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Challenging the Autonomy of Art: An Exploration of the Nature and Impact of Progressive Art Critique

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ABSTRACT

In recent years art is often being criticised from a politically progressive perspective, such as on sexism and racism. Such ethical critique collides with two dogmas of the artistic field: its emphasis on aesthetic evaluations and the autonomy of art. These dogmas, having emerged during the nineteenth century, are often challenged by both (upcoming) members of the artistic field and outsiders. This paper aims to sociologically analyse current debates by exploring the media coverage of two diverse art controversies, in the United States and the Netherlands. It shows that members of artistic fields and allies often defend themselves with arguments drawn from said dogmas, while the critics' counter-arguments are in line with more recent ideas, developed in the humanities. The essay proposes several explanations of this recent phenomenon, related to changing power relations. It calls on scholarship to more structurally study this presumed trend.

Keywords: art critique, aesthetics and ethics, autonomy of art, cancel culture

INTRODUCTION

In the past, there have been many art controversies that are focused on the content of the work rather than its aesthetic features. Paintings, novels, films and other artworks that are considered sacrilegious, sexually subversive, unpatriotic or simply immoral have come under fire from conservative groups and authorities (e.g., Heinich, 2000; Tepper, 2011). Artists and cultural institutions often defend their work, not only by countering conservative criticism with their own progressive ideas, but, moreover, by emphasising the autonomy of art and the superiority of aesthetic over ethical valuations (ibid.). These arguments refer to two dogmas of the artistic field, that emerged in the nineteenth century. First, art is said to have an autonomous position in society, meaning that external influences such as money and politics should play a minor role. Second, artworks are often evaluated with aesthetic criteria, such as form and innovativeness, rather than ethical criteria regarding their political or moral content (Bourdieu, 1993, 1996).

In the 2010s and 2020s, however, a large number of art controversies from a politically progressive angle can be observed that meet more diverse responses. Art that is perceived as racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, ableist, et cetera, is being criticised for offending historically underprivileged groups. Due to the emergence of social media, such criticism can easily gain a wide following, leading to immediate calls for action, such as 'cancelling' the work or the artist (e.g., Ng, 2022; Matthes, 2022). In such cases, members of the artistic field face a dilemma. On the one hand, they may continue using the field's dogmas as a defence mechanism against any political or moral criticism, regardless of its political perspective. But on the other hand, a defensive attitude is

frequently left behind, in favour of a more ambivalent or even compliant response (cf. Matthes, 2022), in line with liberal attitudes in the cultural sector (McAndrew et al., 2020). For instance, in 2017, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis removed a sculpture by Sam Durant, which was intended to commemorate crimes against Native Americans but which highly offended this same group. In 2020, HBO Max temporarily removed the 1939 Hollywood classic *Gone with the Wind* from its streaming service after protests on its racist character and added an introduction by an African American film scholar. Book publishers hire so-called 'sensitivity readers' that check manuscripts for potentially offensive language that may harm certain minority groups.

Although academic scholarship in the humanities and philosophy has been providing art critique from a feminist, anti-racist or queer perspective for decades (e.g., Mulvey, 1975; Booth, 1988), sociologists of art have rarely addressed this type of critique. Art controversies as such did receive sociological attention, most comprehensively by Heinich (2000) in France and the US, and Tepper (2011) in the US solely, but they focus on the dominant presence of conservative issues. Both identified a large number of controversies in the US, often associated with the so-called 'Culture Wars', while Heinich described such debates in France as rare and anecdotal. Both discuss progressive issues relatively briefly and theorise them only moderately. This lack is an indicator of the low prominence of progressive art controversies in the 1990s, when the data for both studies were collected.

This essay does not try to objectively prove a rise of progressive art critique and its impact, although it gives many clues (cf. the 'repoliticisation' of the public sphere (Nieuwenhuis and Zijp, 2022) and the emergence of 'cancel culture' (Ng, 2022)). The aim of this essay, however, is to unravel and explain the used arguments from different sides and to try to sociologically explain this presumed trend. It does so by exploring the media coverage of two recent cases. Although the selected cases differ in many aspects, they share similarities regarding used arguments and social dynamics: members of the artistic field itself challenge the established institutions' defence mechanisms. One case is on the accusation of racism in literature in the United States (Jeanine Cummins's novel *American Dirt*), the other on sexism in the visual arts in the Netherlands (Erik Kessels's installation *Destroy My Face*). These cases move beyond unfounded criticism by angry social media crowds, often labelled as 'cancel culture' (e.g., Ng, 2022), even though this does play a role.[1]

The next two sections respectively theorise and historically trace the dogmas of the artistic field. Subsequently, two recent cases are analysed, which shows that art is partially defended with arguments from the discussed dogmas, while opponents question their self-evidence. The ensuing discussion proposes several explanatory factors that contribute to the recent developments. I argue that members of underprivileged fractions in the artistic field are able to challenge its dogmas by drawing on ideas developed in the humanities, magnified through social media. Finally, the conclusion proposes several lines of possible research in order to give this presumed trend more empirical substance, opening up a potential new terrain of sociological inquiry.

THE DOGMAS OF THE ARTISTIC FIELD

Bourdieu (1993, 1996) portrays the artistic field – or any sub-field within – as a dynamic battleground in which actors compete for power and status. At the autonomous side art is regarded as relatively independent from external influences, particularly of a commercial nature but also regarding political and social constraints, compared to the heteronomous side. Even though such autonomy cannot be absolute, it serves as a strong distinction mechanism that shapes the power dynamics within the field.

Artists acquire field-specific status, 'symbolic capital', by innovating in form, by following their inner feelings and by serving a small audience of like-minded peers who prefer more complex art forms. Hence, the dogma of autonomy is related to the dogma of aesthetics. Art is evaluated with a 'pure aesthetic', deeply ingrained in the habitus, in which form and a detached view prevail over the immediate functions that art can have, such as invoking strong emotions or representing recognisable content (Bourdieu 1996). Similarly, art should only be *criticised* with an aesthetic yardstick, rather than looking at the content that art refers to through an ethical lens (Heinich, 2000). The interpretation of the concept 'aesthetics' is not universal, though: some refer only to form and beauty as such, while others include originality, inspiration, symbolic meanings, et cetera (cf. Heinich, 2000: 186). I follow the broad definition.[2]

Although the supremacy of aesthetic valuations is not absolute (see Discussion), their dominance can empirically be observed in reviews by professional critics, that function as gatekeepers in the artistic field. For instance, between 1955 and 2005, aesthetic criteria such as writing style and structure dominated literature reviews in Dutch newspapers, while moral, sociopolitical and religious criteria were applied only marginally (op de Beek,

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[1] This essay focuses on controversies regarding the artwork itself rather than controversies regarding an artist's *behaviour* (such as #MeToo cases) or expressed *opinions* beyond their work itself (such as J. K. Rowling's stance on transgender people).
[2] One may argue that the dogma of aesthetics is in itself an ethical stance: the ethics of *not* involving ethics (cf. Devereaux, 1993: 209).

2013; Linders, 2014; cf. Purhonen et al., 2019: 68-75). Oft-cited content analyses of film and music reviews do not incorporate moral criteria at all (Baumann, 2001; van Venrooij and Schmutz, 2010). Moral judgements in professional reviews have only been studied in specific cases (e.g., Hall, 2001).[3]

Members of the artistic field and consumers with high cultural capital distinguish themselves from others by applying this pure aesthetic; they exercise 'symbolic violence'. Although Bourdieu (1984) does not explicitly discuss morality, one can deduce from his work on distinction that cultural elites easily dismiss moral judgements as the non-artistic opinions of ignorant 'philistines' and as unjust heteronomous intrusions (cf. Heinich, 2000; Stewart, 2017; Kuipers et al., 2019). However, moral valuations remain an overlooked phenomenon in taste studies, whether of a conservative or progressive nature (for exceptions, see Friedman and Kuipers, 2013; Stewart, 2017).

One caveat must be made on the somewhat arbitrary distinction between conservative and progressive issues that are central in this article. Conservative objections often regard sex and nudity, religion and patriotism, whereas progressive criticism usually regards underprivileged groups (Heinich, 2000; Tepper, 2011). Some types of issues are politically more ambiguous, though, such as art that mocks Islam (either perceived as criticising a conservative religion or as insulting a marginalised group), art that may incite physical violence or art that harms animals.

THE ARTISTIC DOGMAS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

As distinction mechanisms result in the continuous reproduction of the dogmas of the artistic field, these are often perceived as universal or static. However, until the nineteenth century, art had been created mostly for purposes external to art itself, most notably religious ones. Works were evaluated in terms of craftsmanship and morality. Heated debates on art's moral values – or dangers – date back to the ancient Greeks (Belfiore and Bennett, 2008). For ages, the 'fine arts' have been propagated for their individual and social effects, be it personal well-being, education or actual moral improvement (ibid.).

In the Western world, this gradually changed with late eighteenth-century Romanticism, when Kant and other German thinkers developed a conceptual distinction between ethics and aesthetics (Bell-Villada, 1996; Heumakers, 2015). Kant argued that beauty should be distinguished from morality and truth: an artwork or poem is not beautiful because it serves a higher moral purpose, but it is beautiful solely because of its aesthetic features. These aesthetics *serve* morality accordingly. In other words, Kant analytically separated two dimensions, but, in the end, the *aim* of art remained of a moral nature. In early nineteenth-century France, however, several writers and artists adopted Kant's views with an unintended twist: the aesthetic should not only be *distinguished from* the ethical, but it should be *favoured over* the ethical. Art can deal with immoral issues or may even provoke, but it should be evaluated predominantly with an aesthetic yardstick (Bell-Villada, 1996).[4] Originality and innovativeness in style and form gained prominence over art's external functions, such as morality (Bourdieu, 1996). Furthermore, another potential argument against ethical criticism was fed by twentieth-century ideas on the 'death of the author' (Barthes, 1967): if the meaning of an artwork is not fixed but constructed by individual spectators, the artist cannot be held accountable for supposed moral flaws.

Bourdieu (1996) studied power dynamics between different strata of society in order to explain the incorporation of these emerging ideas into an autonomous art field. The autonomisation of the arts as a distinct field in society already has its roots in the seventeenth century. The clergy and the aristocracy had long been artists' main benefactors, but faced increasing competition from a newly formed bourgeoisie and upcoming middle classes. These classes formed the basis for a growing market for artworks and books. In the nineteenth century, a new, 'bohemian' style of artists emerged from both the lower classes and impoverished elites. They romanticised living in poverty by turning 'their marginal position (…) into a badge of honour' (Belfiore and Bennett, 2008: 183). With their 'authenticity', they openly distinguished themselves from the 'superficial' lifestyles and conservative values of the elites. As a 'dominated fraction of the dominant class' (Bourdieu, 1984), they proposed an alternative way of acquiring status. They started to define their own artistic rules and criteria, not to be intervened by anyone external to the artistic field, whether commercial (cherished by the upcoming middle classes) or moral (imposed by the church and conservative elites). The rapidly increasing number of artists oriented themselves more and more towards their peers, including an emerging group of artistic professionals, such as gallerists, publishers and critics. They started to create 'art for art's sake' within a relatively autonomous field, in which new avant-garde movements continuously challenged the previous ones (Bourdieu, 1996).

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[3] Purhonen et al. (2019: 153-159) observe a high rate and an increase of 'political' terms in cultural sections of quality newspapers in six European countries between 1960 and 2010, but these include articles on cultural policy, censorship in non-democratic countries, et cetera.

[4] Belfiore and Bennett (2008: 177) show that this idea has many precursors that date back centuries; yet, until Romanticism, it had never been explicitly propagated.

In the course of the twentieth century, this logic was extended to upwardly mobile forms of popular culture (e.g., Baumann, 2001; Lena, 2019). Distinctions between 'pure' and popular aesthetics, between form and content, between relatively autonomous and commercial forms, were made regarding film, popular music, et cetera (Holt, 1997; Lizardo, 2008; Jarness, 2015; Lena, 2019; Purhonen et al., 2019: 75-80). This can be explained with the increased upward mobility through education of members of the lower and middle classes and the professionalisation and institutionalisation of popular culture (Baumann, 2001; Lena, 2019). Consequently, the artistic field's dogmas remained strong across cultural fields, albeit in various degrees.

The enduring impact of these dogmas does not mean that they are set in stone. Over the years, there have been many exceptions, while art history develops as a less linear process than may have been suggested above. Heumakers (2015: 353-362), for instance, presents it as a continuous tension between art for art's sake and social involvement. Furthermore, artists can only be *relatively* autonomous from the rest of society, while a purely aesthetic gaze is nearly impossible. The latter would imply that not only ethical *criticism* is dismissed but also ethical *appraisal* – not only the fear of negative impact in society but also the aim to have a positive impact. However, artists often wish to invoke certain emotional and cognitive responses. Over the years, many artists have explicitly kept aiming for social impact. Nevertheless, many in the artistic field do not take engaged or critical art seriously (Bourdieu, 1996: 71-77; Bishop, 2006). Many still use the dogmas of autonomy and aesthetics as a means of distinction, turning them into a sort of artistic myths with strong performative power.

TWO RECENT ART CONTROVERSIES

Over the past few years, there have been many examples of progressive art criticism that caused heated debates between defenders and challengers of the artistic dogmas, eventually resulting in 'cancellation' or – a moderate solution – contextualisation (e.g., Matthes, 2022; Ng, 2022). Rather than presenting a broad overview, two cases were selected for an in-depth analysis. By adopting a strategy of maximum variation sampling (Patton, 1990), this essay shows the similarities between two cases that differ in three significant aspects: country, art discipline and type of moral issue. Hence, the aim of maximum variation is not to compare these cases in search for differences, explained by looking at national and field-specific properties, but to study the *shared* patterns in the used arguments *despite* large heterogeneity (Patton, 1990: 172).[5]

The starting point of the research was a case on the issue of gender in the visual arts in the Netherlands.[6] Subsequently, I searched for a second controversy that differed in the three mentioned aspects, resulting in a case on the issue of ethnicity in literature in the United States. A further, unintended difference between both cases might be the more commercial nature of the latter one: the novel at stake was marketed as both a new literary classic *and* an unavoidable bestseller, making it a hybrid of the autonomous and heteronomous poles of the literary field (Sánchez Prado, 2021). Also, this case involves the accusation of cultural appropriation: the author's ethnical identity magnified the perception of moral flaws. An unintended and somewhat unfortunate similarity between both cases appeared to be an underrepresentation of aesthetic arguments (see below).

Both cases were studied by analysing publicly available material. Even though most art controversies initially erupt on social media (Ng, 2022), I focus on the resonance in more established media, that report on the debate within the field itself and feature lengthier arguments.[7] NexisLexis was used for searching news articles, opinion pieces and letters to the editor in English and Dutch respectively, around the months in which the specific issues were debated most. This was complemented with several sources that newspaper articles referred to, such as activists' petitions, online essays and some audio-visual material. Only sources that featured opinions were included in the analysis, predominantly by – but not restricted to – participants of the artistic field, resulting in 38 relevant sources for the American case and 15 for the Dutch case. These were coded according to different arguments pro and contra ethical critique.

Below, I first present the issues at stake and the institutional responses. Subsequently, I analyse the defensive arguments by members of the artistic field and their adherents, followed by the initial critics' counter-arguments. References are listed under 'Primary sources'.

Stereotypes and Misogyny: Presenting the Two Cases

Chronologically, the first case is the novel *American Dirt* by Jeanine Cummins, released in January 2020. It tells the story of a Mexican woman and her young son who are taking on a highly dangerous migration route by train to the United States, on the run from a local drug lord. The author intended to educate American readers and let

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[5] Many other cases were encountered, yet these were studied in a less structured and in-depth way. The arguments used show many commonalities with the two presented cases, except that aesthetic arguments often feature more prominently.

[6] Previously, I wrote a blog post on this case (van den Haak, 2020).

[7] But see Hopman's (2021) Bachelor's thesis for a thorough analysis of Instagram reactions on the Dutch case.

them empathise with Mexican immigrants, who are often perceived as a 'faceless brown mass', as she states in her epilogue. However, the novel was criticised heavily by Mexican-American and other Latinx writers for using one-dimensional stereotypes, telling a migration story in the genre of gruesome thrillers and portraying the US as the promised land. Moreover, the novel was perceived as an act of cultural appropriation, as it was written by a white woman, who – despite years of research – was accused of including many factual errors on life in Mexico. Cummins, who self-identified as Latina due to her Puerto Rican grandmother, admitted her limitations in her epilogue by stating she wished 'someone browner than me' had written the book. However, these disclaimers further contributed to the uproar. A month prior to publication, Latina writer Myriam Gurba (2019) opened the debate with a scathing online review. This was followed by other Latinx writers on social media, in blogs and in op-eds in established newspapers.

Had it been a modestly published novel, the backlash would not have been as harsh. However, the manuscript had been acquired by Flatiron Books (an imprint of Macmillan) for an alleged 'seven-digit sum' after a bidding war between nine publishers. Flatiron promoted it as *the* novel on migration and as a literary masterpiece; a blurb on the cover compared Cummins to renowned author John Steinbeck by calling it '[t]he *Grapes of Wrath* of our time'. But despite their inside knowledge or even lived experience, Latinx writers do not receive equal opportunities to publish work on similar topics, let alone to be massively promoted. Gurba (2019) therefore accused Cummins of operating 'opportunistically, selfishly, and parasitically'. However, she and other critics mainly targeted the publishing industry rather than the author. Writer Reyna Grande (2020), for instance, wrote in *The New York Times*:

> It took me three tries to cross that geographical [US-Mexico] border. It took me 27 attempts to get past the gatekeepers of the publishing industry who time and time again make Latino writers feel that our stories don't matter.

When Oprah Winfrey selected *American Dirt* for her influential Book Club on Apple TV+, a group of 82 Latinx writers signed a petition, asking her to withdraw the book (Literary Hub, 2020). They warned for the novel's potentially harmful effects for the 'depiction of marginalized, oppressed people' in politically conservative times. Many of them organised themselves in the collective DignidadLiteraria. Cummins' book tour was cancelled due to unspecified threats. There were also more constructive responses: publisher Macmillan promised to more actively recruit Latinx writers and editors in order to prevent future mishaps, while Oprah Winfrey hosted a discussion on the issue that had a broader scope than initially intended. Cummins herself apologised for several mistakes. The turmoil did not prevent *American Dirt* from becoming a bestseller, though.

The second case regards the art installation *Destroy My Face* by Dutch artist Erik Kessels, which opened in September 2020 in Breda, the Netherlands. As part of the photography biennial BredaPhoto, he covered a local indoor skate rank with sixty large algorithm-generated pictures of women's faces that had been 'deformed' by excessive plastic surgery. In order to criticise such 'Insta-perfect' beauty ideals and promote self-acceptance instead, Kessels invited skaters to ride over these pictures, which would gradually erase them and hence 'destroy the destruction'. Though intended as a socially critical artwork, it received immediate criticism on social media. Skating over women's faces and finally erasing them was considered an act of misogyny and objectification, particularly within the predominantly masculine skate world, in which female skaters do not always feel safe.

The (initially anonymous) artists' collective We Are Not a Playground (2020) wrote an open letter to BredaPhoto and the skate rank, accompanied by a petition that quickly gained a global following of both artists and skaters.[8] They argued that Kessels 'completely disregards any of the social, cultural and/or patriarchal implications of why more female-presenting people decide to have plastic surgery'. Similar to the first case, though, the petition was directed towards the organisation rather than the artist:

> We would like to acknowledge the work and effort that goes into creating projects like these and know all too well how long it takes for a work to be greenlit, researched, conceptualised, produced and ultimately become suitable for visitors. It, therefore, feels incredibly jarring that this conversation was not held internally. We think that this speaks volumes not only about Kessels' practice but about the field he exists and functions in.

Within a week, the skatepark removed the artwork due to the backlash by its own followers and sponsors. BredaPhoto did not applaud this cancellation but did later organise an open debate on the issue and on inclusion in the art world, featuring both Kessels and critics (BredaPhoto, 2020). Kessels himself was asked to withdraw from a photography jury in the UK, even though 'cancelling' the artist himself had never been the petitioners' intention. Also, he received many hateful e-mails (Maassen, 2020).

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[8] The collective, run by young artists, later turned into a more sustainable group that calls for changes in the art world in general, particularly regarding diversity and inclusion (https://www.instagram.com/not.a.playground/).

