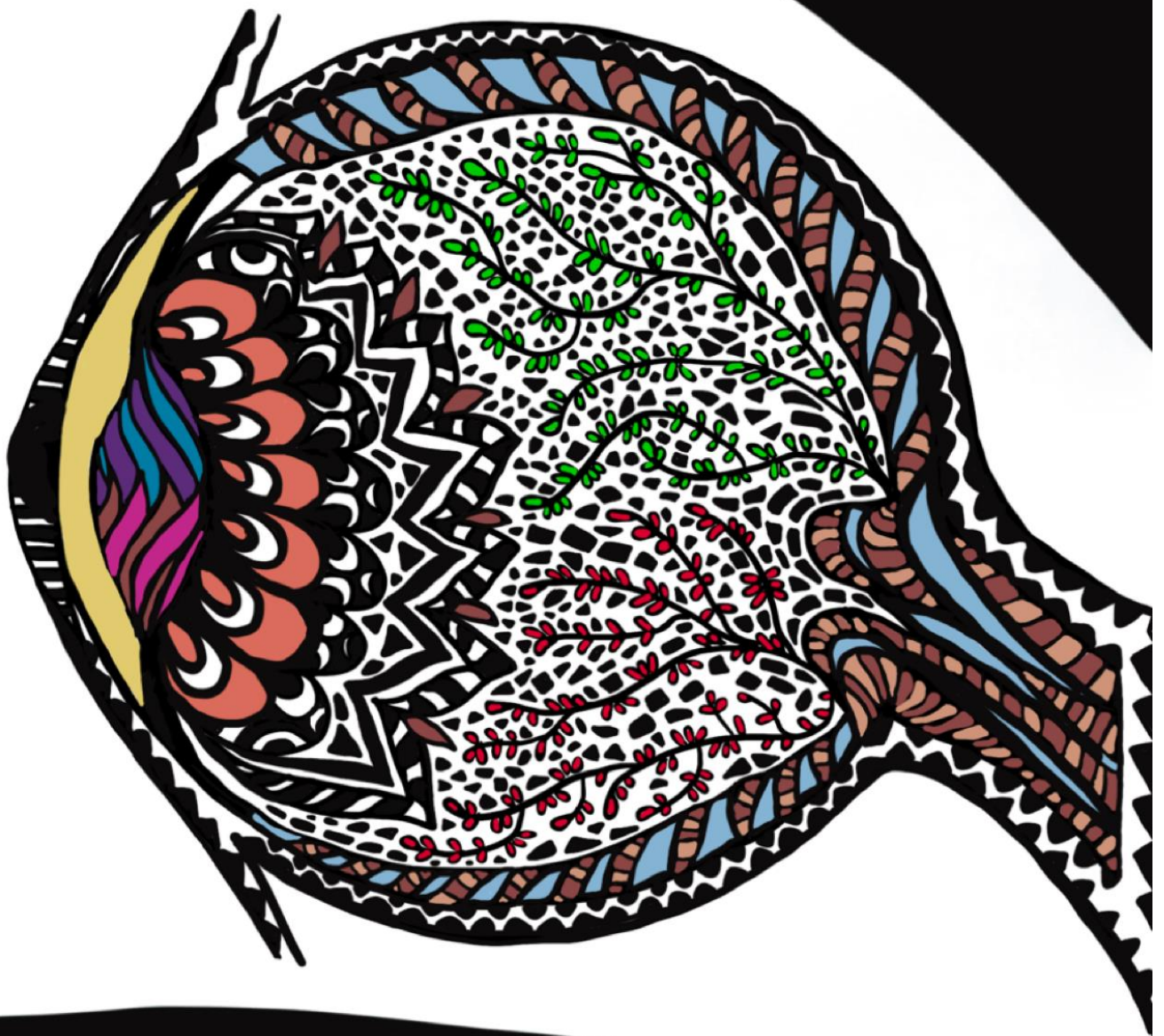


# WATCH



A HUMANITIES GRADUATE STUDENTS' ANTHOLOGY

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## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....v	
HGSA Committee Members.....vi	
Introduction	
<i>Dana Penney and Deserae Gogel</i> .....1	
Where Water Hits Home	
<i>Zahra Tootonsab</i> .....8	
Where Water Hits Home: An Analysis and Artist's Poetic Intervention	
<i>Zahra Tootonsab</i> .....24	
Imperial Fears: The Effect of South Asian <i>Ayahs</i> on the British Colonial Home and its Children, 1612-1947	
<i>Morgan Marshall</i> .....36	
Islamic Revivalism and Paradoxical Governance of Religion in Uzbekistan: Observers Under Strict State Surveillance	
<i>Dilsora Komil-Burley</i> .....47	
When the Lights Go Out: Panopticism in Stephen King's <i>Dolores Claiborne</i>	
<i>Kohlbey Ozipko</i> .....58	
(re)Fractions	
<i>Paul Meunier</i> .....66	
Nebulous Bodies: Towards a Transgender Theory of Sex Work and Space in <i>Tangerine</i> and <i>The Pervert</i>	
<i>Jae Kirkland Rice</i> .....78	
Words Made Flesh: Trauma and Archives of Memory and Mourning in Joy Kogawa's <i>Obasan</i>	
<i>Kyla Morris</i> .....88	

How to Help a Hero: Social Support as Psychological First Aid for First Responders  
*Adriane Peak*.....99

Urban Observers and Inequalities  
*Pegah Behroozi Nobar*.....106

More than a Map of How People Think: Spaces of Surveillance and the Power of Watching in *Ex Machina*  
*Dana Penney*.....115

Hoop Dreams: NBA Basketball Spectatorship in Virtual Reality  
*Arvind Kang*.....125

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Finally, we would like to thank the Faculty of Creative and Critical Studies and the College of Graduate Studies for their financial support. This funding has allowed us to create print copies of the anthology, which would otherwise only be an electronic publication.

## HGSA Committee Members

***Dana Penney:*** My name is Dana Penney, and I am a white settler-invader living and working in the ancestral and unceded and ancestral territory of the Syilx Okanagan Peoples. As a white settler, I have benefitted from the white supremacist and colonial systems that continue to dominate the world. Though my privilege limits my ability to speak directly to the experience of racism and colonization, I practice intersectional feminism in my research, reading, writing, and teaching as an ally. As an editor of the Humanities Graduate Students' Anthology, my priority is to create space for our contributors and readers to question the racist, heterosexist, capitalist, and ableist systems that influence our daily lives. For me, it has been an absolute pleasure working with all involved and reading and re-reading all the incredible work featured in our anthology!

***Deserae Gogel:*** I am a white, settler, cisgender woman living and working on the unceded and ancestral territory of the Syilx Okanagan Peoples, and I was privileged to grow-up in Treaty 7 territory, and in the Métis Nation of Alberta, Region III. As a result of my positionality, I have benefitted from problematic settler colonial norms and practices. My thesis interrogates what it means to be a witness to the trauma and harm perpetuated against Indigenous, Black, and People of Colour by Canada as a colonial nation state. Throughout my thesis I utilize work from IBPOC scholars and activists to critique structures and systems that are based in colonial norms. With the work of these scholars and activists in mind, I have contributed to this anthology as an editor on all articles, and a co-author for the Introduction. This work has been a labour of love, and I am incredibly grateful to my fellow committee members and our contributing authors who have made this possible.

***Mehnaz Tabassum:*** My name is Mehnaz Tabassum, and I am a settler woman from Bangladesh living and working in the ancestral and unceded territory of the Syilx Okanagan Peoples. I come from a South Asian country with a rich yet complex history with an unforgettable colonial past. I consider my voice in research a way to express and expand my worldview to my peers, colleagues, and even strangers, while I welcome theirs. I have been working with the Humanities Graduate Students' Anthology committee as a founding member. I think I contributed most as an illustrator with my novice art, an associate editor for a few contributions, and the generator of awkward jokes that get forced and confused laughs at best. I am beyond excited to see our initiative to publish graduate student work come to fruition.

***Kyla Morris:*** My name is Kyla Morris, and I acknowledge that I live and work on the ancestral, unceded territory of the Syilx Okanagan Peoples. My work focuses largely on intersections of feminist and gender theory, psychoanalytical theory, and trauma theory with an emphasis on deconstructing categories and making strange what we once thought of as normal. I came to the Humanities Graduate Student Committee as a founding member when it first began as a conference before adapting into an anthology. My contributions can largely be summarized as the face behind the screen, an associate editor, and the provider of truly awful puns. I am proud to have an article published in this anthology, and I could not be more grateful to my fellow committee members who worked tirelessly to bring this project to fruition in such strange times as these.

***Anne Claret:*** My name is Anne Claret and I am a white settler living and working in the ancestral and unceded territory of the Syilx Okanagan Peoples. My work focuses on speculative fiction, and

on the role and instrumentalization of myth in fantasy. I joined the Humanities Graduate Student Conference in 2020 as a committee member and participated in the early stages of the conference's transition to anthology format. I am very lucky to have been part of this adventure and glad to have contributed to the foregrounding of graduate students' work.

***Sajni Lacey:*** My name is Sajni Lacey. I am an able bodied, multiracial, cis-gendered, settler woman who lives and works on the unceded and ancestral territory of the Syilx Okanagan Peoples. I have been able to access and utilize my white privilege in contexts where it benefits me, while also being marginalized as a result of being multiracial in contexts that I have not chosen. I recognize and acknowledge that while identities can be chosen and self-defined, they are also often imposed and projected by those who have more privilege and power, who intentionally and unintentionally continue to enforce and sustain systems and structures of oppression. I have spent my entire professional career in academic libraries, and have found that the language, information, and access that we provide within these spaces often perpetuates and supports the very systems of oppression and hegemony that represents post-secondary institutions and their libraries as colonial institutions. My positionality within this context is to strive to use both aspects of my identity to subvert, and when possible change, who, what, and how historically and systematically underrepresented identities are represented, included, and respected. This is what I have tried to support and enable with this project, and it has been my pleasure and honour to work with everyone involved.

## Introduction

Dana Penney and Deserae Gogel  
UBC Okanagan

As we open this anthology, we, the Humanities Graduate Student Anthology Committee members, would like to acknowledge that we live and work on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Syilx People of the Okanagan Nation. As recommended by Hayden King, an Anishinaabe writer and educator, we also recognize that this acknowledgement should come with a statement of our commitments to reconciliation (Hayden qtd. in Deerchild para. 12-3). Our commitments as curators and editors in this anthology are as follows:

1. Follow recommendations for publishing, as outlined in *Elements of Indigenous Style*, by Greg Younging of the Opsakwayak Cree Nation.
2. Ensure that each author contributes a land acknowledgement for the place where they live and work.
3. As editors, ensure that our authors are prioritizing writing and scholarship from writers who are Indigenous, Black, and People of Colour.

In this way, as we work toward anthologizing the work of fellow graduate students, we aim to create equitable spaces while simultaneously identifying and problematizing systemic colonial institutions and practices that otherwise limit or shut down open and equitable conversation.

We the editors approach this work as settler women from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, who have all made our home in the Okanagan. The relationship we have with the land is necessarily complicated by our connections to, and the benefits we have received, as a result of settler colonialism. Indigenous feminist scholarship<sup>1</sup> often challenges settlers to hold the government and other institutions accountable for ongoing instances of state-sanctioned inequities, and often, violence. We the editors aim to answer this call by influencing change within academic culture through our writing, research, and teaching by actively making problematic and ongoing institutional and interpersonal colonial practices visible. We recognize and honour the Syilx people as the stewards of the land we love and call home. It is important to acknowledge that Indigenous ways of knowing are essential to protecting and caring for this land and those who live here—we wish to see this recognition reflected in all state governing bodies.

Because of our positionality as settler scholars, we must also acknowledge our limitations as individuals who have benefitted variably from settler colonialism in the part of Turtle Island, now called Canada. With our limitations in mind, our collective aim for this anthology is to open up a safe and equitable space for our authors to confront topics and issues connected to “watching,” a concept that is integral to colonial control and regulation. This anthology allows our authors to problematize and critically examine the power of watching and its ties to colonial intent.

Our initial plan for the year of 2020 was to continue creating a physical space for graduate and undergraduate students to present their work in a conference format. While our goal was to provide a social experience for scholars to discuss the title theme of *Watch* and all its implications, the COVID 19 world health crisis quickly escalated to pandemic status and meeting physically

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel Flowers (2015), Maile Arvin, Eve Tuck, and Angie Morrill (2013), Leanne Simpson (2008)



became an impossibility. To continue to create a space to discuss the theme of watch and interrogate colonial, racist, sexist and patriarchal ideologies, we have made the shift to a publication.

### How we got here

One thing is for certain, 2020 has been an interesting year to watch. With the rapid spread of Covid-19 leading to a public health emergency of international concern in January 2020, then pandemic status by March 2020, the world has indeed shifted rapidly ever since. Countries across the globe processed quarantine and lock-down protocols of varying degrees and methods—the variety in methodology leading to different degrees of effectiveness in the efforts to flatten-the-curve. The intersecting priorities of saving lives, maintaining economic viability, and limiting government spending surfaced as neo-liberal, and capitalist priorities seem to rise above most other concerns in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom. In many instances, all one could do was watch events unfold while trying to limit contact, and thus slow the spread of the virus. As academics, our studies require us to practice objective observation so that we might contribute to ongoing conversations in our respective fields; and yet, 2020 has become the year where we as a society have had to adapt to various forms of watching.

Watching family and friends through video calling. Watching classes through asynchronous, pre-recorded lectures. Watching a plethora of life-changing events unfold on both national and international stages. Watching as some things changed, and others, painfully, remained the same.

Little did we know, in 2019, as we, the Humanities Graduate Student Conference (HGSC) organizing committee, brainstormed a theme for the 2020 HGSC, that a pandemic—and the political and cultural response to this world health crisis—would soon put the world on its heels, knocking it from its gait, and leaving the world scrambling for any sense of even ground. At the time, the theme of *Watch* seemed prevalent and an appropriate continuation of our 2019 conference theme, *Walls*. And so, *Watch*, like *Walls*, encapsulated several critical issues and questions that we wanted to explore with our peers, colleagues, and mentors through the various disciplines that make up the humanities. Given the advent of data mining, false news and misinformation on social media, personal mobile devices, and wearable tech, the social implications of how we watch and are in turn watched are many and complex. Though a field of study since the late 1990s, Surveillance Studies continues to be a growing and changing area of scholarship. Our anthology, as a humanities focused treatment of *Watch*, is not a Surveillance Studies project, exclusively. Rather, some of the varied work featured in this publication draws from many ideas and writers considered foundational to the study of surveillance. The anthology's theme and surveillance studies, alike,

emerges, in large part, from recognition of the ways in which pervasive information systems increasingly regulate all aspects of social life. Whether with workplaces monitoring the performance of employees, social media sites tracking clicks and uploads, financial institutions logging transactions, advertisers amassing fine-grained data on customers, or security agencies siphoning up everyone's telecommunications activities, surveillance practices—although often hidden—have come to define the way modern institutions operate. (Monahan and Wood x)

While planning our theme, we were struck by the pervasiveness and dynamics of contemporary surveillance practices and technology. We notice, like Monahan and Wood, that the increasing

regulation and implementation of surveilling-capable technology and social systems “indicates more than just the adoption of information-based technological systems by organizations; rather, it represents a larger transformation in how people and organizations perceive and engage with the world” (x). As a result of this larger transformation in social perception, we felt it productive to extend a call for papers (CFP) to our peers in the humanities and begin a conversation about the ways we watch.

