symptoms): Impaired.

Who is dying on whom?

There will be no diagnosis. No formulation. And certainly, no treatment plan. I tell her that she seems very sick and that the sister will examine her, but she will most probably be hospitalised. Her face changes for the first time during the session: 'The last time I went to the hospital, I sat there, waiting, for six hours. Later, I was lying in the corridor, crying. It was so cold. I don't want to go.'

It's a good thing they have gates to let you out.

I do not know what happened to Lettie. I never saw her again.

The Grievable Life of My Mother

My mother was hospitalised in the spring of 2021, after a stroke. It was October. She died on 10 December in a care centre, in a sombre hospital bed overlooking a parking lot and a face-brick building. The only living thing we could see from those sad windows was a very lean dog on a chain in the parking lot. My brothers and I were there when she died on that bed in that room, witnesses to the last desperate and strange breath. I was holding both her hands.

I read the 'Small elegy to my mother' at her memorial on the front stoep of my house on a harsh February morning in 2022:

> My mother likes trees. Yellow wood trees. Fever trees. Stinkhoutbome. Drolpeerbome. Milkwood trees. Cherry trees. Even sometimes non-indigenous trees like guava trees, considered to be politically incorrect trees by serious South African gardeners.
>
> My mother plants trees.
>
> She plants trees everywhere she goes.
>
> All four of my mother's children also plant trees wherever they go, because although we did not inherit much from my mother, we all inherited her love for trees. And her love for people who love trees. Some of us even married tree-lovers.
>
> My mother nurses her trees.
>
> Not in any sentimental way, of sentimentality you could never accuse my mother.
>
> No, her care looks different.
>
> She makes gardens for her trees.
>
> She watches and watches her trees.
>
> She wonders about her trees.
>
> She thinks about her trees.
>
> She is curious about her trees.
>
> She certainly is worried about her trees.
>
> She thinks trees are quite threatened and that she has to do something to protect them.
>
> My mother does not fight easily, but she will fight about trees. She will fight for the right to have a tree, she will fight against anything that she thought may inhibit the growth of her trees, she will fight about the fact that a tree must be pruned and also about how it has to be pruned.
>
> She has a deadly glint in her eye when she has pruning shears in her hands.
>
> But even she is a ruthless pruners and, later in life, pruning instructor, my mother never believes that a tree is dead.
>
> I think I see something green, she would say. Let's give it a few weeks and see.
>
> As child I woke up with the sound of water, my mother with a hose-pipe in the garden. If I think back, I think that my mother and her hose-pipe is probably the sound of a tree growing.
>
> What makes trees grow is someone watching them, looking at them. My mother watched her trees. She tried to know what was going on with her trees. She really cared about what happened to her trees.
>
> She also wanted everyone else to look at her trees. Where-ever you visited her (even when she lived in a flat in the main street of Kuilsrivier), you always had to go and look at the trees. You have not visited her if you have not looked at the trees.
>
> Apart from trees there were a few other things my mother likes. Coffee. Ice cream. Cheese sandwiches. Figs. Bach. Mahler. Schubert. Sleeping.
>
> She also likes stones. Rocks. But that was maybe because she was always looking for stones to put in her garden. Stones go with trees.
>
> She likes walking. But she walked only where the trees were.

She likes her paintings, maybe they don't have much to do with trees, although she had a whole wall of tree paintings.

She likes books very much, but books definitely come from trees.

She was a librarian and of course liked libraries, and a library certainly has everything to do with trees. A library is a massive collection of chopped up pulped processed typed on and finally classified trees.

My dear father, he called himself the *reus van Groenberg*, the giant of Green Mountain – go figure – often mumbled under his breath that my mother liked her library more than she liked him.

As kids we were afraid he was probably right.

My mother also does like us, her family, I think. I am not quite sure what us and our father have in common with trees, but when I am with my mother I think I know how it feels to be a tree.

I don't know why my mother likes trees. I don't think she herself knows. But I think she sees something when she looks at trees.

Your mother, my father always said, is a very clever woman.

I ended my elegy with Philip Larkin's (2014: 124) poem 'The Trees'.

The trees are coming into leaf
Like something almost being said;
The recent buds relax and spread,
Their greenness is a kind of grief.

Is it that they are born again
And we grow old? No, they die too,
Their yearly trick of looking new
Is written down in rings of grain.

Yet still the unresting castles thresh
In fullgrown thickness every May.
Last year is dead, they seem to say,
Begin afresh, afresh, afresh

ELEGY AND THE SHOWING AND KNOWING OF SLOW INTIMACY

Recently, I was part of a team of feminist scholars hosting a conference with the theme of Slow Intimacy.[2] In the Call for Papers we attempted to describe what we mean with the theme Slow Intimacy:

The verb 'to intimate' refers to the action of showing what you know. The noun 'intimacy' refers to an interaction in which a person knows something and then shows that they know and what they know to another. This intimate interaction can be with a person, other living things, inanimate objects, or the planet. The adjective 'intimate' refers to that what is known or those who know and are known, those who show and get shown. The knowing or familiarity associated with intimacy can be cognitive emotional or both and is often embodied. In intimate interactions you can show, manifest, or perform the knowing in different ways: through language, art, music, physical actions, often involving skills and bodily habits… Both knowing and showing can be explicit or implicit, conscious or unconscious. Intimate knowing can manifest as a showing that has the potential to be immensely powerful, ranging from showings that are nurturing and loving to showings that are cruel and destructive…We seek to explore processes of knowing and showing that are subtle and nuanced, complex, multi-layered, and intricate. We also aim to explore the processes of knowing and showing associated with slow intimacy: Who gets to know and who gets to show? In what conditions are knowing and showing possible? How

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[2] Conference hosted at Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Studies (STIAS) between 12 and 14 October 2022. Convened by Professor Amanda Gouws (SARChi Chair in Gender Politics at Stellenbosch University) and by Professor Lou-Marié Kruger (Department of Psychology, Stellenbosch University).

is intimacy tied to power and how is it informed or shaped by larger societal processes (political, social, economic)?

As a team of conference organisers, we thus claimed that to be intimate is to know something and to show what you know. Intimate relationships are about showing what you know. Slow intimacy is about subtle and complex ways of knowing and slow ways of showing.

Subsequent to reading all the conference submissions I am thinking differently about slow intimacy. I think that maybe intimacy is about the acknowledgment of not knowing and the insistence on forever wondering about the other, their impact on you, and your connection with them. The fact that there is always more to know and that it may be impossible to show.

I got to think that perhaps the most profound example of slow intimacy, ironically, is an elegy. An elegy is a ritual, a song or a text commemorating human mortality (Fuss, 2013). A written elegy is a text of serious reflection, a lament for the dead or the lost, a song of sorrow, a poem of mourning or melancholy. Fuss (2013: 4) reflects on how literary critics tend to read modern elegy as a poetics of melancholia, "a despondent and dispirited body of verse that refuses all forms of substitution, transcendence, or redemption". She cites Ramazani as saying: 'the modern elegist tends not to achieve but to resist consolation, not to override but to sustain anger, not to heal but to reopen the wounds of loss.' Ramazani very consciously uses the phrase 'melancholic mourning' to describe an elegy, thereby taking care not to oppose mourning and melancholia in the traditional Freudian sense. [3]

Different from a eulogy, an elegy is not a praise poem or speech, it is a very careful and self-reflective consideration about the person, the relationship, or the thing that has been lost, what has been lost for the lamenting person, and what has been lost for the world. In the words of Fuss, (2013: 6): 'Elegiac utterances were provoked by the loss of what one desired and the desire for what one lost.'

The poet or person performing/writing the elegy also includes in their work how they feel about the loss, and what the loss is like for them personally, it is a way of exploring loss. It is about the hurt, the wound. It is the howl of grief. The person or the thing remains dead, but the feeling is alive. An elegy is an attempt at intimacy when intimacy in the real world has been lost. An elegy is not about the dead or lost person, it is about the relationship between the mourner and the mourned. It is about the loss of the dead person, but it is also about the parts of ourselves (who we were with the dead person) that we lost or think we lost. It is about relationships.

'You put together two things that have not been put together before,' Julian Barnes writes in his novel *Levels of Life* (2013), 'and the world is changed. People may not notice at the time, but that doesn't matter.' (3). '…sometimes it works,' he says, 'and the world is changed'. 'Then, at some point, sooner or later, for this reason, or that, one of them is taken away. And what is taken away is greater than the sum of what was there. This may not seem mathematically possible, but it is emotionally possible' (67).

Because every relationship is unique, no one's grief is the same. Barnes cites E. M. Forster: '"One death may explain itself, but it throws no light upon another." So grief in turn becomes unimaginable, not just its length and depth, but its tone and texture, its deceptions and false dawns, its recidivism' (69).

In an elegy, we try to capture the uniqueness of the loss for ourselves. 'Grief,' Barnes says, 'like death, is banal and unique' (70).

KNOWING: OF GRIEF, MOURNING AND MELANCHOLIA

'I did already know that only the old words would do: death, grief, sorrow, sadness, heartbreak.' (Barnes, 2013: 71)

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[3] Jahan Ramazani (1994), *Poetry of Mourning: The modern elegy from Hardy to Heaney*, xi.
Freud makes the distinction between mourning and melancholia:

In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself. (Freud, 1989: 586)

Freud further explains melancholia:

An object-choice, an attachment of the libido to a particular person, had at one time existed; then, owing to a real slight or disappointment coming from this loved person, the object-relationship was shattered. The result was not the normal one of a withdrawal of the libido from this object and a displacement of it on to a new one, but something different … an identification of the ego with the abandoned object … object-loss was transformed into ego-loss. (Freud, 1989: 586)

I did not know the man who died in the waiting room at all.

The woman who was slowly dying in the clinic consulting room was my patient. I knew her from her file.

The woman who died in the hospital bed was my mother. It was a very close and some would say intimate relationship, but I don't know how well I really knew her.

In these elegies the questions are the same: Who are you? Who were you? Who am I with you? What do I know about you? What was our relationship about? What can I show about what I know? How can I show what I know?

I think I have tried to figure out the strange being who was my mother since I was very young. I watched her, wondered about her, worried about her. She did the same for me, I think. I wondered about myself as a daughter. I wondered about the mother-daughter relationship. Much later on I realised that this kind of curiosity and wondering and contemplating became the basis of everything I do. It became the basis of my work as therapist, as academic researcher, as teacher, as supervisor, as friend, as mother.

No wonder that in all my academic research I have focused on motherhood, long before I became a mother myself and long before I met the mothers of the valleys that I work in. I obsessively read all the thinkers who theorised motherhood, people such as Dorothy Dinnerstein, Nancy Chodorow, Audry Lorde, bell hooks, Julia Kristeva.

Julia Kristeva writes:

> For a woman, the call of the mother . . . troubles the word: it generates hallucinations, voice, 'madness' … It is a fragile envelope, incapable of staving off the irruption of this conflict, of the love which had bound the little girl to her mother, and which then, like black lava, had lain in wait for her all along the path of her desperate attempts to identify with the symbolic paternal order. (1986: 145)

I think what Kristeva is alluding to is the fact that what is often thought of as the most intimate of relationships, the mother-daughter bond, is indicative of the fact that intimacy is perhaps not about knowing, definitely not about understanding, it does not belong in the world of the rational. Intimacy is black lava, madness, fluidity, fragility, desperation, conflict, strangeness, queerness – that which often cannot be captured in words, in language. Kristeva would say the mother-daughter relationship, or then intimacy, does not belong in the paternal order.

Intimacy is then perhaps not about knowing and showing, it is about giving oneself over to the idea of not knowing, never knowing fully, always in suspense, always wondering, always a little bit mad.

Teju Cole (2023) writes in a New York Times article about watching the play Agamemnon in Greece over the summer, saying that the Greeks help us to think about grief. He cites Ted Hughes' translation of a chorus piece from the play:

> Where is right and wrong
> In this nightmare?
> Each becomes the ghost of the other.
> Each is driven mad
> By the ghost of the other.
> Who can reason it out?

If we can never know, it means that the most important thing in our relationships with ourselves, with others, and with the world is to keep on paying attention, to never stop watching and wondering. The elegy is about a wondering and curious gaze on what was there, the person that was there, the self that was there, and the connection (or non-connection) that was there.

Freud considered psychoanalysis to be the cure of love, love demonstrated through 'the evenly-suspended attention' (Freud, 1912: 111). Donald Winnicott (1967) writes about the mother's holding and the mother's gaze. Wilfred Bion (1962) describes maternal reverie as the stance of curiosity and attentiveness (focusing on the other without memory or desire) and speaking from the heart and mind. This 'psychological state of receptivity', psychoanalyst Thomas Ogden says, involves a 'to-and-fro of experiencing and reflecting, of listening and introspection, of reverie and interpretation' (Ogden, 1997: 594). He cites the novelist Henry James: 'Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue.' (as cited in Ogden, 1997: 567). For Ogden, our receptivity must be:

> … for the stuff of ordinary life – the day-to-day concerns that accrue in the process of being alive as a human being . . . the lives and the world that the lives inhabit . . . [they are about] people: people working, thinking about things, falling in love, taking naps … [about] the habit of the world, its strange ordinariness, its ordinary strangeness … our ruminations, daydreams, fantasies, bodily sensations, fleeting perceptions, images emerging from states of half-sleep, tunes and phrases that run through our minds, and so on. (Ogden, 1997: 568)

So in intimacy the commitment is to pay attention. To indulge not knowing. Recognise the strangeness. Giving oneself over to the profound suspense of not knowing and then not ever being able to show exactly.

In South African author Ingrid Winterbach's (2021) latest novel, her main character reads Anne Carson. The narrator then wonders about her husband.

> And then she (Carson) asks, who is this man? The more she observes him, the less she knows.
>
> Who is this man, I wonder, sharing my bed, by day so light, but when sleeping at night as heavy as a stone. (A stone not a fish, we are drought-stricken.) And then he wakes up in the morning with no recollection of how sheerly he has recently plumbed in depths. (His head still attached to his body, unlike that of Nat Turner's master's body.). I gaze into his eyes by day and I don't have the slightest idea. I regard his bare limbs before he gets into bed and I don't have any idea.
>
> Don't stop too soon, the father of the narrator in the Marias trilogy, Your face tomorrow, told his young son. The father always pushed the child to go further. Yes, and what else? he would ask.
>
> When I think of God, I want to ask him things. Help me to dive into the depths like the women in the East diving for pearls. (Winterbach, 2021: 21)

Judith Butler ties the state of not knowing to desire:

> As we ask to know the Other or ask that the Other say, finally, who he or she is, it will be important not to expect an answer that will ever satisfy. By not pursuing satisfaction, and by letting the question remain open, even enduring, we let the Other live, since life might be understood as precisely that which exceeds any account we may try to give of it. If letting the Other live is part of a new definition of recognition, then this version of recognition would be one that is based less on knowledge than on an apprehension of its limits. In a sense, the ethical stance consists in asking the question, 'Who are you?', and continuing to ask the question without any expectation of a full or final answer. This Other to whom I pose this question will not be captured by any answer that might arrive to satisfy the question. So if there is, in the question, a desire for recognition, this will be a desire which is under an obligation to keep itself alive as desire, and not to resolve itself through satisfaction. 'Oh, now I know who you are': At this moment, I cease to address you, or to be addressed by you. (Butler, 2005: 24)

She implies that when one thinks one fully knows, intimacy may be over.

She further emphasises how acknowledging and understanding the limits of fully knowing and being in a constant state of wonder means that we have to remain both humble and generous:

> In other words, do we know in an unqualified way that acknowledgment is always qualified? Is the first kind of knowing qualified by the qualification that it knows? This would have to be the case, for to acknowledge one's own opacity or that of another does not transform opacity into transparency. To know the limits of acknowledgment is a self-limiting act and, as a result, to experience the limits of knowing itself. This can, by the way, constitute a disposition of humility, and of generosity, since I will need to be forgiven for what I cannot fully know, what I could not have fully known, and I will be under a similar obligation to offer forgiveness to others who are also constituted in partial opacity to themselves. (Butler, 2005: 28)

Who is this woman who was my mother, I ask? Who is this woman in the consulting room in the clinic? Who is this man in the waiting room?
And who am I for them or with them?
I wonder. And will keep on wondering.

SHOWING: REPRESENTING GETTING TO KNOW

> Things that give you heart are rare enough, better note them in your head when you find them and not forget. (Barry, 2016: 138)
>
> I realize as I write this that I do not want to finish this account. Nor did I want to finish this year. The craziness is receding but no clarity is taking its place. I look for resolution and find none. (Didion, 2005: 224-225)

> Of all the intellectual surprises my little book on elegy afforded me, this was the biggest: a book I thought was about dying quietly evolved into a book about surviving. The story of this subtle shift – a nearly imperceptible movement from loss to love – names the very work of elegy, a poetics of loss that does not so much mark the end of love as put a name to love. (Fuss, 2013: ix)

If intimacy is about being in a state of wondering or wonderment, how do we show what we know and do not know? How do we represent the wonder of not knowing and the process of getting to know?

'Speaking is impossible,' writes Derrida (1986) when his friend Paul de Man dies, 'but so too would be silence or absence or a refusal to share one's sadness' (5). Rob Nixon claims that 'in a world permeated by insidious unspectacular violence … writing can make the unapparent appear, rendering it tangible by humanizing drawn out calamities inaccessible to the human senses' (Nixon, 2011: 8).

If we don't really know, the showing is complicated, even impossible. We never know exactly how to show the not-knowing. The showing often is in the inadvertent, the implicit, the pre-verbal, the coincidental. In the elegies cited above: the summoning of a nurse, a blanket around the shoulders, driving someone to the hospital, writing an elegy that is more clumsy poem than prose.

An elegy by definition is the attempt of showing the not-knowing. 'Despite their differences', Fuss (2013: 2-3) says, 'all dying modern poems have one important thing in common: all choose speech over speechlessness, utterance over silence'. Insisting on giving voice to the voiceless, these elegies all imagine death or absence by offering fantastical fictions in lyric form.

What then do I know and do not know and how do I show it or fail to show it?

How do I speak about my mother, about Lettie, about Mr. X? How do I show something about our relationship or non-relationship? How do I as psychologist and ethnographer write about the lives of others and myself?

Anthropologist Michael Jackson reassuringly writes about how he 'scribbled notes, gathering glimpses into what it meant to be a stranger in a world where so much was unfamiliar and forbidding' (Jackson, 2011: 190). He cites Habermas' notion of the 'purposeless journeys', the necessity to abandon 'the search for the real or the essential, replacing it with an effort to give voice to the multitude of agents involved in the production of culture…any culture… resists final summation…could never be pinned down or fully known' (Jackson, 2011: 190). Jackson asserts that 'Ethnography provides a method whereby the occluded, denigrated, masked dimensions of our common humanity may be recovered, not through thought alone but through practical engagement with others in the world…' Jackson says that this movement is not away from the empirical but toward it, and 'entails a radicalization of the empirical as encompassing what is illuminated as well as what lies in the shadow, the fluid as well as the fixed, the transitive as well as the intransitive, the verbal as well as the nonverbal, the personal as well as the transpersonal, the worldly as well as the extra-wordly' (Jackson, 2011: 191).

The stories we tell are always tentative, incomplete, open to interpretation and re-tellings.

McKittrick in her recent book, *Dear Science*, talks about how difficult it is to write stories about what we think we know.

> Telling, sharing, listening to, and hearing stories are relational and interdisciplinary acts that are animated by all sorts of people, places, narrative devices, theoretical queries, plots. The process is sustained by invention and wonder. The story has no answers. Indeed, the story cannot tell itself without our willingness to imagine what it cannot tell. The story asks that we live with what cannot be explained. (McKittrick, 2020: 6-7)

Remembering is slow, Milan Kundera (1996) says. Forgetting is fast.

Judith Butler (2005: 27) laments about the slowness of the writing process:

> And it means that my story always arrives late. I am always recuperating, reconstructing, even as I produce myself differently in the very act of telling. My account of myself is partial, haunted by that for which I have no definitive story. I cannot explain exactly why I have emerged in this way, and my efforts at narrative reconstruction are always undergoing revision. There is that in me and of me for which I can give no account.

So how then to show what we know and what we do not know? Sina Queyras said in her elegy to Sylvia Plath, which she titled 'Water, water everywhere':

> I am not interested in what Bourdieu, or Kristeva, has to say about grief. I don't want a grid, I want arms. I don't want a theory; I want the poem inside me. I want the poem to unfurl like a thousand monks chanting inside me. I want the poem to skewer me, to catapult me into the clouds. I want to sink into

the rhythm of your weeping, I want to say, my grief is turning and I have no way to remain still. (Queyras, 2014)

Back then to the poets. As Larkin (2014) indicates in his tree poem, the poem that I read at my mother's memorial, in intimacy there always is the potential of something restless, something thick, something moving, something novel, something new, something green, something strange and maybe even a little queer.

I will be writing about my mother and Lettie and Mr. X and people like them forever, always arriving late with the story, looking for arms rather than words.

James Woods (2023), in a recent *New Yorker* article about George Elliot, writes about her 'remarkably beautiful and tender epigraph for the last chapter—the marriage coda—of "Daniel Deronda"':

> In the chequered area of human experience, the seasons are all mingled as in the golden age: fruit and blossom hang together; in the same moment the sickle is reaping and the seed is sprinkled; one tends the green cluster and another treads the wine-press. Nay, in each of our lives harvest and spring-time are continually one, until Death himself gathers us and sows us anew in his invisible fields. (693)

She published these words in 1876.

Here is Larkin (2014) again in 'An Arundel tomb':

> Above their scrap of history,
> Only an attitude remains:
> Time has transfigured them into
> Untruth. The stone fidelity
> They hardly meant has come to be
> Their final blazon, and to prove
> Our almost-instinct almost true:
> What will survive of us is love.

POSTSCRIPT: '(M)Y STORY ALWAYS ARRIVES LATE'

> Without grievability there is no life, or, rather, there is something living that is other than life. Instead, 'there is a life that never have been lived,' sustained by no regard, not testimony and ungrieved when lost… Grievability precedes and makes possible the apprehension for the living being as living, exposed to non-life from the start. (Butler, 2015)

> Yet it does seem the case that the cataclysmic cultural changes ushered in by modern warfare, technology, and communications have ratcheted up the ethical burden of elegy; poetry now appears accountable to a whole range of losses that appear at least as traumatic as the loss of any individual human life. In no small degree, the ethical task of the modern elegy is to determine what indeed ethics might mean in a world that appears to have lost its ethos, its "principle of human duty." (Fuss, 2013: 6)

> The space, at once empty and populated, of all those words without a language which allow the person who lends an ear to hear a muffled voice from below history, the stubborn murmuring of a language which seems to speak quite by itself, without a speaking subject and without an interlocutor, huddled in on itself, a lump in its throat, breaking down before it has achieved any formulation and lapsing back into the silence from which it was never separated. (Foucault, 1961: 200)

And it means that my story always arrives late, Judith Butler states.

In my musings about the slow intimacy of grief and elegies I become thoroughly stuck. Unable to complete the paper.

While I am trying to finish this paper a close friend's life partner dies after a long and harrowing illness. I walk with her on the mountain. I see her constant grief, I see it manifesting sometimes in anger, sometimes in sadness, but always in a persistent wonder about what it is, what it was, who he was, who she was with him and who she is without him.

How do I dare to write about grief.

I also am stuck because I cannot link my melancholic musings about grief and my elegies to the political. I know that politics are always lurking somewhere in all the relationships that I wonder about, think about and write

about. And I know, as always when writing, what is not on the page is as important as what is on the page. The grievable is on my page, the ungrievable is not.

Let Butler and the ungrievables go, the first reviewer of my paper insists. This paper can just be about your mother. But I can't let Butler go.

Butler implores us to think about grief in a different way. For Butler grievable lives are lives that are recognised as worthy of mourning after they are lost, because they are already recognised and valued as lives. Ungrievable lives, Butler argues, are those lives 'that cannot be lost, and cannot be destroyed, because they already inhabit a lost and destroyed zone; they are, ontologically, and from the start, already lost and destroyed, which means that when they are destroyed in war, nothing is destroyed' (Butler, 2010: xix).

My mother was a white middle-class woman: mother, gardener, reader, teacher, librarian, wife, lover. My big brother writes a eulogy for the local paper:

> Mkhoma, Nyassaland: 4 February 1935-Stellenbosch: 20 December 2021
>
> *Kinders en kleinkinders neem met swaar harte afskeid van 'n sonderlinge vrou. Geliefde onderwyser, bilioteker, tuineir, vireindin, dogter, suster, ouma, ma en lewensmaat. Mens van baie liefdes: see, berge, stap, bome, stories, prent, musiek – en die Reus van Groenberg. Leser op heuwels. Ons sien deur jou oë.*
>
> Children and grandchildren with heavy hearts bid farewell to an inimitable woman. Beloved teacher, librarian, gardener, friend, daughter, sister, grandmother, mother and partner. Person of many loves: sea, mountains, walking, trees, stones, stories, pictures, music – and the Giant of Green Mountain. Reader on hills. We see through your eyes.

But was her life recognised in a South Africa governed by white male patriarchy? Is she grievable? Lettie and Mr. X, black and poor, how ungrievable they seem in the Butlerian sense of the word.

Three precarious lives. Grievable? Ungrievable?

Perhaps mourned by their loved ones, but precarious in the larger scheme of things.

Slowly trying to get to know and then to show.

Nathan Trantraal (La Vita, 2014), South African author and poet, in an interview, describes how poverty means that people almost become accustomed to death and loss.

> Because poverty and struggle necessarily mean that people process things at a hyper-accelerated speed. I know of a family where the whole family, except one sister, died in one year, I know of brothers who all were shot within a year or a few months. The people who stay behind move on, accept it as a normal part of a painful life, not acknowledging that it mostly is a painful existence. It is like fantasy and reality that, with time, melt into each other.[4]

Remembering is slow, forgetting is fast.

Can those people with precarious lives become more grievable if we pay attention to their lives and try to get to know them? In my mind that is exactly what my work as psychologist and researcher entails.

Slowly trying to get to know and then to show.

Fuss (2013: 6-7) writes:

> I am attracted to elegies precisely because of their investment in reparation, resuscitation, and reclamation, their earnest attempt to buoy the living by holding on to the dead. The literary genre of choice in times of personal and national crisis, elegy taps into the binding energies of both eros and logos to offer up the poetic equivalent of a human life preserver. 'Let Love clasp Grief/ lest both be drowned,' Tennyson sorrowfully intones in an elegy for his beloved Arthur Hallam, 133 cantos long and 17 years in the making. Enfolding the dead in its lyrical embrace, In Memoriam, a poem of both 'calm despair and wild unrest,' he shows not just how elegy might be ethical but how ethics might be elegiac. In his critical study of ethical mourning, R. Clifton Spargo helpfully notes that ethics and elegy share two important features: both typically view every death as an injustice, and both routinely make themselves

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[4] The original Afrikaans text is as follows:

> Ek wiet vanne familie waa die hele familie behalwe die een suste in een jaa dood gegan 'et, ek wiet van klomp broes wie 'n jaa offe paa maande ytmekaa doodgeskiet was. Die mense wat agtebly move and, accept 'it as 'n normal part vanne painful life, sonne om te acknowledge meeste vannie tyd dat 'it 'n painful existence is. Is soes fantasy en reality wat seamlessly begin melt met tyd.

vulnerable to the fate of the other… I would go even farther, for in a very real sense ethics is elegy: speaking, acting, and surviving in the face of loss, no matter how irretrievable those losses may be.

Teju Cole (2023) in the *New York Times*, writing about the lives lost when migrants try to cross the border from Turkey to Greece, says the following:

> The Evros River is often deadly for those who try to cross there. Some cannot swim or find themselves caught in sudden currents. Some are shot at by the Greek border police; others make it across the river only to die of injuries or hypothermia. The bodies are sometimes retrieved only weeks later, in advanced stages of decomposition. Those who die in the Evros region are taken to Alexandroupolis, the Greek city closest to the border. There, at the University Hospital of Alexandroupolis, Dr. Pavlos Pavlidis assumes responsibility for them. Pavlidis has been involved in this work for over 20 years and has carried out more than 500 autopsies. He and his team try to determine the cause of death and identify the bodies. In coordination with human rights organizations, they notify the bereaved families, when that is possible. Often, it is not possible, in part because many of those who undertake these journeys, to avoid complications if they're caught, do not carry identifying documents. When all attempts to match the dead with their names have been exhausted, Pavlidis sends the bodies to a small village called Sidiro, about an hour's drive north of Alexandroupolis, in a part of Greece that is home to the once substantial but now small Ottoman Greek Muslim population.

> The unidentified bodies are washed by the women of the village. Under the reasonable assumption that these dead are from a Muslim background — many of those crossing the Evros River originate from Afghanistan, Syria, Pakistan and Bangladesh — the village imam conducts burial rites for them.

Cole's lament is as follows:

> I had a sense that I was there in the cemetery on behalf of others, those who would have wished to be there, if only they knew that this was where their loved ones had ended up. I am not religious. I have no prayers to recite. But in that cemetery of persons once known, I performed a ceremony of farewell: I breathed in the spring air, I listened to the rustle of vegetation, I felt the grass underfoot, I looked across the landscape in the bright but tender afternoon light, and at the farms, the village and the forested slopes. It was a vision of peace and even of consolation.

His lament brings to mind George Eliot's narrator in *Middlemarch*:

> If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heartbeat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. (Eliot, 1871: 199)

And then, while thinking about grief and grievability there is a story that is reported worldwide, the story of a 'tragedy at 80 Albert Street' that 'struck some of South Africa's poorest'. The Wall Street Journal (2023) reports:

> Crouching on a fifth-story ledge, Yandisa Mnqandi pulled his son to his chest and eyed the flames that were devouring 80 Albert Street and the warren of dwellings inside. 'If I die, maybe my baby will survive if I take the blow,' he thought, before jumping into the darkness.

> Seconds earlier, his wife had made the leap, and right behind him, he assumed, was their 16-year-old, Melita, a stepdaughter whom Mnqandi was proud to be raising like his own.

> Landing feet first on the ground, Mnqandi felt his right leg crack. His son seemed OK, and there was his wife, dazed, but alive. But there was no sign of Melita. The 10th-grader had turned back to fetch some blankets, to use as ropes to shorten the terrifying distance to the bottom.

> On the third floor, Cynthia Nkosi awoke with a start, pungent black smoke swirling inside her small room's cardboard walls. Nkosi grabbed her sleeping daughter and strapped the two-year-old to her back using the sheet of the small bed they shared. She opened the window, said a prayer and jumped.

> Nkosi landed, miraculously unhurt. For a second there was silence, then the girl, still tied to her mother's back, began to cry. 'At least she's alive,' Nkosi thought. Above, she saw flames in the window she had jumped from just moments ago.

In horror, she watched her neighbors tumbling from the floors above. Some were on fire, their bodies leaving a trail of light and smoke as they fell. Others clutched pieces of luggage, desperate to save a few belongings as tragedy struck a community that already got by on next to nothing.

At least 77 people died in the fire in downtown Johannesburg in the early hours of Thursday morning, all of them black and among the poorest in the sprawling metropolis christened the City of Gold by its white founders a century and a half ago. (Steinhauser *et al.*, 2023)

Grievable ungrievable lives.

Fuss (2013: 8) claims that the ethical wagers of modern elegy may loom largest in the smallest elegy ever written, 'an exquisitely painful poem' by W. S. Merwin, where he '(i)n just six devastating monosyllables, voices the lament behind every modern mourning poem: Why write an elegy when the beloved is no longer here to read it?' The poem reads as follows:

Who would I show it to

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My story arrived too late.

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The Slow Intimacy of Necropolitics

Amanda Gouws [1]*

ABSTRACT

Human beings seem to have a fascination with pictures of death or what can be called 'necrovoyeurism'. Circulating pictures of dead bodies has become easier with the use of social media. Necropolitics or the politics of death relates to the careless treatment of the lives of the marginalised, destitute and the ones without voice, the precariat. In late modernity one of the shadow sides of democracy is necropolitics, using processes of social exclusion and devaluing the lives of the poor and the ones in need through the desire to 'keep them out' – to curb mobility through the brutality of borders that often leads to death. This article concerns itself with the slow intimacy of necropolitics – how, through looking at pictures of death and redistributing them by retweeting, appropriating, decontextualising and recontextualising them we slowly become acquainted with the intimacy of death that may prevent an authentic empathy or desire to change the conditions of the marginalised.