Hence, in both cases, artists aimed to create a socially critical work of art, intended to spark a debate on a social issue or to invoke empathy with a marginalised group. However, they both received objections regarding the content of the works, potential unintended social effects for which the artist did not take responsibility, and the lack of diversity and inclusion in the institutions involved. A further striking similarity is that the most vocal critics are artists and writers themselves, showing serious institutional critiques from within the artistic and literary field beyond unfounded protests by social media crowds.

Freedom and Interpretation: Defending Art

Although both *American Dirt* and *Destroy My Face* were rarely defended with aesthetic arguments, unlike in many other cases in recent years, the autonomy of art does come forward strongly.[9] The Dutch case shows the most straightforward form, by means of angrily written newspaper pieces. For instance, columnist Elma Drayer (2020) writes: "Once upon a time, the art world was a free place where artists could do their divine thing. And that's how it's supposed to be" (my translation). Others refer to the freedom of speech in general, while Kessels himself argues that, "as an artist you have your boundaries, of course, but you should feel an enormous freedom to do things" (Maassen, 2020, my translation).

In the American case, this narrative comes to the fore in rejections of the cultural appropriation argument: writers should be able to write about whoever they wish, regardless of their own identity. Despite her openness to criticism, Oprah Winfrey opened the Cummins episode of her Book Club with: "I fundamentally, fundamentally believe in the right of anyone to use their imagination and their skills to tell stories and to empathise with other stories." Cummins herself and others ridicule accusations of cultural appropriation in a slippery slope type of rhetoric:

> Would that mean therefore that I am only allowed to write stories about Irish Puerto Rican girls who were born in Spain and grew up in Maryland? (Jeanine Cummins, cited in Conroy, 2020)

> Shakespeare should not have written 'Othello,' Joyce 'Ulysses,' Flaubert 'Madame Bovary' or George Eliot 'Silas Marner.' Everyone is condemned to write autobiographies. (letter to the editor by David Jelinek, 2020).

> [W]e will end up with nothing but novels about novelists, and there are quite enough of those already. (literary journalist Jake Kerridge, 2020)

Related to the autonomy of art is the idea that art is *supposed* to provoke or to incite debate, which is particularly salient in the case of *Destroy My Face*. At several instances, BredaPhoto director Fleur van Muiswinkel emphasised the difference between serious criticism and calls for removal:

> That one of our works elicited a reaction, we really liked. That's what we stand for. That's why we display work in which photographers and artists take a stance and provide the audience with a mirror. We precisely want images to encourage reflection. But please then start a conversation [rather than a call for removal, MvdH]. (cited in Wijnands, 2020; my translation)

A second line of defence regards the discrepancy between the artist's intentions and the audience's interpretations. On the one hand, some argue that there cannot be a fixed or correct interpretation, as it is up to the public to decide what a work means, in line with Barthes's ideas on the 'death of the author'. Erik Kessels maintains that his work was supposed to raise questions, but: 'Which ones? Everyone can decide for themselves. I don't judge, I only bring an issue to attention' (quoted by Wijnands, 2020; my translation). On the other hand, those who freely interpret the work are criticised for their *incorrect* interpretations. Erik Kessels contradicts himself, backed by festival director Van Muiswinkel and others, by complaining in several media outlets that his critics did not dive into the work to understand what it is 'really' about and to detect the intended irony.

Such discrepancies also occur in the Cummins case, yet in a different way. The author intended to let (non-Latinx) American readers empathise with Mexican migrants but was criticised by members of that very community. Many readers and reviewers who like the book, however, emphasise that the intentions worked for them. When Oprah Winfrey asked her audience whose views on migrants had been positively altered, many raised their hands (Oprah's Book Club, 2020).

Finally, and most vocally, the critics are accused of 'cancel culture'. In the public eye, substantiated criticism by writers and artists is often conflated with calls for boycotts by masses external to the artistic field, who show a lack

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[9] On Kessels's work, not one aesthetic judgement is made in the public debate, whereas Cummins's novel is mainly praised with a – in Bourdieu's (1984) terms – popular aesthetic, particularly its page-turning quality. Several reviewers do *criticise* the novel with aesthetic criteria (writing style, narrative clichés, lack of complexity), often complementary to their moral critique.

of cultural capital by quickly liking or sharing social media posts without properly informing themselves. Hence, art's defenders accuse critics of a 'vicious backlash' (columnist Jawad Iqbal, 2020), 'sadism' (historian Jonathan Zimmerman, 2020) or 'fascism' (Erik Kessels, cited in *Medialogica*, 2020) while associating them with a 'mob mentality' (literary agent Doug Stewart, cited in Deahl, 2020) or 'the Taliban' (message cited in *Medialogica*, 2020). Note that some of these accusations compare critics with ultra-conservative groups (fascism, Taliban) that were usually associated with moral art critique. Some artists fear a future of self-censorship, which would run counter to the artistic ideal of autonomy.

Responsibility and Talking Back: Countering the Defence

The abovementioned arguments in defence of art are, in their turn, countered by the critics of these artworks. First, although most critics support the autonomy of artists to create whatever they want and to write about whoever they wish, they set certain boundaries. Rachel Morón, one of the young artists who founded We Are Not a Playground, says: "If you hurt (…) or discriminate someone with your words or your work, it has its limits; you will receive something back" (quoted in *Medialogica*, 2020; my translation). The petitions in both cases emphasise that freedom comes with responsibility:

> Many of us are also fiction writers, and we believe in the right to write outside of our own experiences: writing fiction is essentially impossible to do without imagining people who are not ourselves. However, when writing about experiences that are not our own, especially when writing about the experiences of marginalized people, still more especially when these lived experiences are heavily politicized, oppressed, threatened, and disbelieved—when this is the case, the writer's duty to imagine well, responsibly, and with complexity becomes even more critical. (Literary Hub, 2020)

> As an art institution and your specific recurring role within Breda's cultural field, we find that you need to take responsibility rather than see yourselves as something that is 'outside of society.' (We Are Not a Playground, 2020)

The latter quote disputes the autonomy of art as a sacred domain distinct from the rest of society. One of the artists who had signed the petition, Jan Hoek, sarcastically adds: "Sometimes it seems like everyone, such as politicians, can be criticised… but *artists* can, no, *should* be free, and therefore we cannot heavily discuss things" (cited in *Medialogica* 2020, my translation). Therefore, also the argument that art is supposed to provoke or to incite debate is countered: there *is* a debate but perhaps a different one than the artist wished.

The second defensive argument, on the dissonance between the author's intentions (if relevant in the first place) and the audience's interpretations, is disputed, too. Some critics claim that the author can still be held accountable for possible effects of their work. @Not.A.Playground (2020) writes on Instagram: "Whatever your intention may be, the effects of your work once it is placed are not in your control. (…) Your work has an impact, which can be reviewed separate from your intentions." Kessels's other complaint, that his critics did not inform themselves on his intentions, could easily be disputed: the petition explicitly and thoroughly discussed his aims. Similarly, though Jeanine Cummins aimed to educate white readers and to invoke empathy, she is accused of not taking notice of potential further effects. Mexican-American writer and social justice advocate Julissa Arce (2020) argues:

> I do believe that books, films, and TV shows have the ability to ignite cultural change, which can in turn create political change. But when these mediums perpetuate dangerous stereotypes, they do not build bridges; they tear down the ones we've been working to build.

Finally, all actors involved deny the accusation of cancel culture. In both cases, the most vocal critics did not demand destroying the artwork or boycotting the artist, even though the petition against Destroy My Face strongly 'suggested' its removal from the skate rank.[10] This 'suggestion' was largely informed by the location of the work outside the artistic field, as Rachel Morón later explained: "Removing an artwork is really very harsh, but this is an artwork in a public place" (cited in *Medialogica*, 2020; my translation). Similarly, the petition directed at Oprah's Book Club states: "This is not a letter calling for silencing, nor censoring" (Literary Hub, 2020). Cummins's book tour was cancelled after unspecified threats, but the petitioners felt they were held accountable: Julissa Arce blames the publisher that 'our very thoughtful critique about the book and about the industry was minimised as being vitriolic rancour' (Oprah's Book Club, 2020). Some critics deconstruct the label 'cancel culture' as a defence mechanism by powerful actors and institutions who aim to silence rightful criticism by members of underprivileged groups (cf. Ng, 2022). Mexican-American author David Bowles, for instance, writes that it 'feels like more of a move by white hegemony – often an unconscious move, but a move nonetheless – to continue to marginalize the

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[10] The 'suggestions' in the petition might be interpreted literally, as something for BredaPhoto to consider, but they can euphemistically be read as demands.

voices of color' (cited in Humphries, 2020). With their allusions to power differences and unconscious hegemony, these critics hint at the type of sociological analysis that will be continued below.

DISCUSSION: EXPLAINING THE CHALLENGE OF ARTISTIC DOGMAS

The two studied art controversies show a clash between those who keep adhering to the dogmas of the artistic field that emerged in the nineteenth century and those who challenge these dogmas in light of twenty-first-century developments. Many established participants in the artistic field and their allies stay close to the dogmas that feel natural to them: artists have total freedom in what they create and should not be curtailed by anyone; they cannot be held accountable for alternative interpretations or social effects; and, though less visible in the two discussed cases, aesthetic valuations are more valid than moral or political ones. On the other hand, different artists and professionals – in many cases younger, female and non-white – are challenging these views: autonomy and freedom go hand in hand with social responsibility; art is no sacred domain that is immune to external criticism; and the spectator might talk back with ethical rather than aesthetic arguments. In other words: the arts are not distinct from but an integral part of society.

The observed ubiquity of such progressive moral art critique in the 2010s and 2020s – of which the discussed cases are only two – as well as the often compliant responses within the artistic field and the culture industries suggest that something is changing. How can we try to sociologically explain this supposed development? Above, the emergence of the artistic dogmas in the nineteenth century was explained with the dissemination of previous intellectual ideas on ethics versus aesthetics and with changing power relations in society. In the next sections, I propose several possible factors that may contribute to the waning of these dogmas that partially rhyme with the above: the influence of academic ideas, such as developed in the humanities; changing power relations between established and upcoming groups; technical innovations, particularly the rise of social media; and finally, increased responsiveness by established institutions.

Building on Academic Ideas

The twenty-first century developments are preceded by academic ideas in the second half of the twentieth century. In a 1993 article, Devereaux already pointed at changes within academia, such as 'the end of the dominance of analytic philosophy, the influence of postmodernism, and most especially, the impact of feminism – both as a social movement and as a theoretical discipline' (p. 211). Besides feminism, I would add critical race theories and queer studies. For decades, works with sexist, racist or homophobic elements have been disputed by academics. One can think of the 'male gaze' with which women are portrayed in film (Mulvey, 1975) and the stereotypes of Black characters in American literature (Brown, 1933). The perpetuating of stereotypes of marginalised groups, it is said, immediately affects the majority population's perceptions, with possibly harmful effects. Another pressing issue is the underrepresentation of certain groups, both regarding narrative characters and artists themselves. This movement has led to the deconstruction of the (white, male) art history paradigm, including its emphasis on autonomy and aesthetics, and the subsequent presentation of alternative canons (Wolff, 2008).

Some scholars, therefore, argue that ethical and aesthetic valuations cannot be separated, because most artworks cannot be judged without taking into account the content.[11] Art often teaches us something, broadens our understanding or lets us empathise with other people, even when the artist does not have the intention to do so (Booth, 1988; Carroll, 1998; Currie, 1998). Hence, art often has an explicit moral value, which makes it not unfair to also allow critical reviews of alleged moral failure or unintended interpretations (Gaut, 1998).

Hanson (1998) links this rebuttal of aestheticism with arguments against the autonomy of art: if art is a human activity and if humans are judged with moral criteria, then artists cannot be shielded from such judgements. Moreover, if it is the artist's deliberate purpose to create politically critical art, like both Kessels and Cummins did in a way, one can put the defence strategy on autonomy into doubt. If there are concrete walls between art and the rest of society, why should society listen to what 'autonomous' artists have to say? (den Hartog Jager, 2014).

Changing Power Relations

How did these twentieth-century academic ideas trickle down to the rest of society, including the artistic field? First, there are some trends in the art world itself that coincide with moral art critique. In the 1990s, a so-called 'social turn' occurred, involving collaborative art projects that can be evaluated with both aesthetic *and* ethical criteria (Bishop, 2006; cf. Peters and Roose, 2020). Moreover, a certain social impact is often demanded by governments to legitimise funding (ibid., cf. Belfiore and Bennett, 2008). Other trends are so-called 'artivism', that uses art for political activism (Weij, 2021) and 'relational art', that requires a different type of aesthetic judgement (Bourriaud, 2002).

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[11] See also Kuipers et al. (2019) for a sociological argument for blending aesthetics and morality.

Moreover, an important factor may be the gradual upward mobility of groups that are historically marginalised due to gender, ethnicity and other non-class features, often ignored by Bourdieu (cf. Prior, 2005). They acquire knowledge in college, notably new perspectives and a certain conceptual vocabulary developed in the abovementioned academic disciplines, and in their turn educate others. For instance, Shively's classic 1992 study on Native Americans' opinions on the Western movie genre shows that while the majority of this group simply enjoyed the films, a small portion of academically trained viewers criticised the stereotypical depiction of 'Indians'. It is likely that this latter group has increased since then. This upward mobility gives minorities more and more critical mass to call certain widely spread beliefs into doubt (cf. Tepper, 2011: 189-198). They claim their voice to question the dynamics behind their historical lack of power. Another aspect of this development is that they often face challenges *despite* their mobility, making them more sensitive for boundary drawing and subsequently more combative (e.g., Waldring, 2018). Although factual information on diversity in the cultural sector is still scarce (e.g., van Haaren and Nadimi, 2023; Malik and Shankley 2020), it is likely that the share of minority groups working in this sector is – albeit slowly – increasing.

Hence, I suggest that it is not simply a matter of a new avant-garde challenging the established artistic elite, once the challengers themselves, but that we are observing an underprivileged group within the artistic field challenging the avant-garde rules in the first place. We may interpret this development, again in Bourdieu's terms, as a claim to power by a slowly upcoming 'dominated fraction of a dominant class', by means of an emerging form of cultural capital (cf. Prieur and Savage, 2013; Prieur et al., 2023). They challenge the acts of symbolic violence, such as the use of the label 'cancel culture', with which their criticisms of allegedly racist, sexist and homophobic art have often been – and still are – dismissed.

New Technology

The visibility of this critical mass is magnified thanks to the technological revolution of the internet, in particular social media. Although social media can lead to unsubstantiated mass behaviour and demands of dogmatic purity, as well as vicious backlashes in return, both led by polarising algorithms, they are ideal means to get oneself heard (Ng, 2022). Social media give the traditionally powerless and the anonymous a means to send rather than solely receive, while hashtags, retweets and other tools can greatly increase their audience (Jackson and Foucault Welles, 2016; Ng, 2022). Hashtags – here #DignidadLiteraria and #WeAreNotAPlayground – can lead to a bandwagon effect: they make others in similar situations more confident that the opinions or feelings they may privately hold, or were not even aware of, are worthy of being heard and shared (cf. Alaggia and Wang, 2020).

Social media also play a role in the globalisation of these academic and activist ideas. Heinich (2000) suggests that, in the 1990s, there were far more art controversies in the US than in France, including several cases on progressive issues. This raises the question whether such debates and arguments have since been 'imported' into Europe. After all, a large part of the conceptual framework of feminist and anti-racist activism has been developed in the US, too (cf. Ng, 2022: 101-136, on cancel culture in China).

Finally, the internet significantly altered the way art criticism functions more generally. It makes art critique more democratic and more immediate: it is no longer only professional critics that share their articulate evaluations in print, but the general public and fellow artists talk back directly (e.g., Gat, 2013).

Compliant Reception

A final possible factor is that such calls do not remain unnoticed but actually lead to responses from majority groups, who may change their minds. Stewart (2017: 49) suggested that social distance 'makes it harder to see why others, in a different subject position, might be offended' by a certain artwork. The mechanisms described above may gradually reduce such distance between the established and the challengers, even though more diversity on the working floor does not inevitably result in more inclusive productions (Saha, 2018). Despite defensive movements, artists and institutions seem more and more responsive to criticism. In many cases, this might be an opportunistic move, motivated by fear: under pressure of powerful masses on social media, conceding can be the best option commercially. Also, governments and other funders increasingly demand social legitimacy, such as policies on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) (cf. Prior, 2005). In other cases, though, actors seem sincere in their expressed increased awareness of exclusionary practices and their willingness to change (e.g., Veil and Waymer, 2021), which would correspond with their predominantly liberal political views (McAndrew et al., 2020). Naturally, more research is needed to identify actors' actual motives.

Such changes, however, only occur step by step. Established actors are inclined to protect their positions, while many of them do not even recognise the link between structural problems and their own privileged backgrounds (Brook et al., 2020). Moreover, the autonomy of art remains a competing value worth defending. Weij (2021), for instance, showed sharp disagreements between curators regarding their assessment of political art vis-à-vis aesthetic valuations; a variety that can likely be extended to their views on moral criticism. It is this increased

ambivalence, this complex search for common ground between different stakeholders in the field, that makes this a sociologically highly fascinating development.

TO CONCLUDE

Artistic values that feel natural to us are in fact historically situated. As the 'pure aesthetic' in cultural taste and the related dogmas of the artistic field (autonomy of art, superiority of aesthetic over moral evaluations) once emerged, they can also be challenged by a competing paradigm and perhaps decline (Hanquinet, 2018). Such new values can become ingrained in the habitus, too, shape our valuations of individual art objects and eventually lead to symbolic capital (ibid.). I argue that progressive moral valuations are currently challenging the pure aesthetic (cf. Wolff, 2008: 137-141). This does not mean that ethics will replace aesthetics, as if returning to a pre-Romantic era, but rather that both types of judgements are increasingly combined into a more comprehensive valuation (Bishop, 2006; cf. Kennedy et al., 2019 on food choices).[12] Similarly, the ideal of the autonomy of art is being limited due to increased awareness of social responsibilities external to the artistic field.

As stated before, the two presented cases do not suffice as immediate proof for such a paradigm shift. Perhaps the dominant dogmas of the field of art are stronger and more sustainable than I suggest; they have often been challenged before. Two logics may coexist among different groups, as Hanquinet (2018) suggests. Not all criticism is accommodated, particularly when social media storms rage without participants properly informing themselves. However, there have been many more cases in the last decade that give reason to believe that something is changing in a more durable way. This regards not only highly publicised controversies but also moral evaluations by professional reviewers without immediate consequences or the move towards a more inclusive cultural sector without a preceding row.

However, sociological studies into this matter are scarce. I propose several lines of research in order to fully grasp to what degree, how and why these developments take place. Ideally, such studies have a longitudinal and a geographically comparative character. First, a structured content analysis of media coverage or social media posts can fully uncover the arguments and sentiments of such debates from different sides. A content analysis of newspaper reviews can reveal the development of ethical and aesthetic evaluations over time in different parts of the world (cf. Purhonen et al., 2019). A second line of possible research regards in-depth interviews with artists and gatekeepers with different positions in the artistic field on how they negotiate different viewpoints (cf. Weij, 2021) and how their opinions may have changed over time. Interviews with regular art consumers can complement these insights from a non-professional perspective (van den Haak et al., 2023). Third, recurring national and international surveys on cultural taste can include questions on different modes of valuations in order to determine the distribution of moral valuations over the population and potential changes over time.

Such research could substantiate the developments that I have suggested by means of the analysis of two recent controversial cases, in the publishing industry in the US and the art world in the Netherlands. The artists and writers who protested against racial stereotypes, cultural appropriation, misogynist art and the negligence of social effects are a (mostly) new generation storming into the artistic field, claiming their place and challenging dominant dogmas. They do not aim to 'cancel' these dogmas altogether but rather to adopt a more inclusive and comprehensive assessment of art. The future will tell when and to what extent such an inclusive vision will feel equally self-evident, as part of the artistic field's habitus.

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[12] I follow Hanquinet (2018), though she proposed social values as the main challenger of the pure aesthetic. Furthermore, she combines aesthetics and ethics in a somewhat different way than I do, by arguing that aesthetic distinction is a moral position as such.