In our CFP we wanted to emphasize that watching is concerned with far more than surveillant technology, datamining, or how we see each other. Instead, we aimed to inspire an interdisciplinary conversation between our contributors about the various power dynamics at play in a mixture of locales and histories. We will emphasize it here, again, for our readers that

although definitions of surveillance vary, most scholars stress that surveillance is about more than just watching; it depends also on some capacity to control, regulate, or modulate behavior[sic]. This reading draws upon the French origins of the word *surveillance*, which means ‘watching from above.’ It implies a power relationship. It is not just passive looking but is instead a form of oversight that judges and intervenes to shape behavior. (Monahan and Wood x)

There is power in watching, a power that can control but also produce the other; in this way, the ability to watch is intrinsically linked to power relations that are indicative of intersecting modes of social, political, and cultural hierarchies. To address these intersecting modes of power, we look to the work of the prominent cultural and feminist studies scholar, bell hooks. hooks asserts the need for every individual to be critically vigilant of what we watch and how we watch. As hooks argues, the “*imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy*” are the “interlocking systems that work together to uphold and maintain cultures of domination” that “shape our politics and culture” (*Writing Beyond Race* 4, 17, emphasis from original). In her introduction to *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, hooks turns her analysis to the media more specifically and notes that when,

opening a magazine or book, turning on the television set, watching a film, or looking at photographs in public spaces, we are most likely to see images of Black people that reinforce and reinscribe white supremacy. Those images may be constructed by white people who have not divested of racism, or by People of Color/Black people who may see the world through the lens of white supremacy—internalized racism. [...] There is a direct and abiding connection between the maintenance of white supremacist patriarchy in this society and the institutionalization via mass media of specific images, representations of race, of Blackness that support and maintain the oppression, exploitation, and overall domination of all Black people. (1-2)

As we are all imbricated in the white supremacist patriarchy, then we all have a responsibility to be critically vigilant of this insidious ideological enfolding and of the media and social systems that continue to influence our watching and seeing through racist, sexist, ableist, colonial, and hetero representations. The politics of representation, then, and the work that hooks calls for, is a constant questioning, searching, and acknowledging of the stories, faces, places, and people that are missing. Moreover, who is represented and how? Why are they represented in this way? To what story or ideology does this representation give power? The politics of representation extends beyond our media and into our use of technology and geography as dominant power relations influence how we read biometric data.

In his book, *The Social Life of Biometrics*, George Grinnell asks about the ways that biometric data (say for instance, a passport, fingerprint, or retinal scan) deflects from or erases the stories that belong to the people behind the data. In other words, surveilling technologies only tell one story

about individuals who inhabit a multiplicity of stories, spaces, places, histories, social connections and interactions. According to Grinnell, “biometrics is not a technology. It is a mode of thought. It is a mode of thought that conditions how we encounter identity, regulate access, and understand human mobility” (2). In response to the dominant mode of thought, Grinnell’s “approach is not merely one that sees humans and identifies their unique experiences with biometrics. Where biometrics seeks to record presence and match it to a documented record, [Grinnell’s] method seeks to do more than once again make people countable, identifiable, and verifiable. It seeks to understand how it comes to pass that one can see a person in the ways we often do in the first place” (Grinnell 107). Biometric thought, then, like the politics of representation and surveillance more broadly, are crucial and timely issues of watching, especially as these ways of watching influence who is (un)seen and how.

Given what we have discussed so far in this introduction, it is clear that racist, colonial, sexist, and heteronormative forces influence not only the ways we watch but also the way we live and recognize ourselves and others. Just as we are committed to seeing, making visible, and changing the colonial practices in our home, institutions, and scholarship, the work presented by our contributors in this anthology actively interrogates the ways we watch more broadly and regularly make visible the stories, lives, and lands that are otherwise erased or rendered invisible by colonial, white supremacist, sexist, and hetero social spaces and discourses. We hope the work presented here fleshes-out much of what technology and exclusionary ideologies gloss over. This student-led anthology, thus, features work that offers distinct examples of scholars practicing critical vigilance in a variety of contexts and from several different disciplinary practices to make visible that which is often invisible.

The topics our authors submitted consider a multiplicity of themes connected to “watching,” from a wide variety of positions which range from socio-political critiques to explorative analyses of the ways we watch—and are watched—via technological advancements. As editors, we have resisted the urge to categorize these articles into chapters or sections given the broad scope of this topic and the multiplicity of ways it can be interpreted; instead, we invite readers to consider how these works navigate complex intersections that reveal power-relations pertaining to sociopolitical oppression, gender theory, trauma, and space. The anthology begins with Zahra Tootonsab’s found poetry and corresponding critical analysis, respectively titled, “Where Water Hits Home” and “Where Water Hits Home: An Analysis and Artist’s Poetic Intervention.” The first is a research-creation project that uses ecopoetics and a decolonial framework to critique the ways Eurowestern cultures authorize the seizure of land and natural resources at the expense of communities with Indigenous, Black, and People of Colour (IBPOC). Tootonsab’s ecopoetry reinserts the voices of IBPOC who have been devalued by these colonial norms and systems, while simultaneously making visible problematic colonial logics. In her analysis, Tootonsab uses Jennifer Wenzel’s concept of the colonial “improving eye,” which views land only as a natural resource to be utilized for economic gain, and the people as “overburden” to be removed. In this way, Tootonsab is critical of the way that land and bodies are watched by colonial authorities, and resultantly, she disrupts narratives and norms that would devalue or erase the IBPOC communities that are involved.

The second article, “Imperial Fears: The Effect of South Asian *Ayahs* on the British Colonial Home and its Children, 1612-1947” by Morgan Marshall, continues to critique the colonial gaze, albeit in a markedly different time and place. Marshall considers the role of Indian *Ayah*’s as caregivers within the colonial British home, specifically analyzing the ways that the *Ayah*’s relationship with the British children they cared for was carefully watched and regulated.

Despite the restrictions and regulations, Marshall points to interesting ways that the Ayah's were able to form relationships with elite British children that broke gender, race and class barriers that were otherwise strictly maintained by the colonial British state.

Dilsora Komil-Burley's article "Islamic Revivalism and the Paradoxical Governance of Religion in Uzbekistan: Observers Under Strict State Surveillance" highlights the targeted surveillance conducted during Islam Karimov's regime (1991 to 2016), an anti-Islamic regime. Karimov's regime, then, perpetuated and reinforced state sanctioned violence against prisoners but especially harsh and cruel conditions for individuals that were considered religious offenders. Komil-Burley maps the varied experiences recounted by individual participants in the Uzbekistanian justice system noting and analyzing troubling patterns of surveillance and violence as a way to gain insights into the relationship between Uzbekistanian governance and Islam.

Kohlbey Ozipko's article, "When the Lights Go Out: Panopticism in Stephen King's *Dolores Claiborne*," utilizes Jeremy Bentham's conceptualization of the panopticon as a metaphor for the enforcement of heteropatriarchal norms, as portrayed in King's novel. As described by Ozipko, the setting for King's novel—Little Tall Island—intensifies the persistent pantopic gaze of heteropatriarchal authority; and yet, King creates a moment where this gaze is temporarily obfuscated in the form of an eclipse. Ozipko explores this moment when panoptic social regulation is disrupted, and ultimately, the need for society to expose and reject harmful gendered norms.

For his contribution to the anthology, Paul Meunier has created a poetic series, titled "(re)Fractions," which visually confronts the Canadian political debate surrounding LGBTQ2IA+ rights, while situating his own personhood within the poems themselves. The personal and the political meet in Meunier's work: poems written in his handwriting bookend concrete poems that evaluate and obfuscate legislative policy pertaining to LGBTQ2IA+ rights.

In "Nebulous Bodies: Towards a Transgender Theory of Sex Work and Space in *Tangerine* and *The Pervert*," Jae Kirkland Rice works to move away from the gender spectrum model of gender identity. Instead, Rice uses the concept of nebulousness as a theoretical framework that considers the effects of movement and space in the conceptualization of trans and gender nonconforming identities. With a focus on the invisibilization and criminalization of trans Women of Colour, Rice applies nebulousness as a theoretical concept to analyze the movement of trans Women of Colour through a variety of private and public spaces in the film *Tangerine* (2015) and the graphic novel *The Pervert* (2018).

"Words Made Flesh: Trauma and Archives of Memory and Mourning in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*," by Kyla Morris, undertakes an analysis that returns agency to those with lived experiences of trauma, through the use of archival theory from Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. Morris notes that the trauma experienced by the characters of Kogawa's *Obasan* has been read as archival material that documents the horrifying experiences of Japanese Canadian internment during World War Two; however, Morris argues that a more productive analysis can be found when one recognizes the characters of *Obasan* as agential Archons who possess authority over their own lived experiences rather than passive archives, whose experience is watched and interpreted by those in positions of authority. In her analysis, Morris argues that recognizing these characters as Archons enables a return of political power and agency.

In "How To Help A Hero: Social Support as Psychological First Aid for Responders" Adriane Peak explores the mental and physical health implications of witnessing traumatic events. With a focus on the vicarious trauma often experienced and endured by first responders, Peak analyzes the existing supports for these professionals while considering new and more expansive

ways to support those who regularly witness and experience the pain, suffering, and trauma of others as an integral part of their daily work.

Pegah Behroozi Nobar draws connections between Urban Observers (Urbrowsers) and the reproduction of sociospatial inequalities through a consideration of interlocking, dominant systems of oppression in her article, “Urbrowsers and Inequalities.” More specifically, Behroozi Nobar considers how Urbrowsers may participate in and reinforce problematic neoliberal practices, thus, (often unintentionally) intensifying urban inequalities. Behroozi Nobar explores the theoretical implications of this work with a particular focus on urban spaces in the Global South.

In her analysis, “More Than A Map of How People Think: Spaces of Surveillance and the Power of Watching in *Ex Machina*,” Dana Penney critically examines how problematic sociocultural hierarchies connected to sexism and racism can be mapped on both “real” or physical space, as well as online spaces that have been created via the Internet. And so, Penney explores how the advent of surveillance technology in conjunction with the internet has not only enabled new and varied ways of watching, but like the physical spaces we inhabit, is representative of significant social inequities. Penney applies these theoretical implications to her exploration of *Ex Machina*, and specifically, her analysis of Ava and Kyoko, two humanoid artificial intelligence (AI) who embody dominant hetero, male, and white desires. Penney’s work thus allows a consideration of the multiplicity of ways that we watch, and in turn, are watched, particularly in an exploitative, capitalist society.

We close this anthology with the exciting opportunities for watching that Arvind Kang proposes in his article, “Hoop Games: NBA Basketball Spectatorship and Experience in Virtual Reality.” In the first and only piece that addresses the theme of watch within the confines of the COVID-19 pandemic, Arvind Kang thinks through the ways that spectating might adopt VR and MR technologies. Kang uses existing spectator scholarship in combination with his own experiences as a spectator—both before and during the pandemic—to consider how NBA virtual reality (VR) and mixed reality (MR) could become an alternative way to spectate or reimagine sport spectatorship during and after the pandemic.

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## Where Water Hits Home

Zahra Tootonsab  
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I begin by acknowledging and giving thanks to the spirits and Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island, specifically Edmonton, Alberta, where my work and writing for "Where Water Hits Home" took place. I am located on Treaty 6 territory, a traditional gathering place for the Cree, Blackfoot, Métis, Nakota Sioux, Iroquois, Dene, Ojibway/Saulteaux/Anishinaabe, Inuit, and many others whose histories, languages, and cultures continue to influence my life as a settler, a woman of colour, an environmental activist, and a poet. I am also grateful and indebted to Indigenous Tkaronto, where I (re)learned how to think and speak with nature and face the ongoing settler-colonial divides that constitute my Western consumerist lifestyle. I was born on Treaty 13, the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit; the Anishinaabe, the Chippewa; the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples; and home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. I am also born to parents who immigrated to Canada from Iran and started a family benefiting off of stolen Indigenous lands—accepting my identity as a settler reorients my role as a contemporary actor in an ongoing colonial history of theft and violence on Indigenous peoples and lands. I begin to inhabit a position of active interdependence with the Indigenous modes of tending to an always-changing Earth.

Actively re-orientating ourselves to human and nonhuman beings requires, to echo Zoe Todd, a return to things we have previously explored “with an ethos of growth, change, and doubt.” This return to our previous and current behaviours, logic, and ethics is an active (and mindful) approach in assessing and reassessing how we relate to place and our homes. By assessing our relationships with our physical environments that include the trees, the four-legged animals, the birds, the fish, the insects, and our waterways, we can question how our engagement with land and water re-establishes Eurocentric perspectives of nature as a machine or a material resource. An active re-orientation to the world requires us to question how we demand and depend upon nature so that we can learn how to heal and coexist with our environments. What does it mean when we re-position ourselves to recognize our relationships with human and nonhuman beings as interdependent? For Potawatomi writer and ecologist Robin Wall Kimmerer, to be interdependent and interconnected with nature is to view land and water as “a gift economy with a bundle of responsibilities” rather than property (a right) to obtain for free, at no cost (28). Kimmerer explains that a healthy landscape can sustain all human and nonhuman beings in the Indigenous worldview because all beings understand that “the life of one is dependent on the life of all (338). Reorienting ourselves to the world by engaging with the already active forms of world-building and healing that exist in Indigenous knowledges and storytelling renews our relationships with nature to be of shared responsibility. We learn, for instance, why drinking clean water without contaminants and breathing unpolluted air depends on what we put in our waters and how we care for our trees.

Ardith Walkem calls the interdependency of humans with each other and their natural environment a “kin-centric perspective” (314). A kin-centric notion of ecology is an understanding that our environments can only exist when humans view their relationships with the life

surrounding them as kin, “and it calls upon humans to honour these relationships” (314). By honouring our relationship with nature and each other, we come to understand the limits and thresholds that we are continuously confronting and negotiating with to sustain and heal the environments we need for survival. As explained by Walkem, Indigenous peoples understand that the natural world is related to them, that the animals, lands, and waters are relatives and not resources (314). Kimmerer also teaches us that when we are in a relationship of gratitude and reciprocity with Earth, we can learn from nature’s gifts (food, medicine, shelter) and stories on how “to flourish under the most stressful of conditions” (275). Thus, what differentiates an active renewing of our sense of orientation to other humans and species versus a passive re-orientation is the ability to go beyond the simple recognition and acknowledgement of our physical environments and the current histories of appropriation that surround us (what we call our intellectual and physical “proprieties”). An active re-position enables us to question how our voices, writings, and actions/activism destabilize the structures and systems that limit our ability to coexist with human and nonhuman nature, to then flourish under the most stressful of conditions through our kin-centric perspective.