Keywords: necropolitics, intimacy, migration, Mbembe, social media, xenophobia

INTRODUCTION

Lauren Berlant in her special issue on intimacy for the journal *Critical Inquiry* has written the following:

> To intimate is to communicate with the sparest of signs and gestures, and at its root intimacy has the quality of eloquence and brevity. But intimacy also involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way… Yet … the intimate is met by a corresponding publicness. (1998: 281)

Thus, intimacy is a story shared about oneself and others – radiating from the private to the public.

Bodies when they are alive are full of action, movement, warm to the touch, and mysterious in many ways. Dead bodies are motionless, inactive, cold, expressing a vulnerability that is only visible after death. It is this incomprehensible loss of what may have been active minutes before that we cannot fathom, and this unknowingness has led Judith Butler (2008: 30) to ask 'What is in the Other that I have lost?' 'And that makes us come undone'.

We are surrounded by precarious life on a daily basis in South Africa – the homeless, the jobless, the hopeless, the ones struggling with the pain of mere survival, or what Giorgio Agamben calls 'bare life' – a life where the sovereign (the state) does not protect certain people through its laws, but let them live in a state of exception where the law does not apply to them. In many ways these are the people who are considered 'surplus people' who are not absorbed as citizens, but who are viewed as a burden on the nation state. They make claims on our humanity, leading Judith Butler (2004: 20) to ask 'Who counts as human?', 'Whose lives count as lives'? And what makes for a 'grievable life'?

Given long histories of colonial dispossession and rampant inequality, bare life often goes unnoticed in the post-colony. I want to turn my lens away from the periphery to the empire, to those leaky borders of Europe where the periphery meets the centre. Nowhere are the discarded lives of the surplus people more visible through media exposure (television, newspapers, social media, etc.) than in the border regimes of Europe. Frontex (The European Border and Coast Guard Agency that protects the borders of EU and Schengen countries) and Mare Nostrum (created by the Italian government to protect the Strait of Sicily) control border crossings and operate in a military fashion, prioritising borders rather than human lives. It is a military operation in a closed economy of brutality (Mercieca and Mercieca, 2022). The operations of Frontex have increased the death toll in a war against migrants,

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making the dead suffer a double indignity. They die unidentified and faceless, and nameless people are buried in mass graves. Under the onslaught of millions of Syrians and migrants from North Africa the border regimes have become harsher, more violent and less forgiving of trespass.

According to the Deaths at the Borders Database[1] 3,188 people died attempting to reach Europe between 1990 and 2013.[2] However, these numbers have increased dramatically since the Arab Spring, and especially because of the devastating ongoing war in Syria. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates that 29,000 people died migrating to Europe since 2014. Between 2021 and 2022 alone there were 5,684 deaths.[3]

But these border regimes have also made us intimately acquainted with the deaths of migrants. For us who live on the southern tip of Africa these deaths remain abstract and viewed as mediated media images in newspapers, on television, and social media. We are well acquainted with the overcrowded boats of people attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea. We have seen the seascapes of horror, but always in a mediated fashion.

See **Image 1** here

https://www.google.com/search?sca_esv=578842681&rlz=1C1GTPM_enZA1056ZA1056&sxsrf=AM9HkKlui
RSEUXkmb6y_C02d7UAOnfPiXA:1698938589720&q=leaky+boats+crossing+the+mediterranean&tbm=isch
&source=lnms&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjnk4q5z6WCAxWqRvEDHQuaCKUQ0pQJegQICBAB&biw=1280&bi
h=595&dpr=1.5#imgrc=slRyXy4wrZFCqM

I want to reflect on the intimacy of looking at the bodies of the dead. It is a story of vulnerability, precariousness and failed empathy. As Berlant (1998: 285) argues –

> [I]ntimacy does not necessarily occupy the space of convention – it can be portable, and unattached to concrete space. In this sense the online space is a relative new place for creating intimacy at a distance. But spaces are produced relationally and people can return to them repeatedly – to produce something that is not history in its ordinary, memorable or valorized sense.

This is not always positive. I frame this article in the context of what Achille Mbembe (2003) calls necropolitics. Mbembe argues that 'becoming a (political) subject therefore supposes upholding the work of death' through the calculus of race/racism, through the biopolitical power of who is going to be let live, or to let die or be killed? In the economy of biopower resides the decision about the distribution of death. Maurice Stierl (2016: 174) argues that death-inducing violence underpins the contemporary European border regime. Bodies, found or unfound, identified or unidentified, speak of police and border guard brutality, necropolitical violence, of mental and physical abuse experienced in detention. It also speaks of push-backs at sea and forcible deportations, of abandonment and the failure to render assistance when in need, even of policies that redirect human movement or that foreclose the very ability to move and escape in the first place, rendering millions bound to local conditions of hardship (e.g., 'The Jungle' in Calais in France is an example of a refugee camp, housing about 10,000 migrants from where they want to cross to the UK, but are not allowed. Many stayed there for years despite daily evictions and harassment by French authorities. It has now been demolished)[4].

The question here is whether we, through our constant exposure to death, develop a care ethic to those who are othered. Do we develop true empathy, do we build solidarity through what Stierl (2016) calls 'grief activism' that can form communities in the face of violent necropolitics, or do we watch with horror or outrage, do we retweet it, post it in online spaces, such as Facebook and Instagram? Do we fetishise it? All the while feeling helpless to do anything or never contemplating doing something in the face of a global catastrophe.

I start with the story of Alan Kurdi, the two-year-old Syrian boy who washed up on a beach in Bodrum in Turkey in 2015, showing how a global audience consumed this image of death. The photo was taken by the Turkish photographer, Nilüfer Demir, who has been documenting the migrant crisis in Europe.

See **Image 2** here
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_of_Alan_Kurdi#/media/File:Alan_Kurdi_lifeless_body.jpg

This image became iconic in terms of the outpouring of grief and sympathy. Under the hashtag #HumanityWashedAshore it was shared to 20 million people in just 3 hours, creating contemporary affective

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[1] Death at the Border Data Base is linked to the Human Costs of Border Control project of the Free University of Amsterdam, monitoring numbers of Greece, Italy, Malta, Spain and Gibraltar.

[2] https://research.vu.nl/en/datasets/deaths-at-the-borders-database (Accessed 2 October 2022).

[3] https://www.iom.int/news/more-5000-deaths-recorded-european-migration-routes-2021-iom (Accessed 4 August 2023).

[4] Life, Death and Limbo in the Calais 'Jungle' – Five Years after its Demolition [https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/02/life-death-and-limbo-in-the-calais-jungle-five-years-after-its-demolition] (Accessed 2 October 2023).

networks in the context of public bereavement (Papailias, 2019: 1057). The emotions connected to this image was grief, compassion, sadness and calls for political solutions to the refugee crisis in Europe. There was an appropriation of this image through its viral spread. Appropriation is the personification of an icon through processes of decontextualisation and recontextualisation, implying that the image is taken out of its original setting and fitted into a new setting (Mortensen, 2017: 1143-1146). The image was reproduced through imitation, satirisation, memefication and copying. This translation into new contexts also created new discursive fields and sites of contestation, especially around the treatment of Muslim refugees – paradoxically are they a threat of terror or are they themselves vulnerable to suffering and despair? As Mortensen's research shows 1,634 images of Alan Kurdi were shared under #HumanityWashedAshore, of which 40% were appropriations.

See **Image 3** here
https://www.google.com/search?sca_esv=578828967&rlz=1C1GTPM_enZA1056ZA1056&sxsrf=AM9HkKl2 6VhhLgUAT69UAuOEzFs-HyTJZw:1698936565204&q=%23Humanitywashedashore&tbm=isch&source= lnms&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjRyNvzx6WCAxUIVvEDHWfNAeUQ0pQJegQICRAB&biw=1280&bih=595&d pr=1.5#imgrc=qeURUn141LYQeM

> Nicole Itano that oversees the creative work of 'Save the Children' said the following when she saw the picture:

> > I've thought a lot about why that image really resonated. For years now, we've been seeing incredibly graphic images coming out of Syria and they haven't galvanised public response in the way this has. Part of what touched people about this picture is that it is shocking but it isn't graphic. He isn't maimed, he isn't bloodied, he looks like he could be sleeping except for the context.[5]

The most popular reproduced image that circulated in the first three days was that of Kurdi lying in his bed, safe at home where death cannot touch him.

See **Image 4** here
https://www.researchgate.net/figure/This-image-of-sleeping-Aylan-Kurdi-was-created-by-the-Turkish-artist- Omer-Tosun-and-was_fig1_327404914

The second most popular one was the sand sculpture of Kurdi with the words 'shame shame shame'. This circulated 47 times (Papailias, 2019: 1643). No captions were added, making it open ended and decontextualised, so that general feelings of solidarity were evoked.

The image of Kurdi was also politicised through putting him in the middle of the grandiose assembly tables of the United Nations and the Arab Leagues (shared 25 times), or as a birthday cake for the kids of Syrian President, Bashar Al-Assad – showing the lack of empathy for drowning Syrian citizens (P1152).

See **Image 5** here
https://www.google.com/search?q=Alan+Kurdi+as+birthday+cake&tbm=isch&rlz=1C1GTPM_enZA1056Z A1056&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjk8ejWy6WCAxXhFxAIHcElCSkQBXoECAEQSg&biw=1263&bih=59 5#imgrc=HEWqJ1kWR86puM

See **Image 6** here
https://www.google.com/search?q=Alan+Kurdi+as+birthday+cake&tbm=isch&rlz=1C1GTPM_enZA1056Z A1056&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjk8ejWy6WCAxXhFxAIHcElCSkQBXoECAEQSg&biw=1263&bih=59 5#imgrc=wnMU8EdkP4ivbM

Ai Weiwei, the controversial dissident Chinese artist imitated Alan Kurdi's death by literally and metaphorically inserting himself into the picture, causing many to say that this was distasteful and insensitive, but then continue to do it as well. Many people on beaches assumed the same pose in solidarity with Kurdi, wearing the same colour clothes.

See **Image 7** here
https://edition.cnn.com/style/gallery/ai-weiwei-aylan-kurdi-syria/index.html

Kurdi is the ideal victim because he is an innocent child. He is innocent of motives attributed to adult migrants such as potential terrorism or becoming a drain on social welfare systems.

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[5] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34150419 (Accessed 11 August 2023).

Geboers (2019) argues that there are different ways of observing suffering – emotional, critical and self-reflexive. There is the sufferer and the one seeing the suffering. The sufferer is constructed as the 'suffering other'. What makes the difference in how the suffering is understood is whether the other is like us or unlike us. The reworking of the Kurdi image were illustrations of reversing the tragedy. The aestheticisation of images in the media morally and emotionally insulated viewers from suffering. What we are confronted with is the Western view of the human (in its binaries – self and other, rational and emotional) solidarity is constructed on grounds that the other is like us (Geboers, 2019). Sanitised aesthetics give way to emotions of the viewer rather than rationality that will help us make a decision about why we should act. People stage their own reactions and share emotions through 'liking' tweets or posts – leading to a global politics of pity. Personalisation is easier if the victim is like us, through emotional outpouring and self-reflexivity the tragedy becomes internalised, and makes the personalisation easier, losing the voices of the original victims. In the politics of pity emotions and sentiment are mediated through the pictures (Geboers, 2019: 5-6).

Olesen (2018: 660) calls this memetic (memes) protests. It leads to the production of a massive dispersed corporeal network (Papailias, 2019: 1048). Through processes of memefication, Kurdi's death was not observed but reproduced in the necropolitics of the dispossessed subject – producing them as the living dead of the global precariat that is an indictment of the claims of a post-racial Europe. Kurdi is the spectre that haunts the hospitable and neoliberal Europe, or what Papailias (2019: 1052) calls spectropolitics, which is blurring the boundaries between presence and absence, life and death, self and other in a way that haunts the observer. Kurdi's ghost is a hauntology because the spectrality is linked to relationality – the ghost appears to the living and in that sense is has an 'unkillable' quality.

For Papailias corpse images are marked by fundamental ambivalence of the human/ inhuman, of culture/nature, absence/presence in being both material and spectral, abject and sacred. The liminal status of the corpse illuminates the transition of the human to nonhuman with the vulnerability of the abandoned corpse as evidence of harm and grievability. These images are folded into the necropolitics of biopower that produce death on the borders of Europe and it highlights the global power relations producing carceral states and inhuman states of existence. For Papailias (2019: 1052/3) spectropolitics exposes the mediated living/dead meets biopolitics/necropolitics to highlight the global power relations that dispossess subjects, producing death in life. She argues that memetic moments replace rational debate with weeping emotionalism, through processes of forwarding, commenting and remediating the image that has become decontextualised for communities of depoliticised affectivities. What do viewers have in common with Alan Kurdi? Most did not share anything with Kurdi, no country, religion or culture, but established a relationship through their children – the idea that this could have been my child. In some pictures Kurdi has angel wings, giving Christian imagery to a Muslim child. The idea of Kurdi became a performance that was repeatedly re-enacted in a production of intimacy, of witnesses participating in affective communities. It takes the private mourning into the public and in some cases turn it into a public spectacle.

See **Image 8** here
https://www.google.com/search?q=Kurdi+as+an+angel&tbm=isch&ved=2ahUKEwiqvLbSyKWCAxViDhAI HQeWAzUQ2-cCegQIABAA&oq=Kurdi+as+an+angel&gs_lcp=CgNpbWcQAzoECCMQJzoECAAQHjoFC AAQgAQ6BggAEAgQHjoHCAAQGBCABFDmCViFU2D2VWgIcAB4AIABsAGIAZESkgEEMzYuMpgBA KABAaoBC2d3cy13aXotaW1nwAEB&sclient=img&ei=u7dDZeryMeKcwPAPh6yOqAM&bih=595&biw=128 0&rlz=1C1GTPM_enZA1056ZA1056#imgrc=5Yq7wSHqxYq7KM

As Papailias (2019) argues the Kurdi image that will-not-go-away challenges the dominant media images of the living refugees as nonpolitical subjects of humanitarian compassion who with their demands for political rights are captured by the hashtag #HumanityWashedAshore. The phantasmic apparition, the ghost of Kurdi is a constant reminder to us, the witnesses, of how non-citizens are deprived of the protection of the law, how they are entered into bare life of the state of exception.

What we observe here is the present absence of death. Death did not leave traces of a brutal end, just a motionless little body washed up on the beach. It obscures the history of the very violent war in Syria that is the cause of migration and that caused Kurdi's death. It does not demand from onlookers to account for their response to the Syrian war. It makes no demands on their conscience about empathy for other types of migrants.

THE INTIMACY OF NECROPOLITICS IN SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa also has leaky borders, but its leaky borders are not controlled at the border, but in the interior, not by faceless agencies that visit invisible violence of biopower on the other, but by physical violence from citizens themselves. If we turn the lens back to South Africa what are the images of its xenophobic necropolitics that

circulate? Rather than the present absence of dead bodies we have the present presence of death inducing violence. While these images have circulated in the media, they are not met with sympathy and compassion. They do not inspire memefication and copying, because it confirms the other as other with which we do not have anything in common. The personification through which we can decontextualise and recontextualise does not take place, also because of the nature of the photos. It is hard to look at them. The victims of xenophobic violence in South Africa are not the ideal victims because of their perceived threat, regardless of the fact that they are Africans from other African countries. This is why xenophobia is also called Afrophobia in South Africa.

Physical violence is present in these pictures that reinscribes colonial tropes of the barbaric and uncivilised. As Akpome (2023) points out about the documentary film, *It will be Chaos* (2018), that attempts to humanise refugees by tracing the survival of a Syrian and an African (Eritrean) refugee, is the stark contrast between how the journey of the Syrian and the African refugee is portrayed. The first time the audience encounters black African asylum seekers is through a crane delivering hundreds of caskets of drowned African refugees. The first encounter with the black African refugee is through the corpse. As he states:

> [T]he numbering of the caskets marks them … as an anonymous mass and the palpable stench of putrefaction [officials holding their noses] is capable of arousing repulsion and shock in the audience.

This is not the same for the Syrian refugee, who is described in a family context, having lost his middle-class lifestyle, through which he is humanised. Akpome (2023: 113) argues that the film shows the black African refugee in the European imagination – as outsiders and different to Europeans, either as vulnerable or dangerous outsiders.

Image 9 shows South Africans gearing up to fight foreign nationals. The killing of foreign nationals is a regular occurrence in South Africa, usually accompanied by a discourse of 'stealing our jobs and stealing our women'. In 2008[6] xenophobic violence killed 62 people, injured 1,700 and displaced 100,000 foreign nationals in South Africa[7]. The brutality meted out on the bodies of foreign nationals can be traced in the photos taken of Ernesto Alfabeto Nhamuave from Mozambique. Due to the gruesome nature of the photos I will not reproduce them here, but the photos show Nhamuave being set alight and burned to death (causing him to be dubbed 'burning man') with onlookers doing nothing to help him.

The South African government's expectation is that foreign nationals have to integrate into society. Refugees are not housed in tents or separated from South African citizens. Many are economic migrants. Since many foreign nationals are poor, they have to integrate in the poorest of the poor South African communities where there is already a struggle around scarce resources. This often leads to violent conflict between South African citizens and foreign nationals.

The present presence of death inflicting mob violence in photos does not encourage compassion, grief activism or a desire to help a vulnerable other, but rather it enforces 'othering processes'. The Kurdi image is surrounded by lapping water that has a soothing connotation – that is one reason why onlookers may not consider the picture of Kurdi as one of a violent death. But fire has an all-consuming connotation. It may cleanse, but it leaves devastation in its wake. What remains is unrecognisable as once human.

See **Image 9** here
https://www.sahistory.org.za/sites/default/files/article_image/xenoviolence.jpg

It is not possible to aestheticise these pictures so that they can emotionally and mentally insulate the viewer from the presence of death as in the case of the photo of Alan Kurdi. How much of this violent treatment of Africans a can be traced back to violent colonial histories of exclusion that makes violence instrumental for keepings others in their place, where bodies become the border to be policed?

Viewers engagement with the Kurdi photo may stem from variety of reasons, as Danewid (in Papailias, 2019: 1061) argues that:

> Critics charged that the emphasis on common human vulnerability to pain, suffering, and loss buttresses 'white innocence' about colonial histories, state racism, and contemporary geopolitical complicities that produce such deaths, with self-congratulatory, naive hospitality taking the place of structural reform, acknowledgement of historical responsibility and restitution.

Different dynamics are at work in the case of Afrophobia.

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[6] See also S. Hassim and T. Kupe (eds). (2008). *Go Home or Die Here: Violence, xenophobia and the reinvention of difference in South Africa.* Wits University Press. Photos by Alon Skuy.
[7] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/21/documenting-violence-against-migrants-in-south-africa-a-photo-essay (Accessed 11 August 2023).

When I presented this paper at the 'Slow Intimacy' conference I gave a trigger warning before I showed the audience the South African pictures (including that of Nhamuave). The response was multi-layered – most members of the audience did not feel upset about the images of Alan Kurdi, but black members of the audience were upset that I would show grotesque images of black bodies (although xenophobic violence against white migrants who are generally from the moneyed classes, not the precariat, is rare). They asked me if I would show similar images of white bodies. There was a deep consciousness of colonial violence, its framing of black bodies and its legacy in present day South Africa.

Mbembe (2002) argues that victimisation locates the continuities of colonialism in the minds of the people. The colonised internalised psychological subjugation and in their support of false myths and stereotypes of Africans cannot escape their own bondage. As Thakur (2011) argues:

> … any absence of such sympathy and familiarity can be attributed to the stereotypes about 'African foreigners' in the South African public space. The media under the garb of neutral reporting caricatures Africans and reproduces the Western negative imagery of Africa. Africa, in South African media, is portrayed as 'poverty stricken', 'war-torn', 'barbaric', 'diseased' and 'rotten' …. The migrants, who seem to be fleeing in 'hordes', like animals, into 'Fortress South Africa' bring the African curse onto a 'relatively developed', 'progressive', democratic', in short un-African, South Africa.

The above quote illustrates the difference between being a spectator of images versus being a witness, bearing testimony to atrocities that implies a relationality with the other (Papailias, 2019: 159). The photos of xenophobic violence in South Africa do not disrupt processes of othering so that onlookers can bear witness to injustice, rather it reproduces the African as other, as 'beyond the pale'. It does not build affective communities where embodied practices of care are exercised. This relates to Christina Sharpe's analysis of black bodies as expendable and replaceable in her book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Black lives are always framed by the proximity to death. For Sharpe in the wake of slavery the ship has a symbolic meaning through which the value of contemporary black lives in current global conditions is determined. Thousands of black Africans have died crossing the Mediterranean Sea in leaky ships/boats. Boats that are sometimes pushed back to sea, causing the inevitability of death at sea, resembling the slave's death at sea. The ships facilitate black subjugation and expendability.

The question remains whether the photo a dead two-year-old African boy would have been consumed in the same way as the photo of a Syrian boy, with outpourings of grief and the desire to care. Okoth (2018: 3) calls this 'the incommensurability of blackness and the vocabulary of care'. These images and these violent deaths do not conform to Butler's notion of 'death as a transformative practice'. Rather it traps the African subject in preconceived ideas.

CONCLUSION

The pictures that we have seen circulating made us intimately acquainted with death. It is the slow intimacy of necropolitics. Butler (2004) tells us to make grief itself into a resource for politics is not to be resigned to inaction, but it may be understood as the slow process by which we develop a point of identification with suffering itself. For her grief is a basis for political community.

It is uncertain if Butler is right about this. To what extent does the decontextualisation and the recontextualisation of imagery become about ourselves, and absolve ourselves from the necropolitics of migration? This is not about moral spectatorship, but insulating ourselves from larger global forces over which we have no control and so we become immune to the living death of marginalised and socially excluded people. We become intimately acquainted with death at a distance. These photos have the potential to also make us blind to contemporary necropolitics. Do we observe death or do we reproduce it?

In the South African context, the photography of xenophobic violence reinforces colonial portrayals of uncivilised Africans who mete out vigilante justice on a regular basis. It also produces racial polarisation, reactionary notions of nationalism, and the fear of physical violence from the other, rather than inspiring an ethic of care for the vulnerable other.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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An Illuminated Darkness

Jacques Coetzee [1*]

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Over the past decade or so I have been working towards an anthology of poems, eventually published during hard lockdown in 2020 as *An Illuminated Darkness* (Coetzee, 2020).

On one level the metaphor embodied in this title refers to blindness, to the process of learning to inhabit the world as a blind man and to write from that place. The anthology's reception confirmed and even celebrated this reading. Such an interpretive strategy placed the poems squarely on the side of life, of resilience.

But there is at least one other context in which the anthology can be read, and that is what I want to explore here.

Throughout the years it took me to write these poems, I was romantically involved with someone more than thirty years older than myself. The partnership was also a creative one, producing albums of songs as well as a shared book of love poems, called *The Love Sheet*. But from the start we both knew, perhaps more intimately than most couples, that time was limited. The poems and songs we wrote together, and certainly many of the poems I wrote for this collection, therefore became an attempt to curate the slow process of saying goodbye.

For most of that time, writing poems and songs provided the glue that bound our lives together. Later, as our needs slowly diverged, the poems and songs became attempts to frame particular moments of shared experience; gravity-defying rituals aimed at slowing time down.

Of course all such attempts are ultimately doomed to failure, certainly as far as the body is concerned. So the slow intimacy of celebrating closeness becomes, in the poems, the slow intimacy of letting go what cannot be preserved or held onto.

Deep Listening

It happened again yesterday:
in the middle of a fine conversation
about sublime and lofty things,
something inside me detached
and pulled softly at the pit of my stomach
as you stepped away for a moment
to pour wine for an honoured guest.

I could still hear the separate music
in our four voices, but the words,
the words had gone out of range.
The only detailed information then
came from the song of my blood –
subterranean, preverbal –
calling for your touch across the table.

There are no words for such music,
not in company, not when we're alone.
All I could say for certain then
to myself, under my breath,

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was that all lofty things,
raised up in defiance of gravity –
all the immortal words, and all great music –

seemed to be reconfigured there;
rooted again in the fire
that sings and sings, unheard,
in our hidden blood. (Coetzee, 2020)

Transparent Things

(after the diagnosis)

Today all things are
transparent – out of time; beyond language.
Even this face I have chosen
as I walk into your red room – I know
your eyes will see through
to the emptiness behind it.

Bereft of speech, I sit down
next to you; take both your hands.
We have entered a world where each word
must be weighed – calibrated, interrogated
for any signs of untruth; imprecision.

I would not dare to intrude here
armed with magical thinking. Already
we are being distilled, you and I,
refined until each fibre, each breath,
each slow, deliberate sentence
rings out, never to be repeated.

Come, take these hands; feel
their brittleness, now and to come:
this moment, this narrow
space, is all there is. (Coetzee, 2020)

From: Table of Elements

Today my beloved and I sit under the open sky
on an almost empty beach.
We've come to say goodbye; to celebrate you
as you set out on your very last journey.

We've brought a simple boat, made out of shell;
a stick for a mast; a paper sail,
emblazoned with your praise for the ocean,
where your blood turned into foam for a moment.

There are clear shards of sound from the waves
as they advance and retreat; from the cries of gulls
that fly overhead, not caring about us
who have nothing to give them.

(There are shards of light also, but
I will say nothing about them.
A cellphone camera is recording
what may be shared of this moment afterwards.)

We wait for the waves to take your vessel,
and – I believe, for a moment – you with it.
We wait a long time before it happens,
so that I am ready when it does:

when first the sail goes, and then the mast,
and finally it is only the two of us sitting here,
acknowledging the space you occupied
when we could reach across and hold you.

I could sing you the song the waves sung to us,
sung as if to say that what we'd lost would always return.
I could speak of the circle of small shells around yours,
the opening that suggested we might learn to let go. (Coetzee, 2020)

Morning After

Half past five in the morning: he comes awake
slowly; turns over on his back, floating up from sleep.

A long and lovely shudder runs through his body:
were they really together like that again, last night?

Then, between relief and bafflement,
he reaches his hands down the whole length of him,

of a body he knows he must learn to love again
as his. Then, only then, his left hand very slowly reaches across,

and gently (so as not to wake her)
finds her there, in the bed next to him. (Coetzee, 2020)

Always Again

You unlock the shutters, and the world
floods back into the room, as always. Then,
wanting even more world, we step out into it;
sit out of doors, under the autumn sky.

The first and last discipline, you say,
is to be empty enough to pay attention.
What do you hear now, right now,
in the silence the hadedas leave
in the wake of their beautiful, harsh calls?

Do you feel the coarse grain of the bread between your teeth?

                                                Yes.

Do you hear the song of your own blood?

                                                Yes.

Do you feel my mouth, warm, close to your mouth?

                                                Yes.

I take the warm bread from your hands,
a portion of the bread of the whole world;
I imagine myself at the corners of your mouth now,
which I have kissed, and will kiss again.
A hinge, a shutter opens in me, then
I disappear into everything else.
This is where we lose ourselves; this
is the clearing where the world is made anew.
Only be still now. Nothing has happened yet. (Coetzee, 2020)

I want to end with four poems that do not form a part of this collection, that inhabit a space that has perhaps not yet been illuminated. They circle the awareness that the process of letting go is ultimately chaotic, messy, open-ended, often apparently inaccessible to logic.

After the Bombardment

As long as I live, I'll never forget
the heavy blanket of silence that descended
over our room that morning. You'd just told me
the city had been utterly destroyed
from the air. I looked for words
of comfort for you, but
I could feel you were
in that place beyond consolation
where not even I can reach you.

And if I'd spoken, what would I have said?
That the city is not here, not ours to lose,
not this day, not this time? Ah, that would be no use.
What happens somewhere can happen anywhere.

'I'll make the bed,' I said, willing it
to be an adequate response:
doing the most ordinary things
slowly, deliberately, because we know again
that everything's at stake at every moment.

Halfway out the door to my office,
though it's only fifteen steps away from you, I turned back
to repeat the same old words of love
as before. When I turned again,
the news still playing behind me as I went,
my arms were still open, empty as now,
hungry to console.

Pushing and Pulling Time

Dearest, these are the days of maintenance,
of keeping strict tempo. You always loved me
for being flexible about time, for making it
slow down or speed up. But now

the clocks of our bodies tell me
it's high time to tighten up technique.
Listening to Chet Baker drift his way through
Almost Blue yesterday, I had to focus

past his lazy voice, the dirty trumpet sound
he got from having his teeth knocked out by an angry dealer,
to the tightness of the band behind him:
the piano and drums carrying that drift
and anchoring it. You could say

it's time to pull out the metronome,
to synchronise my two hands over the keys.
Or that gravity is against us now, and there's no-one
else who will lift us up
and frame us carefully in the moment. These words of mine,
these gestures—they must learn
to listen to rhythms not their own,
to be small, precise and terrifyingly sober
before they can push and pull time again.

Patterns

All these years I sat at your beautiful feet.
You were the singing-master, all that time.
And all we did was in service
of learning to be simple, standing
in the present moment.

Only now I can see them,
there in the shadows: the four-year-old child,
abandoned among strangers; the blind boy
vowing to sit at the top table of life,
where the wild things cracked open champagne bottles
like there was no tomorrow.

I never thought how much food they demanded;
never saw the patterns in the carpet
that were there long before we entered this room,
long before (latecomer that I am)
I accepted warm bread from your open hand.

In Search of the Wild Things

(for Maurice Sendak)

Even as a boy, you found a way
through to the next world: across the corridor
from your quiet, stoic family
to the tables of those Sicilian boys,
their parents drinking wine and raucous,
their lives still untouched by reports of holocaust.

Much later you showed us the way there, building escape routes
for the unlit, starving children in all of us,
cooking up a storm in the midnight
kitchens of our imagination.

But I love you best as an old man
tearful and joyous, only months before death,
coming from the ends of the earth to say:

'I am in love with the world'—
knowing that's the most dangerous emotion,
still able to cut through any system,
through any constricting form
to get to the raucous table, the flushed faces
on the other side of the world.

Once, on YouTube, I found an immense recording
(for gay choirs only) of that interview:
the crescendo building to a single note,
your final message to us: 'Live your life. Live
your life. Live your life.'

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Ideology, Subject and Gender: Undoing Representations in the Thought of Teresa De Lauretis and Judith Butler

Zeliha Dişci [1*]

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ABSTRACT

In Louis Althusser's conception of ideology, the subject is linked to gender rules. However, the answer to the question of why there is a collaboration between ideology, subject, and gender is not found in Althusser. Political subjectivity and political struggle therefore remain trapped in class debates for Althusser. Judith Butler and Teresa De Lauretis, similarly situated in their understanding of subject, gender, and politics, extend Althusser's perspective on ideology and subject to the construction of gender and understand gender as a kind of ideology. By emphasising the outside of ideology, they disrupt the collaboration between ideology and subject. They extend the economic level, in which Althusser was trapped, to the whole of social life. In this way, they turn life and every encounter in life into a space of possibility for overcoming gender representations and political emancipation.

Keywords: subject, ideology, gender, identity, heteronormativity, emancipation

INTRODUCTION

Althusser's voice transcends the limits of Marxist theory with his perspective on the logic of the orientation of individuals to the authoritarian voice. Althusser has become the main reference point for almost all philosophers thinking about the relationship between subject and ideology in political philosophy. In some of these references Althusser is affirmed, in others he is criticised. The aim of this article is to argue Althusser's understanding of ideology and subject through its two critics. Lauretis and Butler, who have emerged in the literature with their writings on gender and practices of subjectification in general, are discussed in this article based on their responses to Althusser. Although both thinkers lived in similar eras, Lauretis' interest shifts to the realm of cinema, while Butler's interest shifts to the realm of political theory. Nevertheless, the two thinkers develop their perspectives from a similar standpoint: the construction of the critical subject and the politics of feminism through a critique of Althusser's conception of ideology and the subject. Despite the similarities between these two thinkers, who can be said to have grounded their philosophies in their emphasis on the 'double status' of the subject, there is silence in Butler's own works on Lauretis' thought. The main goal of this article is to contribute to the ongoing debates in this field.