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Sportswork – Towards a Notion of Good Work for Athletes

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the idea of professional sport as a form of labour. While research on everything from performance statistics to sports rights and technology had proliferated, what players think about *sport as work* deserves greater attention. The inequalities and exclusion of sports are evident and we need to understand the drivers of this, but we also need to understand why working in these industries matters to people, how they experience it and what values it has for them. In order to do this, I want to draw on critical cultural labour studies, and the paper argues that applying this lens to work in sport could help develop a notion of what constitutes 'good work' for athletes. The aim of the paper is to both to consider the landscape of sports labour research and to propose a future research agenda.

Keywords: athletes, sport, cultural labour, sports work

INTRODUCTION

This paper is about professional sport as a form of labour. By this I mean something that requires using both mental and physical capacities to productive ends. It argues that the study of sport as a category of labour has been somewhat neglected, and in that respect (and others) it has much in common with cultural labour. Yet while the literature on cultural labour has exploded in recent decades (Banks, 2007; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; McRobbie, 2002b, 2016; Conor et al., 2015), sports labour remains under-studied, despite the growth in writing about other aspects of sport (Boyle and Haynes, 2009).

The recent growth in cultural labour studies was partly driven by concerns about working conditions within the cultural industries, which from the late 1990s onwards were being promoted as essential to economic development in nations across the world (Hartley, 2005; Banks and Hesmondhalgh, 2009). Far from the policy ideal of creative labour however, the research revealed a world of long hours, low or no pay, endemic bullying, sexism and racism (Saha, 2018; Conor et al., 2015). Sport has similarly grown in economic importance and sports labour faces similar concerns. And in both cases they sit alongside, indeed derive in part from, pleasure, fulfilment, excitement and love for work, which McRobbie has memorably described as 'passionate' labour (2002b). It is in this seeming contradiction that much of the interest of studying such labour lies – not in a critique of false consciousness – but in understanding the tensions and perplexities of this form of work. But while research on the cultural industries is increasingly broad in its notion of culture, this is rarely taken to include sport. And while the literature on professional sport is also growing rapidly, there is very little discussion of sport as a form of labour.

There are a variety of reasons for this. Within the Academy study of both sport and the other cultural industries are fragmented through a variety of disciplines; sociology, cultural studies, leisure studies, sports science and so on, and while there are overlaps, sport and culture tend to be studied separately. Public policymakers, at least since the late 1990s, have been keen to categorise the cultural industries as part of attempts to understand and support them, in what is often referred to as the 'creative economy (Howkins, 2013). In the UK, sport has been one of the

responsibilities of the Cultural Ministry since 1997, though as Long and Bianchini note (2019) this has rarely led to them being treated as single policy area.

There is a debate to be had about the degree to which sport is or is not 'cultural' and the degree to which the professional (often highly mediated) sports industry is a 'cultural industry.' Many, perhaps most, would argue that sport and other forms of culture are essentially different: sport focussing on competition and with the necessary indeterminism that this implies, while other cultural activities are primarily symbolic or concerned with aesthetic values, and lack the element of competition (Hesmondhalgh, 2002; Mumford, 2019). This is sometimes presented as a classed debate with sport somewhat being 'looked down upon,' by the arts1 and there is perhaps something in this (Whannel, 2013). But this distinction by no means entirely about class, not least because class distinctions *within* sports are significant, or about a failure to take sport seriously. The difference between an indeterministic activity (not knowing the outcome of the game or match) and a scripted or scored piece of work, which seeks to tell a particular narrative, are real and profound.

But while I completely acknowledge that these differences exist, I feel that there is a huge amount in contemporary, professional sport that is 'cultural' – identity, aesthetics, sense of place, narrative, commodification and mediatisation – are just a few of the terms that spring to mind. Debates about inequality, exploitation and exclusion are common in both cases and the importance of sport in people's lives, the beauty and joy and sense of purpose (as well as heartbreak) that it brings them is evident (Miller, 2023). In both cases, the study of labour has, as I've said, been neglected in part because nether corresponds to what people see as 'work,' and both are closer a model of unalienated work that people might casually see as 'getting paid to do your hobby'. However, developments in both cultural industries 'proper' and sport seems to be blurring some distinctions; playing videogames has indeterminate outcomes, while Olympic snowboarding has prescribed routines. Thus, while I lean towards the view of professional sport as a cultural industry, even if we continue to regard these as distinct fields of endeavour, I argue that the similarities make a strong argument for looking at the sports labour through the lens of cultural labour studies.

Twenty years ago it was reasonable to say that academics has little to say about cultural work (Hesmondhalgh, 2002). Since then it has become one of the most productive areas of cultural industries scholarship, in the process developing productive ways of looking at labour that both understands the agency of workers and the conditions under which they work (Banks, 2007; Banks and Hesmondhalgh, 2009; Conor et al., 2015). In the process it has made contributions to public policy on cultural labour (Brook et al., 2020, 2021, 2022; Cohen and de Peuter, 2022), albeit against a tide of often worsening conditions (de Peuter et al., 2022). It is perhaps a reflection of this success that debates about cultural labour have become somewhat bogged down in questions of inequality and exclusion. I should be clear that I regard these as extremely important questions and have written about them myself on more than one occasion. But there is a danger of eclipsing not only the very real dilemmas that cultural workers wrestle with in terms of their 'passionate labour' and the price paid to do it, but also the broader question of why it should matter at all that culture is produced under often exploitative conditions and often from a narrow social base. It matters because culture matters, in part because it shapes how we understand ourselves, one another and our society (particularly via the larger media industries). But it also matters because people think it matters, because it is meaningful to us, one of the most meaningful areas of our lives in many cases (Miller, 2023). The same, I argue, can be said of sport. In a recent paper on sports management (2021), Gammelsaeter is concerned that sports management literature has in recent years focused increasingly on the externalities of sports – the implications of it for health, for commerce or for public policy, rather than on sports itself, 'and the sporting human' (p. 259).

My own expertise is in cultural policy and cultural labour (refs omitted) and it is specifically the lens of cultural labour that I want to bring to this, as I think that work has done a lot, not simply to map what cultural labour looks like and who does it (Pratt, 1997), nor just to understand inequalities and exclusion (Saha, 2018), but importantly to understand why this labour matters to people, how they understand it, and why it is deemed valuable (Banks, 2007; Taylor and Littleton, 2012). Doing that will require quite a lot of ground clearing and definitional work, and it is to that that I turn next.

DEFINING SPORT LABOUR

Any empirical work on sports labour would require a conceptual mapping of the field; what counts are sports labour, how many people do it and where. Such data is available from national and international statistics agencies, but it is scattered, poorly defined and infrequently updated.

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1 Without spending pages discussing the problematics of the term 'culture', it may be noted that I sometimes use 'arts' as a substitute for culture. I do this where it is primarily people writing about arts (as in the arts/sport debate referenced here) that I am referring to.

The European Union (EU) uses the Vilnius Definition (Eurostat, 2018) of what counts as sport (essentially products and services to do with producing sports) and reasonably enough regards sports labour as:

- people with a sport-related occupation in the sport sector e.g., professional athletes, professional coaches.
- people with non-sport jobs in the sport sector e.g., fitness centre receptionists.
- people with a sport-related job outside the sport sector, e.g., school sport instructors.

Similar approaches, which combine occupational and industry data, are the basis of most employment statistics, though ever year when I am teaching cultural labour classes students are bemused – and sometimes even annoyed – to learn that lawyers who work for entertainment companies and box office staff are part of the cultural industries. I then spend my time explaining why this is important, so it is something of a *volte face* to say that it is core sports labour – the work of doing the actual sport, or as the EU helpfully terms it, being an athlete2 – that I am interested in for this paper.

Of course, defining sports labour in this way is only the beginning of understanding it. Are we just taking about professional labour? And what defines professionalism – pay, qualifications, employment status? While the professional/amateur distinction is perhaps less historically fraught in the other cultural industries than it is in sports (see below), concern about the impact of unpaid labour on paid labour is widespread in cultural labour both in the literature and increasingly in public policy (Brook et al., 2020). Indeed, exploring the differences between amateur and professional, paid and unpaid labour in sports and the cultural sectors, both historic and contemporary, is one of the issues that I think merit most attention.

The other big definitional issues are what we might consider 'sport' and here my focus on sport as an industry makes this somewhat easier. Physical activities or games that are organised competitively will probably serve, but my focus is really on organised spectator sports, even mass spectator sports (though 'mass' itself rather hard to define). I'm interested in sporting labour and that implies sports that are large and organised enough to have a workforce of some sort, whether masses of organised, paid professionals or more likely a labour markets composed of the full and part time, the paid, the partly paid and the not paid. And even the largest of sports – football for instance – is likely to include all these forms of labour within a hierarchy of wealth and reputation (Bourdieu, 1988).

LOOKING FOR LABOUR IN SPORTS LITERATURE

Despite the relative paucity of labour studies in the *academic* literature, the most widely read (and arguably respected) form of sports writing – journalism – concerns exactly that, the labour of boxers, cricketers, footballers, cyclists and so on. The rise of sports journalism is coterminous with the rise of organised sport and of course with the rise of organised gambling on sport (Boyle, 2006; Collins, 2013), starting in the 1800s. But it was the rise and mass circulation of newspapers, including the development of specialist sports newspapers, that cemented the importance of sports journalism as a way of understanding sport and its meanings (Huggins, 2021). Books on sport including biographies and autobiographies can be a useful source for understanding the labour of professional athletes, but clearly do not represent a systematic approach. We would only glean a very partial understanding of working in television from celebrity biographies and the same can be said of sport.

My focus is primarily on the academic literature, and here coverage of labour is somewhat under-developed. Sports history is perhaps the best source, perhaps because the history of sports formation and development is in part a series of labour disputes. The professionalisation3 of sport and the fiercely protected boundaries between amateur and professional sports are discussed in a wide range of sports literature, notably cricket of course (Marqusee, 2016; Wagg, 2017) where it is tied into questions of class, race, and Empire (Marqusee, 1994; Appadurai, 2015), but also football, athletics, baseball, and so on (Jones, 1998; Collins, 2013). The voluminous writing on cricket's amateur/ professional divide is full of accounts of the (perceived) differences in playing style between amateurs and professionals, where the 'freedom' of amateurs, specifically batsmen, to play the shots they want to play without worrying about winning or losing, is contrasted with the paid professional's responsibility to his employers.

Also well-covered in sport history is the history of labour organisations, with accounts of the development of Professional Associations in football (all codes), tennis, baseball, cycling and others (Harding, 1991; Jones, 1998; Holt and Mason, 2000; Korr, 2002; Collins, 2013) as well as the disputes between them (Lowenfish, 1991). Indeed, while recent work on trade union activism in cultural labour markets (Cohen and de Peuter, 2018, 2022) has drawn on revived interest in worker organisation, there are perhaps fewer historical accounts of the development of trade unions in the cultural industries, than there are in sport. The prominence of labour issues in sports history is hardly

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2 Although 'athlete' is sometimes associated simply with what we call athletics, I am using it here as a term for all sportspeople, largely because it is non-gendered and considerably more elegant than 'sportspeople.'

3 Professional in this context simply means someone who is paid to take part in sport, it does not suggest credentialization or control of entry to labour markets.

surprising, as the development of professional associations, often facing hostility from sport's governing bodies, is about the development of a professional, paid workforce in what was becoming a major industry.

Management/labour disputes were thus common and the working-class labour pool on which some of the larger sports, such as football or boxing, drew were often connected through family or community to the wider trade union movements at the heights of their powers. Labour disputes, such as the abolition of the maximum wage in British football (Imlach, 2005), the development of open tennis championships (Jeffreys, 2009) or the Bosman ruling (Duval and van Rompuy, 2016) are sometimes covered as labour disputes in the literature, but not always. The Bosman ruling on the movement of players within the EU at the end of contract has produced considerably more commentary as a legal and trade issue than as a labour one, for example. This is also true of other sports issues, from working conditions and physical dangers to unequal pay, all of which merit attention in the literature, but which are rarely seen primarily as labour issues.

As Roderick notes in his work on professional football labour (2006a, 2006b) the most puzzling gap is in literature on sports sociology, a place that one might expect to find research into labour. Tian and Wise (2020) conducted a quantitative study of sports sociology research between 2008 and 2018, and while gender, masculinity and race appear as top ten keywords, labour is nowhere to be seen. Studies focusing on identity, politics and the body are also prominent in both Europe and North America, which according to the authors indicates that researchers, are engaged in 'classic sociological traditions,' – though notably not the classic sociological tradition of labour studies. There is far more material on consumption of sports (from fan culture to hooliganism) than on its production. Until recently this could equally well be said of sociological work on the cultural industries, and probably still can. In his own research on professional footballers, Roderick comes close to a 'cultural labour' account of footballers perhaps because he describes professional football as 'a form of entertainment work' (2006b: 245) and echoes the language of cultural labour researchers such as Helen Blair (2001) when he notes the maxim, 'you're only as good as your last game.' In his work, Roderick discusses the precarity of football as a profession, particularly with a constant over-supply of labour, as well as the importance of social networking to try and mitigate this, and the emotional labour footballers perform in order to both deal with and mask these anxieties – all issues which engage cultural labour researchers (see below). Roderick argues that the lack of attention to cultural labour in sports sociology arises in parts at least from the lack of qualitative studies of sports people themselves, and it is true that where labour is covered it is often through work on particular parts of the labour market or particular stages of labour formation, rather than via work on professional athletes.

While mainstream sociology could be said to neglect issues of labour, Roderick et al. (2017) point out, there is literature on sports labour in business schools, in management studies and in occupational psychology. There is a large literature on training and coaching, particularly within sports science, complete with handbooks and journals (Cassidy et al., 2009; Jones, 2009; Jones et al., 2011; Potrac et al., 2013; Magill et al., 2017). Although coaches and trainers are not the focus of my interest in this paper, and despite the fact that much of it comes from a pedagogical or sports science point of view, there is material here that is relevant including work on coaching as emotional labour (Nelson et al., 2013; Potrac et al., 2017). Other work, some of which is in the trade rather than academic literature (Baldi, 2019) looks at the fascinating topic of potential sports workers – the talented kids who never quite make it despite early promise and through a combination of injuries, and luck, bad timing or off-field problems. Still other work looks at sports labour markets, particularly the globalisation of such markets (Miller et al., 2001) and related migration (Lee, 2010) along with transfer policies (Hoey et al., 2021), recruitment and management of labour (Amis and Silk, 2005; Gammelsæter, 2021). Indeed, sports management literature is now a rather large field (Gammelsaeter and Anagnostopoulos, 2022), but much as the discipline of arts management is not where one would look for work on arts labour, so sports management contains relatively little on sports workers themselves, or on the material issues of labour as noted above (Gammelsaeter, 2021).

The differences between individual and team sports has no exact parallel in the arts or media industries and this clearly has implications for labour and the experience of being an athlete. There are of course cultural workers who move between standard employment models and freelance work and indeed many of the developments of contemporary cultural labour reflects the growing precarity of the workforce as larger employers from newspapers to museums move from standard to freelance contracts. The changing nature of sports contracts, transfer rules, compensation packages and related commercial activities, have produced relevant recent literature (see for example Dabsheck, 2004, 2006).

One forms of sports labour that does attract more attention than that of equivalent areas in cultural labour, is that of child and other exploited labour in global production chains. The production of footballs, replica kits and other sporting equipment, often under conditions of horrendous exploitation, has been an issue in the literature for some time (Sage, 1999; Miller et al., 2001; Carter, 2018) and it is arguable that coverage is better than that of global supply chains in the cultural industries (Miller, 2018; Lin and Liu, 2018). There is also a relatively large literature on sports labour migration (Poli, 2010; Maguire and Falcous, 2011; Nalani Butler and Dzikus, 2015),

though as Roderick (2011) comments, most of this is from a macro perspective with very little that looks at the subjectivities of migrating athletes.

Much of the work described above is valuable for a study of professional athletes as cultural workers, but there is relatively little focus on the athletes themselves, or what they think about work, and the disciplinary dominance of management or psychology means that, as Roderick et al. put it,

> "the psychological notion of mental toughness in the context of individualized performance (although rarely acknowledged as situated in the workplace) has been vastly over-examined in contrast to basic material human needs such as confidence in employment status, wellbeing, and the right to be treated in non-discriminatory and dignified ways (2017)."

The next section will look at how some of these issues have been covered in cultural labour studies and at the possible research questions that this might open up for a study of sport.

ISSUES IN CULTURAL LABOUR LITERATURE

In their work on cultural labour, Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) elaborate on the concepts of 'good and bad work', and then use this to frame a discussion of cultural labour issues. It is also an approach adopted by Roderick et al. (2017) as they look at sport and its effects on mental health. While it does not cover everything (e.g., it does not consider labour organisation in much detail), this framing seems a helpful way to structure a discussion of issues that cross both fields and I will make use of it in this section.

Hesmondhalgh and Baker's book looks at labour in three sub-sectors of the media; television, music recording and magazine publishing. Their framework for 'good and bad work' considers a variety of issues: autonomy, sociality, self-realisation, work-life balance and security, which, together with factors such as pay and working hours, makes up a notion of good work. Bad work on the other hand, they look at in terms of powerlessness, boredom, isolation, overwork and insecurity (often referred to elsewhere as precarity).

A primary concern of Hesmondhalgh and Baker is the notion of autonomy – both aesthetic and professional – that is available to cultural workers. While keen to stress that they have no idealised notion of pure autonomy, they are interested both in the degree of self-determination that workers can exercise at work and the degree to which their cultural autonomy – the relationship between their work and the creative product – operates independently of other determinants. In this they draw on Raymond Williams (1981) and perhaps more surprisingly on Bourdieu (1996), both of whom give accounts of autonomy, not as abstract individual freedom, but as resistance, in this case to the total interpenetration of cultural production by marketplace relationships. That culture, even great culture, is made under market conditions is not in doubt, but this is in part because it is never completely subsumed by the need to produce for profit. Creative tensions, as we might call them, continue to exist and result in a whole series of fractures from famous legal battles with record labels to everyday discussions about magazine covers, or TV documentary editing (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Young, 2023).

It might appear that of all the cultural labour issues, autonomy is the last one to look for in sport. After all, one argument against treating sport as a cultural industry is its rule bound nature – the rules of cricket or football allow for somewhat less interpretation than is granted to other artists. But in a fascinating paper on CLR James' book *Beyond a Boundary*, (1983 [1963]), Andrew Smith (2006) discusses exactly this notion of contested autonomy, again by drawing on Bourdieu. James has sometimes been criticised for what some see as his naivete about cricket. Collins, (2013: 64) in his rather heavy-handed account of sport under capitalism describes James as being, 'in thrall to the sentimental cant of amateurism,' and even more sympathetic writers see it as a romantic blind spot in James' otherwise impeccable anti-colonialism. Smith, like Hesmondhalgh and Baker, reaches for Bourdieu and in particular *Rules of Art* (1996) to defend James' account.

Bourdieu concludes his critical account of the political limitations of art under capitalism, by noting that 'the fact of finding oneself thus at 'end game' does not necessarily lead to disenchantment (1996: 343).' In other words, the potential for contested autonomy within a particular field still exists and needs to be fought for. As Smith points out, for James, it was 'precisely the autonomy of that field, its operation according to distinctive criteria of meaning and success, which mattered and which gave sports its live political significance,' (2006: 101). Thus, it is not just the 'gentleman' batsman displaying his individual autonomy when he ignored the need to concern himself with winning or losing, but the fact that the cricket pitch was at least symbolically marked off from other social relations that allowed West Indian success in that field to have wider political potential. That fact that sport (as with all cultural forms) operates within its own roles and codes – however frequently abused – allows for what Bourdieu called 'the intention of autonomy.' Many years have passed since James wrote *Beyond a Boundary* or Bourdieu wrote *Rules of Art*, and in that time the commercialisation of professional sport has intensified and spread (Boyle and Haynes, 2009). But as the recent debates about the proposed Europe Super League in football

demonstrate4, appeals to ideas beyond the market – the 'spirit of football' in this case – are frequently made and indeed resonate with a wider public. That this is sometimes cynical, as in UEFA's 'spirit of football' posturing during the same debates is undoubtedly true; but for it to be deployed at all suggests some residual and potential which should not be totally dismissed.