While writing and creating the found poems for “Where Water Hits Home,” I asked myself how I am re-positioning my orientation to the world and its species so that my work and activism foreground marginalized and Indigenous communities without assuming intimate knowledge of them or generalizing about their positions. My poetic/artistic creations come from this position that foregrounds Indigenous and minority peoples’ knowledges, histories, perspectives while asking how I am decolonizing my position as a writer who is also foregrounding her own voice and position in relation to those I seek to think and reimagine my kin-centric relations with. This research-creation follows a decolonial ecopoetics by speaking from a position of limitation, mindfulness, and recognition that all things can be connected by negotiating our differences (kin-centric ecology).

Bruce Gilley’s article, “The Case for Colonialism,” was a challenging source to use as a found material. My found poems on Gilley’s article, however, are not written with any malice toward Gilley. Instead, I appropriate and co-opt the colonial practices of capture and misuse via erasing and redacting his words in the article to undermine the colonial matrix of power that exerts itself on subjectivity, race, gender, economy, and nature. My poems re-introduce interventions into the current modes of ecological and social inequalities rather than invoke hostility. Similar to Jordan Abel’s *The Place of Scraps*, I use an erasure technique to critique Gilley’s article. I create an in-between space in my poems—something in between text and poetry/story—a place to meet the reader. In *The Place of Scraps*, Abel’s erasure poems respond to Marius Barbeau’s ethnographic work, *Totem Poles*. He appropriates Barbeau’s method of cutting and dislocating Indigenous totem poles and distorting Indigenous knowledges by cutting and erasing Barbeau’s words. His erasure technique breaks textual fixity by overlapping fragments of words, creating clouds of alphabets, erasing everything but brackets, commas, and periods. Through the erasure technique, words linger in the empty spaces and each letter, word, and punctuation opens up space for the new words/letters to be heard and echo through (like an oral reading) to reach the reader. My erasure technique also creates a space for the reader to encounter Gilley’s work by opening up space for the particularities of words and sentences to confront each other and accent the



arbitrariness of colonial practices such as mapping and framing people and nature into categories of success, political and economic gains, and progress.

The erasure and redaction techniques invoke feelings of apprehension and create an anxious encounter between the reader, Gilley's words, my poetic responses, and the empty and black spaces on the page. I create an anxious encounter by juxtaposing Gilley's words and my poetic responses. I erase and redact sentences to create space for my poetry to find/confront the reader. In *forage*, Rita Wong also juxtaposes data, facts, fairy tales, and poetry to create an anxious encounter between the found words and the reader. Her poetic techniques create an apprehensive environment that demands the reader to rethink what they know about genetic modification and toxic e-waste exposure, how it should/should not look like, and how it targets bodies. By provoking the feeling of apprehension, Wong conditions the possibility for new modes of perceiving and encountering resource extraction and provides opportunities to turn our anxiety and apprehension into a "resistance from within ... [to a life that] refuses to be anything but life" (22). Similarly, my poetic responses undermine what it means to be visible and in place and create possibilities for resistance/activism. For example, my found words are in a light grey colour between Gilley's bolded words, and the reader is drawn to my faint words and is asked: how do you read if what you know about space and visibility is not knowing anything? A better question might be: How are you (the reader) and I (the poet) positioned here (on/outside the page) to question Gilley's "dimensions" (a term he uses in the article to measure progress) of time and space through his own words that echo/"hunt" in a cyclical nature? How do the poetic responses enable Gilley's words to echo/hunt? Why is this necessary to position both the poet and the reader as always ready, in a state of resistance toward cries for colonialism?

My poetic responses are juxtaposed with Gilley's imperial and colonial language, suggesting that a meaningful conversation between the two is impossible and inappropriate. The appropriate model of an encounter between the two is one of resistance; these two discourses appear in direct opposition. In my found poem "The Case," for instance, I erase half of Gilley's sentences and respond again in gray words. Thus, I accentuate Gilley's "Case for Colonialism" by enabling his words to echo and hunt my poetic responses in grey to then invoke an anxious and curious encounter between their two different and yet uniting hunting: Gilley's words hunt the poet's words, then the poet hunts the reader into existence and resistance toward the systems of exploitation that Gilley (literally and figuratively) demands. Erasing and blacking out (redacting) sentences in Gilley's article then work toward seeing and reading something in excess of what is caught in the frame. Toward seeing something beyond the visibility that is as Billy-Ray Belcourt argues in *NDN Coping Mechanisms* subtended by the logics of coloniality. By also redacting a couple of sentences in the poem ("The Case"), I recreate the colonial borders/lines that organize people and beings based on their racial/social differences. Both before and after the redacted lines, Gilley and I encounter re-occurring experiences: for Gilley, it is the experience of power and greed, and for me, it is the experience of rewriting the struggles of racialized bodies surviving colonialism's hunting manifested through Gilley. The redaction portrays time and place remaining constant for Gilley, while for the poet, it collapses back to past, present, and future struggles for a transformative politics of existing and resisting, even if momentarily, colonialism's/capitalism's practices of capture and power over life.

My poetic practices like erasure, redaction, rupture (breaking sentences/ paragraphs apart) and layering (different words/works together) determine the conditions for coexistence through the particularities of the encounter between my poetry and the found sources. For instance, the found poems in Gilley's article discharge the notion of an opportunity for the particularities of Gilley's and the poet's differences to forge paths for coexistence when only one of us reorients herself to the world and its beings through a kin-centric perspective. For Gilley, a person/being is visible and in place when they conform to colonial/capitalist practices of exploitation; thus, a person like myself (a racialized body) cannot be in dialogue with beings and practices that seek to exploit "the Other." My creative techniques (re)distribute feelings such as apprehension, confusion, and discomfort to provoke the reader to acknowledge, question, and destabilize/undermine colonial and imperial violences on and within bodies/beings. I also ask myself how I can have a meaningful discussion with the reader (you) so that we both flourish together under the most stressful of conditions. As told by Belcourt, "[a] struggling thing isn't a struggling thing/ if everything else is in a state of rot" (55). To flourish like "a forest floor teeming with decaying vegetation" (55), I ask that the reader and I both confront our feelings of hurt, guilt, and apprehension to learn how to coexist with other beings; and this we will not call "struggling" but the ability to find ways to survive and imagine otherwise. Like how Wong works with negative affects in *forage*, by erasing/redacting Gilley's words to open space for my poetic responses, I create an anxious awareness of resource extraction and exploitation through the opposition between Gilley's words and mine. This anxious encounter between the found poems and the reader is not to push the reader away from my poems. On the contrary, it is a desire to position the reader to question and analyze our current relations with "Other" humans and beings.

In "Where Water Hits Home," I also think about how conditions for coexistence with the communities I engage with in my found poetry (Indigenous, Black, and People of Colour) are possible without assuming intimate knowledge of them or generalizing about their positions. My goal is that my found poems enable the stories and truths from the communities to narrate themselves through my creative techniques such as erasure, redaction, rupture, and layering. Working with an article like Stephen Leahy's, for instance, required a re-understanding of what it means to act in solidarity with Indigenous peoples. In order to understand and consider the particularities of the encounter between Leahy's article (written against resource extraction), my own poetic responses, and the effects of the oil sands on Indigenous communities of Alberta, I had to find the point of contact between us and the points of differentiation "while also recognizing the energies generated by their coexistence" (Chen et al. 286). Thus, by rupturing Leahy's article and writing from within this space, I confronted my position as a settler and writer and Leahy's position as both a settler and a writer; we both write from a place of anger toward the oil sands and yet we both cannot understand the reality of living with such pollution or watching the health of the River and its species declining overtime.

To rupture is to break free from the structures and systems that assume how we exist or should exist in relation to capitalist colonial ideologies. My poetic responses within Leahy's ruptured article portray my position as a poet to be limited and partial because while at times my words are in conversation with the article, other times I am in between white spaces, therefore portraying the ongoing work I must do to unhinge/break free from my consumerist and extractive lifestyle. Rupturing is then a process of breaking assumptions and generalizations about IBPOC

peoples through an active re-positioning of how I read, write, and engage with their stories and knowledges. Ultimately, rupture as a poetic technique emphasizes moments where I, the poet, refuse to digest “the Other” into an ideal form or romanticize my own position to be in perfect harmony with nature, Indigenous, and minority knowledges. My poetic responses ask that we continue to rupture our positions with other beings, so we do not assume mastery or complete knowledge over others—this is shown through the consonance and alliteration at the end of ““Treaty Making,”” and the layering of quotes in “Bedford Basin.”

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**Poetic Works**

<b>Capture.....</b>	<b>14</b>
The C Word.....	15
The Case.....	16
The Boy Who Cried Oppression.....	17
<b>Rupture.....</b>	<b>18</b>
Contact .....	19
Impact.....	19
‘Treaty Making’ .....	20
100 Reasons Why: .....	21
Dump Fire in Africville.....	22
Bedford Basin.....	23

## Capture

## The C Word

msilainolo msilainolo. msilainolo. msilainolo olonialism olonialism olonialism. olonialism

s                      **Rather than speak in euphemism about ‘shared sovereignty’ or ‘neo-trusteeship’,**                      s  
i                      **such actions should be called ‘colonialism’ because it would embrace rather than evade the**                      i  
l                      historical record                      l  
a                                           a  
i                      in state of amn-                      i  
n                      esia, melting                      n  
o                      pot                      o  
l                      negates                      l  
o                      colonial                      o  
                    foundation  
                    colonial  
                    still is  
                    colonial

Rather than use an ever-expanding set of euphemisms to avoid the ‘C’ word

**-‘shared sovereignty’, ‘conservatorship’, ‘proxy governance’, ‘transitional administration’,  
‘neo-trusteeship’, ‘cooperative intervention’- these arrangements should be called ‘colonialism’  
because it would embrace rather than evade the historical record**

---

<sup>1</sup> Gilley, Bruce. “The Case for Colonialism.” *Third World Quarterly*, 2017, pp. 1– 17. Research Gate, [www.researchgate.net/publication/319605242\\_The\\_case\\_for\\_colonialism](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/319605242_The_case_for_colonialism).

## The Case

Colonialism can be recovered by weak and fragile states when progress is the colonial ruler drawing white integers on white today in three ways: by reclaiming colonial modes of governance; by bouncing tongues off the walls of occupation to utter white lies by recolonising some areas; and by creating new Western colonies breeds layers of flaky soil, abuses the umbilical cord to suffocate from scratch.

significant social, economic and historic knowledge of a place no knowledge about political gains under colonialism: expanded education, improved public health, the abolition of active slavery to sensible slavery of slavery, widened employment opportunities, improved administration, the creation of colonialism to neocolonial to settler society basic infrastructure, female rights, enfranchisement of untouchable or historically excluded land from Eurocentric power communities, fair taxation, access to capital, the generation of historical and cultural knowl-edges folded thin like a knife on throat edge, and national identify formation, to mention just a few dimensions.

Millions of people moved closer to areas of jobs to pay colonial taxes for their own native land more intensive colonial rule, sent their children to colonial schools and hospitals, went to institutional spaces to learn colonial laws beyond the call of duty in positions in colonial governments, reported crimes to colonial technology in power over land, over dignity police, migrated from non-colonised to colonised areas, fought for colonial armies and par- divides into heaven, hell, and savages ticipated in colonial political processes – all relatively voluntary acts played on stage better than giving up the floor completely

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

## The Boy Who Cried Oppression

**how to motivate Western countries to become colonial. Despite cries of ‘exploitation’, colonialism was probably a money loser for imperial powers. The Stanford economist Richard Hammond coined the term ‘uneconomic imperialism’ to describe the ways that European powers embarked on ruinously costly and ultimately money-losing colonialism for largely non-economic reasons. That is why they gave up their colonies so easily.** Give it up boy! Possessions you’ve gained: milk, honey, whole wheat bread, a dozen eggs, 1 tomato, 7 silver coins, 2 pairs of shoes, a roof, a door, 3 windows, cement, cup of sugar, pinch of sea salt. The list goes on, but space is limited. You wait patiently. When hope is replaced with a cry of oppression you call for a

**‘colonialism for hire’.**

**Colonial states would be paid for their services, an important motivator to be successful.**

**So here is**

**a modest idea: build new Western colonies from scratch.**

**Colonialism could be resurrected without the usual cries of oppression, occupation, and exploitation.**

**A preposterous idea? Perhaps. But not so preposterous as the anti-colonial ideology that for the past 100 years has been haunting the lives of hundreds of millions of people in the Third World. A hundred years of disaster is enough. It is time to make the case for colonialism again.**

*The boy cried oppression. The villagers came with swords and spears. The boy exclaimed, “it was a joke.” But the villagers attacked anyhow, no hesitation, no mercy. The cry of oppression is not the wolf; it is the foundation of the wolf.*

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.



## **Rupture**

## Contact

Scattered along the banks of the Athabasca River is one of the world's largest collections of tailings waste ponds—able to		fill more than 500,000 Olympic
swimming pools. These are so	<i>I belong to</i>	toxic; ducks and other birds have
be prevented from going near	<i>Generation</i>	to
	<i>C</i>	them.
	<i>we read post-</i>	
	<i>colonial literature on</i>	
	<i>colonial</i>	
	<i>land we are</i>	

## Impact

	<i>born</i>	
	<i>with</i>	
	<i>ink</i>	
	<i>in water</i>	
	<i>we write</i>	
	<i>on issues</i>	caribou, bison, moose, birds,
	<i>volumes</i>	fish, affected our ability to travel,
	<i>on Indigenous rights</i>	to really overwhelming, “says
	<i>on water-</i>	Athabasca Chipewyan First
	<i>proof paper</i>	Nation
		north of Fort McMurray.

“It’s had a huge impact on the water, the forest. It has hunt food from the land—it’s Deranger, a member of the located near Fort Chipewyan,

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<sup>5</sup> Leahy, Stephen. “This Is the World’s Most Destructive Oil Operation—and It’s Growing.” *National Geographic*, 11 Apr. 2019, [www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/2019/04/alberta-canadas-tar-sands-is-growing-but-indigenous-people-fight-back/#close](http://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/2019/04/alberta-canadas-tar-sands-is-growing-but-indigenous-people-fight-back/#close).