For that purpose, the article focuses on the thoughts of the two thinkers in relation to their responses to Althusser's conception of ideology and subject. It is argued that it is possible to identify their similarities and, at the same time, their differences in terms of their responses to this conception. To this end, the article, which examines in detail the works of three thinkers and their evaluations in the context of qualitative research methods, focuses on the thoughts of Lauretis and Butler in terms of their inter-reactions to Althusser's conception of ideology and subject. It is argued that both thinkers read Althusser's understanding of the subject in the same way, and in this respect Lauretis and Butler are two thinkers who mirror each other. Despite this closeness between them, the article points out that Butler does not discuss Lauretis' assessments of the subject in Althusser. Second, the article argues that the two thinkers share a similar feminist political perspective that draws on Althusser's thought and evaluates the subject in the same way. It refers to this perspective as 'undoing given representations.' Third, the article points out that the similarity of the politics proposed by Lauretis and Butler resulted in both thinkers reaching the same political impasse. Both Lauretis and Butler limit political struggle and change to the individual level and cannot shift the struggle to the level of collective politics.

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To discuss these claims, the first section of the article, which consists of three parts, discusses Althusser's conception of ideology and the subject and the implications of this conception for Butler and Lauretis. The second section discusses gender as part of ideology. In the third section, I discuss how Butler and Lauretis show a way out of gender ideology and thus suggest methods to overcome Althusser's conception of ideology. Finally, it is emphasised that this perspective, which is positive in the sense of the individual struggle for existence, cannot produce a perspective on collective politics.

IDEOLOGY AND DOUBLE STATUS OF SUBJECT

In his work *On Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and ideological state apparatus*, Althusser draws attention to the fact that he is outlining a general theory of ideology (2003: 79). The relations of exploitation in everyday life are often reduced to oppression. However, Althusser sets himself apart from this tradition by emphasising that exploitation cannot be reduced to oppression and state apparatuses cannot be reduced to oppression. Alongside oppression, he shows the place of ideology as an element distinct from it in the functioning of individuals in their daily lives. Ideology is 'an imaginary "representation" of the imaginary relation that individuals establish with their real conditions of existence' (2003: 89). According to Althusser, who believes that oppression alone does not contribute to the reproduction of class society and relations of production, ideology is a 'beautiful lie' that perfectly ensures this production (2003: 88). Individuals work in the service of class exploitation in capitalist society. Ideology consists of the mechanisms that make this work possible. Ideology, which gives people a worldview in legal, moral or political terms, becomes visible when people relate to reality in a way that is different from reality. Thanks to this difference between reality and the imaginary, people have the possibility to maintain their role in capitalist and patriarchal social relations.

Althusser points out that ideology is more than a pure, abstract idea. As Butler, who shares this judgment, points out, for Althusser, ideology 'always exists in an apparatus, and its realization, its implementation. This existence is material' (Butler, 1997a: 121). That is, it embodies in different practices. This bond of ideology with practices binds it to the subject. Ideology requires the person, that is, the subject, who thinks and acts in order to be embodied. In Althusser, the construction of the subject is also material. Sharing this view, Butler points out that establishment takes place through rituals. Subjectivity, which is the living and imaginary experience of the subject, derives from the material rituals that constitute the subjects (Butler, 1997a: 122). Ideology embodied in human thoughts and actions takes the form of ritual. Ritual constitutes the material dimension of the ideological apparatus (Butler, 1997b: 25). The materiality of ritual is evident in its productivity: it produces the belief that seems to be 'behind' it (Butler, 1997b: 25).

The exploitation in particular and the rules that ensure the functioning of the social order in general, are accepted and applied by individuals. This is how the structure functions. Everyone is a subject in the social structure: one constantly fulfils the ideological rules of acceptance. The ideology that exists through and for the subjects addresses the individuals as 'subject' (Althusser, 2003: 99). When the police officer (as a state apparatus) calls a person 'hey, you there!', in this scene, it is assumed that the person called directly responds to the sound. The person, realising that the call is directed at him, turns one hundred and eighty degrees (Althusser, 2003: 103). In this situation, where the act of hearing and understanding takes place, there is a functioning consciousness. This consciousness is interpreted as a sign that man is a subject. The interpellation brings the subject into existence. Being a subject means controlling our behaviour by making calculations about the causes and consequences of our actions in daily life. The interpellation is formative. It puts the individual in a subordinate position (Butler, 2011a: 82). But this management narrows and evolves toward an awareness of the duties we have to fulfil, according to Althusser, and that we must respond to every call. It turns out that the individual who comes into contact with the police is pacified and passive in the relationship, taking the submissive side. The individual is portrayed as simply turning to the sound. He lacks transformative power. It is not a force. He accepts that the social structure created by the relationships between individuals and places is already in order. In this order, human is nothing more than a being that exists in practices, rituals and definitions. However, the subject exists through its actions. Answering the call of the police is also an action, and there is a consciousness behind it. In Althusser, there is a unity between being subject and consciousness. Lauretis and Butler also affirm the unity of subject and consciousness (Lauretis, 2008: 44). However, unlike Althusser, both accept the role of the unconscious as well as the conscious in the emergence of subject performance and shift their discussion to this point. As Lauretis points out, the unconscious is an important field of inquiry for feminist theory (Lauretis, 1999: 28).

Althusser, who sees the capacity for individual action despite the allocation of power to the police, to the caller, therefore gains importance for Butler and Lauretis. As Butler points out, in Althusser the subject is the one who acts to turn to the voice of the law, state or authority (Butler, 1997a: 14; 2016b: 33). By contemplating ideology with individual actions and practices, Althusser inspires Butler, as well as Lauretis, for understanding the subject. Both Butler and Lauretis see the active character of subjects in ideological production. They take this vision from

Althusser. As all three thinkers can accept, the continuity of the social and political system depends on individuals becoming subjects, that is, fulfilling their roles. But, in Althusser, the interpellation of ideology to individuals as subjects has a cyclical character. 'The cycle results from the fact that, in the field that Althusser describes, there is no way to determine what "individuals" are if not as pre-existing subjects, so that the effect presupposes its own outcome' (Balibar, 2016: 11). Thus, individual turns without hesitation to the policeman who addresses him. In his conception of ideology and subject, Althusser imagines both the individual and society as static. Power is interpreted as the domination of one group over another. The state, which is the focus of power, and state apparatuses are marked as places where power gathers. In his discussions of ideology and the subject, Althusser shows that each individual begins life with a primordial resignation. This subservience ensures the continuation of people's identities in contemporary society, which is formed around categories such as class, race, religion, sexuality, and gender (Butler, 2016a: 138).

A person born into a certain family structure is a subject who gains gender type in line with the ideology operating in the family as a representation of state apparatuses. The type of gender given to a person in the family also imposes roles that must be fulfilled. The control of conformity to gender roles is an ideological control that is active in the establishment of human as a subject. Althusser, who sees the family as one of the ideological apparatuses, is not interested in the relationship between gender operating in the family and subjection. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler puts the stability of gender up for discussion and questions the stability of identity implied by subjection (Butler, 2011a: 15). According to Butler, a discursive gesture must be performed and repeated over and over again to assert its power (Butler, 1997a: 129-131; Balibar, 2016: 11). For Butler, who opposes the absolute nature of submission, the constitution of the subject is not only subordinate but ambivalent (Butler, 1997a: 9). The power that acts on the body activates it. For 'the subject is created in times and places in which it is not conceived as a sovereign agent, a holder of rights or power' (Butler, 2004a: 188). To be a subject is both to be subordinate, that is, to be the object of something, and to become a subject by taking an active position (Butler, 1997a: 10). Lauretis also recognises this dual character of being a subject. The subject who follows the rules is also a being capable of action and will (Lauretis, 2007: 2020). Being a subject is the coming into existence of human with identification with representations and rejection of non-representational ones.

REPRODUCTION OF SUBJECTIVITY THROUGH GENDER

Gender is one of the ideological elements that enable the functioning of the social and political system. It refers to social expectations and assumptions about what behaviours are appropriate for male and female individuals (Stone, 2007: 53). It links gender to cultural content according to social values and hierarchies (Lauretis, 1987: 5). Gender, which is not natural, is 'an ideological representation … between positions provided by hegemonic discourse' (Lauretis, 2007: 7). The ideological representation between positions is heteronormative in nature. It imposes on each individual a way of being within this structure. One of the conditions for people to become subjects within the ideology that appeals to people is that they comply with gender norms and follow its call. From the perspective of Althusser's fiction of ideology and subject, the subject is complicit in the gender order (Sainz Pezonaga, 2017: 2). But the answer to the question of why there is complicity between ideology, gender and the subject is not found in Althusser. It is Butler who really asks why there is complicity between ideology and subject. Butler formulates the relationship between power and subject in terms of 'passionate engagement.' The subject who wants to exist submits to the subordination of power (Butler, 1997a: 14).

Power is something that subordinates the human and establishes her/him as an active being, that is, as a subject. Through the act of returning to the voice that calls her/him, the human is established as a subject. The existence of the subject cannot be mentioned before the act of conversion (Butler, 1997a: 12). All state apparatuses, from the family to the school, are apparatuses in which individuals are reproduced as subjects. Gender is a concept that runs through these apparatuses. Althusser, who is not interested in this aspect of the apparatuses, is interested in showing how the collaboration between people and power is maintained through the concept of reproduction. Butler assumes that this collaboration is not merely a cognitive process, and directs his attention to more than that. When Butler shows the subordinating effect of people's collaboration with power on their existence, she does not preclude them from becoming subjects. People are formed by various institutions such as school, family, church. But this process does harm to the human being. Butler's interest is to make visible the relationship that people establish with these harms and the impact of this relationship on their political agency and the political possibilities therein. In this regard, Butler's conception of the subject establishes a productive rather than repressive relationship to subordination, subordination as the condition that creates the subject. She pays attention to regulative norms and finds in their repetition the conditions for being subject (Butler, 2011a: 61).

Along with Butler, Lauretis also draws attention to the appeal of gender as an ideology to human beings. Lauretis is a thinker who does not seem to attract as much attention in the critical literature as Butler. However, we can say that Lauretis had expressed a similar reading to Althusser, before Butler. According to Lauretis, gender

is not located in the superstructural sphere to which Althusser's concept of ideology belongs and which is determined by economic forces and relations of production. It is located in the private sphere of reproduction, the family (Lauretis, 1987: 6). Gender is at the centre of the family. It is necessary for the creation of the family and is reproduced through the family. Institutions such as medical facilities, the police, and the judiciary are complicit in domestic violence and its social entrenchment (Lauretis, 1987: 33). Just as ideology serves to establish concrete individuals as subjects, so too does gender work. According to Lauretis, who adapts Althusser's definition of ideology to the concept of gender, gender has the function of establishing concrete individuals as men and women (Lauretis, 1987: 5). She points to a similar situation in Butler: Gender, which is the set of meanings assumed by the gendered body, classifies bodies into two sexes. Before the sign of gender, bodies have no meaningful existence (Butler, 1999a: 54). Gender is an effect of ideology. Within gender ideology, people transform from simple subjects into women and men. While men are sexually and socially privileged in family practices and social arrangements, the woman – starting in girlhood – is imagined as an inadequate and deficient being. According to Lauretis, who following Freud and Lacan, points out that this is a psychological condition, the lack of existence of a girl's full subjectivity is because she does not have a penis, Lacan's 'lack'. Accordingly, the girl's whole life is focused on making up for this lack. Therefore, motherhood is considered an important fantasy for all women (Lauretis, 2007: 115). However, this gendered division of labour prevalent in capitalist society is a technology developed for the benefit of reproducing heteronormative, white, middle- and upper-class families. Like an ideology, gendered fantasies construct subjectivity by transforming social representations into subjective representations, self-representations. In making the connection between subject and ideology, Althusser does not distinguish between subject and subjectivity, nor does he show much interest in the production of subjectivity. However, for both Lauretis and Butler, subject and subjectivity are not the same thing. Only by seeing this difference can one think about different ways to return to the voice of ideology and gender.

The fact that the subject is one of the fundamental categories of ideology is why Althusser has his own place in the literature. But that is where Althusser's innovation ends in terms of the subject. For Althusser cannot conceive of gender as ideology. According to Lauretis, ideology, however, is the primary site of the constitution of gender (Lauretis, 1987: 7). While Althusser defines ideology as the imaginary relation of people to the real relations they live, he also defines ideology as something that determines people's existence. This definition also describes how gender functions (Lauretis, 1987: 6). Gender as representation and the construction of representation is both the effect of representation and something that goes beyond it. The basis established is based on the identification of people with two positions: for Lauretis, a subject within gender is constructed through languages and cultures as well as sexual difference; it is also formed through the experience of other intersectionalities such as race and class. Therefore, it has a plural character. Gender, which is one of the means of reproduction of the subject, is an effect or a product. Some of the social technologies (such as family, culture, cinema, and so on) and institutionalised discourses are at the origin of the things that produce it. Gender, which in this respect is more than a property of a body, is the totality of effects produced in bodies, behaviours and social relations (Lauretis, 1987: 3). The subject emerges in the process that presupposes identification with what the gender system of society presupposes. Just as the concept of gender is a subject of representation and construction that is subject to certain technologies of power, the subject also derives from these technologies and manifests itself through their performances. Gender is about culturally and politically determined roles and is normative. It speaks to people as subjects, and it works because people listen to that voice. Gender technology, which produces and reproduces hierarchical distinctions and classifications between masculinity and femininity, is an organised system of management and control (Terry and Calvert, 1997: 4). It gives value and meaning to individuals in society by making them into men or women.

To be a subject, according to Plato, means to be specific in the sense of a tradition of thought that distinguishes man from everything else. This clarity is established in contrast to the indeterminate, the formless chaos, of *physis*, that is, of nature. Active man, conceived as a subject, is also masculine as a cultural and political entity. Nature at its opposite pole is woman, the womb, matter. According to Lauretis, in reality all oppositions are based on the opposition between nature and culture or man and woman (Lauretis, 2007: 29). Butler shares this observation and points out that the body/woman/matter/insignificance is positioned in philosophy as a secondary, dependent party (Butler, 1999a: 63). The secondary is worthless compared to the primary. The body is the site where signification of signifiers/signs takes place for the subject. The body itself is produced as a sign (Lauretis, 2007: 120). One of the meanings of the concept of self, based on perspectives that show that it is trapped in an essentialist perspective with dualities such as soul and body, culture and nature, on which it is based, is 'the reality of the underlying phenomenon, absolute existence,' while another meaning is 'the thing that establishes the existence of something' (Lauretis, 2007: 185). A thing cannot be itself without its essence. While the masculine nature of the being that establishes existence comes to the fore in terms of gender, women are shown to remain subordinate to it, constructing their existence as owed to it. Masculinity, while detached from the body, is also produced by detachment from the negative meanings it represents. Masculine corporeality, which represents this disembodied spirit, is achieved through the materialisation of other bodies (Butler, 1999a: 78). In the representation of gender

that overshadows the philosophical imagination of the subject, two forms of identity are affirmed and the others are excluded. In this way, identification, which is an active process, is stabilised. The regulation of gender always serves the regulation of sexuality. The regulation of sexuality, in turn, aims to stabilise gender norms (Butler, 2013: 45). Butler draws attention to this stabilisation by saying that gender in societies is either seen as a natural manifestation of sex or perceived as a cultural constant that no human actor can change (Butler, 1999a: 25). This constant is maintained by gender norms that determine what is possible.

Gender ideology, which establishes subject positions and subjectivity by drawing the boundaries of what is possible, represents existences. This representation is depressing and oppressive. It is insensitive to the question of sexual difference and subjectivity. Woman, the object of representation, is supposedly the telos and origin of male desire. She is the object and symbol of man's culture and creativity (Lauretis, 1984: 8). Woman is defined by man. Subjectivity and subjective processes are also defined by the male subject. As Lauretis points out, it is possible to see the oppressive and depressing nature of the representation of gender ideology in language and cinema, which are among the ideological apparatuses. Thus, in the representation of the cinematic apparatus, woman occupies an incongruous position. Woman is only found in the space of meaning, in the space between signs (Lauretis, 1984: 8). Representation in cinema is the mapping of the social imagination in subjectivity. Cinema binds the imagination to meaningful images. This connection has a subjectively productive effect. It has an effect on the viewer. The movement of the film defines and directs desire. Cinema is strongly involved in the production of forms of subjectivity (Lauretis, 1984: 8). Active sex in cinema, which is an ideological apparatus, is a relationship, a representation of relationship. This representation continues in literature, which is a cultural apparatus. Italo Calvino's representation of women in *Invisible Cities* is an example of this situation (Lauretis, 1984: 13). For Lauretis, although culture begins with women, that is, women are the subject, they are not mentioned in the cultural and historical process. In the Calvino narrative, there are no women as historical subjects. This is a language practice like cinema, it is an imaginary signifier. It is the constant movement of representation born out of a woman's dream, a representation that perpetuates female bondage (Lauretis, 1984: 14). In the narrative, there is no woman as a theoretical or historical subject. Literature and cinema, which maintain the constancy of the representational schema of gender ideology, become a historical and ideological form and apparatus in this regard. It is in these domains that the subject and codes meet. While codes and social formations determine points of meaning, the individual reworks these positions in personal, subjective construction (Lauretis, 1984: 14). The subject establishes itself in the apparatuses that address the individual as subject. The subject exists in this material and symbolic social habitat (Zaharijević, 2021: 23).

Every image in existing culture is placed within the overarching context of such patriarchal ideologies. Cinema, working with the sexed dichotomy of men and women, functions as an apparatus of representation. It is seen as an image machine designed to construct images and ideas of social reality and their place in the audience (Lauretis, 1984: 37). In cinema, women are usually represented as the object, the audience, the image of beauty. Cinema functions like an image machine. It produces images of women and non-women and reproduces women as images (Lauretis, 1984: 38). In its function as an apparatus of representation, cinema also includes the production and reproduction of meanings, values, and ideology. It is a process in which the subject is constantly captured, represented, and defined by ideology (Lauretis, 1984: 37). Cinema, as a subjective production, influences and produces the audience by connecting him certain representations (Lauretis, 1984: 52). It positions the subject in the processes of seeing, looking, and vision and involves his or her desire. Through the narrative it contains, cinema mediates the movements and positions of desire. The narrative is the condition for the process of meaning and identification. It is the ability to see something. In this respect, cinema is an institutionalised technology (Lauretis, 1984: 82). Cinema, which focuses on the human body, is based on an imaginary representation of the body. The imaginary representation of the body is at the centre of the visual pleasure of cinema, of every identification process. In cinema, where the narrative and the image interact, the subjectivity of the spectator is linked to the body and meaning. The place where body and meaning are connected in classical cinema becomes the male and female dichotomy. In this way, gender ideology appeals to individuals from all walks of social life, especially family structure and cultural institutions, guiding them to remain on the heteronormative fantasy plane in their theoretical and practical lives.

SEEING OUTSIDE IDEOLOGY

Lauretis and Butler agree with other Marxist critics that the social sphere is the domain of power. Society is formed by the intersection of practices and discourses, including power relations. Individuals, groups, or classes have different positions in social space. In dynamic, changing relationships, there is both subordination and resistance. The full existence of power relations rests on the plurality of points of resistance that are ubiquitous in the web of power (Lauretis, 1987: 35; 2007, 167). In the sociality that is the field of power, individuals, groups, classes, etc. move through the various default positions. They exercise power and resistance simultaneously

(Lauretis, 1984: 86). What Althusser calls 'interpellation' is the process of an individual's acceptance or rejection of a social representation as his or her own representation. Lauretis and Butler, who emphasise the diversity of people's responses to interpellation that is functional to produce the existence of power, draw attention to the fact that the possibilities of resistance are simultaneously hidden in people's subordination. According to Butler, power has both regulative and productive effects. For Lauretis, who shares this insight, gender, which relates to the institutional structure of heterosexuality and heteronormativity, is sometimes subjugating and sometimes empowering the struggle (Lauretis, 2007: 6). It is the productive structure of power that emerges from resistance to gender regulations and thus to the call of the law: the pleasures, desires, etc. that constitute human existence. repressive power produces what it wants to regulate. Power operates with the logic of multiplication-growth-dissemination (Butler, 1997a: 61; 2004a: 183, 187). To sketch the details of this process, Lauretis asks, 'How is representation constituted and accepted or rejected by the subject?' and Butler asks similar questions such as, 'How do norms arise? How do people internalize them?' (Butler, 1997a: 27). Both thinkers answer these questions from the same point of view, that is, regarding sexuality.

According to Butler, who points out that sexuality is something provoked rather than suppressed by power, gender, which assigns meanings by classifying, that is, 'naming,' bodies across two genders, lacks the power to accurately mark bodies. For no category is complete. Thus, any category can be subject to contestation (Butler, 1999a: 64). Gender is 'a complicated entity whose totality is always delayed, which is never quite what it is at any given moment' (Butler, 1999a: 65). The gender norm, which establishes identification with the two basic genders, denies the others in the face of a particular gender emphasis. These denied possibilities constantly fracture identity (Butler, 2011a: xiii, 11). It constantly undermines identities that exclude identities. Gender, produced in the materialisation process of norms, is also distorted in processes of repetition. The act of repetition that ensures the dominance of the gender norm also displaces it (Butler, 2011a: 20).

For Lauretis, this means that identification with the representation drawn by the apparatuses is a moving rather than a fixed process. No one sees himself exactly in the object position. Everyone has an ego. The ego, by definition, actively constructs itself (Lauretis, 1984: 141). For Butler, gender and identifications are also in an unstable structure (Butler, 1999a: 15). There is no substantial character. The I, the subject, is the executor of conscious or unconscious choices. It always disguises itself to go somewhere, pretends to be (Butler, 1997a: 143). For example, in wartime, when the number of men at the front decreases, women go to war like men. After the war, when the number of men decreases, they give birth, that is, they return to their female identity. In this way, gender is really about performance. Performance is a 'conscious act of at least imitating what one is not. There is then a clear indication of a fundamental self that puts on an appearance that, however convincing, remains on the surface, outside of an unchanged person underneath' (Butler, 1999b: 413). It includes the possibility of deception and implies that there is no pre-existing self that performs. However, the performative body establishes identity, and gender is one of the most important components for identity (Butler, 1999b: 414). The self/identity that presupposes and seeks to establish and maintain the gender norm is in fact unstable, i.e., non-essential. Subjectivity is also not fixed, because human beings are social beings. We create subjectivity through social interactions in the society in which we live (Butler, 2016: 140). Subject of performance. This means that it is a process of becoming. As Butler puts it:

> gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. This also suggests that if that reality is fabricated as an interior essence, that very interiority is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse, the public regulation of fantasy through the surface politics of the body, the gender border control that differentiates inner from outer, and so institutes the 'integrity' of the subject. (Butler, 1999b: 417)

Gender and identity are thus an effect of discourses. The body is a permeable boundary rather than a specific entity (Butler, 1999b: 419). 'The subject is consequently never coherent and never self-identical precisely because it is established, and indeed constantly re-established, through a series of defining exclusions and displacements that constitute the discontinuity and incompleteness of the subject' (Butler, 2011a: 141). Identity discourses attempt to eliminate this permeability, that is, instability. The reason for the instability is that gender, and thus subjectification and subjectivity, is a process that is produced through performances. Gender is construction, it is an act of doing. It does not belong to a subject that can be said to have existed before the doing (Butler, 1999a: 89). There is no entity behind the verbs do, act. The doer is a fiction that is only added to the done (Butler, 1999a: 77; 2011a: 84). Each person has more than one version of himself. Gender, built around femininity and masculinity, is the reduction of these versions to two and the negation of the other. To be ourselves, on the other hand, we need a plurality of our self-variations (Butler, 1997a: 149). Gender based on repetition and imitation is about structure. 'Gender identity does not lie behind gender expressions; that identity is performatively constructed through the very "expressions" that are said to be the result of it' (Butler, 1999a: 77). In this respect, Butler's performative notion merges with Lauretis' notion of experience. Experience is the term used to describe the process of role-

playing. Through experience, human beings position themselves in social reality, understand financial, economic, etc. Relationships and becomes subjectively aware of them. The continuous process is renewed in daily life (Lauretis, 1984: 159). Accordingly, subjectivity becomes an ongoing construction. It is more than a fixed starting point from which one interacts with the world. Rather, subjectivity is the effect of that interaction. It refers to the self-constitution of the subject through desire (Call, 2011: 93).

Subjectivity is constructed by external experiences shaped by language and culture. It is also shaped and constructed by inner experiences. The inner world is the representation of the given, the outer world, it is not a negation or a consequence. The inner and outer worlds of experience influence each other in dialogue. Gender, which is part of these experiences, is experienced differently by each person. Each person's sense of gender is an individual creation, created by the mix of discursive fields around her/him. Like meaning, which is shaped by experience, gender meanings are reshaped by the emotional self. Subjectivity is fantasy and reality, unconscious and conscious, inside and outside. It is a process of experience consisting of their fusion and separation. It privileges diversity, plurality, and difference over unity and change over the stability and essentialism of identity (Eckert, 2011: 51). Identity could be understood as a socio-political concept of a person's position in society, while subjectivity could be seen as a more psychological concept, resulting from the contextualisation of personal experience and psychological makeup (Eckert, 2011: 62).

The specific identity determined by gender is an artificial determination, the consequence of a range of gender representations. The subject emerges and is constructed in constant interaction with gender technologies. What is called subjectivity therefore is a unique way of being a subject (Lauretis, 2007: 220). As both Butler and Lauretis have pointed out, the subject has two meanings. First, the subject is a being that is subject to rules and rigid social norms. Second, it is the I that exists, moves, and is capable of willing and acting (Lauretis, 2007: 220). The subject, constituted in the context of heterogeneous and often contradictory differences, is determined by race, gender, culture, and sexual identity (Lauretis, 1988: 7). Subjectivity has a dual value that depends on the two meanings of the subject: on the one hand, subjection/dependence determined by social constraints, and on the other hand, the capacity for self-determination, the space of resistance to oppression (Lauretis, 2007: 220). Subjectivity refers to the way of being a subject. It is self-translation. The second value of the subject and subjectivity, the capacity for self-determination, develops from defence against the forces at work in the external world. The external world is both id and superego. The subject of subjectivity is both a social and a psychic being. Consciousness is permeated by unconscious desires, impulses, and fantasies as well as consciousness (Lauretis, 2007: 220). These psychic elements form another modality of limitation in addition to the social elements. Located between the id and the superego, the ego is the split entity that responds to contradiction. The experience of contradiction is the main condition of feminist subjectivity. Sometimes the subject, resisting the optimism of the will, develops its claims, passions and rights (Lauretis, 2007: 221).

The performance or experience that takes place in response to the tensions of the ego is in its interaction with the world. It is not generated by the subjective engagement of the person. It is through experience that people become the women, men, or gendered being that they become. Gender as a normative element controls the processes of subjectivity by determining the normal of everything. It is a normalisation process which draws upon the boundaries of a valuable, intelligible life (Butler, 2004b: 206). Similar to Lauretis's experience of gender, gender for Butler is something that is constantly performed. It is not something that people do necessarily intentionally. It is a matter of improvisation within certain boundaries (Butler, 2004b: 1). This construction of gender happens in conjunction with others. In this respect, gender constitutes both the norms and the field of their degradation. The forms of existence that are prohibited by gender norms are excluded from the dominant structure, even though they are in society. The constitution of the subject requires a social environment (Van der Weele, 2021: 106; Butler, 2014: 35). The human being is a being open to the Other who both craves recognition and is excluded from the arrangements that ensure recognition. Openness to the other makes him feel responsible. His interactive nature makes him vulnerable (Butler, 2004c: 27). This is also true for gender norms. Gender norms, whose main characteristic is their fragility, have the capacity to renew themselves in unpredictable contexts and ways (Butler, 2000: 24).

Gender, as experience and also as a field of ideas, exists through repetition. The subject, which is the domain of such repetition, is a non-mechanical repetition (Butler, 1997a: 23; Lauretis, 2007: 205-206) Behind the demand of such repetition practices by various ideological devices, there is the possibility that individuals do not repeat and threaten (Butler, 2011a: 149). According to feminist psychoanalytic theory, gender norms are phantasmatic, and therefore fictional. Fiction is a historically influential type of idealisation. It is something other than a lie or an illusion. It is an embodiment of an ideal that achieves historical efficacy (Butler, 2013: 98). Gender as fiction is not a specific truth that emerges from the materialisation of the body. Rather, it is the repetitive materialisation of forms in an ordering matrix that creates the appearance of essence (Butler, 2013: 98). No one can fully embody these fictions. The basis of gender identity is a stylised repetition of acts over time: the possibilities of gender transformation lie precisely in the arbitrary relationship between such acts, in the possibility of non-repetition, de-

forming, or parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of enduring identity as a politically questionable construction (Butler, 1999b: 412). Given gender identities that do not have absolute identities, Lauretis argues that the construction of gender can lead to the deconstruction of gender due to the clarity of repetition. Drawing on Butler's notion of the subject in question, Lauretis notes that subjectivation or agency in no way presupposes a choosing subject. Subjectivation is a regenerative or reactive practice; it is intrinsic to power. There is no acting power without an acting agent or subject (Lauretis, 2007: 206; Zaharijević, 2021: 24). Since gender is performative and therefore there is no pre-existing identity against which we can measure actions, there are no gendered actions such as right and wrong. Gender identity can be established and thus distorted through sustained social performances. The postulate of a true gender identity is a 'regulatory fiction' (Butler, 1999b: 412):

> if there is agency , it is to be found, paradoxically, in the possibilities opened up in and by that constrained appropriation of the regulatory law, by the materialization of that law, the compulsory appropriation and identification with those normative demands. (Butler, 2011a: xxi)

The social norms, which involve subordination and existence at the same time, constrain desire and generate it. Thus, it directs the formation of the subject and draws the boundaries of the social order. As Butler points out, repressed desire does not disappear completely. Excluded desire establishes the subject through 'loss.' The loss in question melancholises the subject and identification, as it is a loss that cannot be mourned. The social order, gender as an element of this order, includes the sanction as a kind of regulation. If the subject does not live up to this order, he becomes the object of various sanctions and feels his existence threatened. By repeating the norms given by the rules in his life, he exists on the one hand, and on the other hand his existence is cut off and his life is threatened. But without these repetitions that endanger life, the performative lines that open the possibility of life cannot be established (Butler, 1997a: 35). Lauretis, who reiterates Butler's understanding by stating that 'the radical delegitimization of the subject coexists uneasily with the progressive, redemptive political project' (2007: 206), gives meaning to Butler's thoughts in terms of the displacement of the Cartesian subject. Bodies that conform to ideology are only legitimised in subjects' practices of repetition. The identification of subjects with their roles is thus guaranteed.

The body, which acquires gender/meaning through the embodiment of gender norms, is a field in which the logic of the sensible and the visible operate simultaneously (Lauretis, 1991: 123). This distinction considers both the materiality of the body and sensory registers. The body responds to the external world through sensory records. The body, which is both a material and an immaterial (sensory) thing, hears and feels. Gender, which is not just an abstract social form, acts according to the logic of the body. The subject that relates to the external world ascribes meaning to itself in the internal world as a function of this interaction and is constantly forming itself (Lauretis, 1999: 128). Thus, the subject that performs non-mechanical repetitions is material, that is to say corporeal. Materiality is a particular effect of power (Butler, 2011a: 9). Gender, which is not something natural, is embodied in particular individuals as social subjects. In cultural imaginaries and discourses, the body is represented as inherently differentiated. The body is positioned in both genders. When individuals follow this representation, gender becomes an abstract social form embodied in single individuals (Lauretis, 1999: 133). Similar to Lauretis, Butler acknowledges the material nature of gender and focuses on the psychological underpinnings of the construction of subjectivity with the concept of loss to which he draws attention. This dimension that Lauretis refers to with sensuality is expressed in Butler's reactions to the melancholy caused by loss and the failure to accept the loss that melancholy entails. For Althusser, who is not interested in this area of overlap between Butler and Lauretis, ideology has no outside. As a result, the traces of effect are obliterated. Individuals pass into the other before we become ourselves (Balibar, 2016: 13). Everyone in the ideology becomes caught in its web. According to Lauretis, however, this is not the completely the case in relation to gender ideology. Gender does not have the power to erase the effects of its functioning. This is because gender is a representation, and to be represented is to be constructed. In our age, the construction of gender is perpetuated by the power that controls the field of social meaning that produces, promotes, and inoculates gender representations. This power is accompanied by various gender technologies and institutional discourses (Lauretis, 2007: 18). Gender technologies are at the heart of social work, the production of goods and services, the inner life, the division of labour. While the representation of gender is constructed through a particular technology, it is also subjectively absorbed by each individual. This can be observed in domestic work, service or commodity production, social work (Cervulle *et al.*, 2009: 154).