Alongside debates about autonomy, there exist a whole set of issues, both material and not, that help structure some of the distinctive features of cultural work and may be useful in looking at sport. Precarity, in sport as in cultural work, has long been a feature of labour markets, but the degree to which it characterises them has perhaps intensified. Certainly, the celebration of cultural work in some of the policy literature and the encouragement to young people to take-up these careers, often neglects the degree to which risk and insecurity are core parts of them. The growth of jobs in the cultural industries has been more than matched by the growth of graduate labour seeking to enter them, leading to greater pressures and insecurity, as a large army of labour is willing to take up unpaid and often exploitative work in order to enter these industries (McRobbie, 2016). Work in professional sports, particularly as an athlete, has never had much security; risk of injury or ill-health, declining performance or competition from new entrants has always characterised sports work (Hickey, 2022). Recent years have seen a growth in awareness of other harms such as sexual or emotional abuse, self-harm, hyper-commodification or use of performance enhancing technologies (Griffiths and Bloyce, 2023).

Yet this precarity and indeed these abuses are entangled not just with the *ideal* of cultural work as desirable, but the fact that it is often spoken of as such by cultural workers. Debates about the links between exploitation and self-exploitation in cultural work can sometimes be seen as 'blaming the victim,' particularly at a times of rising militancy and awareness of cultural labour problems by workers themselves (de Peuter, 2014). But there are examples of self-exploitation in cultural work, and indeed the education and training of cultural workers helps inculcate such attitudes (Oakley, 2013). Indeed, contemporary cultural work sometimes seems to rest on the opposite poles of great promise – of freedom and self-actualisation, twinned with the normalization of risk and uncertainty – the price to be paid for escaping so-called 'mundane' work. As Roderick makes clear in his study of professional footballers (2006), much of what the literature tells us about precarity in the workplace in general applies to athletes as well, though there are differences. Athletes face careers which are short term in nature, a fact which, like dancers perhaps, but not writers, they are aware of from the beginning. Competition, which is clearly a feature of many kinds of cultural work, is still more integral to sport than other cultural forms – even though athletes may still be surprised by the extent to which it permeates all aspects of their working lives (Roderick, 2006).

But there are also similarities between the work of athletes and that of cultural workers. The boundaries between 'life' and 'work' for example are notoriously fluid – such that being an actor, or an athlete, can appear to be not just what people do, but what they are. Athletes in particular often appear to inhabit closed worlds where social relationships are primarily with colleagues in the same profession (or even team) or with childhood friends and family (Roderick, 2011). Again, like dancers or in some cases actors – sport is not just the only job they have ever done but the only thing they have been trained to do. As Roderick (2006) explains, just as freelance cultural workers do, professional footballers respond to the insecurity of their working lives by drawing on network contacts to find out who is looking for players, who is getting rid of them and so on (see also Wacquant, 1998, on boxers). While this makes sense as an employment strategy, it can have undesirable consequences as relationships are instrumentalised, friendships become resources for finding work and workers become emotionally detached from others (Wittel, 2001).

The emotional and psychological consequences of this type of work requires that workers devise strategies to deal with them. While popular depictions of athletes often draw attention to the difference between the emotions being experienced and the presentation of them by athletes, summed in in notion of a 'game face,' as Avner et al. note (2022), there is relatively little academic work on the emotional labour of athletes (though see Potrac et al. 2017, Roderick, 2006b). This is in contrast to research on cultural work which reflects growing interest in emotional labour (Grindstaff, 2002; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). Avner et al suggest that promising avenues for further research includes looking at how athletes attempt to interfere or work with other people's emotions, or how they navigate the emotions resulting from the precarity of their work.

When considering the emotional and psychological aspects of this work however, we cannot ignore the pleasure that people get from taking part – whether professionally or not – in sport and other cultural activities. As Woodward has written (2017) pioneer feminists saw taking part in sport as a key element of women's liberation for good reason. The freedom to move your body, 'to run and jump and climb' (p. 165), is pleasure enough and that is before we come to the pleasures to be found in mastery of that movement and, for professionals in front of an audience, the mastery of that movement experienced collectively. While such pleasures can of course be instrumentalised and indeed serve as the basis for both exploitation and self-exploitation, the possibilities of

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4 The Apple documentary *Super League: The War for Football* contains good examples of this phenomenon.

pleasure in our (working) lives should not be dismissed as a goal even, or perhaps especially, when they are fleeting and time limited.

Much critical cultural labour research, perhaps the majority, is concerned with questions of inequality – who gets to participate in the cultural industries and who does not, and whether and to what extent these inequalities determine the kind of cultural production we get (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Conor et al., 2015; Saha, 2018; Taylor and O'Brien, 2017). There are a variety of – normative – reasons for this. An equitable society should ensure that people can have the opportunity to use their skills and talents both for their own benefit and for the benefit of others. Most of this holds for all parts of the economy, but the degree to which cultural products shape our lives and our society, the way that they function in Russell Keat's terms (2000) as a 'meta goods', which help shape our relationship to other goods, makes culture a special case. Thus, if the stories we hear, or the viewpoints we are exposed to, are narrowed and diminished by social inequalities, this can create, as Banks (2017: 3) argues, 'a democratic deficit.' In thinking about sport then, it is reasonable to ask whether sport also functions in this way. Does it shape our understanding of wider society? And thus, does inequality in sport matter as much as it does in other cultural industries? My answer to this would be yes – up to a point. The narratives that sport draws upon, not just of winning and losing, but of place and community, identity, beauty, even transcendence, clearly shape our lives and our understandings – witness the emotional investment that many people have in sporting activities. The mediatisation of sport enhances and amplifies these narratives. The rule-based nature of sports and the emphasis upon competition may limit these narratives in some ways, but sport is clearly one of the primary ways in which we see our society reflected back to us.

There is already a fairly large literature on various form of inequality in sports, but to echo again the theme of this paper, very little of this literature looks at inequality as *primarily* a labour issue. To take just a small part of the burgeoning literature, there is work on disabilities, both physical and intellectual (Kiuppis, 2018; Asunta et al., 2022), sexism (Fink, 2016; Hindman and Walker, 2020), gender and gender identity (Phipps, 2021; de Haan and Knopper, 2021), race and racism (Hill, 2001; Burdsey, 2006; Long and Hylton, 2002) and social class. Indeed, class inequalities are arguably better covered in sports literature that in other work on cultural labour, particularly in sports history for the reasons discussed above (Jones, 1998; Imlach, 2005).

Considering inequality in sports therefore would be a major element of any study of sport labour, and one question would be whether inequalities manifest in the same way or in different ways as in other cultural sectors? We might expect that different sports have different class profiles for example – football being somewhat different from polo. But while we know what class inequalities have worsened over time in the arts and other cultural sectors (Brook et al., 2022), is this also true of sport? In what ways is this linked to consumption, if at all? What about gender, race and other forms of inequality? What are the factors behind this and what counts as cultural capital in sport? What, if anything, does sport do better than other cultural sectors in terms of equality? And – indeed – is the discourse of equality even meaningful in a cultural industry where competition is such a core feature?

One final area of cultural labour literature that has grown of late is that on worker organisation and other collective response to precarity, including trade unionism, co-operatives, the anti-precarity movement and other social movements (Cohen and de Peuter, 2018, 2022; de Peuter et al., 2022). As I have suggested above, sports literature, particularly sport history is generally richer in such accounts and one promising avenue for research might be a comparative piece that looked at labour organization or labour disputes in both sports and other cultural industries.

CONCLUSIONS AND POSSIBLE RESEARCH AGENDA

This paper has argued that in the (growing) study of sports, labour is relatively neglected and that much can be learned from looking at the growth of cultural labour studies. That literature has argued that we should take cultural labour seriously, because these industries are significant in size, heavily promoted in public policy and, in producing cultural products, help shape our understanding of ourselves and society. I argue that research on sports labour could benefit from a cultural labour lens, and that this would in turn refresh cultural labour studies. There are a variety of ways in which this could be done, and I think a significant research agenda could be developed, of which what follows are simply some suggestions.

Both sport and cultural labour have often been seen as good and desirable work, if they were seen as work at all and not purely as 'vocation.' This has to some degree isolated them from critique (Roderick et al., 2017) particularly where ideological notions such as courage or fairness in sports, or self-expression and autonomy in the arts have been mobilised. Decades of critical work on cultural labour has disturbed this to some degree; scandals in sport ranging from doping to sexual abuse have perhaps had stronger public effects. Taking a cue from Hesmondhalgh and Baker's work on the media industries (2011), one approach would be to look at what constitutes 'good work' in sport from point of view of athletes. Hesmondhalgh and Baker looked at issues such as autonomy, self-expression, work-life balance and sociality as well as material issues such as pay, career management

and security. Would these be appropriate issues to consider? What would autonomy or a notion like self-expression mean? What other conditions might create good work for athletes?

Inequality in both sport and other cultural industries has been a major focus for research in recent years, but there is still a relative paucity that looks at this from a labour perspective. If we take just one example – say women in sport – there is research that looks at media coverage of women's sport (Cooky et al., 2021), sponsorship of women's sport (Fink, 2015), or fan attitudes to women's sport, and while I would not want to suggest that there is no research on pay and conditions, I argue that there is a need for more work on how theses inequalities manifest as a labour issue? What are the structuring factors – both material and attitudinal? Race, gender and disability are the main focus of research into inequality – but what of other factors such as class or sexuality? How is inequality narrated by athletes and what are the concerns that they have about it? Do they differ from those expressed in work on cultural labour?

Finally, as mentioned above, I think there is scope for comparative work on labour organisation in sport and in the other cultural industries. The history and role of trade unions and other professional organisations across both sport and other cultural sectors, as well as contemporary labour organisation and labour disputes, would I think be fruitful to examine. The amount of freelance labour in the cultural industries is often cited as reason for poor pay and conditions, and levels of unionisation are highly variable. How does this compare with professional sports, where professional association often play a strong role in representing 'freelance' labour? How are core labour issues such as unpaid work treated across sectors, and how do these issues affect labour market participation and hence representation?

It is traditional to end these articles with 'more research needed' and I am indeed arguing that more research is needed. The cultural importance of sport cannot be in doubt and the growth of research into all aspects of sport is of course to be welcomed, but greater attention needs to be paid to the makers, producers and workers of the sports world.

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Rites without Passage: The Civic Conversion of Young Refugees in Contemporary Germany

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ABSTRACT

The backdrop of Germany's 'refugee crisis' thrusts matters of deep symbolic relevance into public consciousness, transforming 'the refugee' into a potent figure for imagining political community. As the drama of the 'refugee crisis' settles into an 'integration through education' program, vocational school faculty grapple with incorporating diverse sets of newcomers. Young asylum-seeking students negotiate within this deeply uncertain context, weaving routes to belonging that traverse ambivalent discourses and complex bureaucracies. Qualitative analysis and selective sampling are used to uncover dynamics of mixed-contact that emerge in a vocational school's project of civic remediation. Research data include interviews with program faculty and students (N=32) and samples of professional materials used in the field site. Data analysis uncovers the rite of civic conversion, a set of dramatic movements through which the construction of social difference is simultaneously concealed, defeated, and rendered legitimate. Though expressed in distinct forms, civic conversion distances refugee students from pathologized aspects of an imagined social past (exit) and induces scenarios for students to rhetorically cast off the presumed pathologies of their past, present, and future (renewal). This rite consecrates a dividing line between those who must ritually distance themselves from an assigned 'deficiency' and those who need not. The problems, functions, and implications of this rite are discussed in relation to their macro-sociological consequences.

Keywords: social theory, cultural sociology, subjectivities, refugee studies, migration

INTRODUCTION

The 2015 'refugee crisis' and corresponding settlement of new migrants in Germany thrust matters of deep symbolic relevance into public consciousness. En route and on arrival, contemporary refugees from North African and Middle Eastern countries became plot lines in the high drama of symbolically re-defining nationality and culture in Germany. Cast as both symbols of national rehabilitation and national decay, symbols of renewal and decline, of the success and the failure of liberal democracy, 'the refugee' became potent source material for imagining political community.

National newspapers mourned with photos of Aylan Kurdi, a 3-year-old migrant, drowned and washed ashore. Days later, Chancellor Merkel opened national borders to asylum-seekers expelled from Hungary. Thousands of people left Budapest on foot, chanting 'Germany, Germany;' swellings of public support met them – events branded in the press as Germany's *Willkommenskultur* and packaged as a novel national moment: "Could this be the beginning of the end of Germany's postwar rehabilitation?" (Bennhold, 2015). Months later another rendering took hold. Newspapers splashed with accounts of 'foreign' men surrounding, robbing, and sexually assaulting

women at New Year's Eve celebrations in Cologne. These accounts rallied the 2016 PEGIDA demonstrations, propelling a competing attempt to define the nation. Alternative for Germany (AfD) won seats in parliament the following year, overturning Germany's long-standing parliamentary exclusion of the far right. Campaigning against the culture of Holocaust remembrance, embracing anti-Islamic, anti-immigrant rhetoric, the AfD voiced a reactionary narrative of the nation: it was impossible to incorporate these new migrants without also sacrificing the nation. With coarse rapidity, Germany's relationship with asylum-seekers became prime fodder in re-crafting the nation.

Amid this context of symbolic ambivalence, teachers in vocational schools across the country were handed the task of educating and integrating asylum-seeking young adults. As the drama of the 'refugee crisis' settles into this sober institutional project, schools grapple with incorporating diverse sets of newcomers, whose background and needs do not neatly fit within professional and administrative practice. Newly matriculated refugee students negotiate within this deeply uncertain context, weaving routes to belonging that traverse ambivalent discourses and complex bureaucracies. Students, intimately aware of the public and institutional discourses that seek to define them, wrestle extensively with making themselves legible (and worthy) to the representatives of this (and other) institutions. Practical and symbolic struggles coalesce within the German vocational school, an institutional context that 're-solves' these issues through producing definitions of who the refugee *is* and who they *should be* in relation to state, market, and civil society.

This paper uses the context of a German vocational school and its 'integration through education' program to uncover the *rite of civic conversion*, a set of dramatic movements through which the construction of social difference is simultaneously concealed, defeated, and rendered legitimate. Representations of the young 'refugee student,'[1] techniques of civic remediation, and dynamics of mixed-contact animate this rite. Professionals approach the ideological work of 'integration through education' as a project of civic remediation.[2] This remedial approach asserts a common-sense demand that the refugee student be *re-made* to ensure democratic life. I assess the meaning of the broad yet imperative 'civic objective' via success stories of vocational school faculty, stories which portray refugee students as undergoing a dramatized *civic conversion*. Though expressed in distinct forms, *civic conversion* distances refugee students from pathologized aspects of an imagined social past (exit) and induces scenarios for students to rhetorically cast off presumed pathologies of their past, present, and future (renewal).

I argue that extended portraits of refugee students triumphing over their social origins and disavowing social prejudice conceal and divert from real accomplishments of 'integration through education.' *As presented*, pedagogy moves refugee students towards a closer relationship with civic ideals. While the exit-renewal structure resembles a 'ritual transition' – a dramatic pattern marking passage between socially relevant lines (Zerubavel, 1991) – conversion tales merely *present as* ritual transitions. Dramatic turns narrate students as becoming more alike, but the contents of conversion stories either negate the premise that any real change occurred, or the changes observed are indistinguishable from those of standard-track vocational students. What are students and faculty actually creating in their civics-laden encounters with one another?

Students enrolled in *Internationale Förderklassen* (IFK) make good use of the material in their civics classes, but not as expressions of liberatory renewal. These students distinctly encounter faculty (and other institutional representatives) who maintain an unfalsifiable premise of their 'liberal deficiency.' They learn the specifics of how they are considered negatively different, attempt to dispel these notions through disavowals and dialog, recognize the obstinacy of those expectations, and invert the stigmatizing terms applied to them to create a *narrative of belonging*. Completing a remedial course in civics, thus, does not accomplish reforms in how IFK students are regarded as 'problems' by social institutions or professional wisdom; it *informs* students about this situation.

The tangible 'renewal' for these *civic converts* is to realize that their social environment sees in them fundamental deficits and that no evidence can be presented to disconfirm this pervasive social expectation. Out of this interchange, converts develop the capacity to navigate, manage, and tailor the suite of pre-established, intractable symbolic boundaries into everyday strategies for navigating mixed-contact. The requited act consecrates arbitrary lines as legitimate through acute misdirection, enacting what Bourdieu (1991) termed a 'rite of institution.' The *civic*

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[1] I use the term 'refugee student' with reservation. This phrasing is intended to honestly capture how a specific cohort of students has been 'figured.' It describes how people enrolled in 'integration through education' programs have "become fetishistically overdetermined and publicly imagined and represented (that is, figured) in excessive, distorted and/ or caricatured ways" (Tyler, 2013: 10). I switch to more neutral terms like 'IFK Student' or simply 'student,' when not referencing this figure.

[2] *Integration durch Bildung* is an umbrella term used frequently in public-facing representations of the schooling offered to the 2015 cohorts of asylum-seekers in Germany. Two prominent programs instituted for youth and younger adults (ages 16-25) at the time of data collection were *Fit für Mehr* and *Internationale Förderklassen* (IFK). I studied the latter type, which translates as 'international remedial course.' While these courses of study are not officially described as 'refugee classes,' faculty referred to this program interchangeably as the 'IFK' and as 'refugee classes.' *No one* referred to students in the program as 'international students,' which is conventionally used to describe migrants who enter Germany on student visas.

conversion rite institutes a dividing line between *those who must* ritually distance themselves from an assigned 'liberal deficiency' in their imaginary social past, present, and future and *those who need not*.

DATA AND DATA COLLECTION

I collected interview and field data over a 1-year term (2017-2018) at Hofer Vocational School (HBK),[3] located in a city of approximately 200,000 people in North Rhine-Westphalia. Participants in this study include students enrolled in *Internationale Förderklassen* as well as the faculty and administrators of this program. I recruited faculty participants from an IFK program meeting and student participants via classroom visits. Students were provided with a small honorarium (10 euros each) for their participation, and a donation of 100 euros was made to the school association. I conducted 20 in-depth interviews with IFK students and 12 with program faculty, observed school events and program meetings, and analyzed professional guidelines (faculty teaching materials and materials issued by the regional education ministries). The interview protocol for students inquired about their understanding of and experiences with settings and representatives of the host society. The interview protocol for faculty emphasized their understanding of and experiences with IFK students. Interviews were recorded and conducted on-site in German and translated into English by the author.

Data Coding Process

Research aims included understanding the categorical terms program participants used to identify social incorporation and the symbolic structures that support the use of those categories. To this end, I selectively coded research data for

(1) dimensions of success faculty applied to their work with IFK students,
(2) properties targeted for remediation within professional guidelines,
(3) definitions of the context of reception provided by IFK students, and
(4) student presentations of their relationship with the new social context.

A refinement of these codes revealed central patterns in the figuration of the refugee student, the techniques applied to this figure, and the dynamics of encounters between refugee students and representatives of the host society (i.e., mixed contact). Thus emerged two core themes, the *civic conversion story* and the *narrative of belonging*, each of which expresses 'the main concern of or problem for the people in the setting' (Strauss, 1987: 35). I crosscut these core themes to extract variation in how outsiders (student participants) and insiders (faculty participants) make use of civic categories to navigate mixed contact.

Logic of Analysis

The social form at the center of this paper is the 'mixed contact' (Goffman, [1963] 1986) and its layered expression among participants differently situated within that contact. I apply 'mixed contact' to parse dynamic properties of scenarios *depicting* and *manifesting* encounters between insiders and outsiders.[4] While Goffman conceived mixed contact specifically as the 'moments when stigmatized and normal are in (…) one another's immediate physical presence,' my broadened use of this term corresponds to using a 'language of relationships, not attributes' to witness the 'primal scenes of sociology' ([1963] 1986: 12, 3, 13). This broadened application of mixed contact deploys the methods of social pattern analysis by using 'social geometry' to identify patterns of social life (Zerubavel, 2007).

The *imagined*, the *represented*, and the *actual* experience of mixed contact tangle and collide, opening up core contradictions in the rite of civic conversion. Campaigns based on professional expertise provide a trove of 'concretely imagined cases' (Lamont and Swidler, 2014: 161) for accessing systems of meaning and categorization that actors draw upon to participate in social life. The interview situation shows how *actual* mixed contact is managed, revealing beyond the imagined and representational depictions of professional expertise. The full dimensions of mixed contact reveal how a shared reality is constructed, the mindsets necessary for that shared reality to emerge, and the intersubjective work of shaping new populations into an established social system.