**‘Treaty Making’**

“Indigenous peoples are often being widely opposed to oil and development—that’s simply not There are many indigenous communities who have built, and to build, a prosperous economic working with industry,”

The McKay First Nation is an exceptional example.

it has recently sued Alberta government to stop a that would consume some of its traditional hunting lands. But to 2016 it earned an average revenue of more than \$500 providing services to the oil sands

*colonial  
water  
evaporates  
to reconciliation  
lost to  
oppression  
genocide*

*division  
attempts to erase  
Indigenous cultures  
with water  
his-*

*story, her story, their story  
speaks  
water to  
generation C  
seizes  
words  
and mines  
raw sentences  
to condemn  
the Euro-  
centric  
colonial  
culture  
conquering  
country  
Ka-  
nata*

seen as natural gas the case.

continue future by

the  
project  
last  
from 2012  
annual  
million by  
industry,

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

### 100 Reasons Why:<sup>7</sup>

[redacted] place [redacted] “industrial” and “dirty” [redacted] is [redacted]  
 [redacted]  
 [redacted] North  
 Hamilton. [redacted] stigma see [redacted]  
 [redacted]  
 [redacted] as “poor, ugly, polluted and dangerous” [redacted]  
 [redacted] under environmental siege: [redacted]  
 [redacted]  
 [redacted] where [redacted] industrial city [redacted]  
 [redacted] make it  
 so [redacted]

[redacted] place [redacted] also [redacted] a  
 [redacted] scapegoat for [redacted]  
 the problems of Hamilton as a whole [redacted]

[redacted]  
 [redacted] choice of neighbourhood [redacted]  
 [redacted]

“When I go visit some friends in the city of Hamilton in the North End area all the way down to [street name] it the pollution is just horrible And the area just looks bad. The people don’t take any pride in it I find”

“Some people don’t seem to care really where they live Well look at the people that live on [street name] in Hamilton look at what they are exposed to That’s more health affected than we are. But then again that’s you know there are marginal people that live there And that’s a whole issue with the environment is all these marginalized people coming [redacted] unhealthy environmentally unhealthy neighbourhoods because it’s affordable for them”

[redacted]  
 [redacted]  
 [redacted] other places  
 [redacted] source of [redacted] pollution [redacted]  
 [redacted]

---

<sup>7</sup> Wakefield, Sarah, and Colin McMullan. “Healing in Places of Decline: (Re)Imagining Everyday Landscapes in Hamilton, Ontario.” *Health & Place*, vol. 11, no. 4, 2005, pp. 299–312. *Crossref*, doi:10.1016/j.healthplace.2004.05.001.

### **Dump Fire in Africville<sup>8</sup>**

Beside your house the flowers rise and breathe;  
birds gulp the crisp air like worms flying by.  
You love this earthy smell nearby, beneath  
the baby apple trees oh, lovely pie!

You love the water's taste of sweet bourbon,  
reminds you of your wedding night at home  
drunk in the garden, and yet determined  
to settle and accomplish stepping stones.

You love the smell of burned wood in the air:  
of roasted nuts and dates and tender meat.  
These smells are far from here, so be aware  
of our polluted water, of the heat.

"The hospital would just dump their raw garbage on the dump—bloody body parts, blankets, and everything. We were subject to that. And then they would burn this dump every so often. There would be walls of fire and toxic smoke, and we used to run through that fire to get the metals before they melted because we scavenged off the dump. We had to. You had to do that to survive." - Eddie Carvery

I see the eagles flying in the sky.  
Stuffed rats indulging on our waste supply

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<sup>8</sup> Original sonnet by Zahra Tootonsab; quote by Eddie Carvery from: Tavlin, Noah. "Africville: Canada's Secret Racist History." *Vice*, 4 Feb. 2013, [www.vice.com/en/article/4w5q9n/africville-canadas-secret-racist-history](http://www.vice.com/en/article/4w5q9n/africville-canadas-secret-racist-history).

## Bedford Basin<sup>9</sup>

The original Africville settlers were, then, former residents of the refugee settlements at Preston and Hammonds Plains who moved to Africville in order to escape economic hardships encountered on rocky and barren land. In the 1840's, the Africville site offered several advantages. It was not significantly more arable but, located on Bedford Basin, it was convenient for fishing and, most important, it was convenient for wage labour in the Halifax area. Around 1839, with the establishment of a steamship line for mail service, Halifax received a long-awaited economic boom. The following decade was characterized by economic expansion, a flourishing wholesale trade development of the twentieth century.

An important factor in Africville's historicity was the condition of being ecologically isolated from Halifax proper. As the map of Halifax shown on page 65 illustrates, Africville was set apart from the rest of the city, situated on Bedford Basin and flanked by the railway. Although linked to Halifax proper by a railway and an unpaved road almost since its first settlement, traditionally Africville was more an isolated rural community than an urban neighbourhood. Africville used to be separated from the rest of the city by bush and rock; one elderly relocatee recalled that, prior

As the city of Halifax grew, in population and in industry, Africville became cluttered with railway tracks and industry and city service depots (e.g., the city dump). By the decade preceding relocation, Africville's rural image had little substance. City ordinances and the encroachment of industry and government had led to a disappearance of farm animals, and pollution of Bedford Basin had virtually eliminated fishing. In 1960's the editor of a Halifax newspaper felt that the "last rural remnant in Halifax peninsula", could welcome the relocation because, as one woman". By this time, however, Africville's rural image of being located "off the beaten path" and lack of being located "off the beaten path" and lack of This sprawling community of approximately 1,000 dwellings, sheds, and outdoor privies haphazardly possessed few urban facilities. Residents had even dust deterrent), convenient public transit or garbage collection. The neglect of Africville that, according to one elderly relocatee, "for many were led to believe they were in the Country- only when the younger-generation came along the "outside world". It was the closeness to Bedford Basin that the land became increasingly important for power and industrial site.

ound [Africville] there was -time residents mentioned , horses, goats) in Africville local observer, referring to community boasted some Being poor means not only less likelihood of obtaining necessary facilities and services; it also involves the strong likelihood of receiving negative consideration. For Africville, this meant that the City was less than rigorous in enforcing housing standards and, by declining to issue building permits, in encouraging the orderly residential development of the area. The ultimate negative consideration in Africville's case occurred during the 1950's when the City moved its open dump from within walking distance of Africville to the very door-step of the community. This action was a "finishing touch" that established Africville clearly as "the-slum by the dump". Africville became known as a place to visit if one were interested in observing slum conditions.

In 1855 the railway linked the community with the "outside world". It was the closeness to Bedford Basin that the land became increasingly important for power and industrial site.

Bedford Basin that the land became increasingly important for power and industrial site.

**"The City didn't do anything to improve Africville. All the City did was to try and get it, and they did, in the end. They just did it, too, because we were coloured. If they had been White people down there, the City would have been in there assisting them to build new homes, putting in water and sewers and building the place up. There were places around Halifax worse than Africville was, and the City didn't do to them what they did to Africville."**

<sup>9</sup> Clairmont, Donald, and Dennis McGill. *Africville Relocation Report*. Institute of Public Affairs, Dalhousie University, 1971.

## Where Water Hits Home: An Analysis and Artist's Poetic Intervention

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**Abstract** – *This research-creation refuses (questions, subverts, and resists) colonial technologies such as industrialization and urbanization that exploit environments and IBPOC peoples—Indigenous, Black, and People of Colour— as resources for colonial "progress." My research (unpacked in the sections of this paper) examines how nature and human relations intersect through three bodies of water in Canada: The Athabasca River in Alberta, Lake Ontario, and Bedford Basin in Nova Scotia. The creation part of the project is a collection of found poems (refer to the preceding section in this anthology). My found poems use different sources from my research and various methods of found poetry (erasure and cut-up) to unearth conversations on the prevalence of colonial violence in the three case studies. The section titled "Capture" uses Jennifer Wenzel's notion of the "improving eye" and explores how colonial technology can enclose a (wo)man's thinking of land and water as a standing reservoir for expropriating and exhausting under the guise of growth and improvement. The section titled "Rupture" is an analysis of my found poems, unveiling how the "improving eye" disrupts nature by inflicting violence on Indigenous and minority groups. In "Rupture," my first set of poems address the Athabasca tar sand operations, examining the effects of its deadly toxins on groundwater and its impact on Cree, Chipewyan, and Métis territories downstream the River. My second poem discusses Hamilton Harbour's polluted water and its effects on the impoverished communities alongside the Harbour. My last set of poems describe the Bedford Basin. For roughly two centuries, raw sewage was discharged into the Basin, affecting the health and lifestyle of the Africville community during the 19th and 20th centuries in ways that continue to impact Black Nova Scotians today.*

**Keywords:** IBPOC peoples, ecopoetics, ecocriticism, found poetry, water pollution, colonial practices, Canada

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the essay "Afterword: Improvement and Overburden," Jennifer Wenzel argues that a "resource logic is also a resource aesthetic" when the aesthetic gaze inspires the logic behind resource extraction, appropriation and exploitation (Wenzel 6). For Wenzel, capitalist modernity begins with the "improving eye" of the European explorer that is "at once economic and aesthetic" (2). The Europeans were the first to gaze upon the "beckoning landscapes" of the Americas in a matter that envisioned the beautiful and the profitable as one and the same (2). As a result, their "improving eye" reduced already distinguished values and resources on Indigenous landscapes to labels of newfound beauty in need of cultivation for capital, productivity, and technology. For example, the logic of extraction in mining practices uses the aesthetic and economic judgment of the "improving eye" to separate overburden. Wenzel explains that "[o]verburden is topsoil, sand,

and clay; sedimentary rock; surface water and groundwater" that is lying on top and below minable resources like ore, coal and petroleum (6). Overburden is then "the perfectly good stuff that just happened to be in the way" of resource extraction or societal progress, and it is only through an aesthetic gaze that determines what is and is not valuable (or beautiful) that someone can look upon a landscape "and see it all as overburden" (7). Hence, in the name of "improving life for all"—"humans and nonhuman nature"—the aesthetic and economic judgment of the "improving eye" renders everything, except the cherished resource, unproductive waste (8).

Does capitalism and its extractive/polluting technologies consider everything/everyone overburden? If so, why do neocolonial/settler countries like Canada continue to specifically objectify IBPOC peoples—Indigenous, Black, and People of Colour—as overburden and exploit their bodies and communities alongside nonhuman nature within the unequal distribution of environmental health hazards? For instance, Steve Lerner makes the case in his book, *Sacrifice Zones*, that under neocolonial/settler rule, there is a large host of low-income and minority populations who are targeted and treated as environmental "sacrifice zones" and live adjacent to hot spots of chemical pollution (Lerner 3). Most sacrifice zones are predominantly inhabited by IBPOC peoples who "are required to make disproportionate health and economic sacrifices" that white privilege (starting from the privileges of the rich and corporate power) can avoid (3). My short collection of found poems in this paper, "Where Water Hits Home," therefore, is an ecocritical/ecopoetic rendering of how extractive and polluting technologies of violence in Canada focus on those "othered" communities (IBPOC peoples and nonhuman nature) as sacrifice zones for dumping toxic waste on/in their environments and extracting their lands and waters for resources.

"Where Water Hits Home" disrupts the dominant gaze of the "improving eye" of industries and corporations that view polluted environments as valuable for their economic profit. My research-creation, then, practices an ethics of care, of seeing and being present and conscious in the Anthropocene—an epoch of human impact and damage on Earth's geology and ecosystem—by not merely asking questions, but by "telling the stories-that-matter. It is in recognizing this . . . that a truly ethical research practice emerges" (Loveless 54). The research part of my project (described here but also woven throughout the following sections of the paper) examines how nature and human relations intersect through three bodies of water in Canada: The Athabasca River in Alberta, Lake Ontario, and Bedford Basin in Nova Scotia. The creation part of my project ("Capture" and "Rupture") is a collection of found poems. Found poetry is a creative and analytical process of using different ("found") sources (such as research articles, news reports, and written accounts from Indigenous peoples and other minority groups) and various methods (like erasure, cut-up, and layering) to create productive ways of analyzing, critiquing, and viewing the world. Through found poetry, I appropriate the aesthetic/extractive practices of the "improving eye" such as cutting up, redacting, layering, erasing, and drawing on materials to then "find" and unearth conversations for questioning, subverting and resisting nature and IBPOC peoples' orientation to the world as a never-ending, commodifiable resource.

Extractive and polluting industries profit from IBPOC peoples' lands and resources and generate wealth outside the sacrifice zones, which comes at the expense of subjecting Indigenous peoples and minority groups to environmental racism. For instance, in 1959, General Motors and Reynolds Metals dumped high levels of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), mercury, "and other



toxic wastes such as solvents, degreasers, trichloroethylene and formaldehyde" in the Mohawk Nation (an Iroquoian-speaking Indigenous people of North America) at Akwesasne (in Ontario) and the territories of the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe (in New York) (Grinde et al. 181). It took General Motors two decades of downplaying the severity of the problem to finally disclose in a report in 1984 the various toxins they had dumped on the land and in the lagoons surrounding both Akwesasne and the Saint Lawrence River (181). Not only did the Mohawk Nation lose their source of income with the contamination of fish from the Saint Lawrence River, "which devastated the Mohawks' traditional economy," but they also faced adverse mental and physical health effects (189). For example, due to the high degree of toxicity, infants at Akwesasne were being born "with cleft palates, deafness and intestinal abnormalities" (189). A Mohawk mother at Akwesasne, Sherry Skidders, cried as she described her experience with the high levels of PCBs in their waters and land: "[n]ow you have to wonder every time you take a breath," she said (189), when discovering that her breast milk was laced with PCBs; the horrific reality that "[s]he had been poisoning her own children" (qtd. in Grinde et al. 189). Nevertheless, the industries and corporations, along with the relaxed and biased management of governments, continue to exacerbate IBPOC peoples' health, cultural integrity, and economic well-being (Tarbell and Arquette 99).

Through the failures of federal, provincial, and municipal governments, private and government-funded extractive/polluting industries and corporations continue to overlook, mistreat, and refuse to recognize IBPOC peoples' rights to life, health, safety, and culture (including the nonhuman life of their histories and culture) in Canada and the US. For example, in 1983, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) placed General Motors on a Superfund list as an emergency and hazardous waste site needing long-term cleanup (Tarbell and Arquette 97). However, the American and Canadian governments moved too slowly to address the degree of toxicity and environmental devastation at Akwesasne (99). To reduce cleanup costs at Akwesasne, industry and policymakers worked "to relax cleanup standards" while ignoring the Mohawk people's concerns and inputs and denying them to work as a sovereign nation to fulfill "their duties to the natural world and their people" (99-100). Even today, during a global pandemic, Canadian governments have further reduced the "opportunities for meaningful participation in municipal governance" for the "many vulnerable communities that have been among the hardest-hit by COVID-19" (Smit et al. 13). In September 2020, the Windsor Law Centre for Cities released a report on how the vast majority of Canadian municipalities have been "even less responsive than usual to the needs of vulnerable communities, at a time when their vulnerabilities have been exacerbated by the pandemic" (15). The pandemic is therefore not "the great equalizer"—a disease that transcends wealth, fame, prestige, or age—touted by governments and the mainstream media, for it continues to affect those who are socially disadvantaged, "from health, economic, and social perspectives" (13). Similarly, Canada needs to work toward political action and a shift in policymaking to dismantle current structures that unequally distribute ecological harm to IBPOC communities. However, this paper aims not to assign blame on existing systems of power but assign responsibility for the policies/discourses perpetuating Eurocentric agendas for practices that undermine IBPOC peoples' lives and knowledges.