For Althusser, who seems to represent the masculine standpoint of philosophy from ideology and subject theory, individuals do not have the power to adopt gender technologies into their daily lives, that is, to act and determine their own destiny. The only field of struggle in Althusser's philosophy that replaces individual struggle with class struggle is the field of production. For both Lauretis and Butler, however, exploitation is not only a class or society-related problem. It is also an individual issue. Patriarchal domination is the primary instrument of individual exploitation. Through cinema, media, school, court, and family, various forms of gender identification are practiced. In describing these forms of identification in *Technologies of Gender*, Lauretis also identifies spaces of

resistance that resist the gender system and oppose its hegemony (Cervulle *et al.*, 2009: 140). She acknowledges other discursive and social fields such as literature and cinema. She points out that practices of resistance are practiced at the margins, at the edges of hegemonic discourse, at the crevices of institutions, thanks to counter-practices and new forms of sociability (Cervulle *et al.*, 2009: 140). She thus accepts the possibility of the individual to resist gender technologies. Her acceptance of this possibility is made possible by turning to psychoanalysis, just as Butler did.

OVERCOMING GENDER REPRESENTATIONS

Submission to power, which leads to losses in people, interacts with processes of social regulation. Regulatory power acts through the incorporation of norms. This is a psychological process (Butler, 1997a: 26). The process of internalisation of norms generates the distinction between inner life and outer life. Norms are not internalised in a mechanical way. The psychic norm, the gender norm, gives presence to the person by regulating and restricting desire. It is this desire excluded by the norm that, as Butler has shown, grounds subjectivity. Exclusion shows that power lies outside both the subject and subject space (Butler, 1997a: 27-28). Our existence moves impermanently on the horizon of an imposed but incomplete social subject of uncomfortable repetition and its risks (Butler, 1997a: 40). Any attempt to limit the body results in self-consciousness becoming a pleasure-seeking agent (Butler, 1997a: 56). The regulated body is reproduced in this way. Propagation against regulation creates a potential field of resistance. For Lauretis, who argues this point of view, gender, which refers to social relations between the sexes, is subject to social and discursive technologies. These technologies and relations treat masculine and feminine subjects differently. Gender technologies vary according to cultural diversities such as the division of places, goods/properties, traditions, and constantly established powers, religions, and laws. These established relations can also be disrupted (Cervulle *et al.*, 2009: 143). This is because interpellations in ideological apparatuses fail to fully establish the subject. 'The success of the interpellation is not hindered by a structurally permanent form of prohibition (exclusion), but by the inability of the interpellation to determine the human constitutive domain' (Butler, 1997a: 123). The status of human existence is not something that ends, but brings possibility, potentiality, so that the entity is 'a potential that is not claimed by any particular interpellation' (Butler, 1997a: 125). The identity that the subject possesses today is not transferable to the future. This is because, due to the prohibitions that build heterosexuality, desire attempts to transcend an incomplete identification.

In this regard, the critical feminist politics emphasised by Lauretis and Butler, which considers exploitation along with the habits maintained in daily practices, emphasises the invention of new strategies that promote and mobilise change in people's habits. Lauretis embraces this tendency and identifies the change of habits as one of the fundamental elements of both the class struggle and the feminist struggle. Gender ideology is reproduced in daily life. Any change there can lead to a shift toward equality between women and men in gendered relations (Lauretis, 1987: 18). Changing habits means reversing given practices. To resist capitalism, exploitation, and patriarchy, the capacity for productive action and subjectivity must be redirected (Sainz Pezonaga, 2017: 3). Although Althusser points out the connection between ideology and subject and accepts that ideology acts subjectively, the understanding of struggle remains stuck in the class struggle. Its ideas are not extended to the various forms of reproduction of subjectivity that continue to function in society. For Lauretis, on the other hand, subjectivity is at the centre of social transformation given the social reproduction of subjectivity and the gender ideology that is functional in this production (Sainz Pezonaga, 2017: 4). There is a collaboration between the construction of gender and the field of economic relations. In order not to reproduce this collaboration and thus the construction/reproduction of gender, Lauretis chooses to speak where sexual difference is constructed. For Lauretis, women being objectified and ignored by gender is not a concept, but a political issue. Women are constructors, and established women can abandon their construction and turn it upside down (Cervulle *et al.*, 2009: 143). Since there is no real body/identity beyond the gender norm, according to Butler, who also accepts the possibility of disrupting representations, it is possible to subvert them. 'This is only possible through the possibilities that arise within the law, that is, when the law contradicts itself and produces unexpected permutations of itself' (Butler, 1999a: 168). To overturn the law is to reposition power. Power cannot be transcended, but it can be repositioned (Butler, 1999a: 212).

The repeated materialisation of gender enables this repositioning. Gender enactments, which acquire a substantial character through the repetition of norms, cover reality only to a limited extent. The gaps between norm and reality are the space for the repositioning of power, for the subversion of the law. For Lauretis, who interprets the gender embodied by the subject through his performances, technology of gender is the management of people as action over their behaviour. It is a system that shapes people's lives by structuring what they do and how they do it. These people, who seem to occupy the object position by being governed, are in fact free people: they move, they run, they flee. Freedom is the precondition for the exercise of power, but it also includes the possibility of resisting the exercise of power.

To be a subject then, is to leave one's home, one's family, one's self, and experience a change of place, a change of understanding and a conceptual point of evaluation. This point is the eccentric point of view. The shifting movement of the subject is an unusual process of knowledge or cognitive/mental practice. It is a personal, political, and also textual, linguistic experience (Lauretis, 2007: 175). But it is not metapolitical because it is experiential and performative (Zaharijević, 2021: 25). We see this in the process of reading and interpreting, in that the connection between experience and representation, the possibility of expressing experience, forms and codes that enable representation and communication change as historical and cultural conditions change. The author struggles and uses to give the experience in the form of representation. The reader accesses the experience/representation in the historical context and in the subjective dimension of his or her own experience. Each person's reading experience is determined by codes of representation, forms of consciousness, and one's own experience (Lauretis, 1998: 25). Being a subject means liberating bodies from their domestication. It means having the courage to rewrite it beyond given representations.

The subject derived from the contradictions is therefore called the eccentric subject in Lauretis. The eccentric subject is the body that does not position itself within the institution. With its straight logic, the institution produces and supports heterosexuality (Lauretis, 2007: 73). The eccentric subject, who psychically transfers erotic energy to a figure that transcends gender and gender categories, is also a deviation from cultural assumptions and social practices (Lauretis, 2007: 74). The eccentric subject is the one who rejects the heteronormative contract. This rejection requires an epistemological shift in life and knowledge practices. It results from the change in historical consciousness. The eccentric subject begins with the reconfiguration of previous discursive boundaries that constitute a change in historical consciousness. It involves a shift and a self-exit. It leaves the safe place to go to another unknown and risky place. Being an eccentric subject involves both a displacement and a self-displacement. It means leaving the known place, the nest, and going to another unknown place. The reason for the displacement is that it is not possible to live in the nest. Thus, leaving is a necessity rather than a choice (Lauretis, 2007: 75, 175). De-identification as liberation from identitarian, identitarian hegemonic forms, mobility to the margins and peripheries has a special meaning. It implies a shift in point of view and conceptual evaluation (Cervulle *et al.*, 2009: 140). The shift involves a double movement, one theoretical and one experimental. It is through this double movement that the eccentric subject first emerges. It is constituted through the geographical, linguistic, and cultural displacement/division and de-identification of the person. It is both an emotional and a mental/cognitive process. It is created through a process of struggle and interpretation. It is a rewriting of oneself with a new understanding of society, history, and culture (Lauretis, 2007: 77). The eccentric subject is constituted in the process of rewriting the self in a process of struggle and interpretation. This process is linked to a new understanding of community, history and culture. It is a position that is expected to emerge from political and personal practices of displacement. It emerges through the crossing of boundaries between bodies and discourses, between communities (Cervulle *et al.*, 2009: 140).

As Butler points out, the body must be visible for politics to occur. A body appears to others and others to that body. Only the body simultaneously establishes and displaces the human perspective. We notice this most clearly when we see bodies moving together (Butler, 2011b). With her eccentric understanding of the subject, Lauretis attacks the existing ideology of gender, here specifically the concept of woman. While considering the subject as something constituted, she points out that this organisation is a new process of self-description, linked to a process of struggle and interpretation, a process of re-translation, a new interpretation of society, history and culture (Cervulle *et al.,* 2011: 146). To set this process in motion, Butler argues, bodies must be visible and in action, for the body is not only the object of power, it is also the power to interpret and act. Similarly, Butler seeks ways to critically engage gender norms. This tendency means that she locates the action/subject at a point of conscious level. For Butler, it is constructed through a social world in which the individual does not choose agency (2004b: 3). To create space for new possibilities, Butler argues for questioning the meanings of this life-limiting world (Butler, 2004b: 4). Subjectivity is affected by the formations that shape the body. Critique is therefore nothing other than the self-criticism of the subject (Butler, 2017: 92). Butler's subjectivity can be described as a critical subjectivity. One of the main objects of critique is the understanding of property in bourgeois society. Against this understanding that enslaves the appropriate, Butler emphasises the concept of dispossession in political subjectivity (Butler, 2013: 35).

Gender roles, which are part of the basic ideological apparatuses of western bourgeois society, are derivatives of bourgeois society's concept of property, which separates the appropriate from the inappropriate and solidifies inequalities. The renunciation of property implies the renunciation of the dominant/sovereign subject, that is, the male position, and can be seen as a form of dispossession. Lauretis' eccentric subject in contrast to Butler's subject can be criticised because it remains within Cartesian boundaries, because it starts from the concept of consciousness. For one thing, the eccentric subject is the cognitive subject, and what is cognised is the self. Self-knowledge is an epistemic desire for the eccentric subject (Cervulle *et al.*, 2009: 150). Lauretis' eccentric subject, however, is a figural, theoretical subject with epistemological value. It reflects Lauretis' conceptual originality and

significance. For the position of the critical subject is eccentric. It reconceptualises knowledge and the social from an eccentric position. It does so thanks to its cognitive as well as sensory capacities. In this respect, the eccentric subject is the subject of cognitive and sensory practice (Lauretis, 2007: 80). The subject of her feminist consciousness is an actor who has agency and social responsibility (Lauretis, 2007: 74), someone who constantly crosses the boundary. It shifts the boundaries between bodies and discourses, identities and things.

CONCLUSION

The fact that the subject is one of the fundamental categories of ideology is why Althusser has an important place in critical theory. However, Althusser, cannot conceive of gender as a part of ideological apparatuses and remains limited in his discussion of subject and ideology. Ideology, however, is the primary site of the constitution of gender. For the purposes of this article, both Lauretis and Butler are thinkers who find themselves in two similar positions, acknowledging the connection between subject and ideology made by Althusser and providing the starting point in the creation of their own theories. Unlike Althusser, Lauretis and Butler refer not only to gender as a field of ideology, but also see the possibility of a political struggle on how to transform this field. Both thinkers allow us to see the category of gender as a part of his idea of ideological apparatuses, because it is something that determines human existence. The firm foundation is based on people's identification with the cultural and political meanings of the two positions. Individual existence and a certain social and economic order are reproduced through social technologies such as cinema and literature that feed the heteronormative notion of gender. In this regard, we can say that gender, which is the heteronormative notion of bodies, is a means that operates in the reproduction of people's individual and social existence, if we think within the framework of Althusser's concept of reproduction.

By pointing out that the subject is something that emerges in the process of reproduction of the social structure, Althusser's views allow us to see the role of gender in the production of the subject. In the process of responding to gendered regulations that address the individual, people have the possibility of being subject. But in Althusser's world of thought, there is an identity between being a subject and the subjection. Butler and Lauretis, meeting in the same position by pointing to the double meaning of subject, extend this identity toward the possibility of liberation from gender norms and change of order/imagination. They destabilise the relationship between subject and ideology established by Althusser. Thus, they shift the focus to the transcending character of identity that gender orders directed at individuals confer on people.

Unlike Althusser, for Lauretis and Butler exploitation is not only a class or society-specific problem, it is also an individual matter. Hetero-patriarchal domination is the primary instrument of individual exploitation for these feminist critics. Heteronormative gender representations are one of the fundamental elements of this domination. The performative/experimental nature of these representations, which gives identity to individuals whilst making them subjects, allows us to see the practices of resistance at the margins of norms/discourses. These practices are individual in nature, and this character of the experiences of resistance leads both thinkers to neglect the collective dimension of the politics of emancipation.

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The Polycrisis and the Centaur: Hegemony, Masculinity and Racialisation

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ABSTRACT

The multiplicity of crises that mark the contemporary era, the polycrisis, also constitutes a crisis of hegemony. This article explores the functions of gendered racialisation in elite management of this hegemonic crisis, with reference to Gramsci's use of the figure of the Centaur, a hybrid of humanity and animality. It discusses the ways in which this hybrid evokes racialising tropes of human bestiality to express the dynamic interplay of consent and coercion through which hegemony is maintained. Moral panics in relation to the threat of the racialised male Other, variously figured as migrant, terrorist and/or criminal, draw on a bestialised humanisation of racialised masculinities in order to elicit consent to the exercise of coercive authority. Such authority in turn invokes a plasticity of excess/deficiency of the racialised male Other to sanction exclusionary and exterminatory violence. To seize the political opportunity of the current moment to reimagine gender justice and social justice together requires a deeper engagement with the deployment of racialised masculinities in securing consent to coercive authority amid the deepening polycrisis.

Keywords: polycrisis, hegemony, racialisation, masculinities, plasticity

INTRODUCTION

In August 2019, a global convening of feminist activists met in Mexico to strategise towards the UN Beijing+25 events planned for the summer of 2020. They called attention to a 'world in crisis' as a result of neoliberal capitalism and climate change, the resurgence of anti-feminism as a political force seeking to both manage and exploit this crisis, and the need for radical social change (Anon, 2019). The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic a few months later only reaffirmed their warning of systemic crisis. In Hearn's view, there is a 'contemporary economic–political–ecological 'ecosystem', with intertwining, engulfing, holistic crises, perhaps for the whole planet', in which '[e]conomic exploitation, financialised capitalism, growing inequalities, anti-democratic movements and ecological damage work together, with multiple material-discursive feedbacks' (Hearn, 2022: 16).

Economic historian Adam Tooze has described the current conjuncture as a 'polycrisis', in which 'the shocks are disparate, but they interact so that the whole is even more overwhelming than the sum of the parts' (Tooze, 2022). The polycrisis, and the need for urgent systemic change that it reveals, poses a challenge not only to elites who benefit from existing political and economic arrangements. It also calls into question the analyses and strategies of what is commonly characterised as 'liberal feminism', with its emphasis on individualised women's empowerment and equal opportunities within the current system. As Watkins (2018) makes clear, this is a feminism which pursues gender equality and accepts social inequality. In their 2018 *Notes for a Feminist Manifesto*, Arruzza *et al.* (2018: 114) ask whether we will 'continue to pursue "equal-opportunity domination" while the planet burns? Or will we reimagine gender justice in an anti-capitalist form, which leads beyond the present carnage to a new society?'

I argue that this work of re-imagination must reckon with the uses of gendered racialisation in managing the hegemonic crisis produced by the current conjuncture. I begin with the crisis of hegemony produced by the polycrisis, and the opportunities this presents for both Right and Left political forces. Gender has become a significant terrain of struggle over hegemony, with the rise of an authoritarian populism in many societies being marked by a patriarchal and paternalist politics of re-masculinisation. Intersectional feminist movements are challenging this regressive gender politics, as part of a broader anti-racist, anti-capitalist challenge to a crisis-ridden neoliberalism. But scholarly and programming work on masculinities, I argue, still largely fails to articulate itself in

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relation to intersectional feminist responses to the contemporary hegemonic crisis. I briefly review the limitations of the concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' in this regard, before turning to Hearn's discussion of the 'hegemony of men' and its invitation to consider the 'coloniality of gender' and deconstruct the category of 'men' by attending to its racialised human-animal boundaries.

This ambiguity of the category of 'men' and its frequently racialised human-animal boundaries is deployed, I argue, in the management of hegemonic crisis. Gramsci's (1971) foundational account of hegemony, as a dynamic interplay of consent and coercion through which authority is secured, invoked Machiavelli's figure of the Centaur. Its hybrid of humanity and animality expressed the racialisation of rationality that accompanied the entangled histories of Renaissance humanism and European colonialism. I explore the ways in which this dynamic of hegemony, and specifically the eliciting of consent to the exercise of coercive authority, continues to rely on racialising tropes of human animality. With reference to Jackson's (2020) concepts of racialised plasticity and bestialised humanisation, I consider the use of moral panics in relation to the racialised male Other, variously figured as migrant, terrorist and/or criminal, to manage periods of hegemonic crisis. Such moral panics have relied on a bestialised humanisation of racialised masculinities, that in turn invokes a plasticity of excess/deficiency to sanction exclusionary and exterminatory violence against the male Other. To get 'beyond the present carnage to a new society' requires, I conclude, a deeper engagement with the deployment of racialised masculinities in securing consent to coercive authority amid the deepening polycrisis.

HEGEMONIC CRISIS AND ANTI-FEMINISM

The gender dimensions of the polycrisis must be clearly understood as both challenge and opportunity. As Arruzza *et al.* note, an anti-capitalist feminism has become thinkable today because of the 'political dimension of the present crisis: the erosion of elite credibility throughout the world, affecting not only the centrist neoliberal parties but also their Sandberg-style corporate-feminist allies' (Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser, 2018: 114). The polycrisis is thus also a crisis of legitimacy for political and economic elites. 'All the signs have become present that we are living through an epochal crisis', write Gilbert and Williams (2022: vii), in which 'the systems of order that regulate our political world have been plunged into disarray.' This is, then, a crisis of hegemony.

With the rise of far-right authoritarianism and the electoral success of explicit 'strongmen' in ostensibly democratic polities, it has become common to liken contemporary politics to the hegemonic crisis in interwar Europe, during which fascist parties, notably in Italy but also elsewhere in Europe, rose to power. Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci articulated his influential account of hegemony in response to these developments (Gramsci, 1971, 1995). Hegemony, as the process of securing and exercising societal leadership, 'comprises a complex set of practices designed to win the active and passive consent of key social actors in a particular historical bloc, while securing the compliance of others' (Howarth, 2015: 198). Such consent becomes harder to manage during times of economic recession and political instability, producing a crisis of hegemony, which presents opportunities for Left forces to forge a new historical bloc around their own intellectual and moral leadership. To do so, however, the Left must confront the elite's own efforts to resolve this hegemonic crisis through its recourse to, and celebration of, coercive power.

The 2019 Mexico City feminist convening, in their diagnosis of the 'world in crisis', highlighted this coercive turn in contemporary politics, in which '[a]uthoritarian governments, some of which were in fact democratically elected, often consolidate power in the name of security through emergency laws that indiscriminately curb dissent' (Anon, 2019: 3). That this coercive turn should seek to legitimise itself, at least in part, through anti-feminism should come as no surprise; 'authoritarian power is inevitably exercised by targeting women and gender-non conforming people through the regulation of their bodies, roles, freedoms, and rights' (Anon, 2019: 4). Social order, embodied both in the institutions that elicit our consent and those that coerce our compliance, remains male-identified: led by men and lived through masculine idioms, at once heteronormative and cisgendered. A widespread and growing sense of disorder, then, born of conjunctural crises, is unsurprisingly experienced and expressed in gendered terms.

This helps explain the contemporary return of the 'strongman' as a patriarchal source of psychic comfort, a man who can take charge and restore a sense of order. Bolsonaro, Erdoğan, Modi and Putin have all made explicitly masculinised appeals to their electorates, promising to defeat their internal enemies (including ethnic, religious and sexual minorities) who are said to threaten domestic security and national prosperity. An extensive literature, both academic and journalistic, now delineates the entangled growth of authoritarian populism and virulent anti-feminism in many societies, whose appeal in recent years has relied on both a discourse and affect of gendered, and frequently racialised, crisis (Dietze and Roth, 2020; Strick, 2020; Agius, Rosamond and Kinnvall, 2021; Encinas-Franco, 2022).

Recent political developments, notably in the apparent return of a 'pink tide' in Latin America, with the electoral successes of centre-left leaders in Chile (Boric), Colombia (Petro) and Brazil (Lula) among the most significant,

caution against a generalised and reductive reading of the regressive gender politics of the polycrisis. Nevertheless, a revivified masculinisation of politics, both heteropatriarchal and cisnormative, can be discerned in the 'culture wars' against 'gender ideology' being waged in many societies in response to a pervasive sense of crisis (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022; Heinemann and Stern, 2022).

The political opportunity of the polycrisis for Left movements in general, and an anti-capitalist feminism in particular, is the 'erosion of elite credibility' it has produced, a hegemonic crisis that opens space to reimagine gender justice and social justice together. The political challenge is that it is also an opportunity for a range of Right formations to claim to restore a sense of order and resolve the hegemonic crisis through anti-feminist policies and symbolic practices of patriarchal masculinities. It is tempting to frame responses to this challenge in terms of confronting the 'strongman' politics that seems to exemplify such practices. But this would be to construe the revivified masculinisation of politics too narrowly. The 'strongman' is but one example of these practices of patriarchal masculinities, and understanding their broader and deeper insinuation into modes of governance is an urgent task. Nor is it helpful to examine the linked problems of hegemonic crisis and the re-masculinisation of politics through the lens of 'toxic masculinities'. If anything, such a lens narrows the focus to a concern about the supposedly problematic behaviours of 'toxic' men, thus replaying the individualised framing of structural problems for which the field of anti-patriarchal work with men and boys has been rightly criticised (COFEM, 2017).

Current theorising of masculinities in relation to a concern about hegemonic crisis has yet to grasp both the political opportunity and challenge outlined above, confined as it is within the terms set by Connell's (1995: 71) foundational, and still influential, definition of masculinity as 'simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture.' This definition privileged an individualist account of gender practices which emphasised the mutual shaping of culture and embodied behaviour; '[t]his is why life-history studies have become a characteristic genre of work on hegemonic masculinity', as Connell and Messerschmidt (2005: 844) noted in their article rethinking the concept, a decade on from Connell's elaboration of it in her book *Masculinities.*

Widely taken up in both scholarly and programmatic work on men and their masculinities, the concept of hegemonic masculinity invokes Gramsci to explore and explain the processes of 'cultural ascendancy' and 'discursive persuasion' by which 'a specific form of masculinity in a given historical and society-wide social setting (…) legitimates unequal gender relations between men and women, between masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities' (Messerschmidt, 2018: 28). But the concept has long been confused about the relationship between 'cultural ascendancy' and material domination, a relationship in which Gramsci was keenly interested.

In one of its earliest formulations, Carrigan, Connell and Lee (1985: 592) defined hegemonic masculinity as both a 'culturally exalted form of masculinity' and the means by which 'particular groups of men inhabit positions of power and wealth, and how they legitimate and reproduce the social relationships that generate their dominance.' The ways in which the concept of hegemonic masculinity conflates different ways of being a man ('culturally exalted') with different positions in hierarchies of power (materially privileged in 'positions of power and wealth') has long undermined the term's analytical acuity and political utility. As Howson notes, 'hegemonic masculinity slides in meaning between a political mechanism that is tied to hegemony and the manifestation of the dominant version of manhood' (Howson, 2006: 109).

This conceptual slipperiness undermines efforts to theorise the gender dimensions of the polycrisis and its crisis of hegemony, not least because such a theorisation requires that gender be understood in its imbrication with other relations and operations of power. '[B]etter ways of understanding gender hierarchy are required', insisted Connell and Messerschmidt (2005: 848) in their review of the uses of the concept of hegemonic masculinity, implicitly acknowledging the limitations of its account of gender in relation to other social stratifications. Messerschmidt (2018: 69) developed this insight further, highlighting the need to attend to 'the mutual conditioning or intersectionality of gender with such other social inequalities as class, race, age, sexuality, and nation.' But here again there is a reluctance to think structurally and beyond the behaviourist/culturalist framing so characteristic of the discourse of hegemonic masculinity. It is noteworthy that Messerschmidt focuses his use of the concept of 'variable intersectionality' primarily on the interpersonal manifestations of a range of social inequalities in different forms of 'hegemonically masculine interaction' (Messerschmidt, 2018: 99).

An intersectional feminist account of masculinities in the context of the polycrisis, that can make sense of the political opportunities and challenges arising from this moment of hegemonic crisis, needs a clearer focus on the structural forces at work. In his recent article on the place and potential of crisis/crises in critical studies on men and masculinities, Hearn (2022: 566) develops his longstanding argument that it is more useful, conceptually and politically, to 'analyse not only, or not so much, masculinity/ies *per se*, but the naming, identification, construction, historicising, problematising and deconstruction of men as both persons and a gender category.' Drawing attention to the hegemony of men, rather than hegemonic masculinity, highlights men's roles in and responsibilities for a range of crises, from the economic to the ecological. In this way, Hearn argues, it becomes possible to focus on 'the powerful effects of certain groupings of men, with elites, state and military leaders, corporate and finance

leaders, autocrats, oligarchs, dictators, and the super-rich creating crises', as well as on 'men's domination of and specialisation in violence (and non-specialisation in care)' and 'the uneven impacts of crises on men and masculinities, linking with intersectional social realities' (Hearn, 2022: 577).

There is a welcome emphasis here on the decisions and practices of elite men, on differences between men based on 'racialisation, class, age, disability, sexualities and gender, among further inequalities' (Hearn, 2022: 577) as well as on the fact that the 'social category of men is (re)created in everyday life, institutional practices and interplay with other social categories, such as class, ethnicity and sexuality' (Hearn, 2022: 573). Less clearly articulated by Hearn in this paper are the economic and political forces that structure these practices and differences, and the crises to which they give rise, as well as the uses to which masculinities, as a set of symbolic practices and ideological investments, are put in the service of managing and exploiting these crises (also see Hearn, 2015).

But the insistence that men as a gender category 'need to be denaturalised and deconstructed, just as postcolonial theory deconstructs the white subject or queer theory deconstructs the sexual subject' does provide a useful starting point for such an articulation of the structural forces shaping the gender dimensions of hegemonic crisis (Hearn, 2022: 573). As Hearn suggests, deconstructing the hegemony of men as a gender category reveals the shaky biological foundations of the binary sex/gender system so beloved of conservative and right-wing forces and an emerging group of self-identified 'gender critical' feminists. It also helps explain the centrality of the oppression of trans people, and the suppression of trans identities and experiences, to the contemporary rise of anti-feminism discussed above. The patriarchal restoration of a sense of order amid proliferating crises relies, in part, on a renovation of the naturalised boundaries between the categories of male and female in the binary sex/gender system.

The insistence that the gender category of men be denaturalised also opens up important analytical and political space to address the ways in which narratives and representations of masculinities are racialised in an effort to restore elite credibility in this era of polycrisis. Hearn (2022: 573) mentions, but does not investigate, the 'coloniality of gender and rereadings of capitalist colonial modernity' as well as the 'broader question of human–animal/non-human relations, which also problematise fixed, dominant and supposedly autonomous notions of men and masculinities.' Recent theorising of racialised masculinities in terms of the positing, policing and blurring of human–animal boundaries of the category of man is indeed highly suggestive when it comes to understanding the management of hegemonic crisis today (Curry, 2017; Ratele, 2021). Such boundaries were at the heart of Gramsci's formulation of hegemony, as the interplay between consent and coercion in the exercise of state power. Central to this formulation was the mythical figure of the Centaur, half-man, half-beast. For Gramsci, following Machiavelli, the Centaur embodied and symbolised 'the hybrid of compulsion and consent by which men were always governed' (Anderson, 1976: 49). Far from simply juxtaposing consent and coercion as modes of governance, Gramsci was interested in hegemony 'as itself a synthesis of consent and coercion' (Anderson, 1976: 22). The figure of the Centaur not only expressed this synthesis, but grounded it in a racialised policing of the category of man and its human–animal boundaries that persists to this day.

CONSENT, COERCION AND BESTIALISED HUMANISATION

Using Machiavelli-Gramsci's figure of the Centaur, a hybrid of humanity and bestiality, to explore the process of hegemony as a dynamic interplay of consent and coercion, is helpful in highlighting the ways in which racialised gender has been deployed in managing this dynamic. The Centaur appears in Machiavelli's most famous writing on political philosophy, *Il Principe* ('The Prince'), published in 1513 at a time of increasing European colonial incursion into Africa and the Americas and, relatedly, the emergence of the humanist philosophy of the European Renaissance. These distant histories remain extremely consequential for contemporary life. As Wynter (1996: 300) makes clear, the 'intellectual revolution of humanism' was tied from the beginning to the colonial encounter with non-European peoples.

The extraordinary violence of European colonial incursion and conquest prompted debates about its legitimacy, most famously in Valladolid, Spain in 1550 'where the boundary between the civilised and the savage was prosecuted' (Patel and Moore, 2017: 36). At issue was the legitimacy of the encomienda system, by which Spanish colonial authorities extracted the forced labour of indigenous people. Defending the justness of the system in the Valladolid debates was Spanish humanist and jurist Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, who emphasised that the indigenous peoples were inferior to the Spaniards 'as children are to adults, women are to men, the savage and ferocious [man] to the gentle, the grossly intemperate to the continent and temperate and finally, I shall say, almost as monkeys are to men' (Pagden, 1982, cited in Wynter, 2003: 283). It was the animal-like nature of indigenous peoples, bereft of human reason, that legitimated Spanish seizure of their land and labour, Sepúlveda claimed.

The humanism of the European renaissance relied, from its beginning, on this project of racialisation. The origin story of this project, and its roles in European colonialism and the emergence of capitalist social relations,

is both complex and contested. But it is widely acknowledged that, from the beginning, this racialisation of rationality was tied to animalisation. In Jackson's (2020: 4) words, 'Eurocentric humanism needs blackness as a prop in order to erect whiteness: to define its own limits and to designate humanity as an achievement as well as to give form to the category of "the animal".' Gender has long been used to mark and mediate this human-animal boundary so central to racialisation. For Jackson (2020: 4), 'black female flesh persistently functions as the limit case of "the human" and is its matrix-figure' because 'the delineation between species has fundamentally hinged on the question of reproduction; in other words, the limit of the human has been determined by how the means and scene of birth are interpreted.' The animalisation of the African female racialised femininity as white, Jackson (2020: 8) argues, so that 'an idealised white femininity became paradigmatic of "woman" through the abjection of the perceived African "female".' No wonder that Sojourner Truth, a prominent anti-slavery abolitionist campaigner after gaining her freedom in 1827, focused her speech to the Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio, in 1851 on the question: 'Ain't I a Woman?'.

The racialisation of colonised and enslaved populations, from the beginning of European incursions into Africa and the Americas in the 15th century, was legitimated by a humanist philosophy of rationality that used gender as an unstable marker of the human-animal boundary. This instability lives on today. As Vergès (2022: 93) makes clear, '[r]acialised women are not completely "women" and racialised men are not completely "men," according to the norms inherited from slavery and colonialism.' It is telling that Curry uses the term 'Man-Not' to frame his examination of the dilemmas of black manhood in the USA. He notes that the 'colonised/racialised subject was denied gender precisely to define the boundaries between the content of the human and the deficit of those racially speciated' (Curry, 2017: 6). This gender delimitation is enmeshed with the racialisation-animalisation discussed above. As Curry (2017: 7) makes clear, the 'Man-Not is the denial not only of Black manhood but also of the possibility to be anything but animal, the savage beast, outside the civilisational accounts of gender.' He cites the scholarship of Lugones, whose discussion of decolonial feminism begins with the colonisation of the Americas and the Caribbean, in which 'a hierarchical, dichotomous distinction between human and non-human was imposed on the colonised in the service of Western man' (Lugones, 2010: 743).