The Project of Civic Remediation

'Integration through education' presents, in large part, as a project for protecting democracy. Guidance materials for faculty depict potential issues arising in mixed contact classrooms and assign professionals the task of both inducing and managing scenarios in the service of democratic life. This material writes shortcomings onto

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[3] The proper names provided in this paper (i.e., the school and study participants) are all pseudonyms.
[4] To clarify this point about 'manifesting,' the interview situation itself manifests the mixed contact encounter. Encounters with the interviewer unearthed, on the one hand, the faculty's wish to tell a tale of *civic conversion* and, on the other, the students' pressing need to maintain a *narrative of belonging*.

the young 'refugee student,' figuring these newcomers as lacking a sufficiently liberal understanding of tolerance, egalitarianism, and dialogue. The faculty's failure to appropriately induce and manage situations to alter these points of view (imaginatively) creates dire consequences for the social system: an imperiled democratic order, the loss of a hard-won, tolerant civil sphere, and the emergence of a frustrated, dependent migrant populace. New students placed in these programs are thereby earmarked with a deeply problematic *civic character*.

Each vocational school has extensive latitude in how they organize, design, and execute their 'integration through education' programs. Education ministries provide schools with a general blueprint that outlines subject areas of learning and a total number of educational hours required for this 1-year intensive program (with option to repeat for a second year). General aims include learning the German language, developing occupational goals, acquisition of a secondary diploma, and, following program completion, transition into an apprenticeship program and gainful employment (APO-BK, n.d.).

An advisory manual for instructional faculty presents the imagined thought process of teachers reading the program blueprint for the first time:

> "What should students [in the IFK] actually learn? These young people are allocated to vocational schools (…) but do these young people even know the significance of a recognized qualification, of craftsperson or master craftsman? And, what are we even supposed to offer? Isn't language the biggest problem, and therefore the learning goal? Or, should we offer German geography, democratic awareness, etc.? Or, foreground the occupational, with career orientation or the connection of instruction and learning with concrete occupations? The course timetable doesn't provide much information – at the same time this means a certain amount of freedom with the curriculum" (Frehe-Halliwell and Kremer, 2018: 2).

An array of rather open-ended tasks is thus handed to vocational school faculty, who develop a more concrete playbook on-site to meet the extensive and distinct needs of their IFK students. Faculty administering the IFK face distinct challenges in their work with precarious immigrants: students have been deported mid-semester, lost hope in their prospect of staying and abandoned an otherwise successful course of study, been sought by the immigration authorities, failed to fulfill instructional-hour requirements due to unrelenting bureaucratic processes, and generally need a lot of clarification about taken-for-granted standards.[5]

Amid these changes in the nature of their work, program faculty manage (and construct) a symbolic structure that includes themselves and their asylum-seeking students. The framing of remedial civics curriculum assigns significance to this task:

> "Teaching fundamental values and political education are among the most important tasks of faculty. This applies in particular to lessons with asylum-seekers and refugees required to attend vocational school" (ISB, 2018: 11).

During their lessons with refugee students, vocational faculty are figured as upholding the democratic order in Germany and instructed to hold traction against the slippery slope of 'relativism':

> "Under no circumstances should the guiding principles of [political education] be interpreted in such a way that rules for living together in a democratic society can be freely interpreted and, accordingly, applied by each individual. Our core values are non-negotiable and must not be sacrificed to any value relativism" (ISB, 2018: 14).

While not directly construing refugee students as inherently anti-democratic, professional literature assigns a *deficiency* in democratic skills engendered by the refugee student's socialization within distinct political systems:

> "The socialization history of refugee pupils is no less of a challenge. The social and political frameworks in the countries of origin are often based on systems of values and norms that can hardly be compared with the local situation. In class, necessary knowledge and insights must be communicated, which are key to foundational understanding and the hoped-for and desired acceptance of our free-democratic basic order and its underlying consensus of values" (ISB, 2018: 8).

> "An educational challenge is that the above-mentioned principles [*Beutelsbacher Konsens*][6] conflict with the social reality in the countries of origin of the refugee students. Controversy and open discussions are

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[5] This is a summary of interview data describing the administrative and workplace problems of IFK program faculty.

[6] The original 'Beutelsbach consensus' holds multiple principles beyond open discourse; one principle is to put pupils "in a position to analyze a political situation and evaluate how their own interests are affected as well as how to seek means and

usually not cultivated there. The possibility of a controversial public debate on political and social issues is one of the central achievements of our free and democratic basic order" (ISB, 2018: 13-14).

Instructional activities impute sweeping deficits in social tolerance and democratic readiness. These activities provide corrective plans to address anticipated proclivities towards inegalitarianism, tailoring pedagogical means for transforming those mindsets. Depicted classroom scenarios render refugee students as not only deficient in but *resistant to* the ways of a free-democratic order. Opening space for refugee students to exercise political judgement appears here as both imperative and inherently risky.

The protectionist framing of professional guidelines embeds a basic, self-evident premise that the presence of new populations without democratic skillsets will inevitably disrupt the free democratic order. The *necessity* of a program of civic transformation for the survival of democracy appears as a commonsense assertion and core assumption of the project of civic remediation. The validity of that premise is not at issue in this paper. I wish however to illustrate the core template for 'mixed contact' crafted for faculty members who teach civics to refugee students. Suffice to say, there is extensive, specific priming that informs the repertoire of expectations that faculty bring to the situation.

Civic Conversion as Debate

Civic conversion as *debate* casts refugee students' civic remediation as a transformative experience effected through debate and dialogue. These tales depict refugee students triumphing over a troubled social past through settling down in liberal democracy. When these students undergo a debate conversion (and convert their classmates), they appear as embodiments of the ideals of political community. Reasoned debate not only moves the refugee students nearer to civic ideals, the capacity to move students along this path verifies those same ideals. It confirms the 'realness' of principled achievements in German civil society. Key plot points include the refugee student's capacity for major transformation, their (historical) deprivation from adequate experiences, and their civic renewal within the host society.

"We can fight each other on the plane of reason"

The debate style conversion constructs refugees as symbolically 'outside,' but especially able to be re-made in the image of civic ideals. Herr Pasquel, co-chair of the IFK program, discusses his understanding of successful civics education:

> H. Pasquel: We work a lot to convey the idea that we are all human, we are all the same, we all have the same worth, all children of God, and so on. But, for the students that was already obvious. Antisemitism was also a big question. Some have that deeply embedded through their upbringing. But, up through now, students have said, "Herr P., we know that. Our blood is exactly the same as the blood of others" (…) What can I say. This is a new land for them and there you can do anything. There's really a ground -- obviously, there is a preceding history -- but the ground is there to plant anything, so to speak (…) And, it's wonderful when this fruits (…) Everyday I'm glad, because I have students who have lived through war or persecution, whatever it may be, and they are from various nations and religions, which in their home country fought with each other, and suddenly in one room you have peace. Let's say it like that. For students that is – also for me – beautiful to see. That we can learn peace. And, on another level, that we can fight each other on the plane of reason (…) Where you also notice, we can use our reason instead, and that the students can demonstrate that one can speak and use words to solve problems, not just power.

A host of possibilities materialize in this account. The students attain distance from their troubled pasts and experience a *new* social context that counters previous experiences of repression and exclusion. Refugee students *can* demonstrate civic ideals of multicultural tolerance and dialogue. The assumed deficiencies of their social past *can* be corrected. Placing students with histories of ethnic-religious conflicts together in a classroom and teaching them to engage each other using reason and debate symbolizes, simulates, and affirms 'remedial' achievements. The debate story's progression, from fertile ground to peace and beauty, models an 'exit' from a barren social past and a prodigious 'renewal' in the social present.

"Something really happens there"

Imagining and narrating students in such ways heightens the faculty's appreciation of civic life. Herr Richter describes a particularly transformative set of debates in his civics classroom:

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methods to influence that political situation according to their interests" (Wehling 1977: 180). The IFK textbook (ISB, 2018) states this particular principle as "empowerment for participation."

> H. Richter: For most students it's quite boring, but the students in the refugee classes are at least more interested than students in the same department from other classes. Our constitution lends itself quite well as an introduction: "Human dignity is inviolable." This reference to the rights, so not just the duties, which every individual has. (…) I have one class in mind. There are many female students in that class (…) And, there the female students are very interested in equal rights. That's very important and they appreciate that a lot, that in our country we have this form of democracy. Meanwhile, in the same class there are certain male students, who don't find it so great that not all the power comes from the man. (…) Certain young men assume that in relationships, as a principle, that the man always makes the decisions, that this is taken for granted – this also applies to male students, generally - But, [they] can't show this with arguments, why this should be the case. Meanwhile, the women proceed with arguments. And, this leads to conflicts. But, through the debates, the young men become aware that they lack an argument. Something happens there. Something really happens there.

German legal documents and arguments built from them become resources that empower female refugee students to confront illiberal hierarchies (within the refugee in-group). As with H. Pasquel's account, this story of successful civic remediation breaks H. Richter out of the mundane experiences of teaching civics. Instead of bored students, he observes and experiences firsthand the (sacred) value of constitutional protections. The interpretation of female refugees as 'very interested in equal rights' and appreciative of democracy constructs civic deprivation, again, as *preceding* settlement in Germany. The prior deprivation needs to be (and is) meaningfully addressed through well-reasoned debates and rhetorical investment in foundational texts, lending a liberatory meaning to civic remediation. The 'something' that has happened is not primarily a disruption of patriarchal thinking among male refugee students; it is an affirmation of the value and necessity of teaching civics to refugee students. The narrated transformation presents as a substantial disruption of prior presumed experiences with irrational, authoritarian social arrangements.

Dialogue and Social Suspicion

Although students in 'integration through education' programs leave a variety of sending countries, as well as social and economic circumstances, their structural grouping into the same school program means they study alongside other young people seeking asylum. This grouping institutionalizes a common categorical definition and creates a context for shared experience among these recently arrived migrants. Their firsthand accounts describe a common realization that this new social world interprets them and 'their kind' as categorically the same.

Ali, a second-year student in the IFK program, provides a clear articulation that the categorical difference of 'refugee' manifests through a shared stigmatizing experience:

> Ali: I think that everyone, and sure it isn't that many, but that all who are refugees in Germany, when someone from another country, a refugee, does something bad or illegal, then we're all in it. What's important [is] where are, where are the honest people, who want to work and live here? You have to get the people [to] know that. I have that.

The discovery and recognition that one is not seen as an individual but as the embodiment of a problematic category prompts a set of moral arguments to disconfirm that assumption. Students recognize that (in situations of mixed contact) the actions of other people whom they do not know are now their burden, indeed the burden of 'all who are refugees.' The problem of overcoming this position becomes central to navigating social life.

Karam discusses an early experience he had realizing that he was being seen as belonging to the same category as terrorists:

> Karam: Well, at first when we came to Germany, it was, it was the terrorist attack on Paris. Yeah, back then. And we know a little, everyone could think about themselves. When a Muslim killed those people, what are the people to think about us? So [I] had difficulties. When I was with a German or anyone [and] said "I want to talk with you" but I have problems with the language. I can't talk at all. What am I supposed to talk with him? What should I talk about with him? What is he to think about me?

This association with a violent terrorist attack becomes the backdrop of Karam's real and imagined interactions with new people in Germany, infusing these moments with ambiguity and jeopardizing his social identity. Not knowing if others think the worst of him and not knowing how to divorce himself from these assessments complicate Karam's attempts to present himself to others: "What should I talk about with him? What is he to think about me?" Initially, a lack of linguistic resources limits what he can effectively communicate about himself: "I can't talk at all." Managing these circumstances – the specter of stigmatization alongside limited language proficiency – requires major resources, resources of self-presentation that can garner better social interactions and resources to manage the psychological shifts of an ambiguous, polluted social identity.

Tolerance and skill for managing this situation develops over time, with lessons from the civics classroom propping up students' strategies to navigate mixed contact. The following perspective from Saad, an advanced IFK student starting his apprenticeship placement, clarifies how the terms of difficult situations can be catalogued, mentally managed, and addressed using dialogue:

> Saad: I have watched a lot of situations here, because there are many people, for example, they're out smoking hash or something else. And, one doesn't know what I've got, what I'm smoking, if I'm bad or good. He's gonna look close if I'm good or not. Then, afterwards, he comes and talks with me a bit more.

The use of dialogue here operates as a device for dealing with pervasive suspicions, prejudices, and fears of insider-others. The primary utility of dialogue is not to stoke an intellectual debate. It is a step that follows benign acceptance that one is by default regarded with suspicion. It is a tool that disarms and manages others' expectations in the situation of mixed contact.

Civic Conversion as Denunciation

The alternative form of civic conversion is effected through *denunciation*. Successful denunciation conversions are achieved through a refugee student's stated agreement with civic ideals, an agreement tied specifically to how the instructor interprets the meaning of those ideals. While classroom discussion is a tool in this approach, discussion and dialogue are not central in exemplifying a transformation. Success in denunciation conversion entails students espousing approved civic ideas and disavowing 'uncivic' ones.

"Now they're already saying it, too"

Faculty recognize denunciation conversion as occurring when students *agree with* a predefined set of ideas. Frau Hesse, who teaches German and Politics, presents her experience teaching the concept of religious pluralism:

> F. Hesse: We have, at least with regard to religious issues, reached an agreement in my class that it's not important which religion you belong to, rather how people treat each other. We say, I say, 'A good heart is the most important thing.' The students are totally shocked when I tell them that I'm not a person of faith. But, do I behave badly? No. (…) The idea of the next life, for example, is present in every religion and now they're already saying it, too.[7]

Moving students' level of assessment from group membership – 'which religion you belong to' – to behavior – 'how people treat each other' – marks for her a meaningful shift in how refugee students conceptualize morality. Communicating tolerant perspectives on religious pluralism resituates refugee students' judgment of moral behavior, (imaginatively) shifting them away from a prior conception of morality based on religious membership to one based on *individual* behavior. Making the case for evaluating individuals, she presents her own lack of religiosity to separate morality from religious membership. This work to realign the locus of morality is anchored in an understanding that students would otherwise be engaged in religious sectarianism, evaluating others on the basis of their religious membership, or lack thereof. F. Hesse presents her pedagogical success here as convincing students to agree that moral behavior does not require religious affiliation.

A tactic here, which also appears in curricular activities for managing religious pluralism, encourages refugee students to develop an *equated* understanding of religious affiliation.[8] When refugee students come to acknowledge that all religions are in some way the same, religious affiliations (and non-affiliations) are equalized in legitimacy. Agreement with this presentation indicates successful civic remediation. The conclusion of denunciation conversion celebrates 'renewal' by highlighting refugee students' rhetorical separation from a presumed inegalitarian perspective. They are *now* using the same unifying discourses as F. Hesse. This achievement conceives secular morality, religious equality, and the primacy of individual behavior over group affiliation as both *new* and transformative.

"Equal means that everyone is equal"

Major pedagogical effort is put towards having refugee students verbalize their rejection of 'incorrect' perspectives. Frau Breuer recounts her approach to teaching equality before that law:

> F. Breuer: So, as a woman, would I want to live in a society where women are devalued? No, I wouldn't. I'm grateful for the emancipation, I'm grateful for the Enlightenment, and I'm grateful that - by all

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[7] Incidentally, this shared 'idea of the next life' is not a factual representation of all religions.
[8] For illustration of classroom activities used to teach religious pluralism through drawing commonalities across religious affiliations, see KH-II unit 9 (ISB, 2018).

means, theoretically - we enjoy equal rights. Practically speaking that isn't the case, but you also have to convey that this isn't a given - that you impart this to young men and women, so that it is accepted and carried forward (…) in pursuit of an identity, the less you articulate what your expectations are and what you would like to have, then the other one starts to interpret this for themselves: what's acceptable and what's not. (…) I have also spoken about the law, about judges in Germany who handed down rulings that incorporated cultural contexts and gave the perpetrator a lighter sentence. For example, in the context of spousal murder (…) And, I've quite clearly stated my personal position that I see this as wrong. Equal means that everyone is equal, also including getting to have more rights. And, I ask them how they feel about this and honestly I haven't had a single refugee who found this comprehensible, that culture would make a difference.

The imagined 'exit' and 'renewal' that unfold here are harder to see than in some of the other narratives, because the renewal is pressed upon the refugee student's future. The transformation is as follows: F. Breuer's students were, prior to civic remediation, on a certain path with the potential to disrupt legal equality through supporting 'getting to have more rights.' When refugee students 'accept' and 'carry forward' an appropriate interpretation of equal rights, and reject their subversion through 'cultural contexts,' her educational intervention disrupts this path. The refugee student's un-remediated presence in Germany *was going to* introduce more inequalities in the legal system.[9]

The 'exit' is from a pathway of complicity that injects hazards into legal institutions, while the 'renewal' appears as the hearty disavowal of ideas thought to cause such hazards. She instantiates a denunciation conversion by inducing students to vocalize opposition towards the inegalitarian things they were presumably going to precipitate. F. Breuer's surprise in hearing students agree with her interpretation, and the imagined surprise of the listener, reveal again a core presumption that refugee students harbor support for certain things.

Disavowal and Belonging

Dealing with being a 'refugee' means having to answer for the misdeeds of other people you do not know. Distancing oneself from negative assumptions becomes a major part of social interaction for those who occupy this category. Students enrolled in 'integration through education' use the material of denunciation conversion to narratively distance themselves from the negative qualities ascribed to these 'bad others.' They regularly invert stigmatizing qualities: students stress how they are different from the stereotyped image of the criminal or 'bad' refugee, denouncing laziness and welfare-dependence and espousing a moral life of skilled work, paying taxes, and giving back.[10] This *narrative of belonging* includes a self-portrait as *civic convert*.

The following selection demonstrates how IFK students weave in the plot lines of remedial civics to present themselves:

> Saad: I have met with people, and I have learned a lot. There is no difference, I don't know, [if you're] gay or not, we are all equal humans. One just needs to speak from the heart and talk with each other.

> Mohammad: It was, when I came [to] Germany, there's many, many foreigners, who are always making trouble and the Germans, they think: "the refugees, they're all bad." And, they aren't. You can't say, 'everyone is bad.' Every country, there are bad people and good people.

> Amadou: I am a little bit open. I can – I don't say, "him, he's beneath [me]," or something like that. For me everyone, everyone is equal, regardless of religion or what kind of person, it doesn't matter.

> Abdul: With me now, the most important [thing] is that everyone here is respectful, really, regardless of what country they're from, what nation, what religion.

Students steer through the situation of mixed contact using a discursive performance of a tolerant-self.[11] The remedial civics classroom clearly announces itself in these self-presentations: difference appears as a feature of individuals, not groups; group differences are flattened to a point of irrelevance; acceptance and tolerance towards sexual, national, and religious differences is repeatedly and explicitly avowed. These appeals to a greater unity, irrespective of social category, enable students to situate themselves outside of negative labels by presenting group-

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[9] For a dissection of the idea that an irreconcilable conflict exists between women's legal rights and cultural groups coded as not sufficiently liberal (e.g., those from Muslim majority countries), or the concept 'defensive liberalism,' which poses gender egalitarianism and multiculturalism as inherently oppositional, see Benhabib (2002).

[10] See Davis (1961) for a more extensive articulation of strategies that stigmatized people use.

[11] The quotes from this section do not *depict or imagine* the mixed contact dynamic; they are statements students used within a mixed contact encounter.

based distinctions as invalid criteria of evaluation, while also depriving them of the strategic use of group membership to pursue collective aims.[12]

'Integration through education' positions refugee students as capable of reform. Students, for their part, adeptly recognize this expectation and mobilize it to craft the role of the civic convert. Beneath the celebratory civic conversion tale is a troubled moral path, through which refugee students learn of the flaws and deficits their social environment sees in them and come to intimately know that burden. In mixed contact, students mobilize civics lessons to claim self-worth and social belonging. Democratic modes (e.g., dialogue) acquire shape as individual life management strategies; grievances about the social environment are directed inward (e.g., benign acceptance of suspicion, managing presumed pathologies of an assigned in-group). Using legitimate means of democratic redress appears rather unwise, as publicly linking themselves with the categorical pollution they are made to experience could introduce new hazards into an already precarious situation.