IBPOC works (their knowledges, narratives, and art) and mobilities (activism, movements, and liberation) serve as evidence of the immanent-active labour of being and resisting in the wake

of colonialism; their distinct narratives of struggle and resistance can alter the dominant colonial, white supremacist, and capitalist perceptions of environmental devastation, political impotence and inaction. IBPOC peoples' distinct narratives and histories portray the already active forms of world-building and healing that are integral to creative and adaptive modes of surviving an always-changing Earth. In contrast to the capitalist colonial ideologies that represent IBPOC peoples and the land they live on as overburden, IBPOC peoples function as multiple collectivities and heterogeneities with varying capacities and potentials for transformation, creativity, and resistance. They exist and survive in the past, present, and future Anthropocene through their resistance against being physically and emotionally expelled from interacting with all beings and ecologies (their affective encounters). Therefore, to exist and survive an always-changing Earth demands human beings to reimagine and reorient themselves with the world and its human and nonhuman nature and form heterogeneous relations that forge paths for coexistence in the face of global calamities.

One way to exist and survive an always-changing Earth is to move away from the human-centred implications of terms such as "Anthropocene" and use more integrating and grounding terms such as Donna Haraway's "Chthulucene." In *Staying with the Trouble*, Haraway suggests that we refrain from calling our current epoch the Anthropocene, which embraces "autopoiesis" (or self-making) and all other "self-sustaining system fantasies" (125) and instead conceptualizes it as the "Chthulucene" which is "a kind of timeplace for learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying [together] in response-ability on a damaged [E]arth" (2). Conceptualizing the current epoch as the Chthulucene, therefore, requires sympoesis, an ongoingness of "becoming-with" the world, to engender dynamic forms of living together (world-making) on a damaged Earth (125). Kathrin Thiele, consequently, argues for "a belief in this world" that transforms any transcendental belief in an escape from the "bloody here and now" into an acceptance of the conditions of the world as it exists in the present (35). The "active affirmation of 'what is'" enables a resistance that is immanent to life, thereby inaugurating a dynamic process for creating something new and for an "intervention into this world" (37). This research-creation, therefore, follows a decolonial ecopoetics through sympoesis: a becoming-with the "experiences of unease, discomfort, and illness to pursue vital, though difficult, forms of [human and nonhuman] mutuality and association" (Hume and Rahimtoola 6). Through an ecocritical lens, this work "encourages us to expand our repertoire of affects to incorporate disappointment, sadness, sickness, failure, and other negative feelings" so that interventions into the current modes of ecological and social inequalities can take place (6).

The "eco" in ecopoetics comes from the Greek word *oikos*, meaning family, property, and house, and "poetics" comes from *poiesis*, meaning to make (Hume and Rahimtoola 1). Ecopoetics then questions how we might dwell on Earth, the politics of "homemaking," and how human and nonhuman communities come into ecological dialogue (1). If ecopoetics is the process of "making" ecologically oriented connections with humans and nature, decolonial ecopoetics orients the ecopoet to move beyond the bounds of settler logics of space and time (that land equals property and time means resource accumulation) by accepting place as a messy, incoherent, open, and temporary dwelling. What we call place/home is an amorphous mass of aqueous materiality (Chen et al. 71). Within this shapeless and incoherent place of homemaking, we are meeting up and overlapping with other beings and their unique thresholds and tensions. Decolonial ecopoetics

requires that we first recognize the conflicts, negotiations, and unpredictable encounters that arise from our coexistence with human and nonhuman beings (286). It compels the ecopoet to engage in moments of feeling out-of-place to renew her sense of orientation and to discover other ways to relate to a place that escapes habitual assumptions of homemaking (290). In “Where Water Hits Home,” I draw on poetry’s concern with the construction of the self and other to expose the “the Other” as fiction that limits the possibilities for interdependency and yet also highlight the complexity of our inherent differences to reimagine new forms of relations and kinships.

Iranian-Canadian artist Mitra Fakhrahrashti explains that in music, poems, text, and textile, water symbolizes “a place of creation, life, and sanctuary[/community]” (22). Sanctuaries/communities are made through the movements and organizing of human and nonhuman beings who refuse to affirm state boundaries and instead move toward a “radical embrace for protection” of all living beings (22). We can also explore bodies of water as guides that undermine the colonial approaches to mapping, which determine what is and is not out of place. Like Indigenous, Black, and people of colour, water is a highly racialized body in which coloniality can be traced and contested. Thus, I engage with a very literal tracking of water (such as the Athabasca River in Alberta, Lake Ontario, and the Bedford Basin in Nova Scotia) to bring an understanding of how each of us is connected and how, like water, our relations can be “a source of threat and source of possibility” (5). Water is as much a character as the individual beings whose stories propel the poems/writings in “Where Water Hits Home.” Water as materiality and as metaphor enables my ecopoetic and ecocritical thoughts and writings to support and enhance the voices of the people who come from communities resisting environmental racism; they are narrating and doing the activism themselves as my creative techniques create a visual of and an engagement with a decolonial ecopoetics.

In “Where Water Hits Home,” I make deliberate gapes (erasures), textures (blackouts), and overlaps (layering) of varied information to emphasize the thickness of the arbitrary and imaginative line that in maps and settler logic borders/colonizes our human and nonhuman relations. Thus, my creative techniques accent the thresholds—the tensions of our differences—of our watery places and human/nonhuman-based relations to connect to our vulnerable selves and the differences we inherit; to seek the threads that connect our coexistence, we must first confront our differences. Through my found practices, I actively reorient myself to human and nonhuman beings, not with a sense of comfort and certainty toward a place, but, similar to the movements of water, with the energy of adapting and changing toward the possibility of forming heterogeneous relations that forge paths for coexistence. By rupturing, erasing, redacting, and layering the found sources, I create an ethos of confusion, apprehension, unease, and responsibility to question the settler logic that determines who is visible/invisible and who is in place/out of place.

## 2. CAPTURE

In the first section of my small collection of found poems, titled “Capture,” my found poems explore the notion of the “improving eye” by engaging with Bruce Gilley’s article, “The Case for Colonialism.” In his recent article (2017), Gilley, a political science professor at Portland State University, argues for a return of colonialism by discussing the beneficial impact colonial power has had on developing countries via economic profit, technological advancement, and social

development (Gilley 2). Essentially, the article argues for a new colonialism that is beneficial and legitimate because it is chosen by "the colonized," thus attractive to Western liberals, and is "low-risk and self-financing," which is attractive to conservatives (11). The problem, of course, is that his sources are empirically and historically inaccurate. He misuses existing postcolonial scholarship and is oblivious to the physical, linguistic, and political violence of his article and its position. Thus, in this section, I question and subvert Gilley's "Case for Colonialism"—for the colonial devaluation and destruction of nonhuman nature and IBPOC peoples—by appropriating and co-opting the colonial practices of capture and misuse via cutting, erasing, and redacting his words in the article. For example, in the poem titled "The C Word," I chop up, rearrange, and erase Gilley's words to reveal the inherent contradiction in his request. Gilley calls on countries with a history of colonialism to continue labelling their country colonial rather than "use an ever-expanding set of euphemisms that avoid the 'C' word" (8). The contradiction the poem unearths is why Gilley is "right" for marking settler countries colonial when white narratives erase and neutralize decades of colonial power and genocide. Gilley is "right" not because we must "embrace/[support] the historical record of colonialism" (8), but rather, because we must acknowledge the history of colonialism to resist and subvert settler-colonial countries like America and Canada. These countries minimize and erase the severity and structural implication of colonialism via historical amnesia. Hence, the poem undoes the paradox in Gilley's request to not circumvent the "'C' word" by bringing the "'C' word" to the foreground so that the history of colonialism and its ongoing practices and ideologies are not lost to the "improving eye" of the colonizer/capitalist.

In Timothy Morton's *Ecology Without Nature*, he coins the term "dark ecology" to refer to "a perverse, melancholy ethics that refuses to digest the object [the other] into an ideal form [or product]" (Morton 667). Hence, dark ecology is the belief that there are no transcendental positions to take in our current ecological crises. There is no approach to obtain a "better" ecology/world beyond the here and now. It is ultimately a position of what Morton defines a "radical commitment" to the world as we embody it and as we acknowledge and "stay with it" "in all its meaninglessness" (631). There are no critical choices to be made in this world when these choices position (wo)man to care for the world without being responsible for it. Hence, they are choices that fall back into consumerism and extractive ideology (691). To be without nature is then to find yourself on the side of "no choice at all" but to confront the world as is, without a romanticized notion of what it could be/become with/without certain humans and natures (691). Thus, by adopting Morton's dark ecology, I find the essence of the "improving eye" in (wo)man's particular orientation to the world, their distinct interactions with the world and its otherness.

Gilley's "improving eye," for instance, orients him to frame the world in colonial categories of productivity and advancement. Hence, my poem "The C Word" portrays Gilley's position as a white colonial man in power via his bold horizontal writing, whereas my decolonial response is in a vertical position, shown in gray writing. In this manner, can the colonizer/capitalist (re)orient their thinking, their "improving eye" (portrayed in horizontal writing), to consider the position/side of "no choice at all;" can they face a world with no choice for enjoyment without tending to all forms of human and nonhuman suffering? I also question if we (students, activists, teachers, parents, and bystanders) can (re)orient ourselves to embrace the dark ecology of our time. Embracing a dark ecology requires that we see both the beauty and ugliness of the world, which

can be powerful and horrifying. However, this tension is necessary to question the "improving eye" (the horizontal writing) as a fundamental call for racial, social, and environmental oppression and abuse.

The aesthetic practices of the "improving eye," within categories of colonial understanding, reveal specific people and natures as standing-reserve. However, the "improving eye" is not merely a framework that plans what becomes overburden; instead, it is essentially a calling-forth. For instance, my second poem titled "The case" looks like a briefcase to depict the "improving eye" as both a framework and a call for colonial demands. Hence my poem portrays Gilley's words as both a framing of human and nonhuman nature as a standing-reserve and a calling-forth for colonial power. For example, Gilley claims that millions of people voluntarily moved closer to more intensive colonial rule during European colonialism (Gilley 4). As Gilley is calling-forth (making his case for) colonization, I interrupt him by appropriating colonial practices of erasure, disruption, and destruction. My poem, then, responds by erasing and redacting through my blacking-out of most of Gilley's words to display the inherent lie in Gilley's case. In my own words (written in gray colour), the poem portrays that most colonized people were forced to move closer to colonial rule to pay taxes. Black people in Africa, for example, were forced to live near colonial bases to pay the gross colonial taxes placed on their native land and resources (Roo 16). Thus, my poem appropriates the colonial practises of erasure, disruption, and destruction to intervene, complicate, and break Gilley's calling-forth of human and nonhuman nature into labour and product.

My poem titled "The Boy Who Cried Oppression" reveals the "improving eye" as an aesthetic gaze that sees beauty in profit. For example, Gilley states that through "colonialism for hire" colonization can occur again by paying Colonial states "for their services, [which is] an important motivator to be successful" (Gilley 10). Therefore, Gilley demands that the world stops its "cries of oppression" so that countries, the colonizer and the colonized, can start benefiting financially (11). My poem responds sarcastically by alluding to the fable "The Boy Who Cried Wolf." My poem opens up (and ruptures) Gilley's words to reveal his "improving eye" as not "the wolf" (the machines/technologies) who comes and eats the sheep. Instead, the wolf's foundation/establishment ("to cry wolf") renders "the other" as overburden, such as colonial mentality, white supremacy, and Eurocentric perspectives.

### 3. RUPTURE

The "improving eye" is an unstable and destructive orientation to the world. We (human beings) can never form relationships to stay with the world "as is," so long as we solely conceive how to position ourselves outside of the world while making choices for the world and its human and nonhuman nature. Hence, decolonial ecopoetics is intimately related to being responsible for a changing world while resisting, challenging, and subverting the violence of extracting and polluting technologies on IBPOC peoples and natures. The difference between the "improving eye" and poiesis/sympoiesis lies then in their position with the world: the "improving eye" positions (wo)man to exploit and exhaust the world, whereas poetry unearths a responsibility for the world, the dark ecology that we must accept. Specifically, the ecopoet's work is to bring human and nonhuman nature into ecological dialogue, with their distinct narratives of existing, resisting, and surviving in the Chthulucene.

My poems "Contact," "Impact," and "Treaty Making" are about the Alberta oil sands operations. Since the 1960s, oil companies in northeastern Alberta have extracted large deposits of bitumen and extremely heavy crude from the ground while polluting the Athabasca River with deadly toxins (Leahy). These harmful toxins grossly impact the health and lifestyle of the Cree, Chipewyan, and Métis peoples living downstream (Leahy). In his article, "This Is the World's Most Destructive Oil Operation-and It's Growing," Stephen Leahy, talks about Canada's hypocritical stance on mitigating climate change while increasing its oil exports and its oil sands operations in Alberta. The article describes the oil sands operations scattered along the banks of the Athabasca River as "one of the world's largest collections of tailings waste ponds—able to fill more than 500,000 Olympic swimming pools" (Leahy). The ponds are so toxic that "ducks and other birds have to be prevented from going near them" (Leahy). Eriel Tchekwie Deranger, a member of the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, said in the article that the oil sands have "been very destructive to the environment and [the Indigenous] communities in the region" (qtd. in Leahy). The toxins in the Athabasca River have been affecting the caribou, bison, moose, birds, and fish population, which have also significantly impacted the Indigenous peoples' ability to travel and gather food, affecting their health and economic well-being (Leahy). By appropriating the practices of extractive technologies of violence, my three poems, "Contact," "Impact," and "Treating Making" subvert and break the space inside Leahy's article to expose the "improving eye" of the oil sands operations that render Indigenous peoples and their territories as overburden.

My three poems rupture Leahy's article to respond from a position that respects Indigenous knowledges and struggle while speaking from within the limitations of a settler voice/perspective. My first poem, "Contact," animates the dilemma of living in Canada, where Canadians push forward postcolonial narratives (and multiculturalism) while living on settler-colonial land with colonial policies of exploitation. Subsequently, my second poem, "Impact," is about Indigenous struggle and resistance that undermines colonial practices of the "improving eye" (by being "water-proof"—the proof is in the Indigenous ways of protecting the waters/nonhuman nature). For example, emerging Indigenous-led organizations are growing to support Indigenous peoples' climate change discourses and Indigenous sovereignty. The website *Indigenous Climate Action* was created in 2015 by Alberta Indigenous women for Indigenous peoples to connect and share their rights and knowledge systems in response to the ongoing climate crises and violence on Indigenous communities ("Our Story"). As Leahy underscores, Indigenous peoples are working together "to help communities make a transition away from oil and toward renewable energy projects, particularly those that are [I]ndigenous owned and operated" (Leahy). Ultimately, Indigenous peoples continue to resist the "improving eye" of extractive practices, especially when the industries are the only ones helping them invest in renewable energy, with the caveat that these industries continue their oil sands projects (Leahy).

My poem "Treaty Making" responds to Tim McMillan's assertions in Leahy's article on the importance of Canada's oil industries. McMillan, who is the president and CEO of the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP), believes Indigenous communities are not widely opposed to the oil industries because they are building a "prosperous economic future" working with them (qtd. in Leahy). His statements portray both the colonial (wo)man and the Indigenous (wo)man orienting themselves to the River through the "improving eye" of exploitation and extraction. However, it is the "improving eye" of McMillan that tolerates environmental

devastation and Indigenous exploitation if it means "high growth markets" for Canada (Leahy). My poetic undoing of the article and McMillan's statements emphasize the Indigenous (wo)man's position to be of rupture and survival by staying with their dark ecology, so their narratives of struggle and resistance are not lost to colonial attempts at reconciliation or justification. The "improving eye" of industrialization justifies rendering IBPOC peoples as overburden by claiming IBPOC peoples are either benefiting financially from the extractive practices, like the Indigenous communities in Alberta or are "meant" to live in polluted areas, like the minority groups in North East Hamilton.