This colonial distinction between the humanist rationality of civilised Man and the uncontrolled savagery of colonised populations figured the racialised male body as another limit case of the human, but this time as existential threat. Curry emphasises that the Black male 'was constructed as the white race's antipodal monstrosity, a sexual threat to the very foundation of white civilisation if its savagery was not repressed' (Curry, 2017: 4). Contemporary politics, both within and between formerly colonised and colonising nations, continues to be shaped by this 'caricature of racialised men as threats to the social and biological reproduction of white order' (Curry, 2017: 4). In her study of the far-right National Rally in France (formerly known as the National Front, NF), Scrinzi (2017: 134) notes that the 'nation is compared to a domestic community threatened by invaders, on the basis of dualisms opposing Us (the inside, the private) to the Other looming large on the outside.' As she (Scrinzi, 2017: 136) explains, the threat of the Other 'required the hypervisibility of the racialised man, represented as a sexual and cultural threat to female citizens.' This hypervisibility has entered the mainstream, as is evident from 'the media focus on the figure of the "garçon arabe", the young male of immigrant origin, as racialised men of the suburbs tend to be depicted as potential rapists' (Scrinzi, 2017: 129).

Images and narratives of the uncontrolled sexual appetites and violence of racialised men have gained renewed political currency and legitimacy as a result of the popularity of the 'great replacement' meme, referencing the 2012 book by right-wing French commentator Renaud Camus, in which he claims that Europe's white majority faces demographic defeat as a result of the sexual and reproductive excess of North African and sub-Saharan African immigrants (Köttig and Blum, 2017). Such tropes continue to resonate politically in diverse ways, from Trump's rhetoric on immigration to the moral panic concerning what were referred to as 'Asian grooming gangs' in media and policy responses to child sexual abuse scandals in the UK, in which emphasis was given to the 'primitive' masculinity and 'predatory' sexuality of the men involved (Alexander, 2017). Nor is this confined to white-majority societies. The political rhetoric of the Hindu Nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India urges the re-masculinisation of Hindu society in the face of the existential threat posed by Muslim male sexuality, a discursive re-masculinisation entangled with the complexities of the 'coloniality of gender' as a technology of imperial control, through which the colonised were constructed as distinct 'native' groups, in part through an imposition of differential gendering. For one way to understand the Hindu nationalist hyper-masculinity celebrated by the BJP is as a reaction to the differential gendering of colonised men under the 'define and rule' (Mamdani, 2012) governance of the British empire, through which the 'effeminate Bengali' became a staple figure of the imperial imagination (Sinha, 1999).

Significantly, these racialised tropes of primitive and predatory masculinity have always relied, for their political effectiveness as a technology of domination, on an unsettling ambiguity. In her close reading of anti-blackness in US culture and politics from the time of the earliest colonial settlement, and the uses made of animalisation by advocates of slavery, Jackson (2020: 27) emphasises that 'all of the thinkers above identify black people as human

(however attenuated and qualified).' Indeed, as Jackson (2020: 28) explains, the 'enslaved [lived a] bifurcated existence as both an object of property and legal person endowed with limited rights, protections, and criminal culpability.' This 'bifurcated existence' produced an ontological ambiguity, that was politically useful for slave-holding elites. On this basis, Jackson calls for a more complex understanding of the human/animal binary and its uses in racialisation:

> Binaristic frameworks such as 'humanisation versus dehumanisation' and 'human versus animal' are insufficient to understand a biopolitical regime that develops technologies of humanisation in order to refigure blackness as abject human animality and extends human recognition in an effort to demean blackness as 'the animal within the human' form. (Jackson, 2020: 20)

In Jackson's noteworthy intervention, what is central to these racialising technologies of humanisation is not simply a determining dehumanisation or fixed animalisation but an imposed plasticity of being. Plasticity is 'certainly an antiblack mode of the human concerned with apportioning vitality and pathologisation' Jackson (2020: 11) argues, but also a 'praxis that seeks to define the essence of a black(ened) thing as infinitely mutable (…).' In this way, racialised populations are 'cast as sub, supra, and human simultaneously and (…) black(ened) humanity as the privation and exorbitance of form' (Jackson, 2020: 35).

This racialising plasticity, and its gendered hybrid of deficiency and excess, has travelled historically and geopolitically. In her account of the gender narratives accompanying the War on Terror, Puar (2007: xxxiii) notes that 'during the aftermath of the release of the Abu Ghraib photos in May 2004, I maintain that Muslim masculinity is simultaneously pathologically excessive yet repressive, perverse yet homophobic, virile yet emasculated, monstrous yet flaccid.' In this view, racialisation is, in part at least, the production of ontological vulnerability to being defined by the dominant, as Mamdani's (2012) account of imperial governance as 'define and rule', referenced above, makes clear. Fanon's celebrated account of colonialism also spoke to this vulnerability, when he (2008: 89) insisted that 'the Other fixes me with his gaze, his gestures and attitude, the same way you fix a preparation with a dye.'

The more appropriate concept for understanding the racialised plasticity at the heart of anti-black racism, Jackson (2020: 23) argues, is 'bestialised humanisation, because the African's humanity is not denied but appropriated, inverted, and ultimately plasticised in the methodology of abjecting animality.' This notion of 'bestialised humanisation', and its uses in racialising projects both historically and contemporaneously, returns us to the figure of the Centaur, whose deployment as a trope of governance and its hybrid of consent and coercion, emerged at a time when both colonialism and humanism were reshaping political philosophy and practice in early modern Europe. Significantly, the human-animal hybrid nature of the Centaur grounded the insistence on sovereign authority, as requiring both consent and coercion, in the humanist commitment to rationality as the boundary marker between human and animal. The dualities of animal/human, coercion/consent and irrationality/rationality were homologous, as Fontana (2015: 61) makes clear: 'Politics to Gramsci, as to Machiavelli, embodies both force and consent, represented by the figure of the Centaur who represents the synthesis of passion/feeling and reason/thought.' The notion of 'bestialised humanisation' highlights the ambiguity of this synthesis; the practice of politics as embodied in the Centaur is not simply or only an alternation between coercion and consent but their hybridisation. In turn, this 'bestialised humanisation' makes use of a gendered racialisation, in which the existential threat associated with the animal-like nature of the racialised male Other serves to elicit consent for the exercise of coercive authority. The ways in which these chains of association have been used in the management of hegemonic crisis are discussed next.

RACIALISED MASCULINITIES AND MORAL PANICS

In their landmark study of hegemonic crisis in 1970s Britain, and the uses made of the figure of the 'black mugger' in elite management of this crisis, Hall *et al.* (1978) made reference to the centrality of consensualised coercion in such crisis management. They (Hall, Critcher *et al.*, 1978: 321) examined the 'the slow development of such a state of legitimate coercion' in response to an emerging concatenation of economic and political crises in post-war, post-imperial Britain which, by the 1970s, amounted to a 'crisis of hegemony', marking 'a moment of profound rupture in the political and economic life of a society, an accumulation of contradictions' (Hall, Critcher *et al.*, 1978: 217). To explain the ways in which this crisis of hegemony was managed by economic and political elites, Hall and his co-authors turned to Cohen's work on the concept of 'moral panics', first published in 1972. As Cohen (2011: 1) explained, '[s]ocieties appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic' in which a 'condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests.' This threat 'is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media' in response to

which 'the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people' (Cohen, 2011: 1).

In the case of 1970s Britain, it is the moral panic that grew up around violent street crime that served to displace social anxieties on to the male figure of the 'black mugger', stories about whom became a staple of both media and political discourse. Hall and his co-authors focused on the class-race entanglements of the crisis of hegemony facing the post-imperial British capitalist state, but it is also through gender that social anxieties produced by crises of the economic and political order are managed. They referred to the form of this crisis management as a 'displacement effect' in that 'the connection between the crisis and the way it is appropriated in the social experience of the majority – social anxiety – passes through a series of false 'resolutions', primarily taking the shape of a succession of moral panics' (Hall, Critcher *et al.*, 1978: 322).

In this way, Hall *et al.* (1978: 221) suggested that the moral panic is one of the 'principal forms of ideological consciousness by means of which a "silent majority" is won over to the support of increasingly coercive measures on the part of the state', in this way lending 'its legitimacy to a "more than usual" exercise of control.' Eliciting consent for coercion has long relied on a bestialised humanisation, usually condensed in the figure of the racialised male Other. The displacement effect of moral panics is evident in the emblematic crises of the contemporary era, embodied in the para-human and implicitly or explicitly male-identified figures of the racialised migrant, terrorist and criminal. Such figures, and their dangerous masculinities, continue to be invoked in legitimating 'increasingly coercive measures on the part of the state'. As Walia makes clear, the 'migrant crisis' that continues to dominate the news headlines in the Global North is itself a moral panic, serving as:

> a pretext to shore up further border securitization and repressive practices of detention and deportation. Such representations depict migrants and refugees as the cause of an imagined crisis at the border, when, in fact, mass migration is the outcome of the actual crises of capitalism, conquest, and climate change. (Walia, 2021: 3)

Animalising tropes and metaphors have long been used to racialise migrants as a threat, usually coded as male/masculine, 'portraying them as wild animals or savages that must be hunted by potent border predators of the state' (Ceciliano-Navarro, Golash-Boza and Márquez, 2021: 96). Anti-migrant rhetoric in white-majority countries continues to highlight the 'predatory' sexuality of the male migrant (Anderson, 2017; Scrinzi, 2017). With the onset of the War on Terror, and the mass displacement of populations across West Asia and North Africa consequent upon US-led invasions and bombing campaigns, longstanding tropes used by the Christian West to pathologise Muslim and Arab male sexualities have been updated in Islamophobic depictions of a dangerous Islamic masculinity, embodied as migrant, terrorist or both (Puar, 2007; Kundnani, 2015; Kallis, 2019). The racialised figure of the Islamist terrorist is frequently bestialised, nowhere more clearly visible than in the images of US torture of Iraqi detainees, leaked from the prison complex at Abu Ghraib, just outside Baghdad, where some prisoners were leashed like animals.

These links between racialised masculinities, the exercise of coercive authority and processes of social legitimation are also condensed in the figure of the criminal, and his role in the emergence of the 'police power' (Neocleous, 2014). The historiography of this emergence increasingly highlights the primary function of the 'police power' as the preservation of social order through the policing of those deemed to be disorderly. As Neocleous explains:

> This conjunction of 'disorderliness' and 'criminality' was connected to the idea of 'rebellion' against the very structures of life and modes of being that were being imposed by the state and the new regime of accumulation, and even against the political order itself. (Neocleous, 2014: 30-31)

Such rebellion required policing, and coercive measures were often justified through reference to the animal-like unreason of the disorderly.[1] This legitimation of coercive repression through reference to the frequently racialised trope of the criminal-animal, implicitly or explicitly masculinised, continues to be a feature of contemporary police power.[2] Positing the animal-like nature of the criminal (and often by association, the terrorist

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[1] John Locke, whose writings on political philosophy in the closing decades of the 17th century remain widely regarded as foundational for modern liberalism, likened the criminal who resisted labour discipline and land enclosure to a savage beast who has 'renounced Reason' like 'the Lyon or Tyger', and who has thus 'declared War against all Mankind' (Locke, 1988: II, sect 10, cited in Neocleous, 2014: 75). Significantly, he made this argument with reference not only to land enclosure and labour discipline measures in England but also their extension to recently acquired colonies in North America and the Caribbean; the colonial roots of the criminal-animal trope are deep.

[2] In her discussion of the acquittal of Los Angeles police officers for their brutal assault on 3 March 1991 of Rodney King, an African American man, in spite of clear video evidence, Wynter (1994: 42) notes the media reporting that 'public officials of

and the migrant) as the enemy of society sanctioned former President Duterte's official policy of extra-judicial killings by police of suspected drug users and dealers, mostly men, in the Philippines. This policy relied on and reinforced a sense of liminal humanity attached to the urban underclass:

> But what constitutes this liminality? It would seem to many, including to the victims of this ongoing spectacular and everyday war, that it is their humanity that is liminal. Indeed, family and friends of the murdered repeatedly express the violence inflicted on the victims in precisely these terms—it is as if they were animals, they cry in protest, as if they were not human. (Tadiar, 2022: 285)

The formulation by Jackson of racialisation as an imposed plasticity of being, and its assertion of an ontological authority over the para-human status of the racialised, is useful for thinking through the ways in which this plasticity mobilises masculinity in service of its authority. Racialised men become 'hypervisible subjects' (Amar, 2011) through a dynamic of excess and deficiency in relation to the binary gender coding of masculinity that has marked the gender orders produced by the long history of racial capitalism (Bhattacharyya, 2018; Robinson, 2020). In the gender binary system that still shapes gender relations and significations in so many societies, masculinity is expressed, *inter alia*, through sexual potency and industrious productivity. What is noteworthy about the racialising of a para-human maleness, as a means of eliciting consent for the exercise of coercion, is its reliance on a plasticity of gender coding; the racialised man is hypervisible as both excessive (as physical and sexual threat) and deficient (as unproductive waste). While the hypervisibility of racialised masculinity as physical and sexual threat is well documented in the histories of European colonialism and clearly evident in contemporary geopolitics, less often discussed is the way in which this hypervisibility of male/masculine excess is shadowed by the racialised figuring of male/masculine deficiency and redundancy, and the threat posed by this gendered waste.

FROM EXCESS TO DEFICIENCY

Fifteen years ago, as the global financial crisis took hold, Connell (2008: 248), in her discussion of masculinities under neoliberalism, was noting that in 'third-world cities there has been a de-institutionalisation of economic life that has left very large numbers of young men in precarious conditions.' This has provoked considerable anxiety among political and economic elites for many years. Since the Second World War, Hendrixson (2004: 8) notes, 'US military analysts and academics have defined the growing numbers of young people in the South as a potential national security threat.' With the onset of the War on Terror, the 'youth bulge' thesis gained increasing traction in US national security debates, as Hendrixson explains:

> Personified as a discontented, angry young man, almost always a person of colour, the 'youth bulge' is seen as an unpredictable, out-of-control force in the South generally, with Africa, the Middle East, and parts of Asia and Latin America all considered hot spots. (Hendrixson, 2004: 8)

Elite concern about this 'out-of-control force' of discontented young men, often framed as potential or actual criminals, terrorists and migrants, has helped to drive the increasing securitisation of public policy in many societies (Mabee, 2009; Amar, 2013; Reveron, 2016). Singh's discussion of these figures of racialised threat notes that the 'criminal, the barbarian, and the terrorist represent actors who lack self-control, who are incapable of inhabiting liberal subjectivity, and who therefore must be controlled through illiberal means (either extermination or the deprivation of their freedom)' (Singh, 2019: 118). Graham (2011) discusses this increasing securitisation as the rise of a 'military urbanism', which expresses the growing paramilitarisation of urban law enforcement in both formerly colonised and colonising societies. A large body of scholarship on urban youth gangs has highlighted the use of tropes of violent masculinities, implicitly or explicitly racialised, in public policy discourse to solicit consent for repressive measures (Rodgers, 2007; Streicher, 2011).

But the desire for repression of the racialised male Other is driven not simply by elite fear of violent excess but also anxiety over the unproductive waste this Other embodies. The economic restructuring that birthed the 'law and order society' of the UK in the 1970s, via the moral panic of the 'black mugger' analysed so clearly by Hall *et al.* (1978), is also implicated in the expansion of the global prison population over the last 40 years (Acheson, 2022). In Gilmore's (2007) groundbreaking account of the political economy of the California state prison system, whose population grew nearly 500 percent between 1982 and 2000, even though the crime rate peaked in 1980 and then declined, she emphasises the functions of this system in managing the surpluses produced by capitalism's volatility, including surpluses of land, capital, and crucially labour. Capitalism produces, indeed relies on, idled labour; '[a]s

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the judicial system of Los Angeles routinely used the acronym N.H.I. to refer to any case involving a breach of the rights of young Black males who belong to the jobless category of the inner city ghettoes. N.H.I. means "no humans involved."'

systemic expansions and contractions produce and throw off workers, those idled must wait, migrate, or languish until— if ever—new opportunities to sell their labor power emerge' (Gilmore, 2007: 71).

What is striking about Gilmore's account of this use of prison to warehouse idled labour, predominantly men, and mostly men of colour, is the wide degree of support for such an approach to the management of capitalist crisis, not only among political and economic elites but also the voters who supported the necessary funding measures. As Gilmore makes clear, moral panics about the violent criminality of the racialised male Other played a significant role in this expansion of the prison-industrial complex. But so too did the imperative to remove from view the embodiment of such crisis, in the form of redundant men, whose very presence was a lived reminder of systemic crisis. A similar logic, if extreme example, of such 'waste management' is at work in Duterte's sanctioning of extra-judicial killing as part of his 'war on drugs' policy in the Philippines. As Tadiar makes clear, citing the ethnographic research of Jensen (2014) in Bagong Silang, a slum relocation site established in the 1970s and today a *barangay* ('village') with the greatest population density in Metro Manila, the targets of this policy are urban slum dwellers, usually young men. Such men 'face the ever-looming threat of confinement in a deranging infinity of time, an asphyxiating state of perpetual coming to nothing, which they call buryong' which 'expresses in personified form that endless, aimless time of waiting, which haunts these young people facing absolute redundancy with the threat of maddening perdurance as their life sentence' (Tadiar, 2022: 166).

From the earliest colonial settlement in the Philippines, waste 'served at once as a legitimating rationale of capitalist dispossession and as an object of elimination for the improved production of value' (Tadiar, 2022: 29). Then, as now, the threat posed by these lives deemed unproductive was most commonly associated with racialised men, and this threat continues to sanction the use of coercive measures to discipline, and if necessary, eliminate, those whose lives represent waste. The only difference now is that their elimination has itself become valourisable; Tadiar notes the various forms of entrepreneurial activity, including extortion during arrest, ransom after arrest, 'even commissions for funeral parlors' (Tadiar, 2022: 238), that have been opened up by the official policy of extra-judicial killing directed at young, mostly male, urban slum dwellers.

CONCLUSION

The constructed threat of the racialised male, as both violent excess and unproductive waste, is used to elicit social consent for the exercise of coercive authority, in ways that help to suppress political dissent and social unrest in response to contemporary crisis conditions. Central to this project of consensualised coercion, in its effort to manage hegemonic crisis, is racialisation as a flexible technology of power, and its imposition of plasticity on the racialised figure. This article has explored the mutability of the racialised male Other, manifest as both a plasticity of being (through bestialised humanisation) and of doing (as violent excess and unproductive waste). Both forms of plasticity produce racialised men as legitimate targets of exclusion or extermination.

More work, both conceptual and empirical, is needed to examine the mechanisms though which, in differing societies, coercive authority in a context of hegemonic crisis is legitimated through reference to the racialised male Other. Clearly, there is a logic of containment at work, from border fences to prison walls to the policing of the boundaries of the gender category of men itself. It is telling that Ratele has proposed 'the concepts (non)men and (non)masculinity as conceptual resources in efforts to open up critical studies on men and masculinities to decolonial, southern and majority world-oriented perspectives' (Ratele, 2021: 771). The hybridity of these concepts recalls the plasticity of gendered racialisation so central to the legitimation of coercion. As Vergès (2022: 93) notes, in 'white supremacy's view, the gender of non-white people is both fixed and fluid, as gender binarism is an attribute of whiteness.'

A practice of enlistment is also evident in the ways in which majoritised groups are enlisted, ideologically and practically, in the consensual exercise of coercion against the racialised male Other. Far from the state being defined by its monopoly of legitimate violence, a range of state forms have long relied on a dispersal of violent labour among parastate militias and citizen patrols to maintain elite rule. Racialised narratives of security, often centring the threat of the male Other, continue to be used to enlist majoritised populations as agents of exclusionary or extirpative violence, from the 'borderguard masculinities' of the anti-immigration movement in Finland (Keskinen, 2013) to the orchestrated mob violence against minoritised communities, such as the anti-Muslim pogroms that have accompanied the BJP's rise to and consolidation of power in India (Vanaik, 2018). The ways in which this enlistment works in other societies and polities in the current context of hegemonic crisis merit further study.

So too does the incitement to punish that often accompanies this project of enlistment. As Tadiar writes, 'this punitive mode has long operated as a standing practice of racialisation that is intrinsic to capitalism' for which as 'organising codes of discernment and discrimination of conduct and status, race and sex are inextricable in the work of devaluation (…)' (Tadiar, 2022: 244). Deepening ecological, governance and economic crises will only further fuel incitements to punish and scapegoat the racialised and gendered figures of the migrant, terrorist and criminal, and thus displace rising social anxiety about the violent excess and destructive waste of capitalism itself.

If the authoritarian turn of the polycrisis is to be effectively resisted by intersectional anti-capitalist feminist movements, then these specific operations of gendered racialisation in the service of eliciting consent to coercive authority need to be more clearly challenged. Only this way can gender justice and social justice be reimagined together.

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Indigenous Women's Connection to Forest: Colonialism, Lack of Land Ownership and Livelihood Deprivations of Dayak Benawan in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Forest is essential for indigenous women in Indonesia. This article discusses the connection between Dayak Benawan women's lives with their land. Dayak Benawan women today face the challenge of preserving their forest and traditions. Meanwhile, the existence of the Dayak Benawan women is the source of protecting native forests in West Kalimantan. Indigenous women's identity is often connected to living in poor conditions with low quality of life and limited access to various public services. Their daily activities in the forest are part of the way they maintain their traditions in ecological knowledge. Based on long-term ethnographic research, we concluded that the indigenous women's tradition represents the closeness between humans and nature. The connection between ecological and women's knowledge have existed for hundreds of years in the Dayak Benawan community.

Keywords: forest, indigenous women, Dayak Benawan, land ownership, livelihood

INTRODUCTION

One of the major challenges faced by indigenous people in South-East Asia today is the threat to the forest in the form of palm oil plantations and illegal logging (Andrianto, Komarudin and Pacheco, 2019; Dallinger, 2011; Obidzinski, Andriani, Komarudin, and Andrianto, 2012; Stephenson and Dobson, 2020; Unjan, Nissapa and Phitthayaphinant, 2013). Moreover, the development of the indigenous concept stems from the experience of colonialism, where indigenous peoples experienced marginalisation due to colonialism (United Nations, 2009).

The connection between indigenous women and forests has been a topic of growing interest in recent years due to its importance for both environmental conservation and social justice. In Indonesia, the Dayak Benawan community is an indigenous group that has a deep connection to the forest and relies on it for their livelihoods. However, their way of life has been threatened by a lack of land ownership and livelihood changes, which disproportionately affect women in the community.

Indigenous women across Asia experience particular forms of discrimination because of their multiple identities, discrimination against them as indigenous people, and discrimination of a different form against their gender (Tugendhat and Dictaan-Bang-oa, 2013). In Southeast Asia many indigenous peoples are not legally recognised as indigenous people with inherent collective rights. The alienation and marginalisation of indigenous women in Indonesia can be attributed to the fact that they do not have a specific law to protect them as a community. This can be seen also in the subordination (marginalisation) of women in accessing not only development, but also land tenure and use.

In Indonesia, the expansion of palm oil plantations can be observed in Sumatera, Kalimantan, and Papua (Petrenko, Paltseva and Searle, 2016). The land of Borneo (Kalimantan) is the last paradise on earth and is the lungs of the world, as well as the source of livelihood for indigenous peoples (King, 2013). The Dayak indigenous people in Kalimantan today are threatened with loss of their land and livelihood as an impact of illegal logging (Sirait, 2009). They are the target of expansion, and the forest targeted is part of the legacy of their ancestors (Sirait, 2009). The Indonesian state has constitutionally recognised the existence of indigenous peoples through the 1945 Constitution, 18B paragraph 2, which states:

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> The state recognizes and respects integrated legal indigenous communities along with their traditional customary rights as long as these remain in existence and are in accordance with the societal development and the principles of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia, and shall be regulated by law. (Lubis *et al.*, 2019)

Based on the national constitution, it can be said that as a civil society, every indigenous community in Indonesia has the right to live in security and sovereignty over the land that they manage themselves, including the rights of indigenous women in accessing land tenure and management. This means that the mandate of the Constitution is in line with the mandate of the opening of the 1945 Law, which explicitly states 'social justice for all Indonesian people.' This affirmation includes the inclusiveness of access for all indigenous women to get involved in the administration of the state. But, in fact, most of them are still poor and marginalised. Poverty that occurs in rural areas is often closely related to the concept of social class, social stratification, and social structure (Gounder, 2013; Wrigley-Asante, 2012). The different concepts and measures of poverty are found in a study conducted by Richman (2002), Arnold (2001) and Wright and Wright (2009).

Most of indigenous people in Kalimantan are against planting palm oil. One such community is the Dayak Benawan community that will be highlighted in this study. Generally, women in Dayak communities are in charge of the knowledge of forest management systems. However, the existence of palm oil plantations does not only change the involvement of women in traditional agricultural systems, but also destroys forests which change the patterns of obtaining and consuming local foods (White and White, 2011). Furthermore, the process of marginalisation is still happening, especially seeing the Dayak communities through the growing prominence of ethnic politics (Tanasaldy, 2012).

This article aims to explore the relationship between indigenous women and forests by examining the case of the Dayak Benawan community in Indonesia. Specifically, the article will investigate how the lack of land ownership and changing livelihoods have affected indigenous women's roles and responsibilities in the community and their connection to the forest. By examining this case, the article hopes to contribute to a better understanding of the complex relationships between indigenous women, forests, and land tenure in Indonesia and beyond.

The combination of ecological threats and marginalisation faced by Dayak Benawan people, especially women, has pushed the urge to fight back against these issues. Therefore, the initial knowledge of how Dayak Benawan women's connection with the land that they are currently occupying has to be highlighted. This article highlights the importance of recognising the unique experiences of indigenous women and the critical role they play in sustainable forest management. It also emphasises the need for policies and practices that promote gender equality and respect the land tenure rights of indigenous communities. Accordingly, this study aims to answer the questions:

(1) how is the connection between Dayak Benawan women and forest?

(2) how do Dayak Benawan women experience an increasing lack of land ownership and livelihood changes?

INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND FOREST

The literature on the connection between indigenous women and forests is extensive and covers a wide range of topics, including land tenure, livelihoods, gender roles, and forest conservation. In the context of Indonesia, several studies have examined the experiences of indigenous communities, including the Dayak Benawan, and the challenges they face in accessing and managing forest resources.

Land tenure is a critical issue for indigenous communities in Indonesia, as the government often grants concessions to extractive industries without recognising indigenous land rights. This has led to conflicts between companies, government, and indigenous communities over forest resources. For example, a study by White and White (2011) found that the expansion of oil palm plantations in West Kalimantan, Indonesia, has resulted in the loss of land for indigenous communities, including the Dayak Benawan. This loss of land has particularly affected women's access to forest resources and their ability to generate income from traditional livelihood activities.

Livelihood changes are also affecting indigenous women's connection to the forest. In many cases, government policies promoting commercial agriculture and mining have displaced indigenous communities and altered their traditional livelihoods. A study by Alcorn and Royo (2000) found that the Dayak community in Kalimantan has experienced significant changes in their livelihoods due to the expansion of the oil palm industry. Women in the community have been particularly affected, as they are often responsible for gathering non-timber forest products and engaging in traditional subsistence agriculture, which have become more challenging due to the loss of forest land.

Gender roles within indigenous communities also play a crucial role in the connection between indigenous women and forests. A study by Lestari *et al.* (2020) found that Dayak women in West Kalimantan play a significant role in forest management, particularly in protecting the forest from illegal logging and poaching. However, their role is often unrecognised, and they have limited decision-making power within the community. This lack of

recognition and decision-making power can lead to a loss of traditional knowledge and practices that are essential for sustainable forest management (McIntyre-Mills *et al.*, 2021; Widianingsih *et al.*, 2023).

Indigenous women have long played a critical role in preserving forests and the biodiversity they contain (Niko, 2018, 2020). This literature review examines the various ways in which indigenous women contribute to forest conservation and the challenges they face in doing so. One important aspect of the role of indigenous women in forest conservation is their knowledge and use of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK). TEK refers to the traditional knowledge and practices developed by indigenous communities over generations to manage and sustainably use natural resources, including forests. Studies have shown that indigenous women often have extensive knowledge of local plant and animal species and their uses and are important custodians of this knowledge (Padoch *et al.*, 2019). Their knowledge is often passed down through oral traditions, and they play a critical role in preserving this knowledge and passing it on to future generations (Niko, 2021; Harini *et al.*, 2022).

Indigenous women also often take a leadership role in forest conservation efforts, particularly at the community level (Widianingsih *et al.*, 2023; McIntyre-Mills *et al.*, 2023). A study by Lestari *et al.* (2020) found that Dayak women in West Kalimantan, Indonesia, play a significant role in forest management, particularly in protecting the forest from illegal logging and poaching. Women are often involved in community-level decision-making processes related to forest management and are important advocates for sustainable forest use.

However, Lestari *et al.* also show that indigenous women face significant challenges in their efforts to preserve forests. One key challenge is the lack of recognition of their role and contributions to forest conservation. Indigenous women's contributions are often overlooked or undervalued, and they have limited decision-making power within their communities and in larger-scale conservation efforts. This lack of recognition and decision-making power can lead to a loss of traditional knowledge and practices that are essential for sustainable forest management.

Additionally, indigenous women face significant barriers to accessing the resources and support they need to effectively manage forests. This includes limited access to education and training programs, as well as limited access to financial resources and markets for sustainably harvested forest products (Niko, 2022). Their knowledge and leadership are essential for sustainable forest management, but they face significant challenges in their efforts to do so. Policies and practices that promote gender equality and recognise the contributions of indigenous women are crucial for effective forest conservation and the empowerment of indigenous communities.

DAYAK IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Traditional identity is indeed an unclear concept. Even in international policy, non-traditional minority groups are not recognized as indigenous peoples even if they claim a native identity, this is because ethnic groups internationally are seen as empowering terminology (Corntassel and Primeau, 1998). For example, in many economic empowerment programs, non-traditional minority groups are not to benefit from economic growth.

Weaver (2001) actually questioned whether indigenous identity is the same as cultural identity which is reflected through indigenous values, beliefs, and perspectives. There are various definitions of indigenous identity. Formally, the government provides specific detailed definitions so that they can be useful for legal protection actions and the fulfilment of certain rights to indigenous peoples (Jacobs, 2019).

The term 'indigenous' has been commonly mentioned since centuries before Indonesia became independent. Indigenous people can be preferential by other terms such as tribes, indigenous peoples, ethnic groups, and others. Additionally, when referring to geographical location there may be mentions for land people, sea people, mountain people, hill people, etc., where this practical purpose is used to refer to the terminology 'indigenous peoples'. Martono *et al.* (2022) study that identity has a positive impact on maintaining national stability. There are about 370 million people in the world who could be specified as indigenous communities. They are spread across 70 countries, including Indonesia. The National Indigenous Peoples Alliance (AMAN) estimates that around 70 million Indonesian citizens are indigenous. They still practice unique traditions, they retain social, cultural, economic and political characteristics different from the dominant society in which they live.

It is undeniable that in many cases the terminology 'indigenous' can have a negative connotation. It is possible that many people do not use the word to express its definition of origin. However, of course these choices of use of the word must be respected to counter and eliminate structured discrimination among indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples are always what is conceptualised as '*orang Asli*/Native People', and when it comes to indigenous peoples, the idea of marginalists is also important to address (Tamma and Duile, 2020).

There are many other terms used in government policies that basically refer to the terminology 'indigenous peoples', for example local communities, traditional communities, indigenous villages, Indigenous Papuans (OAP) and others. This shows that the customary identity that is managed has not been established in the use of one terminology. The Alliance of Indigenous Peoples of the Archipelago (AMAN), an institution that conducts Judicial Review (JR) claims against Law No. 41 of 1999 concerning Forestry, uses the term Indigenous Peoples with the

Figure 1. Maps of Dayak Benawan settlement in Pejalu Sub-Hamlet (Source: Google Maps)

following definition: 'Indigenous Peoples are a group of people who live based on ancestral origins in a certain geographical area, have a distinctive value and socio-cultural system, are sovereign over their land and natural wealth and regulate and manage the sustainability of their lives by law and indigenous institutions.'