A Rite without Passage

There appears to be no way for refugee students to behave that would dispel the pervasive expectation that they bring ideological perils, nor any way for these students to prevent being understood (pre-civic conversion) as threats to cherished civic arrangements. Students regularly present themselves as *already* possessing the desired attitudes. In conversion stories, faculty depict a preexisting embrace of treasured liberal ideas: as when H. Pasquel recounts students telling him 'Herr P., we know this' or when F. Breuer points out that *none* of her refugee students agreed with differential treatment before the courts. The transformative thrust of the conversion story persists despite clear observations that students express 'normal' levels of support for civic ideas; as in the cases of H. Richter and F. Hesse, when their students were swiftly receptive ('they're already saying it, too') and non-receptive to liberal ideas ('this also applies to male students, generally') in ways typical of any young person developing a moral horizon. Yet, these same students are narrated as being substantively changed and the work of changing them as an imperative contribution to the maintenance of democracy.

Civic conversion stories present an exit-renewal transformation, despite contents clearly at odds with that portrayal. The denunciation form of civic education simultaneously *marks* students with a set of contaminating attributes and induces them to rhetorically cast off these same contaminating attributes. This process is treated as correcting the refugee student's nebulous, yet ever present, potential to negatively influence the standing order of things. Debate conversions offer a less contaminating instance, while still insisting on the exit-renewal structure. Faculty persist in casting IFK students as civic converts, despite the more nuanced picture that directly working with these students reveals to them. Major public and professional educational efforts continually urge refugee students to 'fit' into liberalism; faculty simultaneously acknowledge that their students already embraced these ideas (or were receptive and unreceptive in typical fashion); and, there is the persistent understanding that 'success' fundamentally transforms the refugee student. The necessity of this transformation can only be verified, not disconfirmed. The curious thing, then, is the hegemony of the narrative form and its intractability to disconfirming evidence.[13]

The presentation of civic conversion as a dramatic transformation holds major properties of what Zerubavel termed 'ritual transitions':

> "Most of the fine lines that separate mental entities from one another are drawn only in our own head and, therefore, totally invisible. And yet, by playing up the act of 'crossing' them, we can make mental discontinuities more 'tangible'" (1991: 18).

To punctuate the 'reality' of discrete things and to pass between relevant symbolic boundaries, we substantiate transitions by 'dramatizing the moments of entering and exiting' (Zerubavel, 1991: 18-19). The denouement of civic conversion exemplifies this aspect of ritual transition: the refugee is *now* liberated from their unenlightened past, the refugee is *now* cleansed of intolerance, the refugee is 'now already saying it, too,' and so forth. But, what happens when there is no *transition* – only a ritual? What if the conversion rite enhances discontinuity without passage? As conceived, a ritual transition *creates passage*. To use a few of Zerubavel's (1991) own examples, the boxing match does (barring a major interruption) start after the ritual glove touch, and you are married to your spouse after your wedding (until you get divorced or die). Where do refugee students land after they express a civic conversion? Are they German now? Are they integrated now? What tangible change is made possible?

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[12] The externally assigned group agenda to convert patriarchal male counterparts or prevent the German courts from giving spouse murderers light prison sentences, notwithstanding.

[13] My intention is not to suggest that no student enrolled in an 'integration through education' program holds any of the problematized points of view imputed to them, nor to suggest that IFK students have no need for clarification about permissive aspects of liberal democracy. It is instead to point out that faculty, in the face of potentially disconfirming evidence, continue to approach refugee integration monolithically as a civic conversion.

I argue that the dramatized exit-renewal structure *conceals non-passage* between lines. While it is tempting to see civic conversion as a kind of initiation rite, this encounter does not confer ascendence to equal (or improved) social status, attributes which would allow it to correspond with an initiation.[14] 'Passage' through civic re-education does not revise the expectations applied to refugee students. The *tangible* 'renewal' of civic conversion is*, on the one hand, students learning that their assigned symbolic difference can only be managed, not dissolved and, on the other, institutional insiders confirming (to themselves) that this is the opposite of what they are doing. The reality of an exclusionary boundary is *being made* through its triumphant defeat.

Civic conversion as a rite without passage consecrates the legitimacy of arbitrarily constructed boundaries, while concealing that effect behind a conversion drama. The mechanisms of 'rites of institution' are at play here:

> "To institute, in this case, is to consecrate, that is, to sanction and sanctify a particular state of things, an established order, in exactly the same way that a *constitution* does in the legal and political sense of the term (...) by making it known and recognized; it consists of making it exist as a social difference, known and recognized as such by the agent invested and everyone else" (Bourdieu, 1991: 119).

The ritual transition presented in civic conversion – the 'before' and the 'after' of refugee students – obscures. It directs attention away from the "hidden set of individuals in relation to which the instituted group is defined" (Bourdieu, 1991: 118). Rites of institution, as social rituals, invoke the passage of their subjects, while legitimating a difference *between those subject to the ritual and those not subject to it* (Bourdieu, 1991). The dubious dramatic claim of civic conversion sets refugee students symbolically outside by stubbornly insisting they be brought inside. The arbitrary line instituted by the rite of civic conversion is between *those who must* ritually distance themselves from an assigned 'deficiency' in their social past, present, and future and *those who need not*.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The circumstances of 'integration through education' for these younger cohorts of asylum-seekers in Germany instantiates many of the elements in the civic integration models increasingly relied on in Europe. Citizenship scholars have charted and critiqued this 'civic turn' (see Mouritsen, 2008; Halikiopoulou et al., 2013; Goodman, 2018; Mouritsen et al., 2019; Larin, 2020). This scholarship identifies fundamental patterns in state-led immigration regimes and their civic integration projects: 'one-sided' focus on the individual, direct state involvement to 'encourage desired mind sets,' expansion of the 'realms of desirable 'good citizenship,'" and use of civic tests to screen migrants prior to granting them rights of entry and/or residency (Mouritsen et al., 2019: 601). Civic integration models have been critiqued for their inability to demonstrate measurable increases in integration outcomes (Mouritsen et al., 2019), for applying ideological requirements of membership only to migrants (Larin 2020), and for promoting the use of liberal-democratic ideals in reactionary movements of ethnic exclusion (Halikiopoulou et al., 2013). This paper invites a distinct lens on civic integration, one which sees its parameters as unfolding from a rite without passage.

Civic conversion requires that 'national' boundaries and coherent attributes of European societies exist; it demands that there are *outsiders* who can, if not properly transformed through education, undermine these societies by polluting them. While 'integration through education' programs conceptualize these differences as mutable through pedagogy, the necessity of corrective remediation remains irrefutable. The construction of the refugee student as a cultural outsider who can merely be *reformed* stands immutable. Consecrating the pathological center of the civic conversion rite – the 'refugee student' who needs re-education to not threaten democratic society – actually binds the larger cultural system, and the social system beyond.

German 'integration through education' pervasively weaves in and tames the discourses that pollute and impinge the refugee student.[15] When students wrangle and evade these discourses, they bring their own 'self-governing capabilities into alignment with political objectives' (Rose, 1992: 147). Ani, a student from Armenia clarifies this larger social function:

> Ani: Yeah. [I'm] learning so much about everything. What do you need to know when you go to the Social Welfare Office [*Sozialamt*], for example. What do you need to say; what should you not say. How do you need to do this? And, then, for apprenticeship training, apprenticeship language, and what do

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[14] To be clear, the school itself does help students gain stable footing in Germany in quite significant ways such as brokering their migration status, but these are not direct elements of what is attained through civic conversion.

[15] For a discussion of how the 'assimilative' modes of incorporation in the United States encourage individuals to separate themselves from civic discourses that pollute their identities, see Alexander (2006: 425–427).

> you need to wear, what do you need -- what do you need to talks about, what do you need to be able to do, what do you need to do beforehand, *so things go easy for you* [emphasis added].

The school and the knowledge she obtains there provide her with an insider's perspective on how to navigate the social world, explicating behaviors that will ease individualized difficulties. As administrators of an instance of civic integration, the IFK faculty become 'experts of subjectivity' who perform the task of 'governing through freedom' (Rose, 1992, 1999). Much like professionals, everyday citizens, too, are called upon and deputized to perform these functions.[16] The demand for experts of subjectivity clearly exceeds the school walls.

Tenacious, unscientific convictions about the realness of ritually imposed differences constrain young newcomers within the German opportunity structure.[17] Their encounter with symbolic closure tells them what is really on offer. In keeping with the project of aligning selves with political objectives, the emergent disposition that 'converted' students display – their *narrative of belonging* – articulates with a state-led project of migration utilitarianism, in which migrants fill shortages in the direct labor force without altering organizing principles of the social structure. This accomplishment mitigates strain between the finite opportunities on offer and the subjective aspirations of the students.[18] The ability to reformulate their complicated predicament into simple matters of skill directed towards the self – to make it *so things go easy for you* – sustains a growing rift between the subjective and objective dimensions of contemporary life.[19] As a type of social integration, the rite of civic conversion affixes system to psyche and civil society.

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[16] The broad involvement of everyday citizens in the German 'integration through education' effort was beyond the scope of this paper's analytical emphasis on professionalized forms of civic remediation. Additional public-facing efforts such as the 'Open Your Heart' campaign enlist everyday citizens in the task of aligning immigrant selves with liberal governance.

[17] To this point, see Lamont and Molnár (2002: 168) on the role of symbolic boundaries in organizing and stratifying social life. Symbolic boundaries become 'objectified,' manifesting 'unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities' (Lamont and Molnár, 2002: 168).

[18] See Merton (1938) on the strain between subjective aspirations and objective opportunities.

[19] See Furlong and Cartmel (2006) on this rift and its consequences for contemporary youth.

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"We're Building Our Little International Community": A University-Sponsored Program for International Students

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ABSTRACT

Intercultural competence is an outcome of the internationalization of higher education institutions, directly impacting international students' experiences in the receiving country. An exploratory case study was used to investigate the perceptions and experiences of participants of a university-sponsored program designed to integrate and acculturate international students in a Southwest Florida university. The participants were six newly arrived international students and eight student-ambassadors. Multiple data sources were collected and analyzed using content analysis. Findings reveal the importance of student-led initiatives in fostering campus inclusion and community-building, as well as enhancing cross-cultural interactions. Yet, significant challenges persist in sustaining engagement and bridging cultural divides between domestic and international students. Additionally, the study's findings highlight the importance and challenges of university programs in facilitating meaningful exchanges between these groups, underscoring the need of institutional support in improving the experiences of international students in higher education settings.

Keywords: international students, intercultural competence, internationalization, higher education, case study

INTRODUCTION

Nearly one million international students worldwide have chosen the United States to advance their education and improve their career prospects despite recent travel bans and the COVID-19 pandemic (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2022). Financially, international students contribute immensely to the United States economy with 33.8-billion-dollar expenditures in the 2021–2022 academic year and supported around 335,000 jobs nationwide. For example, in Florida, the seventh leading state receiving international students, 39,622 students contributed over 1.2 billion dollars to the state in the same academic year (IIE, 2022; NAFSA, 2022). In addition to economic contributions, international students bring the United States intellectual and cultural capital, a vast array of life experiences, and skills that significantly expand domestic students' intercultural awareness and cross-cultural understanding (Alghamdi and Otte, 2016; Martirosyan et al., 2019).

However, international students face numerous challenges transitioning to the receiving country's education system and culture, significantly impacting their social integration and academic success (see Alghamdi and Otte, 2016; Halpern and Aydin, 2021; Perry et al., 2017; Urban and Palmer, 2016). Social challenges commonly include feelings of homesickness, isolation, depression, experiences with cultural intolerance, and hostile attitudes from their domestic counterparts (Akhtar, 2011; Paltridge et al., 2012; Yuan, 2010). Also, international students' visible cultural and linguistic differences add to their negative social experiences, resulting in difficulty making friends and

interacting with domestic students (Alghamdi and Otte, 2016; Constantine et al., 2004; Lee and Rice, 2007; Perry et al., 2017; Poyrazli and Lopez, 2007; Poyrazli and Kavanaugh, 2006; Olivas and Li, 2006). Thus, international students experience discrimination manifested in microaggressions and racial/ethnic labeling and report feelings of otherness and exclusion, particularly in predominantly White higher education institutions (Halpern and Aydin, 2021).

Consequently, international students tend to establish stronger relationships with other international students, finding mutual support to alleviate stress related to negative experiences on campus (Urban and Palmer, 2016). Therefore, to address the social transition and acculturation challenges, higher education institutions committed to internationalization (Knight, 2004) must foster programs and activities that promote integration, social support, friendship formation, contentment/satisfaction, a sense of belonging, and, ultimately, a welcoming campus to international students (Aaron et al., 2018; Chai et al., 2020; McFaul, 2016).

Knight (2004) defined internationalization as the "process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of post-secondary education." (p. 11). This definition emphasizes that internationalization is not just about cross-border activities but also about integrating international and intercultural perspectives into teaching, research, and service functions of higher education institutions.

Previous studies explored cross-cultural interactions between students, how they develop friendships, and the cultural learning outcomes of such interactions (Belford, 2017; Chai et al., 2020; Hendrickson, 2018; Li and Zizzi, 2018; McFaul, 2016; McKenzie and Baldassar, 2017). However, limited research was conducted on university-sponsored programs designed to promote friendships and cross-cultural interactions. Thus, this study investigated the benefits of a peer-to-peer program sponsored by a Southwest Florida university in promoting cross-cultural awareness, integration, and acculturation of international students in the United States. Specifically, these benefits were assessed by investigating the perceptions and experiences of arriving international students and student-ambassadors who participated in the program in the 2021–2022 academic year.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous studies on the experience of international students in the U.S. focused on friendship development (or lack thereof) with domestic students, co-nationals, and other international students and how they impact oral communication skills and cultural learning (see Belford, 2017; Chai et al., 2020; Hendrickson, 2018; Li and Zizzi, 2018; McFaul, 2016; McKenzie and Baldassar, 2017). For example, Quiñones et al. (2021) conducted a comprehensive study on the adaptation challenges faced by international students in both on- and off-campus settings, focusing on issues of autonomy, housing, discrimination, and stereotyping. The study highlighted the students' struggles with communication barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and difficulties in social integration. Additionally, it pointed out the challenges international students face in adhering to academic conventions, meeting the expectations of faculty and peers, and establishing trust-based relationships. Relatedly, Belford's (2017) research concluded with a recommendation for universities to enhance intercultural communication skills and foster friendships among students from diverse cultural backgrounds, underscoring the importance of supportive measures in facilitating successful intercultural adaptation.

Chai et al. (2020) conducted an analysis of the impact of familial and community resources on the academic success and social integration of international students, emphasizing the significance of on-campus socialization in enhancing students' sense of belonging and adjustment beyond the confines of formal education. McFaul (2016) further explored this domain by examining the influence of cross-cultural friendships and campus engagement on the acculturation processes of international students, highlighting the diverse cultural connotations of friendship and love. However, the limited scope and qualitative nature of McFaul's study restrict its applicability to a wider demographic, despite providing detailed insights. This issue of generalizability is echoed in McKenzie and Baldassar's (2017) critique, which underscored the potential misalignment in the understanding of friendships between international and domestic students, attributed to deep-rooted cultural variances. This discrepancy suggested a possible Western bias in the conceptualization of friendship, indicating a need for more nuanced, culturally sensitive research in this area.

Aaron et al. (2018) addressed the deficiency in substantive interactions between domestic and international students in higher education institutions by implementing a conversation partner program, underscoring the imperative for university-endorsed initiatives to bolster international student support. In a similar vein, Arthur (2017) posited that social integration is pivotal for the academic success of international students, advocating for the involvement of faculty, counselors, and domestic students as vital social support mechanisms. Hendrickson (2018) emphasized the role of educators and administrators in creating conducive environments for fostering interpersonal relationships between international and local students, a need echoed by numerous studies. Furthermore, it has been recommended that university administrators should acquire cultural knowledge to enhance their advisory capacity and develop effective strategies for the academic and social integration of

international students. Ammigan (2019) suggested that the responsibility of universities extends to facilitating interactions between international and domestic students, necessitating the integration of such initiatives within both curricular and extracurricular frameworks, as well as in social contexts both within and beyond the classroom setting.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that, besides the possible differences in conceptualizations of friendship in Eastern and Western culture, the typical weak friendship ties between international and domestic students reported in numerous studies can be explained by an increase in fragile, distant, and superficial relationships that characterize the current era, which Bauman (2001) conceptualized as liquid modernity. The liquidity of relationships, according to Bauman (2004, 2005), is expressed in short-term, less committed, weak ties, with an overemphasis on individualism, where relationships between self and others are defined less based on their moral content and solidarity than their utility and ability to provide any form of gain. Therefore, we, the authors, acknowledge that liquid relationships in liquid-modern times might have impacted international students' challenges in establishing friendships in the receiving countries despite this element not being problematized or discussed in previous studies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

Intercultural competence is complex and has multiple definitions and models (Deardorff, 2006). It refers to the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from different cultural backgrounds; it involves understanding and appropriately responding to the cultural context and perspective of others (Deardorff, 2006). This competence is increasingly important in our globalized world, where interactions across cultures are commonplace in both personal and professional settings. Most importantly, it entails cognitive skills that allow individuals to adapt and adjust their behavior when interacting with others in cultural situations (Association of American Colleges and Universities [AACU], 2010). Deardorff (2006) viewed intercultural competence as a process rather than an end state. This means that it is something individuals continually work on and develop throughout their lives. She proposed a pyramid model for intercultural competence where the base is attitudes, followed by knowledge and comprehension, then skills, and at the top is the desired external outcome of effective and appropriate behavior and communication.

Zhang (2015) focused on the communication aspect of intercultural competence and how university advisors could consider international students' different signifiers and perspectives. Similarly, Liu (2019) and Moradi and Ghabanchi (2019) highlighted the importance of building intercultural communication sensitivity to the adaption of international students in higher education institutions, as it helps reduce cultural barriers between individuals from different cultures. Despite the relevance of intercultural competence aiding individuals to develop "knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact; valuing others' values, beliefs, and behaviors; and relativizing one's self" (Byram, 1997: 34), there are not many institutions that apply, document, or measure intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006).

It is important to consider that the concept of intercultural competence itself is not universally defined and can vary significantly across different cultural contexts. This variability raises questions about the universality of the models and frameworks proposed (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006). It is crucial to acknowledge that these models, while insightful, might carry inherent biases reflective of their cultural and academic origins. A critical examination would involve exploring how these frameworks align or clash with non-Western perspectives on intercultural interactions and competence.

Furthermore, the implementation and measurement of intercultural competence in educational and professional settings also require scrutiny. Often, institutions adopt these models without adapting them to their unique cultural and organizational contexts, potentially leading to superficial or ineffective implementations (Sierra-Huedo and Nevado-Llopis, 2022). The assumption that intercultural competence can be universally taught, measured, and applied overlooks the nuanced nature of cultural interactions and the influence of individual experiences and identities. Critical analysis should also question the efficacy of current educational strategies in genuinely enhancing intercultural understanding rather than merely ticking off administrative checkboxes.

Intercultural competence, nevertheless, means acknowledging and understanding other cultures, being empathic by expanding one's linguistic barriers and applying one's attitudes and skills to one's career (Lambert, 1993). Putting intercultural competence into practice is an essential factor in the integration of international students. Previous studies suggest that most postsecondary institutions in the U.S. fail to provide their students and faculty with proper international experience and intercultural support and funding, such as a global curriculum, international studies workshops, and study abroad opportunities (Wickline et al., 2020). It is imperative that higher education institutions committed to internationalization nurture strategies to attract and retain international students and faculty by introducing immersive study-abroad programs and global curricula (Som, 2015; Wilson-Forsberg et al., 2018; Zenner and Squire, 2020).

Furthermore, the concept of internationalization in higher education is intrinsically linked to the development and application of intercultural competence (Knight, 2004). As institutions strive to become global hubs of learning and research, the emphasis on cultivating a deep understanding of diverse cultures becomes paramount. Knight (2004) underscored the need to infuse an international and intercultural dimension into the very essence of post-secondary education. This not only enhances the academic experience but also prepares students and faculty for a world that is interconnected and interdependent. However, the journey towards comprehensive internationalization is multifaceted. Beyond offering international programs and partnerships, it requires an approach that integrates intercultural competence at every level, from administrative strategies to classroom interactions. As the global landscape of higher education continues to evolve, institutions that prioritize internationalization and intercultural competence will undoubtedly lead the way in shaping globally aware, empathetic, and skilled future leaders.