Since the 1970s, Hamilton Harbour's steel industry is no longer the "pride of Hamilton's city government" for "the "steel mills; the smoke stacks; the jumble of buildings; the docks piled with ore and coal" have become a symbol of "what went wrong with Hamilton," Ontario (Wakefield and McMullan 303). Particularly, Northeast Hamilton is situated near the industrial areas and is adjacent to the harbour that was used as a dumping ground for raw sewage and industrial waste until the late 1960s (303). As of today, Northeast Hamilton has a greater proportion of low-income households and visible minorities. As a result of Hamilton Harbour's polluted water and air, residents have poor health, with "more hospitalisation for 'preventable' illnesses," and babies who have lower birth weights (304). My poem "100 Reasons Why" redacts by blacking out portions of Sarah Wakefield and Colin McMullan's article, "Healing in Places of Decline," to reveal why the "improving eye" "re-imagin[es] Hamilton from a centre of growth to a 'place on the margin'" (309). Wakefield and McMullan's article explains that most residents in Hamilton blame "marginal" people for living in Northeast Hamilton because these "people don't care where they live," making it "their choice of neighborhood" (307). The "improving eye" of industrialization renders people of colour as overburden who are "meant" to live in Hamilton's polluted areas. By way of redaction, my poem ruptures (shown by the black bars in-between the words of two people sharing their opinions on the poor community in Hamilton) Wakefield and McMullan's article only momentarily, opposing the notion that IBPOC communities in Hamilton have a choice in where they live. The black bars in the poem create a sense of entrapment and become a barrier to reading the words easily to portray the aesthetic practices of the "improving eye" (the gaze that determines what is and is not valuable) as a form of systemic oppression that cannot easily be removed by choice.

My poem stresses the financial, environmental, and social barriers (through the black bars in the poem) that create the conditions for living in sacrifice zones. The Canadian government systemically oppresses low-income individuals and communities by refusing to hold industries accountable for their ongoing violence on human and nonhuman nature and failing to provide accessible housing in safer neighbourhoods for impoverished peoples. Hence, further marginalizing, harming, and erasing the IBPOC communities in Canada. Yet, despite the negative stigmatization of Northeast Hamilton, residents help each other and the community. As Barbara, a Northeast Hamilton resident, states in the article: "There's a lot of people that like the North End still. They want to live down here" (qtd. in Wakefield and McMullan 308). People of Colour in Hamilton do not choose to live with pollution, but rather, as Morton says, they are on the side of "no choice at all," where they have to engage with their dark ecology to help their community heal.

My poems "Dump Fire in Africville" and "Bedford Basin" expose the effects of the "improving eye" of the Nova Scotian Government on Black Canadians living in Africville.

Africville developed on the southern shore of Bedford Basin. For roughly two centuries (19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries), raw sewage was discharged into the Basin, and the city dumped garbage near the Black community (Clairmont and McGill 12). Therefore, the Black people of Africville had to live with polluted water, air, and land. The poem "Dump Fire in Africville," the poem is written as a Shakespearean sonnet to compare the sonnet's fixed and calculated structure to the fixed and calculated mindset and "improving eye" of the government of Nova Scotia when exploiting the Black community of Africville. Although, the poem subverts the Shakespearean form of addressing a problem in the first three quatrains and a solution in the last two lines. It does so by portraying an ideal white middle-class lifestyle in the first three quatrains of the poem and then addressing the polluted waters and waste plants in the last two lines. Hence, my poem does not end with a "solution" or resolution for Black people post-Africville. Instead, the poem "extracts" a description of Africville (placed adjacent to the last two lines of the poem) from a former resident, named Eddie Carvery, as a glimpse into the life of a Black person surviving in Africville: "There would be walls of fire and toxic smoke, and we used to run through that fire to get the metals before they melted because we scavenged off the dump. We had to. You had to do that to survive" (qtd. in Tavlin). The snippet's purpose is to portray the toxic procedures of the "improving eye" for interventions to take place without creating conditions for analog. As Black academic scholar Frank Wilderson says, "[t]he violence that turns the African into a thing is without analog because it does not simply oppress the Black [body] through tactile and empirical technologies of oppression" (Wilderson 38). The "improving eye" of empirical technologies of oppression condition an anti-Black climate where Black bodies must constantly and immanently survive an always-changing world with past, present, and future traumas.

The poems "Dump Fire in Africville" and "Bedford Basin" appropriate the aesthetic practices of the "improving eye," via extraction and collision, to underscore the process of "sympothesis" for Black bodies; that is their ongoingness of "becoming-with" the excess spaces of overburden in order to survive and resist colonial/racial practices on Black bodies and communities. For instance, I collide quotes from the *Africville Relocation Report* in "Bedford Basin" to rupture an instance of Black suffering into the excess space at the bottom of the page where you can hear a Black woman talk about her experience growing up in Africville:

The City didn't do anything to improve Africville. All the City did was to try and get it, and they did, in the end. They just did it, too, because we were coloured. If they had been White people down there, the City would have been in there assisting them to build new homes, putting in water and sewers and building the place up. There were places around Halifax worse than Africville was, and the City didn't do to them what they did to Africville. (Clairmont and McGill 12)

In revealing her experience, she also reveals her "staying with the trouble" of a polluted, neglected, and exploited community to continue surviving, rupturing, and existing in places of anti-Blackness. Her experience portrays Black survival and resistance to be separate from the struggles of other poor areas in Halifax. Ultimately, Black collective victory cannot be from reports/peoples/Histories that still dominate Black existence. Black collective victory must come from the possibilities of breakages and ruptures in all forms of Black domination, such as master narratives that overlook the interrelated facets that create the Black experience (environmental racism, poverty, capitalist growth, and ongoing revolution/resistance). Therefore, "Bedford Basin"



moves against those enclosures (found in the *Africville Relocation Report*) and breaks open a creative space to look critically at the text/poem and try to understand different perspectives (from “othered” beings) that are drowned out.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Extractive and polluting technologies of violence in Canada, such as the oil sands operations in Alberta, the industrial factories in Hamilton, and the landfill site in Nova Scotia, target “othered” communities (IBPOC peoples and nonhuman nature) as sacrifice zones, for dumping toxic waste on/in their environments and extracting their lands and waters for resources. The “improving eye” of the European explorer/colonizer/capitalist determines who/what is overburden or unproductive waste; hence, Indigenous, Black, and people of colour in Canada become a never-ending, commodifiable resource. Thus, my research-creation argues for the recognition of IBPOC peoples’ micro-interventions, responsiveness, and cultivating ways of living with an always changing Earth, despite (settler-)colonial assumptions that IBPOC lands are “wastelands” awaiting improvement or dumping grounds for colonial development. By appropriating the aesthetic/extractive practices of the “improving eye,” such as cutting up, redacting, layering, erasing, and drawing on materials, I removed the readily visible, dominant ideologies of white supremacy and colonialism, and furthermore, for resisting transcendental fantasies about a utopian world without colonial abuse, neglect, and selfishness. Ultimately, my research-creation advocates for an ethics of care, of seeing and being present and conscious in the Anthropocene/ Chthulucene through a “radical commitment” to the world as we “stay with the trouble” of all its meaninglessness and our beautiful relationships with human and nonhuman nature.

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# Imperial Fears: The Effect of South Asian *Ayahs* on the British Colonial Home and its Children, 1612-1947<sup>1</sup>

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My name is Morgan Marshall, I am a born and raised Canadian cisgender woman, a descendant of British immigrants from the late 19th century. I must recognize the land that I inhabit is the traditional and unceded territory of the Syilx Nation and Okanagan Peoples. Thus, I have inherited a degree of privilege, allowing me to study the untold stories of South Asian women working within the British Empire. As a historian, I intend to utilize both a historical and art historical methodology to uncover agency for Women of Colour and a more multi-dimensional colonial history.

**Abstract:** - *Ayahs were domestic Indian servants working within the colonial British household, aboard ship, and in Britain as lady maids, domestic nurses, and nannies. This paper aims to investigate the experience of ayahs within the colonial home, specifically focusing on the intimate relationship these women established with British children. In India, ayahs acted as primary caregivers to British children and subsequently established mother-like relationships. These relationships broke gender, race and class barriers that the British Empire worked vigorously to maintain and reproduce. Ayahs' disruption of racial superiority and the reproduction of colonial power within British India did not go unrecognized. These relationships created wide-spread imperial fears across the Empire. I argue that such fears created a microcosm culture within the colonial household that actively watched and regulated ayahs' impact on British children, in hopes of minimizing Indian women's 'contamination' of white children with 'inferior Indian traits.' This regulating culture within the colonial Indian home was transmitted through different tactics. And so, this micro-history contributes to a larger narrative of the colonial home as an extension of the Empire's power.*

**Keywords:** Ayahs, domestic labour, colonial India, British Empire, *memsahib*, South Asian, family history

## 1. Introduction

The ayahs of the present century, more akin to serfs than the domestic servants to which we are ordinarily accustomed. (A.C Marshall in the 1922 magazine, *The Quiver*)

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's note: this article analyzes Johann Zoffany's painting *Group Portrait of Sir Elijah and Lady Impey and Their Children* (1783-1784) and Joshua Reynolds' painting *Tysoe Saul Hancock, His Wife Philadelphia, Their Daughter Elizabeth and Their Indian Maid Clarinda* (1765). For copyright reasons, we were unable to include these images in the final publication. We highly encourage readers to find the accompanying images online, as they read.

For centuries, Indian women have been working within the British household as domestic servants and nannies, both in colonial India and aboard ships travelling between continents. In the 1922 edition of the *Quiver*, journalist A.C. Marshall draws a comparison between ayahs and Medieval serfs; however, instead of being bound to the land, ayahs were bound to British children (923). Ayahs' employment was niche and entailed working closely within the British family as maids, domestic nurses, and primary caregivers for white children. Despite being a vital part of the British colonial family, ayahs have been highly disregarded in British history. Few works have investigated the convergence of colonialism and the domestic world in the colonial household, especially through the perspective of the subaltern. As subordinates to their British employers, ayahs were unconsciously involved in the racist, gendered and hierarchical rule of Britain over India for centuries. These intimate and essential positions held by ayahs in the colonial household allowed Indian women to establish an immense cultural impact on the British Empire's future generations. Thus, the employment of ayahs fundamentally transmuted the empire's power by crossing such racial, gendered, and hierarchical barriers to create mother-like relationships with elite British children. However, ayahs' disruption of racial superiority and reproduction of colonial power within British India did not go unrecognized. Because ayahs' employment was considered essential for British families to thrive abroad, they were not replaced by white nannies to avoid the Indian ayah's "culturally contaminating" British children. Instead, I argue these imperial fears created a cultural microcosm within the colonial household of watching and regulating ayahs' impact on British children, in hopes of minimizing cultural contamination. The regulations of ayahs are established by four processes: creation of the *memsahib* as an imperial agent and slave-like authoritarian; hiring an ayah based on her caste or religion, if financially possible; hiring a white nanny to manage the ayah; and, lastly, sending children to Britain as young as possible. By analyzing the ways in which ayahs were watched and regulated by their employers, this paper aims to reconstruct the inner workings of the colonial household and challenge ayahs' historically passive and unimportant representation in history.

To fully investigate the role of ayahs in British history, I provide further context on the three spheres in which they functioned. As the employment of ayahs within the British Empire was highly specific depending on their geographical location, their employment and their experience varied drastically between India, aboard ships, and in Britain. The context in which they are represented often skews their representation across the historical field. In India, ayahs were considered indispensable; they were in charge of complete childcare, acted as lady's maids, and performed other domestic chores and nursing. Their expertise in childrearing was necessary for British babies to survive in the harsh colonial climate, away from accessible science and health technology. Suzanne Conway contrasts the death rate of children born in England between 1860 and 1869 of 67 per 1000, with Bengal where the death rate was 148 per 1000 children (Conway 53). Ayahs also provided a support system for the *memsahib*, who likely left their friend and family networks in Britain, which Chaudhuri argues was one of the biggest difficulties and detriments to British children and *memsahibs* in India (521). Given the ayahs dedication and responsibility to both the *memsahib*'s children and the *memsahib* during her pregnancy—and the birth as their own mothers were a continent away—ayahs acted not only as domestic nurses but also as surrogate mothers. A quotation that encapsulates the ayahs' roles as a protector and mother comes from a

nineteenth century woman living in India, who states, “an ayah should always be an arm’s length away from the child” (Roberts 128).

Ayahs also worked for British families as travelling ayahs, supporting families returning to England and travelling elsewhere in the empire. Many traveling ayahs that worked in the colonial home travelled with their British family on ship voyages, but there were also many ayahs that exclusively worked on ships (Robinson 53). Ayahs working aboard ships were again considered vital; they were in charge of complete childcare, baggage, the *memsahib*, cleaning, laundry, and could even be a qualified nurse and sailor (*Ayahs, Lascars and Princes* 29). Much like their role in India, ayahs were tied to their employing British family, providing anything they needed to travel comfortably during the grueling journey between continents. They did not just work on journeys between India and Britain, they were also recorded to have travelled to Australia, Canada, the Caribbean and other port cities in Europe (Robinson 53). Travelling ayahs earned around fifteen times the monthly salary of household ayahs; many even crafted their own fees and terms of employment (56), making them not only skilled nannies and nurses but also savvy business women.

In India and aboard ships, ayahs were crucial, but once arriving in Britain, they were rendered useless and incompetent (*Ayahs, Lascars and Princes* 29). Families could then employ British nannies and the ayahs’ niche skills were no longer necessary. Their former employers could simply abandon them at British ports, forcing ayahs to find their own passage home (*Asians in Britain* 11). For many women who remained, they were also forced to live in ‘squalid’ lodging houses, begging on the street or were forced into slave-like workhouses (11). The firmly established role of ayahs within British families continued into the nineteenth century, despite the uncertainty of their well-being upon their arrival in Britain (7). In 1897, this uncertainty inspired Mr. and Mrs. Rogers to establish a home for ayahs on Jewry Street in Aldgate, England (Fisher et al. 106). The home provided housing and accommodations, known as a place of refuge for poorly treated and deserted Indian ayahs and Chinese amahs (*Asians in Britain* 51). The home also helped ayahs find job placements with families returning to India, becoming an epicenter for British families looking to hire an ayah (51). However, the Ayahs’ Home, named by the Rogers, can also be viewed as another facilitator of racial segregation, enhancing the exoticization of Indian women. (Robinson 50). The mistreatment and segregation of ayahs in Britain often perpetuated their historical identity as victims or childlike women who needed saving from the Ayahs’ Home. It seems that, as ayahs travelled closer to the metropole, their subjecthood, essential employment, and human-ness diminished.