Most of the indigenous peoples in Asia territories are in mountains, plains, river basins, forest, and coastal area. Indigenous peoples in Kalimantan are a group of people who live in the rain forest areas of Kalimantan. The literature states that the words 'indigenous', 'tribal peoples', and 'indigenous peoples' have different terminologies (Benjamin, 2016). However, in this article, we choose to utilise the word 'indigenous' because we want to take the concept of whole community action at the local to international level. Veeger (1985) stated that society is not only a forum, but also action, namely social action.

The Dayak community originates from the Kalimantan Island. For thousands of years, they lived in a nomadic system (hunting and gathering) to survive (Roth, 1892; King, 2013). Apart from the new steps taken in recent times, the Dayak community still maintains the same cultural system, customs of the past and the traditions of their predecessors. Because of this, the Dayak community is often represented as being very close to nature (Cleary, 1997; Gönner, 2000).

The term Dayak is divided into two terms: *Dayak Darat* and *Dayak Laut* (Tillotson, 1994). *Dayak Darat* represents the Dayak people who live in wilderness areas under the foothills or on the hill, while the *Dayak Laut* represents the Dayak people who live close to the coast/sea. Tillotson further explains that the terminology of *Dayak Darat* and *Dayak Laut* was used at that time due to the fact that there was no customary term to unite or to distinguish these two groups.

METHOD AND DATA

This research utilised an ethnographic approach. Ethnographic context in this research is the process of documenting women's experiences to generate knowledge about culture and oppression, and to provide a space for women to explore existing knowledge and resources (McNamara, 2009; Schrock, 2013; Visweswaran, 1997). Primary data collection techniques in the ethnographic method applied were participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentary studies. Niko, who identifies as a native Dayak Benawan, spent some time living with the community in Pejalu Sub-Hamlet. This researcher has 'insider knowledge' and fluency of the native language and consequently fluently speaks with informants in the native language which generates a rich knowledge base (Watts, 2006).

Our study is specifically on indigenous people of Dayak Benawan community in Pejalu Sub-Hamlet, Cowet Village, Balai Sub-district, Sanggau District, West Kalimantan Indonesia. Based on the data from the Cowet Village office, the population of Dayak Benawan is around 1,558 peoples. Fieldwork for 11 months took place between June 2017 to November 2018 and November 2019 to February 2020 (**Figure 1**).

In the data collection process, the researchers were not assisted by assistants or other parties. The ethnographic data collection techniques included participant observation, in-depth interviews, documentation studies, and living with the Dayak Benawan community. Fieldwork was aimed to understand the way of thinking and acting of the Dayak Benawan community through involvement in the activities of the Dayak Benawan community. By being

Figure 2. Dayak Benawan women in conversation before leaving for the fields (the individuals depicted in the photo have given their consent) (2019) (© Nikodemus Niko)

directly involved, the researchers were able to document the women's knowledge in everyday life. This is in line with Williams (1995) assertion that ethnography is designed to explore how one interprets the world of experiences.

In the field, the researcher interviewed 20 Dayak Benawan women informants using a purposive sampling technique. All of them are native Dayak Benawan who were born and raised in the Pejalu Sub-Hamlet. They are not native Indonesian speakers, so the researcher interviewed process in their mother language of Dayak Benawan. Interviews with informants lasted an average of 45-60 minutes in their home. The interview questions were focused on how their daily activities connect to nature. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. The interviewer (Niko) was a native Dayak Benawan.

Data analysis was carried out simultaneously with the writing of this research report, so that data verification was also carried out at the same time. Data verification is based on primary data sources, namely verification through informant statements. Direct quotes from the informants were then catalogued under the themes of their experience and knowledge. Therefore, the data validation method is informant triangulation.

DAYAK BENAWAN WOMEN LIVES CONNECTED TO FOREST

Shifting cultivation is part of the Dayak Benawan community's tradition of survival and maintaining forest sustainability. Clearing fields by burning and shifting is intended to maintain the balance of their forest. The largest content of phosphorus in tropical forests is stored in trees, so it is necessary to burn the land to release the phosphorus (Setyawan, 2010). Furthermore, in terms of their farming system, the indigenous people only cultivate enough for their family's food needs (subsistence). After farming, the cleared forest is then abandoned for 10 to 15 years. After that, the community will find and open new forests for farming in the following year. In farming activities, women take part in clearing land, cutting trees, burning land, and harvesting rice.

Before clearing the forest to clear fields, there are several rituals performed, such as the *berai't* ritual which means giving offerings to the forest; rituals before burning the land; and rituals before *nugal* (planting rice). Women are a lead in the ritual, and the ritual is a form of their respect for the forest.

> The Benawan people cannot afford to not have fields. From the time of our ancestors, we have been farming. There is nothing to eat if there is no field. Nowadays, things are very expensive, you cannot afford to keep buying rice. (*in conversation with Ibu MD, a Dayak Benawan woman*)

Based on the interview, it is shown that in every ritual related to the farming system, women are the ones who perform the whole series of rituals (**Figure 2**). There is an intense psychological bond between the women and nature, causing this ritual tradition to indirectly maintain the balance of the natural ecosystem, respect human nature, and maintain good relations with nature (Shiva, 1986, 2001). So in the Dayak Benawan tradition, women are always seen as the masters of the forest.

Figure 3. Dayak Benawan women's daily activity in their home (the individuals depicted in the photo have given their consent) (2019) (© Nikodemus Niko)

Dayak women are closely related to the forest in their daily activities. They wake up earlier than men, usually they wake up at dawn starting with lighting up the fire and opening the windows in their houses (Roth, 1892). They leave for the forest before sunrise, and return before noon. Every day, they do the same activities; out and into the forest. From an early age of Dayak women, the introduction of life in nature and the surrounding forest is a must (Riwut, 2011) (**Figure 3**).

Every Dayak Benawan family has an average income in one day between IDR 15,000-IDR 20,000 (equivalent to 1 or 1.5 US Dollars). Poverty in indigenous women occurs not only because of economic problems but also due to structural issues—discrimination, lack access to education, health care and ancestral lands, and subjected to domestic violence, which curbs women's lives as indigenous peoples (Alcorn and Royo, 2000; Duile, 2020; Elmhirst, Siscawati, Basnett and Ekowati, 2017). Rural poverty is also synonymous with agricultural aspects that are linked with people's livelihoods (Dao, 2004). Situations in the household that often occur are a lack of fuel, insufficient household income, and poor housing conditions (Thara, 2017; Todd and Steele, 2006).

The Dayak communities in Kalimantan are still dealing with massive oil palm expansion, illegal mining, and illegal logging, and poverty is one of the consequences (Alcorn and Royo, 2000). Dayak women are the most disadvantaged with their forests being besieged by oil palm plantations. Furthermore, gender inequality is seen from inequality between men and women, in areas such as access to education, health services, and tenure/ownership of land (Tyer-Viola and Cesario, 2010; Balagopal, 2009; and Delisle, 2008). They cannot buy many things, while household needs must be met. Other needs such as the children's school needs then become a new burden. This is evident from the interviews with informants as follows:

Figure 4. *Mawant pade* (drying rice), traditional knowledge of Dayak Benawan women (the individual depicted in the photo has given their consent) (2020) (© Nikodemus Niko)

> *Motong'k* (tapping rubber) at this time the rubber price was low. The needs of the house are many and not all of them are fulfilled, I feel lucky just to be able to buy salt and seasoning. (*Ibu NL, a Dayak Benawan woman*)

> Nowadays, everything is difficult. We only work *motong'k* (tapping rubber), there is no other work to do. Meanwhile, my children need money (for snacks and to pay for school needs). (*Ibu NT, a Dayak Benawan woman*)

Based on the interviews data, household income of Dayak Benawan women has still low. The aspect of poverty in the household can be seen from household income (Thara, 2017). The dependence of the Dayak Benawan household economic system on *motong'k* as their only source of livelihood, creates income uncertainty. Rural women have low levels of formal education and very limited competitiveness, as well as very limited quality of human resources due to economic, political and cultural dimensions that oppress them (Alkire and Shen, 2017; Poonacha, 2010). Even in agricultural management, a gender gap can be observed between the severity of poverty experienced by men and women, with women's poverty being twice as severe in developing countries (Dao, 2004, 2009) (**Figure 4**).

For the indigenous Dayak Benawan women, nature is believed to be sacred and fruitful for the survival of the community and their descendants. This is evident from the informants' statements as follows:

> The forest is what feeds us. If there is no forest, we die, you cannot eat, you cannot live. (*Ibu MT, a Dayak Benawan woman*)

> If there is no forest we cannot live, we just have to wait to die. We keep the forest for life. Even if we don't have property (money), the important thing is there is a forest, we can definitely live. (*Ibu HY, a Dayak Benawan woman*)

We concluded that regarding the life of the Dayak Benawan women, their survival cannot be separated from the forest around them. Apart from the routine of daily work in the forest, the Dayak women always have various things to do, and are never lacking in work, such as taking firewood for cooking purposes, fetching water, and caring for children/babies (Roth, 1892).

LACK OF ACCESS TO LAND OWNERSHIP AND LIVELIHOOD CHANGES

Currently, the Dayak Benawan women face local expansion of palm oil plantations in their surrounding forests. Palm oil plants are a new commodity entering the Benawan forest area. Palm oil trees were planted by the Dayak Benawan men, as shown in the following interview:

…yes, there is planting of palm trees, we follow the lead of other people. Hoping to be successful like everyone else. We are women, so we follow our husbands. (*Ibu MG, a Dayak Benawan woman*)

…yes, we plant too. Rubber plantations were cut down into fields. After that, palm trees were planted. We don't plant (but our husbands do), we women go along with our husbands. (*Ibu LN, a Dayak Benawan woman*)

Based on the field data, the Dayak Benawan customary system does not accommodate women's rights to inherit land. However, the data collection system at the village level requires the male head of the family as the name of the landowner. This has made the Dayak Benawan women to become increasingly marginalised in regard to land ownership. Moreover, this situation makes women dependent on men for accessibility and land management. The aspects of poverty faced by the Dayak Benawan women are the lack of access to land ownership and limited access to land management. The aspect of gender inequality is seen differentially according to men's and women's access to control/ownership of land (Bradshaw *et al.*, 2017; Tyer-Viola and Cesario, 2010).

The data from the Central Statistics Agency of Sanggau District (2020) stated that the superior plantation products in the Sanggau region are palm oil plantations (TBS/*Tandan Buah Segar*), rubber plantations (Latex, Lumb), pepper plantations, and cocoa plantations (wet fruit). In 2009, a palm oil company (through the village government) conducted an outreach to get the attention of the Dayak Benawan community in Cowet Village to convert their land which was deemed unproductive—turning forests and fields into palm oil plantations. At that time, most people disagreed. Palm oil companies almost entered the Dayak Benawan customary area, but that did not happen because there was resistance, including the Dayak Benawan women who firmly refused to convert their forest into plantations (**Figure 5**).

On the one hand most of indigenous people are against palm oil corporation; on the other hand, they are clearing land for planting palm oil in their native forest areas. They have changed forest rubber plantation, to palm oil plantation. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the boom in the international market caused forest rubber to be exploited more intensively and competitively, and planted with a type of Para rubber (*Havea brasiliensis, Euphobiacea*) (Dove, 2011). The decline in rubber commodity prices is correlated with Indonesia's export account balance which is in deficit (Noviantoro, Bondan, Emilia and Amzar, 2017). The low price of rubber commodities has an impact on the purchasing power of rubber farmers, changes in family income sources, and the ability of farmers to invest (Syarifa *et al.*, 2016).

The existence of palm oil plantations does not only change the involvement of women in traditional agricultural systems, but also destroys forests which change the patterns of obtaining and consuming local foods (White and White, 2011). This change in farming norms has a negative social impact on palm oil plantations (Suryadi, Dharmawan and Barus, 2020). The existence of this smallholder palm oil plantation is accommodated by the various companies by utilising middlemen/collectors to buy TBS (*Tandan Buah Segar*) produced by the indigenous community.

The conversion of the fields of the indigenous people today is increasingly being carried out, this can also be seen as an impact of the West Kalimantan provincial government policy which issued the Governor Regulation Number 39 of 2019 concerning Forest and Land Fire Prevention and Management policy, which in the article prohibits everyone and legal entities (companies) to clear land through burning (Pemerintah Provinsi Kalimantan Barat, 2019). This policy had an impact on the indigenous people in Kalimantan generally. They have grown fearful in opening fields using their traditional methods, because they usually burn the land. Another option is to plant former fields with palm oil trees. This palm oil expansion has a negative impact, where farmers transform their livelihoods from subsistence shifting cultivation to planting palm oil, which also has an impact on decreasing biodiversity in the landscape (Suryadi, Dharmawan and Barus, 2020). In Dayak Benawan, they lost their water sources to pollution, and the fish that are the source of protein for their young are contaminated by harmful chemicals.

DISCUSSION

The Dayak women in Kalimantan face a situation of massive ecological expansion (Elmhirst *et al.*, 2017; White and White, 2011). This expansion creates conflict, in which women are positioned as victims (White, Borras, Hall, Scoones, and Wolford, 2012). The land conversion from forest into oil palm has had a significant transformative impact on indigenous livelihoods (Haug, 2014). For the Dayak women, nature is a source of breath that is important for the sustainability of life. Nature is a place for the Dayak women to find and process various types of food to feed their families and children (Roth, 1892; King, 2013).

Traditionally, the indigenous women have played an important role in preserving nature for the survival of their children. Significantly, traditional ecological knowledge contributes to maintaining biodiversity and building

Figure 5. Dayak Benawan women in their field rice (the individuals depicted in the photo have given their consent) (2020) (© Nikodemus Niko)

resilience of environmental ecosystems in the face of global change (Gómez-Baggethun, Corbera and Reyes-García, 2013). In the Dayak Benawan Women's case, they have traditional knowledge in preserving their forest. For example, women safeguarding their customary forests for a sustainable food supply. Unfortunately, the natural ecosystems in Kalimantan are being degraded by the massive expansion of palm oil and mining companies (Elmhirst *et al.*, 2017; Elmhirst, Siscawati and Basnett, 2015). This threatens the lives of the indigenous people and their nature, culture, and customs (Brainard, 2011; Petrenko *et al.*, 2016).

Our study found that in the last 20 years, the people of Sanggau District have lost 18% of their living space due to the expansion of palm oil plantations. Some of indigenous people have converted their forest to palm oil plantations, this situation adds to the number of palm oil expansion in Sanggau District. This expansion has slowly shifted the traditions of the Dayak Benawan, where women find it increasingly difficult to find their living space and livelihood. Moreover, in the hierarchy of palm oil plantations, women are one of the most negatively impacted by the industry (White and White, 2011).

The indigenous women traditionally have a double workload, working as family breadwinners as well as being housewives. The social order also legitimises this dual role, if there are women who do not work in the fields, they will become the talk of the villagers; being called lazy and unproductive. In this case, women suffer more than men in line with the increasing modern patriarchal economy which prioritises productivity (Shiva, 2001).

Access to basic livelihoods for Dayak Benawan women's households still rests on relying on natural resources such as rubber tapping (*motong'k*) and farming/rice fields. The existence of oil palm plantations that promise economic benefits and improve family income, instead this extractive crop takes away the roots of women's knowledge about farming with traditional systems and the loss of fertility of the land in which women daily livelihood. Palm oil actually marginalises women from arable land that is the source of household livelihoods, then the layers of marginalisation experienced by women because of their land ownership and management rights to land are also lost.

The indigenous women still maintain their knowledge of caring for nature. Caring for the environment with this tradition of women's knowledge has existed in the life of the Dayak Benawan people in the past and present. This psychological bond between the women and nature shows how women are an important element in sustainable environmental management (Shiva, 2001). The local knowledge that is part of the lives of the indigenous women indirectly maintains the balance of the natural ecosystem; where there are humans that respect nature, and maintain a good relationship with nature. The local knowledge of indigenous peoples has an important element in maintaining the remaining biodiversity of forests (Setyawan, 2010). Through their persistence in occupying the land despite economic disparities, women are highlighting the significance of the land as a valuable asset and a fundamental aspect of their cultural heritage.

Today's indigenous women of Dayak Benawan continue to participate in nurturing and preserving the tradition despite the large amount of expansion in their land. Their inability to access and control land results in their helplessness to prevent the conversion of rubber plantations and fields to palm oil plantations. Their livelihood structures have changed. Women's participation in palm oil plantations is inevitable, because they have no other choice, and their access to land tenure and ownership is still very limited (White *et al.*, 2012).

CONCLUSION

The lives of Dayak Benawan women exist closely side by side with their knowledge of nature management—land, forest and water. The findings of this study showed that Dayak Benawan women's lives have a specific connection to nature, namely, household livelihoods and land rights. The connection between Dayak Benawan women and the forest experiencing threats by the expansion of palm oil. There is impact on changing the livelihood of the Dayak Benawan family.

The experiences of the Dayak Benawan community illustrate the complex challenges faced by indigenous communities in accessing and managing forest resources, particularly for women. As such, policies and practices that promote gender equality and recognise indigenous land rights are crucial for sustainable forest management and the empowerment of indigenous women. Therefore, their forest-related traditions are intended to maintain the balance of the forest in the area where they live.

The land expansion is a serious threat to the indigenous people of Dayak Benawan in Indonesia. Therefore, the marginalization that may be faced by the Dayak Benawan women in the future is not only a matter of household economy and lack of access to control and land ownership, but also related to changes in livelihood systems that depend on palm oil and bringing further changes in lifestyle towards modern forms of consumerism. It means that Dayak Benawan women's lives and their connection to their land is threatened. Their knowledge of cultivating land is facing the threat of palm oil expansion and related industries. It is important to recognise the basic rights and local knowledge of the Dayak Benawan community in local government regulations and to consider how to manage the land sustainably without further marginalising these women.

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Female Fandom and the Anxieties of Agency: A Feminist Reading of the Indian Female Fan in *Guddi* (1971)

Parvathy N [1]*, Priyanka Tripathi [1]

ABSTRACT

Academic research on fandom has sometimes stereotyped female fans, potentially influenced by the gendered dichotomy in fan studies. In the context of Indian fan discourses, there has been insufficient academic engagement with gender which poses a significant gap that requires attention. This article explores the intersection of gender, specifically focusing on women, in Indian fan studies. Through a feminist lens, the article undertakes a textual analysis of Hrishikesh Mukherjee's *Guddi* ('The Doll', 1971), possibly the first Hindi film to diegetically represent a female fan. The study examines how the film portrays female fandom and yet acknowledges that it falls short in successfully dismantling the pathologising stereotypes associated with femininity. Nevertheless, the film successfully initiates a dialogue on the presence and importance of female fan practices in India. It explores how the film acts as a catalyst for a narrative that highlights the agentic potential of fandom. Additionally, the article delves into the broader implications of the film within Indian fan studies, including its capacity to challenge gender norms and inspire further research on female fan practices in the context of Indian cinema.

Keywords: agency, fan studies, female fans, gender, Hindi film, India

INTRODUCTION

Fifty-one minutes and twenty-four seconds into Hrishikesh Mukherjee's iconic film *Guddi* ('The Doll', 1971), Professor Gupta (Utpal Dutt), guffaws loudly at his niece Kusum (Jaya Bhaduri), who expresses her love for the actor Dharmendra and says*, kaun bacha he aaj filmon ke asar se?* ('who is spared from the influence of films?'). This scene is significant for two reasons: first, the scene epitomises the influence of cinema as a cultural form on social beings, and secondly, it can be considered as the first open admission and celebration of (female) fandom in mainstream Indian cinema[1] (Sharma, 2021). The choice of a female protagonist in what is possibly the first Indian film about fandom, despite its ideological conformity to patriarchal structures, speaks volumes about the development of female agency in uncharted territories. What sets *Guddi* apart and renders it memorable is its distinctive focus on the rarely explored theme of the eroticism associated with female spectators' cinephilia (Katyal, 2020). The film delves into the nuanced dimensions of female fandom, recognising and portraying the deep emotional and sensory connections that female viewers form with the objects of their cinematic adoration. Before delving into the complexities of these concepts, it is crucial to establish a clear understanding of their definitions. The notion of spectatorship in film studies encompasses the intricate relationship between the viewer and the cinematic experience (Colman, 2014: 72), while fandom denotes a collective and fervent adoration for a film star, enacted within tangible or virtual public spheres. Fandom reveals the interconnectedness of cinema, religious practice, and politics, particularly in regions like South Asia where cinema's popularity coincides with mass politics (Srinivas, 2021: 83). Unlike the spectator, who is positioned within the spectatorial situation and subject to the film's influence, the fan serves as a convergence point between the audience and the film star (Colman, 2014: 72; Srinivas, 2021: 83).

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[1] In 1913, Dada Saheb Phalke introduced India to motion pictures with *Raja Harishchandra*. It heralded the beginning of the Indian cinema industry, which continues to cover a wide range of films in regional languages including Hindi, Malayalam, Tamil, Kannada, Bengali, etc. These industries are often referred to by their sobriquets Bollywood, Mollywood, Kollywood, Sandalwood and Tollywood, and so on.

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By placing the female fan at the centre of the narrative, *Guddi* challenges prevailing assumptions that portray female fans as passive consumers or mere objects of desire. The film's exploration of the eroticism of female fandom is a significant departure from these conventional narratives that tend to prioritise the male gaze and thus objectify women on screen. The film instead, offers a refreshing perspective by recognising and celebrating the agency and desire of female fans. It acknowledges that women's engagement with cinema extends beyond mere admiration and underscores the complex and multifaceted nature of their cinematic experiences.

The primary objective of this article is to analyse the portrayal of the female fan in *Guddi* and highlight how the film becomes a significant intervention. Through a close examination of the female fan in *Guddi*, the article aims to shed light on how the film presents female fans as active participants with agency and desire, challenging the prevailing notion of passive consumerism. Additionally, this study seeks to critically reflect on the construction of female desire and subjectivity within the cinematic realm as depicted in *Guddi*. Moreover, this research aims to examine the broader implications of *Guddi* within Indian fan studies, recognising its significance in advancing our understanding of the complexities and agency of female fans in the Indian cinematic landscape. By contextualising Guddi within the larger discourse on female spectatorship, this study will contribute to the growing body of literature on Indian fan studies and pave the way for further research on female fan practices in the context of Indian cinema.

INDIAN FAN CULTURE: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

This celebration of stars as both textual subjects and facilitators of fan engagement embodies the essence of Indian fandom (Srinivas, 2021: 85; Dasgupta, 2021: ix). It speaks to the profound impact of cinema on Indian society and the role celebrities play in shaping popular culture. Within the context of Indian fandom, this lens allows for a deeper understanding of the dynamics at play. The celebrity assumes a central position as the object of fascination, analysis, and interpretation. Their on-screen performances, off-screen personas, and public appearances became the subject of scrutiny and discussion, shaping the narrative of their stardom, and by extension fandom. The visible escalation of fan activities (Srinivas, 1997: 8) resulted from the popularity of cinema as a social and public activity (Srinivas, 1997: 19). The rise in organised fan activities began in the southern states of India (Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh), such as the All World International MGR Fan Club Conference in 1986 (Dickey, [1993] 2007: 23), which then expanded to other regional film industries. While the presence of organised fan activities (fan clubs) was a rarity in Bollywood[2] (Srinivas, 2021: 84), fandom held a pivotal role within the cinematic landscape. The phenomenon not only contributes to the longevity and viability of the film industry but also signifies the cultural significance and impact of fandom as a dynamic social phenomenon in shaping the trajectory of Indian cinema. As mentioned before, notwithstanding the dearth of organised fan activities in the form of fan clubs within the realm of Bollywood, the enduring presence and influence of fan culture remained an integral and inseparable aspect of Hindi film culture. This assertion is substantiated by the profound influence and popularity garnered by Dev Anand, a highly celebrated Hindi film actor with a distinguished career spanning over six decades. A notable recollection shared by Hindi film actress Asha Parekh further accentuates the overwhelming devotion of fans towards Dev Anand. She nostalgically recalls how 'people were crazy about Dev Anand… we were shooting at a hotel which had beautiful flowers, and by the time we started the shooting… there were no flowers because people were going crazy about Dev Anand' (Arya, 2022). By the beginning of the 1970s, Rajesh Khanna[3] (a Hindi film actor), who was called the 'first Superstar of the Indian cinema' (Sarin, 2012), became the centre of fan attention in the Hindi film industry. Particularly popular among female audience members, his fans often followed his car chanting his name and leaving lipstick on it (Vivek, 2020). The enduring and dynamic nature of fan culture within the Hindi film industry signifies its intrinsic presence and profound impact on the Indian audience. The passion, dedication, and active participation demonstrated by fans towards iconic actors reflect a deep-rooted fascination that transcends mere entertainment. The recognition of fandom as a complex and multifaceted social phenomenon necessitates comprehensive scholarly exploration to unravel its intricacies, understand its implications, and shed light on the interplay between stars, fans, and broader sociocultural contexts.

And yet, the fandom landscape in India exhibits a distinct gendered nature, characterised by pronounced disparities between the representation of and attitudes towards male and female fans. This gendered dimension

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[2] Bollywood, often referred to as the Hindi film industry, holds a prominent position within the global cinematic landscape. It is known for its prolific production of Hindi-language films, which captivate audiences not only in India but also across various parts of the world. With its origins dating back to the early 20th century, Bollywood has evolved into a powerful cultural force, influencing fashion, music, dance, and storytelling trends.

[3] Described as the first superstar of Indian Cinema (Imam, 2012), Khanna was best known for his 15 consecutive solo hits between 1969 and 1971 (*Aradhana* ['Worship'] in 1969, till *Haathi Mere Saathi* ['Elephants Are My Companions'] in 1971), still an unbeatable record (Pothukuchi, 2019).

becomes apparent through the marginalisation of females in fan clubs and activities (especially in the South Indian states), as well as the limited scholarly attention given to female fan practices (Osella and Osella, 2006). These observations raise crucial inquiries regarding the problematic gender dynamics prevalent within Indian fandom (N and Tripathi, 2023: 4). The dearth of extensive research on Indian female fans sheds light on the oppressive nature of patriarchal constraints that compel women to assume a fragmented identity, thereby impeding their ability to fully embrace their fan identities (Pronin, Steele and Ross, 2004). Within this gendered framework, women encounter limitations in actively participating in fan communities, which subsequently perpetuates epistemic injustices by depriving them of recognition and agency within the fandom space. The patriarchal structure of Indian society reinforces traditional gender roles and norms, positioning women as subordinate and relegating them to the margins of fan culture. The dominant perception of fans as primarily male has resulted in a lack of attention given to the experiences and practices of female fans. Consequently, the voices and contributions of female fans remain largely unheard and unacknowledged in scholarly discussions and popular discourse. The gendered aspects of fandom in India not only restrict women's active involvement in fan communities but also impede their opportunities for self-expression and self-empowerment within the fandom space. By denying them the recognition and agency they deserve, this gendered framework perpetuates inequality and reinforces existing power dynamics. Through the diegetic representation of a female fan, *Guddi* attempts to address the broader discourse on Indian fan studies by foregrounding the experiences of a female fan. Furthermore, the film's treatment of female fandom addresses the need for a more inclusive and diverse fan community. It encourages a re-evaluation of the gendered dynamics within fandom spaces and advocates for the recognition and empowerment of female fans.

GUDDI (1971)

The release of the film *Guddi* in 1971 holds significant socio-political and cultural relevance in understanding the evolution of the 'new woman' in Bollywood and the feminist movements of the time. The 1970s marked important milestones globally, such the initiation of the Equal Rights Amendment passed by the US Senate in 1972 and the founding of America's first national feminist magazine, *Ms.* (1971) (Foussianes, 2020). In India, the period was characterised by social and political upheavals, including the establishment of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) (Tripathi, 2018: 185) and the declaration of the International Year of Women in 1975. These events contributed to the growing feminist discourse and the emergence of autonomous groups advocating for women's rights and social issues.

Within the Indian cinematic landscape, the 1970s witnessed a shift in the portrayal of female characters. Directors like Hrishikesh Mukherjee (*Guddi* ('The Doll', 1971), *Anand* (1971), *Bawarchi* ('The Chef', 1972), and Basu Chatterjee (*Us Paar* ('That Side', 1974), *Chitchor* ('The Heart Stealer', 1976)), amongst others who negotiated a middle ground between the 'extravagance of mainstream cinema' and the stark realist perspective of art cinema (Gulzar, Nihalani and Chatterjee, 2003: 592). They portrayed the uncertainties of 'romantic and marital' quagmires as opposed to the narratives of the 'vigilante superhero' (Poduval, 2012: 38), thereby designing a spectacle or narrative that could be understood by the general populace (Prasad, [1998] 2001: 161). Additionally, the feminist movement brought the 'woman question' central to the national agenda, which prompted directors such as Mukherjee to speak out about gender norms (Poduval, 2012: 43). Similar to the shift in the cinematic oeuvre, there was a perceptible transition in the treatment of female characters in the films of the 70s. Middle and parallel cinema featured more meaningful roles for female characters (Chamola, 2019: 752), creating a new female trope in Hindi cinema. One such film that vividly captured the spirit of the times was *Guddi*.

The film played a significant role in introducing the female fan trope into Bollywood's cinematic archives. Hailed as one of Hrishikesh Mukherjee's best light-hearted comedies and Jaya Bhaduri's acting debut, *Guddi* is often summarised as a film that 'show[s] the unreality of the commercial cinema' (Singh, 2015: 83). But *Guddi* is more than a didactic deconstruction of the fantastical world of cinema. The film traces the life of Kusum, an enthusiastic fan of Bollywood actor Dharmendra[4]. Her fandom, while initially presented as harmless, is seen as a transgression by her family members when she declines the proposal of a desirable groom (Navin), for she has surrendered her heart to Dharmendra – the object of her fandom. Kusum's apparently liberal family cannot digest the notion that she would 'waste' her life on a film actor. Her uncle engages the help of Dharmendra (the star) to cure Kusum (the fan) of her affliction (fandom). The pathologising of fans (Jenson, [1992] 2001: 13), here the female fan, who needs to be cured, is a clear reflection of the societal stigma against fandom in general. The film effectively portrays the pathologising discourse by presenting a scene in which Dharmendra himself refers to Kusum as crazy when discussing her intense devotion to him. When Professor Gupta seeks Dharmendra's

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[4] Best known for his roles in *Sholay* (1975), and *Anupama* (1966), Dharmendra is an Indian actor popular for his works in Bollywood. He 'created an influential image as a markedly North Indian, even specifically Punjabi macho man devoted to his mother and committed to upholding the honour of the family or of the village' (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen, 1998: 90).

assistance in helping Kusum disengage from her excessive admiration, Dharmendra's response reinforces the prevailing societal tendency to stigmatise and pathologise individuals with passionate fandom. He casually remarks that the film industry already has a reputation for attracting obsessive fans, effectively labelling Kusum as Professor Gupta's *paagal bhaanji* ('crazy niece') in the process. This dialogue encapsulates the larger cultural perception on the stereotypes and judgments imposed on fans, challenging the notion that being a fan is inherently negative or indicative of psychological abnormality.