Research Questions

This study explored international students' and student-ambassadors' perceptions of and experiences participating in a peer-to-peer program that aims at promoting cross-cultural awareness, integration, and acculturation of international students on a Southwest Florida university campus in the United States. Therefore, we aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions and experiences of the participants of a peer-to-peer university-sponsored program designed to integrate and acculturate international students?
2. In what ways does the program contribute to the integration and acculturation of international students to campus and the local community?

METHOD

We used an exploratory qualitative case study (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2005) to investigate international students' and student-ambassadors' perceptions of and experiences participating in the Welcome to America program[1] (WTA), a university-sponsored program designed to promote the integration and acculturation of international students on campus. Our goal was not to problematize the purpose of the WTA program but to use the case as grounds for the exploration of participants' perceptions and experiences that can, ultimately, serve as lessons (Stake, 2005) that might indicate the need to challenge or revise the program's purpose.

The nature of this case study is also intrinsic as the WTA program is unique among universities in Florida (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The case is real-life and contemporary, bounded by time and space, as the investigation occurred in the 2021–2022 academic year at a Southwest Florida university.

The Case: Welcome to America Program

Established in 2010 and sponsored by a Southwest Florida university's International Services Office, the Welcome to America (WTA) program seeks to integrate arriving international students enrolled at its campus. The program is described with the aim to enhance cross-cultural awareness and skills for all participants and to facilitate global learning. Each academic semester, the WTA program leaders recruit students across campus to host the newcomers (i.e., international and exchange students). The recruitment message is shared throughout campus, asking for volunteers to serve as cultural ambassadors to the newcomers for one academic year. The volunteer student-ambassadors are selected based on their responses to an online application survey that identifies their experience as students on campus and their interest in discussing and reflecting on the experience of international students living in the United States. Next, they participate in an online interview with the program leaders and a remote or in-person training session that highlights the objectives and expectations of the program and the needs of international students arriving on campus.

While the volunteer student-ambassadors are selected, the new international students are sent messages advertising the benefits of having a cultural ambassador on campus in their integration, acculturation to campus life, and as a way to build friendships. Typically, two to four new international students are paired with one volunteer student-ambassador based on information collected on a survey that inquiries their academic interests as well as cultural, linguistic, and personal preferences (e.g., hobbies, desire to be connected to a student who speaks a specific language, similar majors and/or field of study, others). During one academic year, the student-ambassadors are expected to communicate with their designated students regularly, including before they arrive in the United States, to assist with pre-arrival information (e.g., information about the campus and dormitories) and welcome them to the Southwest Florida region and the campus (e.g., pick them up at the airport, tour the campus, help them buy groceries, and register for classes).

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[1] Welcome to America is a pseudonym created to maintain the anonymity of the program and their participants.

Moreover, the student-ambassadors must attend bi-weekly meetings with the program leaders to discuss their relationships with their assigned students, converse on their experiences, and plan social-cultural activities. Thus, student-ambassadors become responsible for organizing mixers and participating in a minimum of four events with the arriving international students, including touring the region, participating in on-campus activities, traveling to neighboring cities, visiting farmers markets, karaoke, ice skating, barbecues, and an international student reception hosted on campus.

The benefits promoted to student-ambassadors entail cultural learning, making global friendships, developing leadership skills, and earning service-learning hours. Service-learning hours are a graduation requirement for all students enrolled in four-year programs at the university. Altogether, the duty of a student-ambassador is to support arriving international students in their integration into campus and the local community; therefore, ideally, the student-ambassadors are American students that join the program interested in cultural learning, worldwide friendships, leadership development, and completing service-learning hours (required by four-year undergraduate students).

Participants Selection

Before the participants were selected and data were collected, we got approval from their university's Institutional Review Board (Protocol #S2021-38). A purposive sample of 14 participating students of the Welcome to America (WTA) program from the 2021–2022 academic year volunteered to participate in the study. Six of them were arriving international students, while eight were student-ambassadors; four were male, and ten were female; 12 were undergraduate students, and two were graduate students. The international student participants were diverse concerning their countries of origin and cultural backgrounds from Germany, France, Italy, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti. Although the WTA program leaders recruit students to become student-ambassadors campus-wide, the students who volunteer are typically senior international students. Thus, in the 2021–2022 iteration of the WTA program, the student-ambassadors were international students from Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Jamaica, and Venezuela; only one was from the United States. All participants but one (from the United States) spoke at least two languages fluently, and their average age was 22 years old.

Data Collection and Analysis

Multiple data sources were collected to ensure a detailed description of the case, exploring the perceptions and experiences of the participating students in the WTA program. The goal was that the multiple sources of data would elicit the "whys" and "hows" (Yin, 2018) of participants' perceptions and experience in the program and its purpose of integrating and acculturating them to campus and the Southwest Florida region (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). Specifically, the data were collected through documents, participant observations, semi-structured interviews, a focus group, journal/reflections, and field notes (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015; Yin, 2018).

The documents collected about the WTA included the program's internal documents (e.g., reports, recruitment forms, and pairing information), public documents (e.g., website, recruitment folders, and marketing materials), and artifacts (e.g., emails, demographic and academic information of the participants of the program, and records of events offered) (Patton, 2015). Gathering the previous WTA years' documents was crucial to evaluate the program's previous iterations, to identify where participating international students, both in the position of the hosts or newcomers, were from and their goals, academic interests, and reasons for joining the program, and to discover which events and activities were offered. Analyzing internal reports also facilitated an understanding of how the office views and runs the program and how the program is advertised to the campus and potential participating students.

The participant observations occurred mainly during the events hosted twice a month during the Fall 2021 and Spring 2022 semesters. As volunteer program leaders in the 2021–2022 academic year, the first and second authors were responsible for pairing the incoming international students with the student-ambassadors, training them, and supervising the biweekly meetings. These opportunities allowed them to participate in the activities while observing the students interact in real time. These opportunities offered invaluable first-hand accounts of how the student-ambassadors' and international students' cultural backgrounds impacted their social choices. Thus, the participating students became used to our presence, creating rapport and promoting a naturalist environment between them (Gibson, 2007; Yin, 2018), and contributed to their wanting to participate in the interviews. Furthermore, the observations allowed us to "learn things that [the students] would be unwilling to talk about in an interview" (Patton, 2015: 501). In other words, the observations identified behaviors, relationships, and interactions between the ambassadors and international students that would not be visible to us during the interview. Each observation lasted an average of two hours.

The semi-structured interviews explored the participants' perceptions, experiences, feelings, opinions, and attitudes about being student-ambassadors and international students participating in the WTA (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The semi-structured format allowed the interviews with the participants to be molded by their comments,

in which we adapted the questions and the direction of the interview based on the responses and reactions of the participants. Although we facilitated the pace and direction of their reasoning, at the same time, they helped them avoid steering the conversation off-track. Essentially, the semi-structured interviews facilitated communication between us and the participants to elicit information on their experiences and perceptions as participants of the WTA program (Roller and Lavrakas, 2015). Therefore, despite participating in biweekly or monthly social-cultural events and observing them for a full academic year, the interviews were crucial to allow the participants time and space to elaborate further and qualify their perspectives and feelings about their experience in the program.

In addition, we used the focus groups to gain understanding through the "eyes and hearts" of those directly involved in a specific scenario (Krueger and Casey, 2015: 39). Among the many types of group interviews, the evaluation focus group type was chosen because it best fitted the purpose of this research. The focus group sessions were conducted biweekly, and the participants were the program's ambassadors. Since one of the primary goals of the WTA program is to encourage participants to engage in self-reflective dialogue, which allows them to express their thoughts and experiences, it was important for us to understand how these dialogues occur as well as the language used to discuss them (Patton, 2015).

Journal reflections were a valuable tool for both us and participants. For the latter, journals function like a reliable and regular vehicle for the various thoughts, reflections, ideas, and transformations that might have happened to them through the experience. For researchers, the journals became the evidence that permitted a timely examination of what went on in the minds of the participants during their experience. Thus, to ensure participants would complete them, journals in the WTA program were tied to the service-learning hours they would be granted at the end (Janesick, 2011). Finally, we used field notes extensively to aid them in their participant observations, provide greater insight and depth to their analysis, and increase the trustworthiness of the case study (Patton, 2015).

The data analysis involved several steps to ensure the credibility, trustworthiness, and accuracy of the findings. First, the audio-recorded focus groups were transcribed verbatim. Initially, we condensed the data into organized written texts to strengthen the content analysis (Miles et al., 2014). Then, the data were organized and coded to find patterns to "understand behavior, issues, and contexts" (Stake, 1995: 78). Next, the data were triangulated from different viewpoints, analyzed separately, and compared to check for inconsistencies and minimize interpretation bias (Denzin, 1989). Finally, member-checking and experts validated the consistency of the findings. These measures ensured the findings' credibility, trustworthiness, and accuracy (Patton, 2015).

Researchers' Positionalities

It was important that we were aware of how our positionalities impacted the construction of this study, from its conceptualization to the interpretation of findings and conclusions (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Holmes, 2020; Malterud, 2001). The disclosure of our positionalities ensured trustworthiness and transparency to the research process (Patton, 2015). By providing context about our positionality in the study, such as our cultural backgrounds, language skills, and academic interests, we may help readers understand the potential impact of our perspectives and the potential limitations of the study (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

At the time of the study, the two first authors were international doctoral students who had had personal experiences with the WTA program when they first started their educational journeys in the United States eight years ago. Although the third author was an international professor at the same university, he also had experience being an international student in the United States, making him familiar with the participants' experiences. Therefore, we recognize that our personal experiences with the phenomenon may have affected our methodological decisions, views, and understanding of the data collected in the study. In addition, we may have had certain assumptions or expectations about the program or acculturation process that affected our construction of the themes in the study. Additionally, the combination of our personal experiences and research expertise studying international students may have made us more aware of certain aspects of the participants' experiences in the WTA program and less aware of others.

It is also important to state we inadvertently carried with us assumptions that shaped our initial perspective of the role of this program as well as participants' place within it. We initially overlooked the pervasive neoliberal tendencies that influence both higher education and society as a whole, specifically within the context of funding and assistance for international students. This happened because, despite having had experiences as international students and faculty, we are immersed in a society and education system pervaded by neoliberal, positivist rationalities that put a higher emphasis on individualism and place the burden of seeking support and a sense of belonging on the individual international student. Therefore, we acknowledge that, initially, we fell into the trap of studying the WTA program and searching for prescriptive solutions to everyday educational and societal issues instead of challenging these taken-for-granted assumptions about international students' experiences in the receiving country and the role of higher education institutions in this process. More so, we focused on the micro-

level experiences of the participants, overlooking the structural responsibilities of higher education institutions and political policies that foment anti-immigrant sentiments at different societal levels.

FINDINGS

The content analysis of the data collected in this study identified four main themes, namely,
(1) university-sponsored, student-led,
(2) empowerment and service,
(3) building a little international community, and
(4) shallow connections.
Overall, the themes indicated that participants felt that the program empowered them to make a positive impact on international students on campus and that it helped them to feel more connected to each other and to the institution.

Theme One: University-Sponsored, Student-Led

The first emerging theme emphasized the WTA program's leadership aspect, which encouraged the participants to take the lead in planning, organizing, and conducting activities to promote the integration and acculturation of international students on campus. One participant said, "it's great that the program let us ambassadors organize events that make sense to us" (Ambassador 1, Venezuela). They felt like planning their own events would ensure their success and attendance of domestic and international students; "we didn't feel like going to events that the [International Service] office planned. We didn't feel like we had to [attend]. But when one of us plans it, we feel we have to go to support our friend" (Ambassador 6, Ecuador). In this sense, the participants highlighted the program's leadership aspect and the comradery among them, knowing that the ambassadors were organizing the events and encouraging them to attend.

Another crucial aspect that the participants pointed out was the International Services Office's support of participants' leadership in planning the events: "it makes all the difference to know that the university is backing us up. If it weren't for their support, we wouldn't feel encouraged to continue" (Ambassador 5, Colombia). Another added, "We feel like the university sponsors us to take the lead and help create something meaningful for the international students on campus" (Ambassador 8, Bolivia). They highlighted the financial support and infrastructure the International Services Office provided to pay for decorations, food, beverages, and rent spaces on campus to conduct the events and activities.

However, one international student from Germany commented, "I thought Americans would have been the Ambassadors, but I was surprised to find that there were barely any Americans participating in the program." Despite the international service office's support and divulgation attempts, U.S.-born students rarely participated as ambassadors in the program. This student added, "All of us [international students] talked about it, wondering why this happens. It seems like Americans don't really care about internationals" (International Student, Germany). Nonetheless, participants emphasized the value of having students take the lead in promoting integration and acculturation events on campus and discussed to which extent this contributed to a sense of ownership and empowerment among the ambassadors.

Theme Two: Empowerment and Service

The second theme featured the participants' reflections on their decision to become ambassadors. They described their empowerment as serving newcomer students to overcome issues they experienced when they first started their journeys on campus. In other words, the ambassadors who were senior international students became ambassadors to help new international students avoid having similar negative experiences as they had as freshmen. For example, Ambassador 2 from Brazil said:

> When I first started, it was so hard to find information about jobs on campus! I was literally on my own to find answers and help myself. Now, as an ambassador, I want to be the person to make the experience of finding on-campus jobs easier for them [newcomers].

Others echoed the need to become ambassadors to help alleviate the burden of first-year experiences of new international students. For example, Ambassador 4, from Jamaica, said: "I'm always reaching out to [international students] to make sure they don't feel alone or left out as I did in my first year. It was very hard, and I even got depressed." Similarly, Ambassador 7, from the United States, mentioned: "I decided to become an ambassador because I had experiences abroad in professional figure skating, and I know how hard it is not to know what to do, where to go, and simply make friends." Therefore, they emphasized the value of service and the empowerment felt by helping prevent newcomer international students' experiences with isolation, lack of sense of belonging,

and other challenges on campus. Generally, most of the participants highlighted that the program offered them the opportunity to impact international students' lives positively and expressed a sense of responsibility.

Theme Three: Building a Little International Community

The third theme highlighted the ambassadors' perceptions that the WTA program served to build a little international community on campus, bringing together international students in friendship. They emphasized the importance of pairing ambassadors and newcomers before their arrival in the country to help them navigate the beginning of their educational journeys in the United States. In particular, the participants emphasized the importance of newcomers having a friend to turn to and help them overcome the initial challenges and cultural shock: "When I first got here [the United States], everything was so new that it is overwhelming to even think of grocery shopping. But we [ambassadors] are here for them to make this process easier" (Ambassador 1, Venezuela).

Moreover, the participants viewed the WTA program as an opportunity to build an international community on campus, in which the events and activities would promote global cultures, languages, and customs across campus. For example, Ambassador 3, from Guyana, said: "[international students] are pretty invisible on campus. So, by sticking together, we can help each other and make ourselves visible to others." Ambassador 4, from Jamaica, added:

> Even though we're building our little international community, it still makes us feel secluded from them [Americans]. It's like we live in a little bubble where we stick together and stay away from those who don't want to be near us.

The participants unanimously regretted the absence of more American ambassadors in the program that would enrich international students' cross-cultural experiences and support on campus. However, instead of ideally having more American ambassadors, the senior international students felt they had to step up and become ambassadors to serve and help the newcomers acculturate to an American campus. Moreover, all participants—ambassadors and international students alike—mentioned having few American friends. An international student's viewpoint exemplified this matter:

> None of us or the Ambassadors have American friends, at least not close friends. We all tried in the beginning, but it didn't really work out. [Americans] seem really nice at first, doing small talk, but not interested in a tight connection at all. I guess they lack a sense of community or are just not interested in having a big group of friends. But I am not sure. (International Student, France)

Conversely, participants felt like they were at least building connections and friendships with people from different cultural backgrounds through the WTA program. They talked about how the program helped them to create a sense of belonging and to feel more connected to the international community on campus.

Theme Four: Shallow Connections

The fourth theme highlighted international students' difficulties establishing meaningful social connections with American peers. Most noted the prevalence of shallow connections in their relationships and how that impacted their perception of Americans and their culture. The findings further indicated that international students often feel ignored and perceive their interactions with American students as superficial or assignment-oriented. As a result, they tend to rely on other international students for support and friendship, which can impede their proper integration and limit opportunities for cross-cultural exchange.

Furthermore, the findings also revealed a shift in international students' perspectives of their home countries compared to their expectations of the American experience and the concept of the "American Dream." The students identified various social, cultural, and political issues in the U.S. that were dissimilar to those in their home countries, which impacted their academic performance and overall satisfaction with the experience of studying abroad.

An international student from Italy noted that "the lack of socialization [in the United States] has been something that I was very shocked [about]." She explained that Americans do not seem to experience the concept of "il dolce far niente," which translates as "the pleasure of doing nothing" in Italian, emphasizing that "all Americans seem to think is about work and money rather than connections and friendships" (International Student, Italy). Another international student added, "In terms of American friends, I will say that what I have are acquaintances. I think this is the American way. Everybody is independent, individualistic. They don't rely on others" (International Student, Haiti). When asked to choose adjectives to describe his experience with Americans versus the international students he met, an international student added, "Americans: busy, superficial, and fake. Internationals: caring, interested, and open-minded" (International Student, Dominican Republic). Ultimately, this theme highlighted the importance of promoting cultural exchange and creating opportunities for meaningful connections between international and American students. The prevalence of shallow connections in relationships

is a broader societal issue that needs to be addressed to build a more inclusive and welcoming community on and off campus.

DISCUSSION

This study's findings yielded important reflections on the perspectives and experiences of participants of a program that aims to promote the integration and acculturation of international students on a SWFL university campus. Despite the well-intentioned efforts of the WTA program in aiming to foment meaningful interactions between international and domestic students—regardless of how successful these turned out to be—there was a persistent lack of American students' participation in the program to establish cross-cultural interactions and, ultimately, fulfill the university's internationalization and intercultural initiatives at the institutional level (Halpern et al., 2022; Ammigan, 2019; Deardorff, 2006; Hendrickson, 2018; Wickline et al., 2020; James, 2018). This might be related to liquid-modern relationships, where individuals avoid sustained interactions with the Other, preferring to establish less committed, short-term, superficial relationships based on individual gains rather than moral solidarity or living with difference (Bauman, 2001, 2004, 2005).

The liquid (Bauman, 2001), shallow connections experienced by the participants of the WTA program materialized in student-led initiatives to promote events and activities that aimed to engage newcoming international and exchange students on campus. On the one hand, the student-led initiatives could be regarded as positive, where students could become agents of change in their communities and develop a sense of civic responsibility. After all, it yielded the sense of empowerment and dedication that senior international students, serving the role of student-ambassadors, had in assisting new international students in their needs and preventing them from having similar negative experiences as they did when they started their educational journeys in the United States. Moreover, building an international campus community helped promote cross-cultural understanding and foster a sense of global citizenship among students.

On the other hand, the fact that the WTA program encouraged student-led initiatives could be contested as a manifestation of neoliberal tendencies of placing the burden of fostering their sense of belonging on the individuals. This could be why ambassadors and new international students felt the WTA program was an opportunity to build their little international community on campus. It was a way to find mutual support and build resilience in the face of isolation they experienced in the broad campus community. Therefore, the little international community could be regarded as a coping mechanism for international students to deal with the feeling of otherness and to seek some agency within the university (Halpern and Aydin, 2021; Tavares, 2021).

The support offered by the WTA program to fund the student-led initiatives is commendable, particularly considering that previous studies indicated that international students tend to be seen as sole sources of revenue rather than integral parts of the campus community (Ammigan, 2019; Wickline et al., 2020). Nonetheless, the fact that any support for international students came solely from the WTA program and the International Services Office that sponsored it was alarming. It may reveal a broader issue, where investments toward internationalization and inclusion of international students on campus are not priorities (Halpern et al., 2022). Once again, it seems like engaging in relationships with international students and integrating them into campus are seen by different campus constituencies as a matter of profit and personal gains (Bauman, 2004, 2005), disregarding the cultural capital, skills, and unique lived experiences these students bring (Martirosyan et al., 2019). Instead, higher education institutions, their leaders, educators, and scholars must push for investments in programs such as the WTA and its potential to reap several benefits of internationalization and intercultural development, such as better academic performance, personal growth, and cultural diversity and enrichment (Halpern et al., 2022).