## 2. Imperial Fears

As British children grew in India, the intense bond between ayah and child only became stronger, and they began to show the ‘side effects’ of having Indian women raise them. Throughout British households across the sub-continent, there was a common imperial fear that British children would grow up more akin to ‘native’ cultures; although extremely racist and classist, these fears were actually coming to fruition. The British began to acknowledge children’s close relationship with ayahs, instead of with their biological parents. Moreover, the British Empire began to note how British children associated India as their true home, and not Britain. To further concern the

Empire was the children's tendency to speak Indian vernacular languages over English. Due to their Indian upbringing, children became the contact point for multiculturalism and thus created a new kind of British subject. This imperilled the strict line between the colonizers and the colonized, contradicting British colonialism (Chaudhuri 531).

The children of high-ranking British officers or civil servants grew up in India, around a diverse group of Indian servants. They were almost exclusively cared for by ayahs, undermining their relationship with the only British people around them, their biological parents (Conway 47). It was not unusual for children to have spent more time with their ayahs than with their own parents. Emma Roberts admits that the parent and child relationship under these conditions is very "singular", in that parent and child are biologically connected but culturally disconnected (226). This created fears that ayahs would start replacing the biological parents in the children's affections, causing the children to grow up with a more 'native' sense of self (Sen 311). They believed it would influence their children to prefer their ayah's society and culture rather than their own, which was seen as highly detrimental to the British (311). In addition, Indian women would not instill "imperial characteristics of leadership, self-control, and manliness," as the British hoped because they were not white or British (312). This would effectively cause "indiscipline among the European children", eventually leading to Indianisation of their community (311), hence the Empire's overwhelming desire to monitor the Indian ayah and British child relationship. (Chaudhuri 531).

A key example of this cultural disruption is Johann Zoffany's *Group Portrait of Sir Elijah and Lady Impey and Their Children*<sup>2</sup> in 1784-5. Depicting Sir Impey, the Chief Justice of the Bengal Supreme Court, this painting represents his career and status which allowed his family to live a very comfortable life in India (De Almeida and Gilpin 138). The Impeys had left their eldest children in England for a British education when they departed for India, but the three youngest children depicted in the painting were born in India (Conway 46). Their eldest India-born daughter, Marian, located on the central axis exhibits the most prominent Anglo-Indian identity. Marian is dancing in Indian garments to music played by the household servants. Marian represents a merging of two cultures, the one of Marian's biological heritage and the other of her Indian ayahs (47). Sir Impey grins innocently and claps as his daughter's dancing, ignoring or not realizing the cultural disconnect between him and his children. This painting also depicts the ayah's closeness to the children, which is then juxtaposed with Lady Impey's depiction as an emotionally distant mother. The youngest Impey child is cradled by one of the ayahs as they both playfully watch Marian dance. On the other end of the painting, Lady Impey invites no physical affection from the last Impey child, her back is turned away, and she is gazing off into the distance disinterestedly. She is represented as the disconnected *memsahib*, gazing away from all three of her children, despite Marian's lively performance that captures the other figures' attention. This is symbolic of her lack of involvement in the upbringing of her children.

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<sup>2</sup> Johann Zoffany (painter). *Group Portrait of Sir Elijah and Lady Impey and Their Children*. Calcutta, India, ca. 1783 - 1784. Oil on canvas, 91.5 x 122 cm. Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, Spain, Inv. no. 445 (1986.11)

The artist, Johann Zoffany, was a painter from the age of the Enlightenment, known for his appreciation of intellectual and artistic pursuits (De Almeida and Gilpin 133). Specifically, he is known for his ironic and critical depiction of his patrons through his theatrical method of including various objects and figures (33). Zoffany's often 'hidden' visual metaphors within his work are seen throughout Impey's portrait. Marian's depiction reveals the concept of British children's creation of a multi-cultural identity in the colony of India, while Lady Impey shows her distant role in the upbringing of her children due to her other colonial duties in India. The composition of the painting gives viewers an interesting visual insight into not only the colonial home's complex relationships between ayah and child but also child and biological parents, which all contributed and expressed the creation of white children's Anglo-Indian identity.

British children born in India were subjected to a unique early childhood, as they not only grew up around a diverse group of servants but also lived in a foreign land—regarded by the British as the Indian sublime. However, for many children, India was the only home they would have experienced, actually making Europe the foreign land. Emily Bayley, the daughter of a civil servant of the East Indian Company, grew up in India until she was five years old, after which she was sent to attend school in England. Emily regularly describes India as her "beloved home", rather than the home of her parents, England (Bayley et al. 25). Young Emily and her sister packed a box of treasures to bring with them to England, to remind themselves "of the land that we looked upon as home and were being sent away from" (27). As they departed, she writes, their household of servants gathered on the front steps with their parents to say goodbye, the ayahs and servants making tearful salaams and kissing their feet goodbye (25). Emily acts as an example of Anglo-Indian children's British heritage conflicting with their Indian experience. How could they identify with a home they had never been to? This attachment to an Indian home and estrangement from England is also portrayed in fictional accounts of a young British boy named Julian in *An Ayah's Tale*. Julian, son of a British officer working in Chinsurah, is confused about why he is being sent "home" to England, when he has never actually been there (Massey 301). Julian even attempts to run away in order to stay in India with his beloved ayah and avoid being sent to England. Although fictional, it reveals how children that grew up exclusively in a different country than their parents would have felt about leaving their true home. In the case of Emily Bayley, when she finally returns to India at the age of seventeen, she recounts herself being overwhelmed with excitement, writing, "I felt I was really getting home" (Bayley et al. 122). The identification of India as the children's 'home' further disrupts the core foundation of British identity and further stirred imperial fears.

The most noticeable 'side effect' that spurred imperial fear was the children's tendency to speak Indian vernacular languages over English. It was an undesirable repercussion of Indian women raising these children, resulting in Anglo-Indian children seeming less British. Victorian woman, Emma Roberts, affirms this stating, "the former do not speak their mother-tongue; they are certain of acquiring Hindostanee, but very seldom taught a word of English until they are five or six years old, and not always at that age" (226). British families viewed this as "cultural contamination through language" (Sen 313). Many families attempted to search for English-speaking ayahs, especially for older children, in hopes that would curbe the undesirable contamination, thus allowing the children and ayah to be monitored by white authority (315).

This difference in dialect created even greater dysfunction and strain between European parents and their children. As *memsahibs* could not understand or speak local languages, mothers

had very few ways to communicate effectively with their own children (312). George Roche recalls his relationship to his ayah, Lela, when his father worked as an officer in the Royal Engineers in 1918 (Conway 55); Roche states that he and his little brother “could speak little English.... We spoke Urdu much better than our mother tongue” (55). How could a mother establish a meaningful relationship with her child if they cannot speak the same language? Roberts states that most children could understand some English but were “shy of speaking” perhaps because it was often broken English; notably, this did not compare to how fluent they were in speaking their ayah’s language (226). The language gap was so wide that prolific writer, Kate Platt, says many children learned how to speak English aboard the ship on their voyage to British boarding school (Sen 313). This disjunction between the children’s parental language and that which they learned from their ayahs had an enormous effect on white children’s Anglo-Indian identity.

### 3. Microcosm of the Empire

Imperial fear was rooted in the concern for a continuation of British superiority and imperial power. The multi-cultural Anglo-Indian identity of high-ranking families’ children created a new kind of British subject, one which may have lacked racial, religious, vernacular, and gendered superiority over non-white people. However, this sense of superiority was arguably a key factor in the continuation and expansion of colonization. Thus, the imperial agents created a microcosm of hybridized culture within the domestic home reflective on British values, which was used to minimize such effects on British children. These subtle yet specific practices within the home do not have a start or end date, instead, I argue it is a gradual change across British rule, with increased imperial fear after the Indian Rebellion of 1857. The rebellion exacerbated British families’ apprehension of hiring Indian servants, particularly because it was historically known as an attack on British women and children, as the *memsahib* and British child represented Britain’s domestic, national and imperial power, not to mention the honour and prestige of the elite colonial society (Ghose 92). These ‘watch and regulate’ tactics include: the *memsahib* evolving into a colonial agent, hiring an ayah based on caste or religion, hiring a white nanny to manage the ayah, and lastly, sending children to British boarding schools as young as possible.

Blunt argues that the colonial home was a place of British cultural and moral reproduction, which endorsed imperial domesticity in India (422). As managers of the colonial home, the *memsahib* was in direct control of this imperial reproduction. Despite women often being excluded from colonial history, these women were active agents of the empire that helped to gain and maintain social, racial, and gendered hierarchies—exemplified through the ways they closely watched the ayah’s relationship with their children, in order to minimize Indian influence. Through a variety of source material, it seems *memsahibs* took the authoritative parenting role while ayahs are often regarded as loving and kind-hearted. The authoritative role is confirmed by Emily Bayley, who claims in her memoir that most Victorian children were very frightened of their parents (Bayley et al. 82).



This complex dynamic underlines Joshua Reynolds' portrait of *Tysoe Saul Handcock, His Wife Philadelphia, Their Daughter Elizabeth and Their Indian Maid Clarinda*<sup>3</sup> in 1765. Tysoe was a surgeon employed by the East India Company working in India at Fort St. David near Cuddalore (Mitchell and Mitchell 14). Elizabeth is the couples' four-year-old daughter, positioned in-between her mother and ayah—this is emblematic of her two motherly figures. Philadelphia assumes the ideal *memsahib* role, as she holds Elizabeth's chin up in good posture to the painter. Reynolds' portrayal of mother and child is also representative of Philadelphia's role in the cultural preservation and reproduction of elite British families. It is as if you can actually hear her scolding Elizabeth to stand up straight and pose for the portraitist. Clarinda is situated in the background with only half her body presented as she is positioned kneeling or sitting while keeping a firm grasp on Elizabeth. Clarinda's body language suggests she is embracing Elizabeth, while Philadelphia's contact with her daughter is minimal. The ayah is physically holding up Elizabeth, symbolizing how ayahs acted as the primary caregivers and support systems to these children, replacing their biological parents. Yet her position is subservient, more hidden in the painting, similar to the minimal recognition ayahs receive in historical scholarship. Clarinda's position in the background can also be interpreted as rendering her racially, socially and culturally inferior to the more pronounced British figures. The noticeable focus on facial skin pigmentation is yet another demonstration of the eighteenth century's ideology of human morality and hierarchy. (Lafont 90). The Hancock's extremely pale and even ghostly complexion was crucial in representing health, beauty, moral goodness and purity (Palmer 204), while Clarinda's brown complexion represents racial inferiority. This imagery is suggestive of not only the different roles both motherly figures possessed, but specifically represents the biological mother inhabiting the strict and authoritative imperial agent and the ayah occupying the loving and gentle protector. Yet, the composition of the painting also demonstrates racial segregation.

The relationships between child, ayah and biological parents is a contested space that is difficult to quantify because historians do not have many accounts from the children. It is unreasonable to claim that all mothers were emotionally removed or did not have an intimate role in their children's lives because relationships vary from family to family. Although, as Roberts states, "the joy of the mother, especially, is subjected to many draws-backs" (228). It is clear through the source material that biological parents, specifically the *memsahib*, experienced high cultural expectations to ensure imperial dominance in India, thus taking her away from her loving and motherly duties.

We can also see the creation of an imperial agent throughout the pages of literature from female writers, which aims to help *memsahibs* run an orderly British household in India. These books are detailed guides to how the *memsahib* should treat her ayah/servants, the servants' tasks based on their caste, the average wage of ayahs, how the *memsahib* should conduct herself, and often they include tales of the Indian sublime. An example of this literature is a popular book titled,

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<sup>3</sup> Joshua Reynolds (painter). *George Clive and his Family with an Indian Maid*, [now re-identified as, *Tysoe Saul Handcock, his wife Philadelphia, their daughter Elizabeth and their Indian maid Clarinda*] ca. 1765. Oil on Canvas, 140 x 171 cm. Gemäldegalerie der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, Berlin, Germany. no. Nr. 78.1

*The Complete Indian Housekeeper & Cook: Giving the Duties of Mistress and Servants*, published in 1902 by two British housewives living in India. It is a guide laced with racial prejudices alongside simple recipes (Steel and Gardiner). Books like *The Complete Indian Housekeeper & Cook* reinforced memsahibs' roles as colonial agents and the *memsahibs* acted more like domestic administrators than mothers, maintaining British dominance within the home while historically placing the care of their children on ayahs, and, once old enough, onto to British boarding schools. Hiring domestic servants proved to be an increasingly annoying task for families because most servants were lower caste Hindu and refused certain jobs due to the social restrictions of their caste (Sen 302). However, many employers did not want Christian Indians because they believed it was too dangerous to be religious equals with their servants (304-5). Britons wanted to maintain a hierarchical divide between themselves and their servants to ensure superiority and control. Thus, families continued to hire Hindu and Muslim servants, risking the 'cultural and religious contamination' of their children in order to maintain the divide. There were Christian ayahs, but they required higher pay and, again, in the British perspective, they threatened the colonial master and servant hierarchy (Chaudhuri 532).

To cope with their children's endless exposure to non-white servants, many families attempted to bring British nannies over from Europe (527). If a white-British family could find a European nanny it was considered a huge financial strain as these women demanded a much higher wage than Indian ayahs and even wanted servants for themselves (Roberts 58). Further, the family would often still employ an ayah and *ammah* in addition to the British nanny, because ayahs were more useful (Chaudhuri 532). Regardless of religion, one British housewife and active novelist, Mary Martha Sherwood, stressed, she was "not content" with child rearing counselling from a white nurse (379). Ayahs were more qualified, trusted, and reliable for the job in colonial India. Similar to ayahs in Britain, European nannies can be considered obsolete in India; ayahs had more knowledge and experience of keeping children alive in the harsh colony of India. English journalist, Francis William Blagdon, expresses this by writing that ayahs have a "habit of endearment and attention," to which he adds, it "renders them far better calculated for the care of children, than our juvenile race of nurses" (Blagdon 73). However, if the family could afford a white nanny, it was considered another tactic to regulate children's exposure to Indian culture.

The last practice of British families to minimize and regulate the 'cultural contaminations' of their children was to send their children to British boarding school or to live with relatives in Britain (Roberts 226). By doing so, British families historically placed the care of their children on ayahs, and once old enough, onto to British boarding schools. The children were sent to England as soon as they were strong enough to endure the long journey 'home' (Conway 52). Blagdon claims this was around four or five years old, while Chaudhuri claims it was at seven years old (533). Nevertheless, it was imperative to British parents to get them out of India as soon as possible. This was used as a form of cultural assimilation to strip as much Indian identity away and redirect them to the culture of their mother country. It was seen as essential because many children lacked the 'imperial traits' of a British subject, as England had "not yet destroyed the simplicity of Anglo-Indian children" (Roberts 225). As mentioned above, many children had to learn how to speak English aboard the ship on their voyage to British boarding school (Sen 313).