In India particularly, fandom is considered an important cultural intersection of desire and (or as) transgression. The structural confines created by the patriarchal as well as the class (and/or) caste structures attribute a derogatory label to the homo or heterosocial desires that characterise fandom. While the male fans are privileged as '"natural owners" of the fandom habitus' (Friedman and Rapoport, 2020: 54), the idea of a woman experiencing desire for someone outside the familial paradigm is condemned and, thus, branded as a rebellion against the dominant structures that oversteps the bounds of proper feminine behaviour. Madhava Prasad in his seminal work *Ideology of the Hindi film* (1998) highlights the significance of films like *Guddi* and Basu Chatterjee's *Rajanigandha* ('Tuberose', 1974) in raising questions about the potential threat to class identity posed by external influences, particularly affecting women (164). In *Guddi*, Kusum disrupts the sexual economy of a middle-class, upper-caste extended family through the allure of cinema. She challenges the established norms by expressing her love for a film star, which jeopardises her role as a future wife within the endogamous network (Prasad, [1998] 2001: 170–171). The enforcement of endogamy, which signifies class solidarity, becomes necessary to maintain patriarchal authority and uphold the existing social order. Prasad's further observation though on Deepa from *Rajanigandha* can be extended to Kusum in *Guddi* as well. Both female characters embody a transgressive nature that seeks personal fulfilment without discriminating between social classes. Their pursuit of satisfaction through cinema threatens to establish undesired connections with the lower classes, thereby endangering the preservation of class identity and reinforcing the anxieties associated with it (Prasad, [1998] 2001: 174–178). As Nivedita Menon argues, 'Isn't it also more likely that humans experience sexual desire in a variety of ways, of which the heterosexual is only one? But the point precisely is that only the heterosexual, patriarchal family is permitted to exist' (2012: 23). A female fan breaks this extreme patriarchal policing of desire by society and by encroaching on an 'obsessive, predominantly male, working-class, and rowdy' (Punathambekar, 2007: 205) space.

Ironically, it is the star himself who spearheads the treatment of Kusum to cure her of her affliction (fandom). Dharmendra takes them to the shooting set, where Kusum is enlightened about the various processes and people involved with the production of a film. The lesson imparted to Kusum can be characterised as a two-fold process that simultaneously demystifies the cinematic image and attempts to remystify the image of the legitimate (real, not reel) hero, and patriarchal system. Throughout her interactions and experiences, Kusum is made aware of the realities behind the idealised portrayal of film stars, recognising their inherent fallibility, flaws, and limitations. This process of demystification challenges the uncritical idolisation and worship of actors that often pervades popular culture (Prasad, [1998] 2001: 171). The film concludes with Kusum realising that her love for Dharmendra was an illusion and accepting Navin's love and proposal for marriage. As she expresses her love for Navin, it signifies her voluntary acceptance and endorsement of the societal norms and expectations that dictate a reinforcing of the heteropatriarchal structures. This instance provides valuable insights into the socio-cultural dynamics and constraints faced by female fans in the Indian context. It illuminates the pervasive societal pressures and limitations imposed on women, compelling them to prioritise traditional roles and conform to established norms, often necessitating sacrifices of personal interests and passions. Kusum's manipulated transformation serves as a poignant illustration of the inherent tensions and conflicts experienced by female fans as they navigate the complexities of their desires within the rigid confines dictated by societal expectations.

At the outset, *Guddi* is a movie that warns the glossy-eyed audience (fans) of the reality of the film industry and what Mukherjee addresses as 'star charisma' (Singh, 2015: 212). Beginning from his introduction of Bombay, the cinematic hub in the film, there is a deliberate emphasis on the influential nature of the cinema world on the Indian populace. This is effectively conveyed through the use of an establishing shot that pans through the mammoth film posters and hoardings, capturing the attention and shot from the perspective of a star-struck young girl. By showcasing the massive film posters and hoardings, Mukherjee not only highlights the visual grandeur and scale of the cinematic world but also signifies its omnipresence in the lives of the people. Furthermore, the point of view shot adds an immersive quality to the scene, allowing the audience to experience the Kusum's sense of wonder and awe firsthand. It invites viewers to empathise with her fascination and serves as a reminder of the collective enchantment that cinema brings to the Indian populace. In a 1997 interview in *The Hindu* Mukherjee talks about an encounter with Chatura, a female flight attendant and an ardent fan of Rajesh Khanna. The meeting served as a catalyst for his introspection on the concept of star charisma, prompting the realisation of its elusiveness. Inspired by this reflection, Mukherjee directed *Guddi* as a cinematic exploration that critically examines the complex relationship between cinema and reality (Singh, 2015: 81).

The success of *Guddi* led to a regional Tamil remake titled *Cinema Paithiyam* within four years (1975). The titles of both films offer an interesting observation. The Hindi title *Guddi*, which is also the (nick) name of the protagonist, translates to 'Doll'. A doll, as De Beauvoir opines, is a capitalist strategy to foster maternality and passivity in young girls ([1953] 1956: 282–284). This conscious association of the female fan to with a symbol of naïveté is a manipulative strategy serves to remind the transgressive female (the fan) of her predetermined role (in the home-space). On the other hand, the Tamil remake's title (*Paithiyam* in Tamil translates to 'madness' / 'insanity') reinforces the popular characterisation of fandom, particularly female fandom, as madness. This problematic association of the madness trope with female fans becomes a controlling manoeuvre to reinstate the hegemonic gender hierarchy within the socio-cultural structure of the nation. Similar to Gilbert and Gubar's observation about the heroines of Jane Austen, Guddi (and Jaya from *Cinema Paithiyam*) is manipulated to accept their 'adolescent eroticism(...)as an outgrown vitality incompatible with womanly restraint and survival' ([1979] 2000: 161).

Female fandom, and the broader issue of female spectatorship, has long served as a site of resistance against hegemonic structures that seek to restrict women's agency. The anxiety surrounding female sexuality becomes heightened when women challenge socially prescribed norms, even within the realm of fandom. In response, men often feel compelled to tame these non-conforming women and mould them into docile wives, as a means to establish their own virility and honour (Pandian, [1992] 2015: 78–79). This dynamic is exemplified in the film where the male characters—Professor Gupta, Navin, and Dharmendra—regard Kusum as a non-conforming woman and devise an elaborate plan to eliminate her non-conformity and transform her into a subservient wife for Navin. These negative stereotypes associated with female fan practices, aimed at curtailing and controlling women's agency, are further perpetuated through subsequent filmic representations. Films such as *Sreekrishnapurathe Nakshathrathilakkam* ('A Shining Star' in Sreekrishnapuram, 1998), *Julie Ganapathi* (2003), and *Mohanlal* (2018) contribute to pigeonholing female fans into stereotypes, portraying them as comical figures or femme fatales (George, 2017: 100). These representations reinforce societal expectations and limit the scope of female spectatorship within predefined boundaries.

THE DYNAMICS OF FEMALE SPECTATORSHIP IN *GUDDI*

The constraints imposed on female spectatorship are deeply intertwined with social, sexual, and historical contexts. As feminist criticism highlights, the existence of constraints indicates the necessity for critical engagement with cinema. Roland Barthes, in his essay 'Leaving the Movie Theatre,' asserts that the film image functions as a lure, captivating spectators, and retaining its effect on the viewer ([1986] 1989: 347). This becomes particularly relevant when examining the female spectator, who is often portrayed in popular culture (films like *Guddi*) as succumbing to the mesmerising power of the cinematic image. By considering the constraints faced by female spectators, the allure of the cinematic image, and the dynamics between fans and stars, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in female spectatorship. This analysis not only contributes to the broader discourse on gender and cinema but also highlights the importance of recognising the agency and diversity of female spectators.

It is important to recognise that the female spectator is not an essential category, but rather an effect of discourse (Doane, 1987: 9). Feminist film theorists have emphasised the need to move beyond the limitations of sexual difference in spectatorship analysis. Scholars such as Juli D'Acci (1990) and Annette Kuhn (1984) have emphasised that the shift in focus from the male spectator to the female spectator reflects a significant political gesture in contemporary film theory. Pam Cook argues that women's understanding of cinematic representations is often dismissed as naïve or innocent, underscoring the need for feminist analysis (1983: 17). Female spectators may form strong attachments to cinematic representations, repeatedly watching the same film or avidly consuming fan magazines, as a result of their desires and identification with idealised versions of themselves. Although focused on the male spectator, Laura Mulvey's work on scopophilia and narcissism (1975: 10) significantly contributed to the theorisation of the role of desire in female spectatorship, revealing the ways in which women engage with and invest in the cinematic imaginary. In addition, Mary Ellen Brown also argues that society tends to perceive the act of women deriving pleasure from popular narrative forms as inherently problematic (1990: 201). This perspective underscores the underlying challenges and biases that women face in their engagement with media texts and further emphasises the significance of critically examining the dynamics of female spectatorship.

Through Kusum, *Guddi* explores the vicissitudes of female spectatorship, capturing the interplay between cinematic representations and the desires attached to them. The film's effectiveness lies in its ability to create a relatable character. The dynamics of Kusum's relationship with Dharmendra encapsulate the complexities of female spectatorship and fan culture. The film oscillates between the dreamlike sequences where Kusum imagines her fandom acknowledged and legitimised by the star and the harsh reality where the divide between the cinematic world and her own life becomes apparent. Mukherjee brilliantly exemplifies this divide through a scene which unfolds during Kusum and Dharmendra's second meeting at the film studio. The scene unfolds as a dreamlike

reverie, depicting Kusum's anticipated encounter with Dharmendra and contrasting it with the stark reality. In her reverie, Kusum envisions an idealised response from Dharmendra *Aap ko ek baar dekh liya toh kaise bhool sakte hain?* ('Having seen you once, how could I ever forget you?'). Equally enamoured, she responds with a filmy touch, questioning, *Aisi kya khoobi hai mujh mein?* ('What is so special about me?'). However, as the daydream nears its end, the film jarringly cuts back to reality. The transition sharply shifts the scene back to reality, where Kusum is portrayed standing under the harsh glare of studio lights. Dharmendra, observing her with a hint of discomfort, appears distant and reserved. This stylistic choice, employing naturalistic elements in the dream sequence, serves a specific purpose in the film's storytelling. This deliberate cinematic technique blurs the boundaries between fantasy and reality, engaging the audience in the illusion that a movie star belongs to them. The unexpected transition (cut) from the dreamlike state to reality further creates a jarring impact, evoking a sense of surprise and emotional resonance for both Kusum and the viewers.

By weaving together, the narrative of female fandom and the exploration of patriarchal control, *Guddi* illuminates the complexities involved in female spectatorship. Andrea L. Press' assertion that television exerts a 'class-specific' hegemony for working-class women and a 'gender-specific' hegemony for middle-class women (1990: 179–180) prompts us to examine how these power dynamics intersect with the representation of women in cinema. *Guddi* captures this interplay exposes the ways in which Kusum's desires and aspirations are shaped by societal norms and expectations, reflecting the complex negotiation of agency within a patriarchal framework. The film raises crucial questions about agency, representation, and the negotiation of desires within a patriarchal framework. By highlighting the struggles faced by Kusum, the film underscores the urgency of critically examining the influence exerted by patriarchal systems on the agency and aspirations of women spectators. It underscores the necessity of unravelling the mechanisms through which patriarchal control manifests itself within the cinematic realm and beyond.

GUDDI'S SIGNIFICANCE IN THE INDIAN FANDOM SCENARIO

In the Indian context, women's fandom is often viewed as a 'clandestine affair, which implies that it is deemed unacceptable' (Herrmann, 2008: 86). While Mareike Herrmann's observations were focused on German female fans, they can be aligned with the situation of female fans in India. Even in India female fandom is frequently perceived as a clandestine affair, lacking acceptance and failing to be recognised as an empowering agency. However, fandom can serve as a means for women to reshape the status quo and challenge existing norms. From the beginning of the film, Kusum is portrayed as a fiercely independent character who bends the rules to exercise her choices. Despite her family's attempts to regulate her immense fandom for Dharmendra, she never misses an opportunity to sneak out to the theatre and watch the star's films. Furthermore, Kusum fearlessly challenges the societal expectations that dictate her marriage and conformity to the subservient role of a wife. Moreover, Kusum's unwavering commitment to her fandom, exemplified by her refusal to marry Navin, becomes the very reason she is manipulated into sacrificing her relationship. This manipulation exposes the prevalent societal dynamics that seek to suppress and undermine women's agency, particularly when it defies traditional expectations and challenges the existing power structures. The film subtly underscores the struggles faced by women who dare to assert their desires and navigate the complexities of societal norms.

FANDOM AND SEXUAL AUTONOMY IN *GUDDI*

In its exploration of female fandom, *Guddi* presents a nuanced exploration of sexual autonomy that intertwines with the broader socio-cultural fabric of its time. The film not only celebrates the assertiveness and yearning for sexual autonomy demonstrated by a young woman but also sheds light on the struggles and compromises women encountered while asserting their agency within a patriarchal society. Consequently, *Guddi* emerges as a poignant commentary on the complexities and limitations imposed on women's desires, even as it hints at the potential for change and the inclusion of women's perspectives.

The analysis of particular scenes in *Guddi* offers valuable insights into the limitations placed upon the sexual autonomy and agency of the female fan depicted in the film. By examining these scenes closely, we gain a deeper understanding of how the character's self-expression and desires are constrained, revealing the intricate dynamics of power and control that shape her experiences. The first notable instance is the scene where Kusum, prepares to go out with Navin to watch a film. The choice of costumes in this scene, as an integral part of the *mise-en-scène*, becomes a significant visual element that conveys the societal constraints and negotiations surrounding Kusum's self-expression. Initially, Kusum plans to wear a short skirt, inspired by the popular actress Mala Sinha, who embody modernity and nonconformity in films like *Paisa Ya Pyar*. However, her sister-in-law intervenes, emphasising the impropriety of such attire in a public space, particularly a film theatre. This intervention reflects

the social constraints imposed on Kusum's choices and underscores the cultural expectations that dictate appropriate clothing for women in public settings. Kusum's initial inclination towards Western attire symbolises her aspiration to defy traditional boundaries and assert her individuality. However, the subsequent transition towards Indian clothing signifies the constraints imposed by societal norms, resulting in a diminished sense of agency for Kusum and reinforcing the expectation that female expression should conform to cultural conventions (Dwyer and Patel, 2002: 203).

Another significant scene is a dream sequence which serves as symbolic expressions of desire. Although not explicitly, the introduction of this dream sequence enables his heroine to express her sexual desire. The sequence depicting Kusum in a bridal attire, ready to celebrate her *suhag raat* [5] with Dharmendra, is an adolescent reflection of claiming her sexual desires rather than shying away from them. Kusum's '*risqué*' dream sequence (Pandian, [1992] 2015:76), which is presented through a song, was originally included in Hrishikesh Mukherjee's 1962 film *Asli-Naqli* ('The Real and the Fake').

> The star: *Tujhe jeevan ki dor se bandh liya hai, bandh liya hai* ('I've tied you with the string of life')...*Tere zulm-o-sitam sar aankhon par* ('All your traits (imperfections) are welcome').

> The Fan: *Maine badle mein pyar ke pyar diya hai, pyar diya hai* ('I've given you love in exchange for love')...*Teri khushiyan aur gham sar aankhon par* ('I'll bear all your joy and sorrow').

Mukherjee contextualises this song to accommodate the star-fan paradigm. The star is singing what the (female) fan wants to hear. The sequence aligns with M. S. S. Pandian's perspective on female characters in MGR[6] films: 'The young and beautiful heroine (here, the fan) who takes the initiative, dreams of the hero …and pursues him, a behaviour that would in real life be treated as brazen' ([1992] 2015: 76). The dream signifies the maturation of a young female fan who, through her fandom, used to believe in the realness of her idol's (super)human talents. The song becomes a representation of a woman's desire for a partner who can embrace all her imperfections and create a deep emotional connection. The inclusion of this sequence in the film contends with the conventional notions of femininity, presenting a young fan who openly expresses her desires and challenges societal norms.

In *Guddi*, the examination of sexual autonomy intertwines with the socio-cultural dynamics shaped by the hetero-patriarchal framework prevalent in the nation. By doing so, the film transcends mere individual narratives and reflect the experiences of countless women (and fans) in Indian society. Yet, the empowering note with which the movie begins, slowly surrenders to the patriarchal notion of stripping a woman of her agency (here her desire and fandom) and forcing her to conform to the hegemonic structures that frames the society. While the film celebrates the assertiveness and yearning for sexual autonomy demonstrated by its young protagonist, it also reveals the compromises and struggles women encounter in their pursuit of agency. By juxtaposing moments of liberation with instances of constraint, *Guddi* acknowledges the complexity of women's experiences and the multifaceted nature of their desires.

RESISTANCE TO FANDOM AND AGENCY IN *GUDDI*

One key aspect explored in *Guddi* is the pervasive resistance encountered by Kusum in her pursuit of fandom. This opposition is emblematic of a broader pattern of marginalisation and pathologising of female fans in Indian society. In the narrative, Kusum does not understand the problematics of the resistance towards a woman performing fandom in India. The people who have decisive control over Kusum's life, such as her sister-in-law (the stand-in for her mother), Prof. Gupta, Navin (potential suitor), and even Dharmendra (object of her fandom) always offer strong resistance to her independence which includes her fandom. The instance from the film wherein Navin and Prof. Gupta belittle her fandom is a classic example of the opposition to and pathologising (Jenson, [1992] 2001:15) of female fandom in India. The characters associate Kusum's devotion with madness, employing such narratives to control and suppress her desires. This manipulation is often veiled as a means to facilitate her maturation or 'coming of age' (Raheja, 2002). However, it ultimately reveals the deeply ingrained hostility of society towards women who dare to challenge prescribed notions of femininity.

The manipulation of Kusum aimed at curing her of her cinephilia and curtailing her agency, is perceptibly manifested through a pronounced shift in point of view within the film's narrative. Initially, during her visits to the shooting set, the camera predominantly adopts Kusum's subjective perspective, vividly capturing her active engagement and fervour as a fan. However, as the orchestrated manipulation devised by Professor Gupta and

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[5] *Suhag raat* is a culturally significant term in South Asian traditions, representing the wedding night or the first night of marriage. It holds symbolic importance as the initiation of the marital bond and the beginning of intimacy between the couple.
[6] M. G. Ramachandran (MGR) was a prominent figure in the South Indian (Tamil) film industry and Tamil Nadu politics, known for his charismatic on and off-screen presence and strong connection with his fans.

Dharmendra unfolds, the focal point progressively shifts away from Kusum and increasingly centres on these characters, as well as Navin. Navin is portrayed as the embodiment of an ideal suitor, who unlike the film actors doesn't need 'duplicates' to rescue Kusum from goons. This deliberate alteration in camera perspective effectively symbolises Kusum's gradual erosion of agency within the narrative. Visually, it signifies her diminishing presence and significance as the focus pivots towards characters seeking to control and shape her desires. This shift in point of view functions as a narrative device that mirrors the broader socio-cultural context within which female fandom and agency are constructed. By distancing the viewer from Kusum's subjective experience, the film subtly reinforces the prevailing patriarchal gaze, which tends to dismiss or pathologise female desires and aspirations. The altered camera perspective aligns with the vantage points of those who endeavour to curtail Kusum's agency, effacing her subjectivity and perpetuating the inherent power imbalances ingrained in gendered relationships.

While in a completely Mukherjee fashion, none of the characters are evil, their actions reveal the complex subtleties of institutionalised hegemony that mediated depictions try to inject into the cultural psyche of the society. But it is also important to acknowledge the monumental achievement of creating a film that places a female character at the forefront, embodying agency and autonomy, especially considering the challenges prevalent in the 1970s. Borrowing from what Namita Bhandare suggested about *Padman* (2018), films such as *Guddi*, which aim to depict unexplored experiences, warrant some leniency despite their imperfections (2019: 203). The film emerges as a daring first attempt to establish a narrative that challenges conventional gender roles and advocates for the empowerment of women. By intertwining themes of agency, resistance, and the social construction of femininity, *Guddi* sheds light on the broader socio-cultural context surrounding female fandom and the suppression of women's desires. The nuanced portrayal of characters and the deliberate manipulation of Kusum's agency, as exemplified by the shift in narrative perspective, serve as devices that illuminate the power dynamics inherent in gendered relationships. The film exposes the patriarchal gaze that dismisses or pathologises female aspirations, effectively perpetuating hegemonic structures and denying women the right to exercise their agency fully.

CONCLUSION

Guddi emerges historically as a compelling and transformative intervention within Indian cinema, defying conventional assumptions about female fans and their place within fandom. By centring the narrative around the female fan, *Guddi* disrupts prevailing notions of passive consumption and objectification, instead celebrating the agency and desires of women as they engage with and form deep emotional and sensory connections to their beloved cinematic icons. *Guddi*'s release in the 1970s coincided with a momentous period of socio-political and cultural transformations in India, marked by the emergence of feminist movements and the public discourse on women's rights. The film reflects this evolving landscape by portraying the uncertainties surrounding gender norms and exploring the tension between societal expectations and individual desires. The film is also relevant to the praxis of Indian fan studies since it creates an inceptional conjunction between feminist studies as well as fan studies facilitating the mapping of female fandom within the corpus of Hindi (and Indian) cinema. The film serves as a catalyst for a more inclusive and diverse narratives on fan community, advocating for the recognition and empowerment of female fans. It prompts a critical re-evaluation of the gendered dynamics inherent in fandom spaces, compelling scholars and researchers to attend to the long-overlooked voices and contributions of female enthusiasts. While the narratives on female fandom have gained substantial traction in recent years, particularly with the continuous exploration into the possibilities of digital fandom, the film remains a landmark in the history of Indian narratives on fandom.

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The Place of Women in the Armed Forces: Legislation and State Compliance with Gender Equality Policies

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this comparative study is to analyse the challenges and problems faced by women during military service based on the state of gender equality in different countries. The study analysed international law and international judicial practise, which are the driving forces behind making adjustments and changes to the legislation of different countries. The main research method was to compare the existing doctrinal approaches to the study of gender inequality in the armed forces of different countries, to display quantitative indicators of women's military service in those countries, as well as to analyse and compare the nature of the challenges faced by women during their military service. The study also conducted a thorough analysis of the works of scholars in this area, which confirmed the existence of this problem of gender inequality in the armed forces. It was concluded that the authorised bodies of states should allocate significant resources and efforts to implement measures to ensure the rights of women in the armed forces.

Keywords: gender equality, gender inequality, discrimination, military service, armed forces

INTRODUCTION

Military service is a rather interesting object of research and is relevant in terms of regulating legal relations within and between nations. Historical experience shows that in their internal lives, states have been guided by a generally uniform definition of the conditions and rules of military service. They could also borrow the experience of other states, for example, during armed confrontations and wars. The period of the 20th and 21st centuries was a turning point when public opinion began to influence the regulation of the conditions of military service. The 20th and 21st centuries also marked progress in the protection of women's rights, including a significant expansion of women's right to defend peace and order, sovereignty, and the territorial integrity of their homeland. Military service in a range of armed forces became a way of providing such protection.

In the 21st century, there is still stereotyping regarding the role and place of women in the army and during combat operations. The study by Letendre (2016) shows that many people still tend to believe that the primary mission of servicewomen is not to participate in combat operations as soldiers but to provide quality support and care of servicemen, primarily medical care of them. However, this stereotype does not meet the realities of today, when women can serve in the military on an equal footing with men and fulfil their duty to the state.

The first mention of women serving in the army on an equal footing with men without any restrictions was in 1895 in Canada. Women served in combat units as fully-fledged soldiers. Women were also granted a certain social status as military personnel. This tradition continues to this day in several states. Gender equality has always been a topic of much debate and controversy and this includes the issue of access to military service, including the debate about the role of women during the Second World War which is still ongoing. Globally, discussions continue on the issue of women's involvement in difficult and dangerous combat missions and participation in missions; the issue of increasing the number of women in the army and the possibility of their career growth in leadership positions in the armed forces are key issues.

In Western Europe, even during the First World War, women joined the armed forces to defend their country. The 1970s marked a transition to voluntary recruitment, which led to an increase in the number of women in the

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armed forces. Bangladesh, Nicaragua, Northern Macedonia, France, Spain, Zimbabwe, the Maldives, Switzerland, Denmark, Austria, North Sudan, Suriname, Belgium, Togo, Montenegro, South Africa, Canada, and Germany are among the nations that have had women as Ministers of Defense (Tenkov, 2022). It is perhaps remarkable that over the past three years, women have led their defence ministries in the majority of states. This demonstrates the rise of certain forms of liberal equality in contemporary society.

In this current study, the main research methods used were the comparative method and methods of analysis and synthesis. These methods were used to analyse in detail the situation with gender equality in the armed forces of different countries and to correlate such situations with the challenges faced by both women servicewomen and the authorities. These methods were also used to compare scientific research in this area, i.e., how the mission and role of women are perceived in different parts of the world and whether their service in the army is possible at all. Statistical method was used to determine the quantitative indicators of women's service in the army. The problems faced by women in real life and in the army and the measures taken by the authorised bodies to eliminate such problems were investigated. The empirical basis of the study focuses on international legal acts, and some specific legislative acts of the countries of the world.

The purpose of this study is to conduct detailed research on the problems faced by women during military service based on the state of gender equality in the armies of different countries which is determined by several reasons. Undoubtedly, military service is a crucial process that takes place in every country, as it has a direct impact on the country's defence capability, national security, and the protection of its citizens. Where women serve in the military on an equal footing with men, it is imperative to ensure and properly protect their rights and interests. Moreover, the study of the problems faced by women during their service will not only help to eliminate these problems in the future but also become a catalyst for the implementation of policy of ensuring equal conditions for all military personnel without exception, regardless of gender. At the same time, the implementation of such a policy at the state level could reduce the well-evidenced and level of stereotypes and discrimination that currently exist within the military sphere. This, in turn, affects the overall effectiveness of the armed forces by broadening the range of useful skills and encouraging innovation, originality, and resourcefulness in the conduct of combat operations. More broadly, the study of this topic has a global social impact since it could increase public attention in the needs and rights of women in the army, encourage dialogue, and contribute to a change in military gender norms and stereotypes.

MODERN REALITIES OF MILITARY SERVICE BY WOMEN

An analysis of research on gender equality in the armed forces of different countries gives us grounds to note the following complications faced by women during their military service which is predicated on the model of the male soldier:

1. Physiological differences related to the specificities of the female body: these include issues such as being responsive to the different medical needs of women over men;
2. The physiological ability of a woman to become pregnant (for example, according to the US Department of Defence, the rate of unplanned pregnancy among servicewomen is almost twice as high as among the civilian population (Naclerio, 2015);
3. Sexual violence against women, which is several times higher than against men, and the consequences of such violence can affect both the mental state of women (depression, stress, various mental stresses) and their physical health. For example, according to the UK Criminal Justice Service, which provided data for the period of 2020, it was noted that criminal offences committed against women in general (sexual harassment, sexual violence) accounted for 76%, and the remaining 24% were committed directly against women in the armed forces (UK Parliament, 2021).

The military command and the military environment in general can create the very conditions for the spread of sexual harassment and discrimination in the army, and the increase in cases of harassment, bullying and violence against women. A number of measures should be taken to address the problem in this regard. First of all, a proactive zero-tolerance policy should be fully implemented to record cases of sexual violence and harassment, with appropriate sanctions imposed on offenders and bringing them to justice. Secondly, various trainings and educational events should be conducted on a regular basis to raise the legal awareness of military personnel for the purposes of preventing sexual harassment and violence (Meger, 2016).

It is important to create and implement mechanisms to support victims of sexual violence through providing 24-hour access to support, assistance and protection services. In the event of confirmed cases of violence, regardless of the rank and position of those involved, there should be an active investigation by independent and impartial bodies, which should include both men and women (Simic, 2010). It is also important to establish mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of measures aimed at combating sexual harassment

in the army. In turn, this will help to identify weaknesses and ensure continuous improvement of the system of combating sexual violence in the army.

Furthermore, there are limited opportunities for career advancement and promotion in special ranks. This is generally evident in states with military dictatorships or where men dominate parliamentary positions. Such an autocratic policy of not allowing women to hold high positions and be promoted is also typical of states that are actively involved in ongoing military conflicts, as they are guided by the misguided, outdated and historical assumption that women in such circumstances will be a burden and are not capable of performing supposedly serious tasks or being brave and courageous due to their emotional state. The stereotypical and patriarchal image of women as family carers and mothers, is the exact opposite of the main task in the army that constructs men as rational, and women as emotional.

There are gendered problems with military recruitment, which is a prerequisite for increasing the number of women in military structures. Often, all advertising for recruitment represents and promotes only the male body as the ideal soldier, associating them with certain markers of combat. At the same time, the male voiceover of the adverts is also being adjusted (Brown, 2012). Rarely in such circumstances is a woman's body depicted in a military uniform, thus reducing any connection between war and women. In addition to this, the portrayal of women in traditional stereotypical roles is quite common, for example, in the medical field. At the subconscious level, this creates inappropriate associations and reduces the number of women joining the army and their further career development by simply excluding them from representation (Speck, 2020).

By imposing physical activity and physical standards that are the same for both men and women, prospective recruits are excluded because of the implication that these are standards developed for men, and women simply have to follow them. In some western countries, the term 'gender neutrality' in the passing of physical standards has been introduced, meaning that such standards are developed which take into account the physiological characteristics of both women and men, but in accordance with specific expected combat tasks and not taking sufficiently into account age, gender, or other indicators.

It is worth noting that the issue of physical activity and the physical capabilities of women in the army in general has historically been subject to a number of discussions regarding women's participation in combat missions (Newby and Sebag, 2021). However, nowadays most processes and weapons are modernised and robotic. Therefore, the latest technologies correspondingly reduce the requirements for ground combat, automatically placing a more significant burden on the mental capacity of soldiers and their ability to use the available technical capabilities. These arguments undermine patriarchal perceptions of women's participation in the army, and therefore can serve as a basis for further integration of women in large-scale combat missions (Letendre, 2016). There is no doubt that under such conditions, women's military service can be much more effective and have a number of advantages over men's service.

There are also problems with military uniforms, which in many countries of the world are designed in accordance with the physiological characteristics of men, and for women they are uncomfortable both during regular military service and during combat missions. In more westernised countries, this problem has long been addressed but many other countries lag behind in this respect.

Countries which do support the rights of women in the army face a number of challenges, such as eliminating sexual harassment and violence, ending bullying, eliminating the use of outdated methods for training male soldiers in the context of training women, eradication of stereotypical ideas about the role of women in society, taking into account the physiological needs of women during their military service, provision of equal opportunities for promotion and assignment of ranks, and other issues. It is worth noting that the issue of women's participation in military companies is not particularly new. In general, women performed auxiliary functions in these companies, taking care of the economic, social, supportive and medical needs of the army. Their main functions were limited to domestic, menial duties such as cooking, laundry, and cleaning. A small percentage of women did participate in military companies with arms in hand, but this was not given much importance at the time, and their basic needs as women were ignored.

Noticeable changes were seen during and after the Second World War, when the issue of gender equality in general and in the armed forces in particular was raised at the international level (Campbell, 1993; Polishchuk et al., 2019; Böcker, 2020). These shifts began to take place when the discussion of securing the status of women in the armed forces was put on the agenda of international institutions and organisations. The first legal document that was subsequently ratified by many states was Convention (III) relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War (Diplomatic Conference of Geneva, 1949), which in Article 14 stated, 'Women prisoners of war shall be treated with the same favours as men prisoners of war, with due respect for their sex.' Article 29 stated that appropriate sanitary facilities should be provided in prisoner of war camps to meet the needs of women. Moreover, Article 108 provided that if a woman prisoner of war is serving a sentence, she should be allocated a separate bunk and should be supervised by female personnel only. Along with the 1949 Geneva Convention on the Treatment of Prisoners of War, it is worth mentioning other international legal documents that cover the issue of equality between men

and women. These include, first of all, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (United Nations General Assembly, 1979). This Convention provides for equality in the enjoyment of civil, cultural, political, social and economic rights regardless of gender and marital status. Moreover, the Convention requires the state to take all necessary measures to adopt and/or improve legislation to combat discrimination on the basis of sex.

In turn, the Beijing Declaration (Fourth World Conference on Women, 1995) contains provisions on the undisputed equality of women and their full participation in all spheres of public life, including in the management of public affairs and in general government. Paragraph 18 of this document states that achieving peace at both local and global levels is achieved, among other things, by ensuring equality for women, as they are a driving force in leadership and contribute to conflict resolution and peace. UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (Security Council, 2000) on Women, Peace and Security is the basis for addressing the promising issues of gender equality at the international level, establishing international security and conflict resolution, as well as operating successful peacekeeping missions and military missions. The provisions of the Resolution can be seen as patronising, intended to reassure the public that the role of women in the military is important in resolving conflicts where peaceful and military objectives intersect, as supposedly women can easily find the line between them. This does reproduce existing stereotypes of women as somehow 'nicer' than men and restricted to the caring role.