Nonetheless, this study also promoted a relevant discussion about the voices of international students. Despite the recognized economic, cultural, and academic assets brought by international students to the receiving countries, Abdullah et al. (2014) pointed to the relative invisibility of the "voice" of international students, who tend to be labeled and framed as a "problem" in the United States and other parts of the world. However, international students are a crucial part of the student population in the U.S. higher education system, as their enrollment is considered an important indicator of a university's prestige (Lee, 2010).

This study contributed to the body of literature on international students' experiences by shedding light on the perspectives and experiences of those enrolled in a peer-to-peer university-sponsored program at a Southwest Florida university. The significance of addressing the experiences of international students in higher education was highlighted by the specific problems and possibilities these individuals faced, including the lack of American student participation in the program or its events. We understand that the lack of American students engaging with international students could be a symptom of a broader liquid-modern tendency of individuals who avoid interactions with the Other and prefer to engage in fast-paced, superficial relationships (Bauman 2004, 2005). As a consequence, American students miss the opportunity to interact and build meaningful cross-cultural relationships with international students, and this could be one of the reasons why cultural understanding and

cross-cultural relationships have declined over the decades in the United States (Arnova et al., 2013; Olivas and Li, 2006; Salinas et al., 2022).

For this reason, the university should adopt a more proactive stance in promoting intercultural competencies, thereby highlighting the potential advantages of a more inclusive and global-oriented educational experience accessible to all students. For instance, several researchers recommended that university authorities and faculty arrange projects and programs to develop collaboration between international and domestic students in which students of different cultural and religious backgrounds could participate and exchange their beliefs, customs, and knowledge (Glass et al., 2015). The collaboration programs must provide cross-cultural relationship training programs encouraging cross-cultural sensitivity among domestic and international students to decrease discrimination and prejudice and increase respect for foreign cultural values and customs. After all, experiences of social isolation and disconnection from the campus community can be exacerbated if U.S. higher education institutions do not have culturally relevant spaces, counseling, and programming for integrating the international student population into college communities (Chen et al., 2019; Salina et al., 2022). Thus, this research underscores the importance of probing higher education institutions about their efforts to promote inclusivity and diversity within their programs and initiatives. It prompts reflection on whether more proactive recruiting strategies are needed and whether administrators should be approached for additional resources and support. It also raises questions about how to encourage American students to recognize the benefits of engaging in intercultural activities and what incentives could be created to foster their participation in such programs (Halpern et al., 2022).

The research provided valuable insights for professionals working in the field of international education and student services. The findings emphasized the importance of universities taking a proactive approach to addressing the needs of international students and creating opportunities for them to increase their sense of belonging to the university community (Halpern et al., 2022; Altbach and Knight, 2007; Leask and Carroll, 2011; Spiro, 2011). It particularly highlighted the importance of the institution's International Services Office in this regard. The findings pointed out the need for universities to welcome international students and actively support them throughout their stay, creating opportunities for their integration into the campus and using strategies like the WTA program to promote this goal; otherwise, they risk isolation, and the desired cross-cultural exchanges among international and domestic students will never occur (Alghamdi and Otte, 2016; Bourke, 2016). Therefore, this study's findings emphasized the importance of grounding programs on intercultural competence to increase students' cross-cultural experiences and promote global awareness on campus (Deardorff, 2006). Consequently, other internationalization efforts on campus would reap the benefits of intercultural competence at the institutional and interpersonal levels, contributing to international students' sense of belonging and improving their academic and social experiences (Halpern et al., 2022).

The main limitation of this study is its small sample size. On the one hand, the sample allowed for an exploration of the participants' perceptions and experiences; however, it was not representative of the experiences of every international student on campus or of the broader population of international students across the United States. Future research could explore the potential for expanding or replicating the WTA program at other universities, particularly those with large international student populations, and a study that questions similar programs. Additionally, future research could investigate the long-term effects of the program on the integration and acculturation of international students and the impact on their academic and personal development. It could also be helpful to study the effectiveness of different program models or approaches to student-led initiatives in promoting integration and acculturation and the potential for leveraging technology and other resources to enhance these efforts. Additionally, other researchers could focus on identifying best practices for recruiting, training, and supporting student ambassadors in these types of programs, as well as exploring ways to measure the impact of these programs on the broader campus community.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the WTA program—and the university it is inserted into—fell short of properly welcoming international students, placing the burden of integration and sociability on them instead of providing the necessary support to have them interact and exchange with American students (and vice-versa). While the student-led nature of the program was seen as a positive factor in the overall lukewarm experience of students, as it contributed to a sense of ownership and empowerment among the ambassadors, the fact the students must take a leadership role to make the program function is a symptom that the program is not working. Nevertheless, the participants also emphasized the importance of positively impacting the lives of the international students and supporting them as they adjusted to life on campus and in the local community. Despite its shortcomings, participants felt the WTA program was seen as a valuable resource for building connections and friendships with people from different cultural backgrounds, which helped the participants to create a sense of belonging and feel more connected to the larger international community on campus. One may wonder how much

better their experience would have been if the university had dedicated more time and resources to help international students.

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What Readers Do: Aesthetic and Moral Practices of a Post-Digital Age

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Driscoll, B. (2024). *What Readers Do: Aesthetic and Moral Practices of a Post-Digital Age.* London, New York and Dublin: Bloomsbury Academic.

In his book 'Under the Cover', which follows the life of a novel from its inception to reception, Clayton Childress uses field theory to define three distinct but interrelated fields in book culture – the field of creation (the writer), the field of production (the publisher), and the field of reception (the reader). Beth Driscoll's fascinating new book explores this third field and offers an analysis of the 'manifold practices' of recreational readers, taking reading as a cultural practice which is 'dynamic, meaningful, and infused with energy' (p. 1) and considering it within a post-digital world of BookTok and Goodreads where print and digital co-exist and interact, and readers slip between online and offline spaces and between social and private activities.

In doing so, this book contributes to a field of scholarly work which concerns itself with the activities, relationships, meanings, and uses of reading, from Long's (2003) study of book groups and Fuller and Sedo's (2013) study of social reading events, to Felski's (2008) work on why we read and Rubery's (2022) exploration of neurodivergent reader practices. This field is referred to by Driscoll as 'reading studies' and she positions her work in relation to both literary studies where reading has been conceptualised through the relation between the reader and the text and where the academic ('legitimate') reader is favoured over the recreational one, and social science approaches which favour an empirical focus on the reader, particularly from book history and cultural sociology. Driscoll advocates for a model that combines these different perspectives and uses actor-network theory to look at the connections that readers form with books, other readers, academics, critics, publishers, and authors.

What Readers Do is based on two decades of research combined with extant qualitative studies. Presented here are case studies of digital platforms, analysis of bibliomemoirs (books about reading), social media analysis, qualitative research with book clubs, interviews with readers at literary festivals, personal reflections, ethnographic analysis of a reading group, and discourse analysis of media texts about reading. This rich array of methods is skilfully woven together to build an expansive and robust picture of recreational reading as 'a multidimensional cultural practice that involves social and private, aesthetic and moral behaviours' (p. 9).

The book sets out its intentions, scope, and methodological framework before exploring networks of readers in Chapter 2. This chapter considers readers as consumers, citizens, and conversationalists in relation to book retail, education systems, libraries, and 'book talk' at book clubs and festivals, and on online platforms, showing how readers interact with networks and make connections to enact their identity as readers.

Chapter 3 is concerned with the aesthetic aspects of reading and the ways that readers use books as 'models for living' (p. 10) in terms of constructing a 'bookish' identity or aligning with a particular genre. Driscoll argues that

this 'aesthetic conduct' is a socially-performed set of actions embedded in networks to construct a bookish life in relation to contemporary book culture.

Chapter 4 sees reading as a way to form and perform a moral stance in the world, suggesting that readers make moral judgments in relation to reading itself as a worthy endeavour, characters and plots, and authors and the publishing industry. Driscoll provides a valuable discussion on the role of empathy here, and considers moral disapproval of the actions of authors and publishers, often publicly performed in online discussion or enacted by the 'not reading' of a particular book, positioning this within the 'shifting power relations of contemporary book culture' (p. 113).

Having shown how *social* reading is, Chapter 5 turns to private reading practices, noting the methodological difficulty of researching interior experiences of reading. She addresses this challenge through a discourse analysis of 'pervasive and influential' (p. 119) social and mainstream media accounts of private reading, identifying three 'principal modes' used to describe the personal reading experience: eroticism (sensuality and desire), deep reading (uninterrupted and sustained), and mindful reading (meditative and related to well-being).

The concluding chapter reminds us of the 'incredible variety of practices and affects' (p. 137) associated with reading, described here as a cultural practice with social and private, aesthetic and moral, dimensions. Driscoll argues that book reading has proved to be remarkably persistent and adaptable and suggests that it will continue to thrive in the multiple networks and expressions of aesthetic and moral identity that readers enact, as well as its role in private self-care. She notes the limitations of reading that result from its relationship to capitalist systems and the potential for 'smug self-satisfaction' (p. 142), but ultimately makes a plea for the celebration of reading and advocates for readers.

This is a captivating, clearly-structured and beautifully-written book, accessible to the lay reader who can recognise themselves within its pages without requiring specialist knowledge due to the clear explanation of academic concepts. If I had to point to a limitation, perhaps more consideration of class in relation to access to book culture might have been valuable, although this is acknowledged and the book has a different focus. As a recreational reader myself – one who is currently, for some reason, struggling to read the fiction that I used to love – this book has reminded me of the joy of reading in all its myriad forms and drawn me back into that readerly (or 'bookish') world. It has inspired me to return to my To-Be-Read pile and for that I would like to thank the author. This valuable book will be enjoyed by literary studies and reading studies students and scholars, by authors, publishers, and, most importantly, readers.

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Book Review

(Un)sighted Archives of Migration

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Bublatzky, C. and Siegenthaler, F. (eds.) (2023). *(Un)sighted Archives of Migration*. Oxon and New York: Routledge.

Through consolidating writings across disciplines, the editors have increased awareness regarding the availability and accessibility of (un)sighted archives. The book's central focus is the construction of unique migrant spaces which represent individual and collective subjectivities, and making these archives visible to wider society. Examples include the public exhibition of a private family archive (Bublatzky, Chapter One) and contrasting items left by different migrant groups in the same destination (Kittner, Chapter Five). This brings forth an important debate regarding ongoing global migration crises, the need to reframe discussions around migrant communities and new forms of tangible migrant histories.

The opening chapter introduces the concept of archive-as-activist art, making the archive itself an activist methodology, whilst providing a service to the wider community. The case study of Parasotous Forouhar's family history exhibition in Frankfurt (1999-present), because of her parents' assassination in 1998, presents the family histories and identities of her subjects as a form of resistance. This underscores the power of combining protest and art, 'inviting them to support the artist in collecting, selecting and sharing reports about cruelty, injustice and violence against other humans' (p. 28). Bublatzky, the author of this chapter, recognises the limitations of presenting an archive in a public manner. By opening it to the public, the work itself is no longer in the artist's control and the audience has the choice if they wish to view the archive as a piece of activism or not.

The second chapter explores In/Visible images of mobility with Senegalese migrants in Berlin and Dakar trying to embrace the digital age. Here, smartphones act as 'personal pocket archives' (p. 39) for the representation of voices. Pfiffer and Neumann argue that this transition to the digital allows migrants to tell stories of their struggles and successes. Their conclusion that the 'archive discussed here stands in stark contrast to the dominant images of migration shown in Western journalistic contexts' (p. 53) highlights the need to consider such personal archives in a research context. Their personal insight into the subject matter and fieldwork allows for the building of personal relationships, potentially leading to subjective research. However, the authors can circumvent this by being aware of the cultural intricacies and their researcher positionality.

The third chapter explores the power of utilising the skills and experiences of migrants in the creation of archives. Here, the involvement of migrants highlights a commitment towards stronger migrant representation. Removing the Western influence in the creation of an archive allows a shift in the perception of archival constructions. When considering the construction of these neo-archives, Goldhan and Ricciardo's argument that we should 'not define cultural heritage as limited to a retrospective perspective' (p. 80) but rather actively engage with it head on, is a valid point; especially when considering the need to ensure the representation of those directly

affected. However, what is not highlighted enough is the question of access and engagement of these archival materials, such as the destruction of art pieces. Further emphasis on the input from migrants regarding the chosen objects would have been useful, rather than the researcher choosing the objects themselves.

Fierz's argument in the fourth chapter, that 'triggers of memory and storytelling, can be interrogated and function as apt tools to make migratory archives, hidden memories, and narratives of migrant communities visible' (p. 87), explores the lack of voice and visual history of Turkish migrants in Switzerland. It comes at the heel of the three personal and emotionally engaging chapters and could have read better if placed more theoretically towards the front of the book. Its renders it less impactful that the previous chapters. While its concluding remark 'I have made an appeal for keeping the eyes open for visual traces of migrants' acts of remembering' does read as an impactful personal statement (p. 100), a more robust conclusion would have provided a stronger analysis of the city-as-archive concept as one example. Nevertheless, Fierz allows for consideration of spaces to allow activism and resistance to help Turkish migrants feel heard, especially when compared to the first chapter, with the concept of the archive having been reassessed by both Fierz and Bublatzky.

The final chapter, on objects of migration, concerns the distinctions 'between objects of flight and objects of migration' (p. 103). Although the second part of the article could have been expanded upon further, Kittner focuses on three areas: the archives of Turkish migrants in Switzerland, the photo collections of Senegalese migrants, and collections in the context of art and history, which reflected the questions and connections between ownership and authorship. Kittner points out how, in the present day, archives can take on an invisible function, only being made visible when certain questions require clarification and through performative practices. Archives can be constructed with potentially trivial objects, but to certain individuals, they could be prized possessions; this acts as a form of self-identification, reflecting the second chapter's personal pocket archives. This links to the central theme that runs throughout the edited collection, that the presentation of migration through photography or personal artefacts has been exhibited in a way to evoke and invoke senses of activism and identity.

In conclusion, the book is a strong interdisciplinary publication, highlighting centrally the power of archives in expressing the voices and experiences of migrants. It is especially important with regards to how academics and archives should consider migrant voices in the collection of materials, whilst emphasising the importance of having such collective historical spaces and the need for the public to engage with archives. This shows the need to continually reassess the potential of spaces to produce outputs that can benefit individuals and communities, enabling both activism and self-identity. An interesting addition could have been further consideration to the longer-term impacts of the archival constructions on the lives of migrants and how the archives themselves would engage with migrants' lives and experiences. The chapters do consider the extent to which migrants' lives may improve because of the archival constructions, but a stronger look to the future would have empowered the book further.

Empire of Normality: Neurodiversity and Capitalism

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Chapman, R. (ed.) (2023). *Empire of Normality: Neurodiversity and Capitalism*. London: Pluto Press.

Dr Robert Chapman's *Empire of Normality* is a meticulous contribution to the field of neurodiversity studies, charting the rise of the concept of neurodivergence through the history of normality ideology. Following the pioneering work of Remi Yergeau (2018), Nick Walker (2021) and autistic rights activists including Jim Sinclair (1993) and Kassiane Asasumasu, *Empire of Normality* galvanises the project of neurodivergent liberation by undertaking the first historical analysis of neurodiversity itself.

Theorising a different route out of neurodivergent oppression than that offered by the 'liberal, rights-based' reformism of mainstream neurodiversity activism (p. 7), Chapman offers a practical theoretical outlook for all those subjugated by "cognitive capitalism" (p. 115) in the post-Fordist, high-tech economies of the Global North (p. ix). Making a renewed case for Marxism as a critical disability paradigm, this outlook is presented in the form of Neurodivergent Marxism: a framework for analysing the economic apparatus undergirding dominant understandings of neurodivergence-as-pathology, which naturalises cultural associations between productivity and normality.

Chapman has shown the undeniable reality of the neurological domination driving workers' pursuits of 'normal' cognitive functioning in the Global North, in a text which lifts the veil on the widespread stress, panic and trauma which now characterise our emotional lives (p. 164). Liberation from this state will not be possible, Chapman argues, until the economic structures which constrain the pathology paradigm's acceptable ranges of mental and physical 'normality' are finally, collectively brought down.

Chapman's articulation of the empire of normality is compelling for the accessibility of its central thesis, and for the sheer scale of the historical narrative which it systematically sets out. The book has noticeably been designed with lay readers as well as academic audiences in mind, conscientiously yet concisely laying out each of the key theoretical concepts it employs such that those without expert knowledge of political economy or critical disability studies will not be put off. Chapman has been careful to create a theoretical resource of use to scholars and students of neurodiversity and disability studies, as well as community organisers, support workers and neurodivergent readers themselves seeking an understanding of themselves beyond dominant models of mental distress as pathology.

Beginning with conceptions of physical and mental health as matters of harmony, in a wide array of cultures across the ancient world (p. 23), Chapman charts the advent of normality as a measure of health through mechanical understandings of the human body that arose alongside the technological advancements of the Enlightenment. Taking Cartesian analogies of the body as machine, alongside Adolphe Quetelet's statistical development of 'the average man', Chapman shows how measures of human normality went from fringe ideas to

necessary ideological foundations for the emerging capitalist economy. As the 'normal man' began to be shaped by the Industrial Revolution's requirements of the worker's body and mind, mental and physical 'abnormality' and sub-normality came concurrently into form; concretised through the eugenicist Francis Galton's efforts "to naturalise the cognitive, economic, gendered, and racial hierarchies of capitalist and imperialist Britain." (p. 52)

Chapman's materialist analysis of the anti-psychiatry movement stands out as an especially valuable chapter, for its illustration of how state capitalism inevitably subsumes efforts to effect neurodivergent revolution when normality ideology is not accounted for. Chapter 5 details the legacy of Thomas Szazs, forerunner of the antipsychiatry movement until its culmination in the 1970s, revealing the distinctly neoliberal foundations of his convictions that mental illnesses were no more than the 'problems in living' of those "pretend[ing] to be disabled by illnesses that do not exist." (p. 80) Chapman persuasively attributes the failure of the movement to its misunderstanding of the nature of psychiatric harm; arguing that the social control of patients did not stem from misunderstood notions of mental illness, but from institutions and practices generated out of "the broader neuronormative logics of the capitalist system" (pp. 82-83).

Chapman's historical account guides readers step-by-step to Chapter 8's dénouement, at the generation of widespread neurodivergent disablement under post-Fordism. The rise of the service economy has been predicated on a degree of cognitive and emotional labour never before necessitated of the workforce, pushing more workers outside the boundaries of 'normality' and into neurodivergent disablement than ever before. Although such an analysis might appear to suggest a causal link between oppressive working conditions and disabilities such as ADHD and autism – and hence, a curative route out of such disabilities completely – Chapman shows how late-capitalist neuro-normativity stifled "the development and thriving of even those who diverge in a relatively minimal way from the ever-more restrictive cognitive norms of the age" (p. 117). Neurodivergence, as we call it today, is historically and culturally relative; yet is always a lived reality. Extending social model approaches to neurodivergent liberation, Chapman here illustrates the limits of accessibility for those who can never be made to live neuro-normatively.

Readers should not expect a fully fleshed-out strategy for overcoming the domination of normality ideology from the author. On the contrary, Chapman anticipates that their book will be succeeded by "many years or decades" of "mass consciousness-raising, critique, and collective imagining" of what a post-normal future might look like (p. 160). It is notable that Chapman leaves room for imagination as a liberatory strategy, despite situating their framework as a response to neurodiversity theory's limited focus on changing individual thinking (p. 137). Alongside recent cases for autistic narrative agency and neuroqueer embodiment as neurodivergent resistance strategies (Smilges, 2022; Stenning, 2024), the political-economic analysis offered here will be most useful to neurodivergent workers in the Global North, whilst our collective understandings of 'neurodivergent' in this region remain so strongly adhered to perceived deficiencies in productivity, time management, attention and sensory sensitivity.

Empire of Normality is a catalytic, clear-eyed view of the mechanisms by which so many workers in the Global North have been rendered divergent from the neurological norms of our time. Anyone who has ever felt the pain of being deemed 'abnormal' will hear its urgent call to divest from the myth of mental normality, and to strive instead towards a truly revolutionary neurodiversity movement.

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