To date, the issue of women's limited access to leadership positions, significantly lower salaries compared to men in similar positions, and less frequent access to professional development and training remains ongoing. As noted, this is a consequence of well-established customs, the culture of particular regions, or the political orientation in certain countries. Gender stereotypes formed in this way can have a significant negative impact on women's lives. When a woman claims a so-called male position this can result in an aggressive backlash (Krook and O'Brien, 2012; McSally, 2011).

Cultural and religious gender norms have a strong influence on the development of public opinion regarding the role of women in the military. Even the issue of gender equality and the ways to achieve it will differ from region to region due to cultural differences. There are also many traditionalists who oppose gender equality in the military. The conservative Indian researcher P. Chowdhry (2010) argues that fighting and rivalry are male activities, as are combat missions and warfare. At the same time, it can be seen that women in the military are changing the usual way of life and establishing gender norms in Indian society. Although women have begun to actively serve in the Indian army in recent years, the experience of ongoing gender inequality continues to flourish.

The USA researcher M. H. Mackenzie (2012), in contrast to the above position, argues for the mandatory admission of women to military service on an equal footing with men and their active participation in military campaigns and operations. This researcher points out that being guided by stereotypes about the role of women in the army is to be taking the wrong path that will ultimately not service the modern army well. It is possible to find the confirmation of such a position in the monograph by Colonel Paul Grosskruger, who learned firsthand about the professionalism of servicewomen. The researcher's work 'Women LEADERS in combat: One commander's perspective' represents a gender critical examination of roles, responsibilities, and the contributions of servicewomen. Paul Grosskruger describes his eyewitness observations of women combat leaders and dispels popular myths regarding the employment of women in combat situations by providing examples of their great feats in complex and dangerous circumstances over a year-long deployment. The author concludes, '...effective leadership is based upon a number of factors – not one of them being gender' (Grosskruger, 2008). The views of these representatives of two different countries demonstrates differentiated approaches to the issue of gender equality in the armed forces, as well as to the definition of the role of women in society in general.

Although there may be binding norms and standards for preventing gender discrimination and inequality, women in different regions of the world still face violations of their rights due to their environment and discriminatory legislation. Rather, nations should adopt and implement policies that promote gender-neutral standards that are designed specifically for the military and defensive tasks at hand (Ables, 2019; Haltsova *et al.*, 2021).

EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN WITHIN THE REALM OF MILITARY SERVICE

The article now will turn to the appointment of women servicewomen to leadership positions in the armed forces and their promotion up through the ranks, which are generally carried out in states with a high percentage of women already represented in parliament or the presidency, suggesting that these are already nations that have widespread and embedded attitudes on gender equality. This is particularly evident in peacekeeping states, where such positions are gaining new importance (Barnes and O'Brien, 2018). Another significant factor is that the appointment of women to leadership positions in the armed forces is a consequence of conscious awareness and acceptance of liberal feminist tenets in western nations (Bashevkin, 2014; Koch and Fulton, 2011).

There are two principal ways to staff the armed forces:
1. Contracts signed on a voluntary basis (in practise, a significant percentage are generally men);
2. Compulsory military service for citizens who have reached the age of majority or a specific age.

In general, women are actively involved in military service in the global north countries such as the United Kingdom, Switzerland, Canada, the United States, the Netherlands, France, Sweden, Ukraine, Germany, etc. At the same time, there are a number of countries that require all men and women, without exception, to perform military service. These include Israel, Norway, Taiwan, Peru, and others. However, in these latter examples sometimes women generally perform support functions either in communications or medical units.

In the twenty-first century the percentage of women in the U. S. Army is 16%, or 200,000 women. But this data is only for recent years. In 1948, the Women's Integration into the Armed Forces Act was passed, the provisions of which set certain restrictions. These restrictions included, first and foremost, a ban on serving on warships and various types of aircraft that were directly necessary for missions and combat missions. However, this law granted women the right to participate in ground operations. At the same time, only 2% of the total number of military personnel were women, and 10% were allocated for female officers (U. S. Congress, 1948). Clearly, mandatory military service affects the percentage of women in the country's armed forces.

The end of the 20th century in the United States was marked by mass movements for women's rights in all spheres of society, and the percentage of women in the military increased significantly. This trend was also driven by a shortage of male recruits. The case 'Struck v. Secretary of Defence' in 1972, where the applicant was a servicewoman, caused a great stir. She was forcibly dismissed from service because she was pregnant. The court ordered the plaintiff's superiors to reinstate her and revise their policy on involuntary discharges for pregnancy accordingly (Powell, 1972).

In contrast, U.S. Congress decided to re-establish male military registration to facilitate recruitment for the first time after the Vietnam War in 1980. Note that this was only for men, not women. Later, the U.S. Supreme Court (1981) made a decision in the case of Rostker v. Goldberg, which stated that such actions did not contradict the Fifth Amendment of 1981 (Rostker v. Goldberg, 1981). At the same time, the US Department of Defence adopted a kind of 'risk rule', which provided for the removal of women from combat missions that could result in direct enemy fire or capture. In 1993, a Congressional special law was issued that prohibited women from serving on warships. Already in 1994, the above-mentioned 'risk rule' was abolished, but a policy of significant restrictions on women in the armed forces was introduced. Women were only allowed to serve in units that were not directly involved in combat.

The year 2011 marked a number of changes in the USA. These changes were associated with the passage of the National Defence Authorisation Act for Fiscal Year 2011 (NDAA). This law obliged the armed forces to revise their rules and regulations regarding women in the military to ensure that they complied with the principles of equality and non-discrimination. This was done to ensure fair competition in the armed forces. That is why, in 2016, the US Northern Command (NORTHCOM) and the North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD) were headed by Air Force General Lori Robinson. She became the first woman to reach this level in the armed forces. Another striking example was the fact that women can already serve in the Marines. 2017 was the first year that the US Marine Corps Women's Reserve was formed (Task and Purpose, 2017).

Changes in the physical standards for women have made a significant contribution to gender equality. Changes were also made on US warships, as women need separate amenities to men (Osiejewicz *et al.*, 2022) which was a considerable financial investment, perhaps demonstrating the US military's commitment to gender diversity.

In the UK in 2000, a specific study was conducted that showed that the presence of women on combat missions could have a negative impact on unit cohesion and the division of functions. It was also argued that women could not physically perform combat tasks and were not properly trained, claiming that the involvement of women in operations reduces the possible success of a combat mission (Bryce, 2017; Abrhám *et al.*, 2018). Many retired colonels are also of the biased opinion that women do not belong in the army due to the physical strain and fragile emotional state. They believe that the standard should be raised, not lowered (National Army Museum, 2016). The presence of such studies reflects the ongoing sexism in military structures. Despite the results of such studies, the number of women in the UK military is steadily increasing. In 2016, David Cameron, the then Prime Minister of the country, led Parliament to gradually abolish the exclusion of women from the army. In the same year, women were able to receive specialised military education and join the UK Royal Armoured Corps. Two years later, women were able to serve in the British Royal Marines, Infantry and the Royal Air Force Regiment. In 2019, women were granted access to all branches of the armed forces, with the exception of the unit, the Gurkhas (Ministry of Defence, 2020). As a result of these actions, in 2021, women accounted for 11% of the total number of personnel in the UK army (Ministry of Defence, 2021).

It is important to note that women have access to all military ranks without restrictions in Canada. The percentage of women among all military personnel was 15.3% in 2008 (Park, 2008), and 4.3% of them held military positions in the infantry, and artillery (Government of Canada, 2022). As for Ukraine, it is safe to say that the role

of women in state defence remains significant, especially after 2014 when active hostilities with Russia and the war started. A large number of people, including women and foreigners, joined the army on a voluntary basis in 2014. The number of servicewomen in 2018 was 22.4% or 25,000. They have occupied and continue to occupy various positions, including officer positions (Torop, 2018). In 2021, the number of women in the army increased to 31,757, of whom 4,810 were officers, 2,780 were privates, sergeants, and non-commissioned officers, and 1,162 were cadets (Mosiondz, 2021).

CONCLUSION

The basic argument for the need, efficiency and expediency of gender equality at any level, including military service, is key to the presence of women's leadership qualities. These qualities allow them to build a career in the field of state security policy, as well as in other related areas. In addition to having a wide range of leadership qualities, women have a high level of physical fitness, which is a key factor in their selection for combat missions and operations (Guliyeva *et al.*, 2018). It is thanks to broader gender equality and its promotion in the military that women have significantly expanded their rights and freedom to choose their place of work, and field of activity, and this now includes access to military careers. We argue that the differences that exist between men and women cannot justify in any way or contribute to the narrowing of women's rights, and the reduction of the overall number of women at all levels of the military.

In addition to a high level of physical fitness, women have enduring psychological qualities. Taken together, this serves as a basis for expanding opportunities to find non-standard solutions to military issues and better achieve goals. Accordingly, such actions also have an impact on increasing the number of women in the military, which in turn replenishes the human resource, knowledge, skills and capabilities of the state's defence forces. It should also be remembered that women are more likely to find a common language with women in the local population, who may sometimes, due to their religious beliefs or established traditions, feel that they cannot communicate with men. The intellectual abilities of women in the military can contribute to the improvement of strategy in military operations and the development of various plans for the advancement of troops, including protection plans. Women should not be stereotypically associated with weakness and the inability to perform military service. In our opinion, the equality enshrined in international legal documents should be a priority for women's rights and full access to military service. Moreover, this applies to the choice of occupation and profession in general.

The information provided shows that the number of women in the military and women in leadership positions in the army is gradually increasing. However, many countries still adhere to traditional, biased systems of gender order, where a man defends his country and a woman defends her children and home. The prejudice against women in the military in such countries remains quite significant. It is important to note that scientific developments and research on this issue should continue, as it is of significant public interest and it is a significant area of development in legal and military science.

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Sexuality and the Rise of China: The Post-1990s Gay Generation in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland China

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An ambitious book that is broad in its geographical and thematic reach, Travis S. K. Kong's *Sexuality and the Rise of China* captures the particular zeitgeist of the sexual and intimate politics of Chinese gay men post the 1990s generation. Kong employs what he has termed 'transnational queer sociology' as a method to examine the subjectivities of Chinese gay men across Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China to counter dominant Western-centric methods of queer knowledge production. Kong argues, Western-centrism in queer knowledge production either posits the West as a globalising origin of gayness, or essentialises the non-West as an authentically local and cultural Other to debunk a Western universalism. Kong therefore proposes instead to start with rich sociological analysis of nonnormative sexualities across multiple sites, to demonstrate how 'interregional knowledge systems' shape human experiences 'in critical dialogue with the West and *within* the non-West' (p. 16, emphasis mine). In the book, Kong draws on ninety interviews with gay men across the aforementioned three sites and compares their experiences of coming out, community building, sexual and romantic relationships, and identity formation in response to the changing political and economic regimes across these Sinospheres.

The commonality of Kong's subjects across these three sites is undoubtedly related to Chineseness. The title of the book, 'rise of China,' also signifies a temporal shift in our understanding of Chineseness that is distinct from previous enactments of 'cultural Chineseness' (expressed via Confucianism) or the regional 'Greater China' framework, which centred on mainland China—the People's Republic of China (hereafter, the PRC)—as the homeland of all Chineseness. For Kong, the rise of China indicates both the rise of Chinese nationalism and the Xi Jinping regime (p. xv). For his subjects in Hong Kong and Taiwan, especially, the rise of China necessitates a critical reconceptualisation of Chineseness that was taken for granted. The political particularities of living under democratic governance with a rich history of anti-authoritarian and social justice movements in Taiwan and a postcolonial, cosmopolitan city with conditional forms of democracy and human rights in Hong Kong become the factors that affect the distinct sexual, intimate, and identity building practices between gay men in these two places in comparison to the PRC. As Kong notes in the book, for example, post-Umbrella Movement, political affiliation between pro- and anti- Beijing is a definite 'deal breaker' in partner choices among gay men in Hong Kong (p. 112), whereas the vibrant LGBTQ movement and general societal acceptability of the *tongzhi* community grants gay men in Taiwan a more 'imaginative space' to explore partnership and intimacy (p. 127). In contrast,

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neoliberal precarity and political censorship have made dating and partnership more unstable and unattainable in the PRC.

Kong's analysis on the distinct trajectories of sexuality in these three sites raises the question of whether *Chineseness* can still serve as an unproblematic comparative framework. Despite (partially) shared cultural roots, the LGBTQ communities in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the PRC are shaped by different colonial histories, political movements, and economic developments, as well as ethnic and class tensions, which render Chineseness an ambiguous yet hegemonic concept that is most visibly defined by its Han-centrism and PRC nationalism. Kong's call for 'transnational queer' comparison perhaps only makes sense when Chineseness encounters the West— serving as regional case studies that 'resists the dominance of Western models in elucidating non-Western, nonnormative sexualities' (p. 9). To put it another way, a limitation in such transnational approach that even interregional referencing *within* the non-West is ultimately situated in the West/non-West divide to the extent that, from a bird's eye view, the non-West can only be significant in comparison to the West rather than on its own. Similarly, the Sinophone peripheries of Hong Kong and Taiwan are also only meaningful when compared to the Chineseness of the PRC rather than having their own significance. The insistence on Chineseness as the main common denominator and transnational comparative framework may lose the growing political disconnect across LGBTQ communities in the three places due to Beijing's heightened censorship. This not only drives activists in the PRC to concentrate on more urgent and local demands within the country, such as the rise of patriarchal nationalism, but also build closer political affiliation between activists in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

The discussion on the three enactments of homonationalism in Chapter Five provides the most controversial application of Chineseness as a comparative framework. Originated from Jasbir Puar as an analytical tool to examine sexual hierarchy among queer subjects via racialised nationalism, Kong expands the concept of homonationalism as a method to distinguish different forms of sexual nationalism enacted at both the state and individual level. According to Kong, Taiwan exhibits a form of 'incorporative homonationalism,' whereas Hong Kong expresses a 'deficient homonationalism,' and the PRC demonstrates a 'pragmatic homonationalism.' Kong sees the legalisation of same-sex marriage in Taiwan (a.k.a. Constitutional Interpretation No. 748) as a definite moment of homonationalism, which 'affirms Taiwan as the global/Western civilized world' and '[views] mainland China as conservative and backward' (p. 135). This analysis fails to capture the local queer and feminist debates and activist confrontations with the transnational Christian Right that drove Taiwan toward the path of legal inclusion, and instead, frames it as a tactical geopolitical move against the PRC. This analytical issue, again, is part of the limitation of using Chineseness as the main frame of reference, where countering 'Western hegemony' remains the ultimate goal and any distancing from Chineseness can be read as a sub-imperial betrayal, as Chen Kuan-Hsing famously frames Taiwan's relation to the United States and China in his influential book, *Asia as a Method*.

The popularity of the above transnational analysis 'in critical dialogue with the West and within the non-West' (p. 16) is certainly not an issue of Kong's book alone, but a problem of queer studies at large. Whereas queer scholars have attempted to undo their Euro-American-centrism for at least two decades *vis-à-vis* the transnational turn, the turn to look at the 'non-West' (even as an 'interregional knowledge system') in order to provincialise the 'West' is laden with the high risk of self-Orientalising—for who other than a Western audience is the overarching framework of 'Chineseness' as the most salient and digestible way to conceptualise interregional difference? *Sexuality and the Rise of China* certainly has moved beyond the binarism analysis of West/non-West, and in its sociological analysis, readers can encounter many political and economic details of gay men's lives in these three changing Sinophone societies. However, Kong's book brings a new set of issues to light, around how to do comparisons in Queer Asia when there are multiple empires and colonial histories embedded in interregional networks, rather than a singular hegemony of the so-called 'West.' While the centrality of gay Han Chinese male subjects may be an appropriate methodological move to simplify multi-sited comparison, this decision also misses the chance to capture the multi-ethnic, multi-national, and multi-gender dynamics of LGBTQ communities in all three societies. For instance, the rise of Southeast Asian populations in both Hong Kong and Taiwan due to neoliberal labour shortages. The emerging political discourses of queer Indigeneity in Taiwan, and the confrontation of racism and nationalism in the PRC with its economic expansion in Africa, all provide vital knowledge for queer inquiries in the era of the 'rise of China.' Kong's book definitely serves as an exciting beginning of this line of investigation across these queer Sinospheres, but it should certainly not be taken as its end.

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Birthing Black Mothers

Anelise Gregis Estivalet [1]*

Published: March 1, 2024

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The issue of the protagonism of black mothers in the public space has gained notoriety in the USA in recent years, especially in recent decades. The beginning of this process dates back to the 1970s, when black and indigenous women began to demand, more insistently, greater visibility and recognition of their actions, particularly among social movements. However, Jennifer Nash, in this extremely important publication for the discussion of this topic, questions the spaces and places that have been dedicated to black mothers in the public sphere. Thus, *Birthing Black* mothers presents a rich discussion based on debates on public health and visual culture, establishing two timelines in dialogue: the first, which refers to activist work around state violence against black men; and the second, which refers to the set of aesthetic and activist projects around medical violence against black women.

According to the author, the book was born from a desire to question the narrative about black motherhood, as well as seeking to understand the political usefulness of this narrative, recognising that black mothers themselves make use of it. She also considers black affections that are culturally valued, such as mourning or sadness, while anger, for example, remains unauthorised, often being treated as reckless or excessive.

Furthermore, the book is interested in naming, describing, and analysing what the author calls the 'feminist birth industry', highlighting the place of black motherhood in this industry, as well as the centrality of female praxis for this same industry. It is also interesting to think about the challenges imposed on black feminism. Nash understands that black mothers have used motherhood as a form of activism, since the US struggle for civil rights. By subverting domestic space, they transformed public space into arenas of resistance and empowerment. Nash also considers maternal policy both as a practice of defence, survival, and a strategy to safeguard maternal and child life, and as a way of making obstetric violence visible as a form of state violence.

This book is divided into four chapters. In the Introduction, the author calls attention to the theme of the crisis with a device that frames black mothers through a discursive representation of concern and care. Still, in this initial part, the author argues that black mothers only appear in the public and political discourses of representation through crises involving pathology or lack of support. In this sense, the author investigates how the 'narrative market' treats violence as an exception and not as a permanent condition that permeates the lives of black people. Following this thought, she discusses how black mothers would like to be seen, as they refuse to be represented as places of crisis. Nash continues, provoking interest in knowing how black mothers manage to make their needs visible, especially during the perinatal period. She studies how the black mother in labour becomes a political sign that can bring together affective engagement through compassion and pity. At the same time, she proposes thinking about the visibility of the black mother regardless of the temporality determined by the crisis. Meanwhile,

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black mothers continue to be *objects* of political value and symbolic support, being forced to navigate between medical racism and state-sanctioned violence, which day by day makes such black lives disposable and vulnerable. Black mothers continue to be invoked as bodies that inhabit the crisis, constantly experiencing the trauma, since they only gain strength from mourning, where their respectability and visibility take shape from the loss. Furthermore, the book traces how black mothers in general have become a political category for the US Left. In addition, the author argues that black mothers are figured as bodies that deserve compassion, education and support, due to their proximity to death, as they live in crisis. Thus, black mothers have become a political commodity for those who speak on their behalf.

Having black motherhood as a guiding principle, in the first chapter, entitled 'Black gold – black breasts', Nash explores the crisis faced by black mothers and the struggles developed to support, encourage, and reinforce black breastfeeding in the face of a construction of black mothers as not - breastfeeding. By analysing the idea of the black breastfeeding gap, he traces how this breastfeeding is represented by the state, by black feminism and by corporations, how it is starting to be seen instead as a practice marked by fullness, health, and nutrition. Drawing from this and the public health literature, he examines how in a short period black breastfeeding came to be seen as a cure for black precariousness. This chapter concludes by debating how black women respond to the temporalities of the crisis, as the images suggest that the structure of the crisis continues to shape and constrain the very registers through which black maternal flesh can be imagined and represented.

In the second chapter, called 'In the bedroom – childbirth', the work of black women doulas in Chicago is discussed, dealing with how doulas have been seen as being in the front line of defence for pregnant black women. Based on the analysis of 23 interviews carried out in 2018 with birth doulas working in the Chicago metropolitan area, the author addresses three tensions that permeate contemporary doula practice: issues of professionalisation, medicalisation and the exceptionality of childbirth. By treating doulas as actresses who brought visibility to what happens in the delivery room, the author perceives doulas as instrumental in reformulating the black pregnant body and, in this sense, as a political category.

'Black maternal aesthetics' is the title of the third chapter and presents the controversial black maternal aesthetics by analysing the ways in which three black celebrities are seen differently from the prevailing conception that sees precariousness, scarcity, and crisis in black mothers. By following these three contemporary performances of black celebrity motherhood, the author argues that these performances allow black motherhood to be re-narrated and reorganised. Furthermore, she traces how Black celebrity performances centre female friendship as a distinct form of relationality that Black motherhood makes possible. She further argues that this conception of black maternal friendship is enacted and represented in different ways than other contemporary public performances. Thus, this performance is rooted not in shared trauma and grief, but in black motherly pleasures, in glamour, and fun. In this sense, this trio is an example of the remodelling of black motherhood, imagining it not as a position of urgency, but rather as a complex and self-authored aesthetic that can be playful, cheerful, creative, sensual, and fabulous, even when related to loss and grief and in solidarity with more recognized black maternal political efforts such as in the activist group, Mothers of the Movement.

In the fourth and final chapter, 'Black motherhood – maternal memories and the economy of mourning', the author returns to black maternal memories, examining how the writing of contemporary black maternal life positions itself with and against the crisis. The author studies black maternal memories with attention to how the writing of black maternal life conforms and subverts the temporal, political and aesthetic demands of the crisis, presenting black motherhood as a space of communion, tranquillity, and connection, instead of precariousness and trauma. At the same time, the author argues that black maternal memories resist ecstatic, spiritual and natural motherhood, disturbing the expected logic and problematising the loss in a different way. These memoirs contest the association between pain and black motherhood and challenge the dominant conception of gender aesthetics and politics. Nash also argues that black maternal memories remain under-analysed, being little explored by the academy. The author's proposal, in this chapter, contemplates the desire to tell a different story of black maternal memories, a story that reflects on the intellectual and creative exchanges between black and white women. The investigation then focuses on perceiving the concern with motherhood as an experience permeated with feelings, even if these feelings are expressed in different ways.

Finally, in the Coda, we have a discussion about the place of black women in the COVID-19 pandemic, about the recent killings of black people by the police, and also about black maternal mortality. Relating these situations to black mothers, Nash problematises the use of black maternal flesh as a symbolic currency, a use that leaves the bodies of black mothers vulnerable to recruitment by the state and black feminism. By alerting to this type of use, the author intends to understand the variety of political needs of black mothers, as well as the multiplicity of their affections. Thus, in this imaginary reconfiguration exercise, black mothers can be much more than a political category to be mobilised.

Featuring rich analyses, whether on black breastfeeding, the work of black female doulas, black maternal aesthetics or black maternal memories, *Birthing Black Mothers* brings to light the discussion on the association of

black motherhood with loss and trauma. Instead of reinforcing this association, Nash skilfully demonstrates that black motherhood is much more than the pain associated with it, being permeated with affection, solidarity, creativity and joy. In particular, the work brings forward a new representation of black motherhood as a locus of black life, precisely as something that must be maintained, preserved and celebrated, not because of its ability to reproduce, but because of its ability to speak of a distinct and urgent position.

Overall, the publication is a very timely contribution to the field of gender studies, particularly on social representations commonly related to black women. The different approaches and analysis methodologies used by the author, with interviews and document analysis, make the publication extremely attractive and easy to read, both for scholars from different areas of knowledge and for those people who want to know more about the reflections that have been about maternity and black women.

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Knowledge, Power, and Young Sexualities. A Transnational Feminist Engagement

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It is not an easy task deconstructing inequalities, gender in/justices, the persisting dominance of heterosexuality, prejudice, and violence among those labelled 'marginal and marginalised,' all in the context of class-based and globally imbalanced struggles. Yet, Shefer and Hearn have done that, engaging, in a feminist manner, with young sexualities – a *troubling* book, as announced in the preface by Floretta Boonzaaier and Kopano Ratele, about youth sexualities coupled with a focus on adults (teachers, parents, policymakers, and politicians) demonstrating how a one-sided approach of young sexualities does not help in unfolding healthy, untroubled sexuality (and general wellbeing) for generations to come. The study unravels a vicious cycle of politics, power, and restriction, repeating itself across generations and geographically distributed power. The book is troubling in the sense that all critical research should be: disrupting, questioning, and systematically unveiling the taken-for-granted that keeps certain groups of people in their historically designated and traditionally gendered place, and others in dominant (patriarchal) positions. All that via an in-depth account of how youth sexualities unfold in a one-sided manner dominated by heteronormative prejudice, ageist assumptions, and pervasively gendered local and global politics.

The first chapter sets the stage by illuminating how trouble can and should take multiple meanings. It disquiets, uprooting undesired and historically systematic patterns, while at the same time showing how troubling it is to convey one-sided messages of health and social risks. Which other country than South Africa builds a stage where all forms of separateness (Apartheid) thrive until the present day, where the legacy is so vast? Thus, the book departs from South Africa, but at the same time mirrors patterns of thinking and behaviour to inspire worldwide. Young people's sexualities, their sexual 'education' mirror and reflect adults' norms, fears and political direction and adaptation, often in forms of disciplining instead of genuine, *respons-able* care. Efforts for gaining social justice in terms of gender, 'race', class, and educational positioning are manifold, but often reproducing, and thus undermining, the good intentions, if there are any.

The book is based on a vast body of literature, academic and popular (public discourse), about education, health care, politics, and of course, gender studies – it problematises the effects of certain dominant and often unquestioned knowledge. Chapter two unpacks the interrelations of youth, gender, and sexualities by looking at developments in South Africa after 1994, the year when the new constitution was put in place, with the promise of equality and equal chances for all. Obviously, this was – and is – also the age of HIV, and thus of a firm focus

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on health in relation to especially young sexualities. As already described by Pisani (2008), HIV triggered normativity and 'trade' to come to the fore: norms about (hetero)sexuality coupled with worldwide 'help': flows of money to the extent that we can speak of trade, streams of good and bad intentioned warnings related to sexuality. All this predominantly at young people, who are supposed to be sexually careless while non-heterosexuality '[is] marginalized, pathologized and stigmatized' (Shefer and Hearn, 2023: 23). The main body of research supporting and elaborating this stance builds key themes for interrogation: intersectionality, gender-normative practices (including the blind spots in heteronormativity), coercion in sexual practices (based on a combination of both preceding terms), a specific focus on how boys and men are socialised into fairly one-sided masculinity and gender-biased norms and practices, and the impact of programmatic interventions. For instance, the probably unintended focus on sexuality as 'dangerous' and abstinence as a 'solution' triggering a very one-sided, build no helpful advice for young people. Herewith the stage is set for further detailed investigation, underlining that South Africa is a highly relevant context for these studies, but also reflects worldwide patterns of meaning, policy, and practice.

Chapters three to five each provide in-depth study and critical interrogation about the main themes: hetero-normativity, patterns of power via 'victims and perpetrators', and a revealing treatise on how young people are being idealised and demonised via the adult gaze (and mind) of teachers, policymakers, and 'well meaning' social programmes. Gender binaries and heteronormativity have been widely studied and often proven ineffective in changing (gender) relations. Binary thinking and reinscribing heteronormative undercurrents keep producing images of passive femininity, rendering women helpless, vulnerable, and often victimised, or as super female survivors. Especially in the context of HIV/Aids, the reproduction of (older) male seducers and (very) young female victims has reinscribed both heteronormativity and a one-sided, ageist role division. Even the safe sex campaigns re-produce sexuality as one-sided or male pleasure driven – after all, all stories around condom use represent a specific understanding of male sexuality as both most important and most endangering.

What is a stake here is that identity and behaviour attribution (re)stereotypes young people, women and men, while hiding more detailed, 'life world' accounts of diversity and creativity in gendered behaviour that might provide a more nuanced picture of roles and of options that better express, and possibly alter the life world of young people. Summarising these patterns in a quote:

> …the construction of a binarism in which masculinity is associated with the sexual, and femininity with the relational appears to be inherent in the assumptions of many researchers and educators … (52).

All this raises questions for researchers and educators: how to address sexualities without affirming stereotypes that just confirm 'old' role models, practices and thus a lack of safe and happy sexualities? How much contestation will it take for a more nuanced understanding of feminine and masculine sexuality to gain common ground?

In Chapter four, the reproduction of binaries both in research and educational practices are unravelled as resulting in further entrenchment: heteronormativity further unquestioned, gender stereotypes affirmed, stereotypical behaviour (especially related to violence and victim positioning over time) and less normative space for thinking or acting otherwise continued. More specifically, this chapter shows how zooming in and out of South African contexts by switching scope from world research and South Africa-specific examples, helps gain a sense of the continuation of traditional patterns in an ever-changing world. Although alternative strategies are being promoted by some researchers and young people themselves, it proves hard to acknowledge the value of alternatives; showing and enacting vulnerability is hard under current circumstances.

This leads, in Chapter five, to explicitly address both idealisation and demonisation of young people. Using what is called a 'Critical Adult Studies' (CRAS) lens, the authors demonstrate how young peoples' sexualities (including education, if performed at all) depart from an 'adult' understanding of sexualities rather than a human-development understanding of what sexualities should and could entail. This further perpetuates heteronormativity and 'old' norms and values about 'proper behaviour,' stressing danger, risk, and violence in the first place. In South Africa, this takes on particularly harsh forms as:

> … South African young people are revered as the hope for the future, while at the same time stereotyped as at risk, vulnerable and dependent on adult knowledge and protection (79).

Especially in education, young sexualities are silenced – because it is difficult for adults to address the topic? Or because 'ideal' students should refrain from sexuality to better concentrate on their studies? This fatefully means that students who do explore their sexualities, and for instance, get pregnant, are to be excluded from education, obviously confirming gender patterns (girls leaving school for being pregnant and being 'promiscuous'). This can hardly be taken as an adult solution for 'a problem'? At the same time, such type of normativity engenders multiple power dimensions, via a temporal, or life course paradox: how should young people ever develop an 'adult' (balanced – non-binary, non-heteronormative) sexuality as part of their human lives if not via education, discussion, and openness about a multitude of related questions?

Chapter six then opens what at first sight (read) seems a different debate: the North-South debate in studies of youth and sexualities, whereby the south (Africa, Southern Africa, South Africa) is often represented as 'suffering' more from health risks, violence, and risky behaviour. What is being problematised here is a *transnational* perspective on young sexualities and how this is supported by traditions of doing and dispersing research knowledge. This take shows how research (transnational, transdisciplinary) also suffers from engrained norms and habits reflecting traditional power relations. Neoliberal university practices have once again colonised research habits, practices and what is seen as rules for proper research. Transnational feminist postcolonial studies have promoted different forms of knowledge production in that they address globalisation of capital, politics, and imperialist ways of knowledge production as pervading science and hindering alternative vistas on inequality, traditional norms, etcetera. But it is hard escaping neoliberal ways in research and teaching while, for instance, notions of 'development' and 'aid' speak so loudly, leading to 'privileged irresponsibility' (p. 99) among academics, politicians and those funding research and development in the first place. Yet, alternative approaches and knowledge outlets emerge when the pressure is high. Also concerning young sexualities, alternative powers are appearing via student activism and 'wild' scholarship promoting alternative pedagogies and creative assignments, e.g., in a combination of art, theatre and forms of activism purposefully including new knowledge and revealing extant power relations.

The latter is taken up in the concluding chapter, Chapter seven, where the authors sum up what they found and again dig deeper: showing how inspiring examples arise by young scholars who expand the limits of 'traditional' knowledge production. As with every revolution, student resistance and activism show glimpses of what a more equal and fair understanding of youth sexualities could look like - in 'intersectional gender justice struggles' (p. 125). Never to reach an ideal situation any time soon, but at least addressing, unveiling, and reversing extant power dimensions, in classroom relations as well as worldwide against neo-colonial undercurrents.

The book is densely written, citing numerous works and highlighting those publications and researchers that do problematise 'traditional research' by an explicitly feminist and deliberately international stance. Could it be that the *troubling* proven in this volume troubles more than young sexualities? It would be a benefit for all.

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