Children like Emily Bayley and her sister did not return to India or even see their family in India for twelve years (Bayley 49). In that time, Emily's mother had died, and she never saw

her again (49). Emily and her younger sister fared well in England, living with their aunt, uncle, and cousins while attending a school nearby. They both seemed to enjoy school though it was strict. Victorian children were extremely disciplined, as it was a common view that children raised with “soft-heartedness and spoiling can be even worse than too little, or none at all” (81). This contrasts starkly with the tales of children growing up in India, many recollecting that children were free to play and have fun, with their ayah close by of course. Emily’s dull reminiscence of England do not compare with her vivid and extraordinary romantic reminiscence of India. In her case, and arguably for other children, they loved India and could not wait to return.

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, by investigating the experience of ayahs within the colonial home and the specifically intimate relationships these women established with British children, we can analyse the microcosm culture that it created within the colonial home. Household ayahs acted as primary caregivers to British children and subsequently established mother-like relationships which broke gender, race, and class barriers that the British Empire worked vigorously to maintain and reproduce. However, ayahs’ disruption of racial superiority and the reproduction of colonial power within British India did not go unrecognized. These relationships created wide-spread imperial fears across the Empire. The three most prominent of these fears included British children’s close relationship with ayahs instead of their biological parents, their association of India as their true home, and their tendency to speak Indian vernacular languages over English. The effects of the children’s Indian upbringing resulted in an intersection of cultures, creating a new kind of British subject—one that, by imperial British eyes, had been infected with an inferior culture. To minimize the effects ayahs had on British children without losing the expertise of the ayahs, British families created an extension of British dominance into the domestic home. This created a microcosm culture that watched and regulated ayahs influence on white children. Such tactics included the creation of the *memsahib* as an imperial agent, which required British women to extend British ideals and superiority onto the household and its servants. The family hired ayahs based on their caste or religion in order to enable further racial segregation. If financially possible, families would hire a white nanny to manage the ayah, again establishing a racial divide and to bring white staff into the home. Lastly, sending children to Britain for boarding school or to live with relatives as young as possible became a method of assimilating them into British culture. By analyzing the ways in which ayahs were watched and regulated by their employers, I have re-constructed a portion of a colonial home’s inner workings and challenged ayahs’ historically passive and unimportant position in history.

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## Islamic Revivalism and Paradoxical Governance of Religion in Uzbekistan: Observers Under Strict State Surveillance

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**Abstract:** *After the collapse of the Soviet Union, socialism's hostility towards Islam was replaced by paradoxical models of religious governance in Uzbekistan. On the one hand, Islam became central to national identity and was embraced by the majority of Uzbeks; on the other hand, the transition away from socialism coincided with the establishment of an anti-Islamic authoritarian regime (Khalid; March). Surveillance, imprisonment, abduction, and the disappearance of Islamic leaders and members of different Islamic groups became widespread practices during former president Islam Karimov's regime between 1991 and 2016.*

*As part of my dissertation project, this paper is based on my international field study in 2019 and 2020. During the interviews, I noticed the recurring patterns of similar experiences of the participants in the justice system in Uzbekistan: the participants' observations of the systems of oppression, the patterns of how they were surveilled and detained, and the cruelties used against them. The participants stressed that the religious offenders were kept under strict observation and harsher conditions than the prisoners who committed other types of crimes. The Karimov regime's use of surveillance as a tool of state violence led to the prisoners' equally intense observation of the discourses and practices of oppression such as false accusations against religious people, fabricated evidence of involvement in extremist or terrorist organizations, torture, mistreatment of the family members of imprisoned people, and arbitrary extension of prison terms, among others. Here, I argue that victims of the system who serve as observers of the misdeeds performed by the state are uniquely positioned to help us to better understand the relationship between the state and Islam in Uzbekistan.*

**Key Words:** Radicalism, Targeted surveillance, Victim-observants, Islamophobia

### 1. INTRODUCTION:

Since the beginning of the 1990s, organizations such as Human Rights Watch (HRW), Amnesty International (AI), and the US Department of State (DOS) have sounded the alarm about

surveillance, fabricated indictments, harsh punishments, abductions, and disappearances being used to target religious individuals. Targeted Muslims were apprehended not only inside the borders of Uzbekistan but also in neighbouring states after having left the country to avoid persecution. Some Muslims were swept into a dragnet based on their appearance; religious practices; social, political, and religious activism; interactions with surveilled individuals; and membership in banned Islamic groups (HRW).

Targeted surveillance during the Karimov presidency led to the persecution of thousands of innocent Muslims, the disappearance of religious authorities, and the unlawful treatment of religious prisoners in Uzbekistan. *Surveillance* refers to the ways in which information about behaviors and activities is gathered and processed for the purposes of prevention or investigation of crime and protection of people, objects, or places (*Lyon*). However, surveillance often has a negative connotation as being a method of repression and a practical tool for authoritarian control. The central focus of this paper is not how targeted surveillance operates against offenders charged with religion-based crimes in Uzbekistan, but how the individuals under strict surveillance and who are victims of state violence view these systems of oppression.

During the interviews with both currently and previously incarcerated religious offenders as part of my doctoral research, I noticed the repeating patterns of detention, the types of information used against detainees, and the methods of surveillance used to gather them. The collected information was evaluated based on unsubstantiated beliefs and political objectives and was used as evidence against the Muslims being surveilled of disloyalty towards the existing political regime. The surveillance of Muslims continued even after those individuals were officially brought before the justice system. Harsh methods of interrogation and torture were used to extract more information, which often required naming other Muslims or confirming fabricated accusations against them, resulting in more ‘wrongdoers’ being dragged into the justice system. Prisons also isolated religious prisoners and implemented harsher monitoring and disciplinary practices towards them. Accusations of extremism and radicalism became a lucrative practice for corrupt law enforcement. The victims of these practices can also be viewed as subjects in a panopticon, which observes the state violence. My discussion of the panopticon and panopticism here draws from Michel Foucault’s work in *Discipline and Punish* and in *Power/Knowledge*. Their invisibility lies in the fact that their role as observers of this violence was overlooked by the state authorities.

During my archival research, I found documentation of twenty-six cases of disappearances and abductions of Islamic leaders who were the victims of targeted surveillance and the unsubstantiated analysis of the data collected through this surveillance. As Muhammad Salih Abutov, a former imam of a mosque in Uzbekistan who was jailed for eight-and-a-half years for religious extremism, stated during our interviews, “Karimov wanted to pluck the ‘radical’ Islam by its roots and created the harshest totalitarian ruling against Muslims of Uzbekistan.”<sup>1</sup> This paper emphasizes the role of these unique observers whose experiences offer invaluable information about the qualities entrenched in the political system and law enforcement agencies in Uzbekistan,

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<sup>1</sup> Interview 009 (Muhammad Salih Abutov)

shedding light on the often-invisible sides of social reality. The lack of academic discussions about the experiences and observations of such individuals can be attributed to the difficulties involved in conducting research in authoritarian states and accessing participants who have experienced oppression.

## 2. REVIVAL OF ISLAM IN UZBEKISTAN:

The term *Islamic revivalism* is often applied to the activism that seeks renewed attention to the Islamic faith and a renewed commitment to Islam through influence and, in some cases, through direct political and military action. For Mahmood (3), Islamic revival refers “not only to the activities of state-oriented political groups but more broadly to a religious ethos or sensibility that has developed within contemporary Muslim societies.”

The gradual weakening of the Soviet system and the initial signs of Islamic resurgence made many scholars believe that the revival of Islam in Central Asia would gain considerable strength and serve as both cultural identity and spiritual guidance (Rashid; Roy; Jalil). Other scholars claimed that Islam would emerge as a powerful political dynamism, reclaiming its historical status in the region with the capability of mobilizing Muslims (Allsworth; Haghayeghi; Voll; Jalil). Both sets of arguments proved to be correct in the case of Uzbekistan.

The emergence of both pro-Islam incitement and an anti-Islamic, hardline authoritarian regime (Khalid; Louw; Jones) led to the paradoxical governance of Islam. The paradox started when Islam Karimov held the *Quran* while taking the presidential oath of office, seemingly a first step towards introducing Islam as part of the Uzbek national identity. Hundreds of new mosques and Islamic educational institutions were built, and old mosques and shrines were renovated. Islam took root in every part of social life, including fashion, food, media, and publishing industries.

The favouring of certain forms of Islam and the hostility towards other forms created confusion in society. President Karimov showed great interest in the promotion of Sufism and Hanafi jurisprudence as part of the “national inheritances,” making it easier to reject transnational Islamic influences like *Wahhabism*, *Tablighi*, and *Hisb-ut Tahrir* (O’Dell: 102). The formation of politically-motivated Islamic militant groups in the Ferghana Valley of Uzbekistan, with names like *Islom Lashkarlari* (Islamic Army), *Adolat* (Justice), and *Tavba* (Repentance), and President Islam Karimov’s harsh authoritarian regime subsequently pushing these groups out of the country and persecuting large numbers of innocent Muslims between 1991 and 2016 are well documented. (Khalid; Jones). After leaving Uzbekistan, the leaders of these groups, Tohir Yo’ldosh and Juma Namongoniy, founded the *Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan* (IMU) and *Islamic Jihad Union* (IJU), which formed alliances with the *Taliban* and *al Qaeda*. As Khalid (573) describes,

The events of autumn 2001 in Afghanistan, when fighters belonging to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) played a prominent role alongside the Taliban, seemed to vindicate the darkest fears and to justify the unremitting campaign that the regime of President Islam Karimov has waged against “religious extremism” since 1998.

The IMU and IJU have brought followers of Islam, especially young Uzbek men, closer to foreign radical Muslim organizations (Mann). Terms like *Wahhabi*, *Hisb ut-Tahrir*, and *Akromia* were used to ascribe strong political implications to Islamic fundamentalism, extremism, and terrorism (Mehrddad; Ruzaliev). However, the size of these groups and the number of Muslims who were



influenced by such groups were small. HRW reports, AI and DOS's country briefings, and the work of many scholars state that the exaggeration of the presence of danger was used to justify surveillance, false accusations, torture, and state violence against certain segments of the Muslim population in Uzbekistan to suppress dissent and opposition (Khalid; Hartman; Kendzior). Scholars have argued that the Tashkent bombing in 1999 (Polat and Butkevich) and Andijan violence in 2005 (Hartman; Kendzior), where the military forces of the Republic of Uzbekistan fired into a crowd of peaceful protesters and killed over 700 civilians (Khalid), were orchestrated by the government of Uzbekistan for the same reason.

### **3. ISLAMOPHOBIA AND THE FABRICATION OF "ENEMIES":**

The emergence of militant Islamic groups in Uzbekistan is undeniable; however, Islamic groups were marked as radical not only based on whether they were politically motivated or used violence, but according to the doctrines they followed. This process included consideration of the aspirations, assumed motivations, and prognoses about the far-reaching goals of the organizations. Arun Kundnani (2015) argues that the existing jihadist movement has nothing to do with jihad and that Islamic terrorist movements have nothing to do with Islam; rather, they use Islamic vocabulary to legitimize their violence. The incorrect assessments of who should be watched and who poses the biggest potential threat led to the rise of Islamophobia in society (Kundnani). The only accepted form of Islam in Uzbekistan was one that complied with the existing constitutional, political, and social order—commonly called an official Islam (Khalid). Marking various Islamic groups as radical made it convenient to target members of these groups and detain them, regardless of their involvement in the group or if they presented any risk to society. Law enforcement agencies in Uzbekistan did not need any further guidance on identifying radicals; belonging to any Islamic group was sufficient to accuse Muslims of radicalism.

Following the 1999 Tashkent bombings, mosques, Islamic schools, and religious organizations were placed under surveillance and political control; unregistered Islamic groups were banned by law and their members were targeted by law enforcement agencies (Polat and Butkevich). Islamic leaders were under immense scrutiny and the campaign of religious persecution by the Karimov government between 1991 and 2004 "resulted in the arrest, torture, public degradation and incarceration in grossly inhuman condition of an estimated 7,000 people" (HRW) in Uzbekistan. Finding Islamic audio or video materials on someone's phone or Islamic books in someone's home was seen as evidence of their connection to potential extremism or terrorism. This unique form of surveillance put Muslims under a constant spotlight, with every bit of information accumulated in the process serving to reinforce the powers used against them. Surveillance as state violence is "exercised through its invisibility; at the same time, it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility. In discipline, it is the subjects who have to be seen" (*Discipline and Punish* 187).

Finding "radical" individuals or groups furthered the careers of those in law enforcement. Flawed understandings and incorrect predictions of the causes of radicalization led to misleading political beliefs. Mass surveillance and violence against pre-criminal Muslims became acceptable. Muslims were accused based on their religious expression.

Reports show that Islamic debates, texts, and commentary (Frank and Mamatov) were redefined as contradicting state ideology and then used to frame Muslims as enemies of the state. The government of Uzbekistan never defined terms such as *extremism* and *radicalism*; however, these terms were regularly incorporated into legal and political rhetoric. With no definition, what were the default assumptions and markers of extremism or radicalism that were used in the systems of surveillance in Uzbekistan, given the lack of an informed reference to the issues at hand? Although no agreed-upon definition of Islamism or political Islam exists, Islamism is generally understood to be an activism advocating implementation of Sharia law, Islamic principles, and pan-Islamic unity in all social, political, and legal aspects of society. Radicalization is often viewed as a process and radicalism is the beliefs or actions that advocate complete political or social reform (Nasser-Eddine, Garnham, Agostino and Caliya; Schmid). Peter Neumann and several other scholars insist that radicalization is political rather than religious or cultural. Neumann argues that all types of terrorist movements in human history had the same roots and that the underlining cause of terrorism has been the same all along. The jihadists, for Neumann, are not a group, but an activism that is “inextricably bound up with a radical political movement” (Neumann 43), originating as a response to the colonial suppression of Islam and the damage from the imposition of Western or democratic standards to Islamic values.

Human rights organizations<sup>2</sup> continually reported that Muslims were under observation everywhere: mosques were under video surveillance, undercover members of the National Security Service participated in every Juma prayer, and imams were ordered to watch out for those who prayed differently than the Hanafi Muslims<sup>3</sup>. In contrast, the victims were also observing the deeply-rooted contradictions and corruption in the system. Despite knowing of the innocence of many detainees, law enforcement agencies fabricated allegations and tortured Muslims until they confessed. Detained Muslims were tortured and told to name others and give false testimony against them. Therefore, the targeted surveillance not only served as a predator, it also created channels for the fabrication of criminals. As Foucault suggests, the panopticon and the mechanisms of power it contains extend beyond the prison and into other institutions of society. Power “reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives” (*Discipline and Punish* 30). When that power is used incorrectly, it can create a rigid tyrannical regime.

Karimov’s radical stance towards both religious and non-religious opposition helps to make sense of what the term “radical” meant to the government. The “radicals” were not only the people who opposed the existing political system, but those who might form an opposition. People were punished for “pre-crimes” or fabricated crimes. Human Rights Watch’s report (2004: 5) states:

The government’s actions were intended to eliminate a perceived threat of Islamic “fundamentalism” and “extremism” by silencing and punishing Muslims who rejected government control of religion. The policy was designed and carried out to remove charismatic Islam from the political equation, to prevent any potential contest between the

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/uzbekistan0304.pdf> (Human Rights Watch Reports, 2004)

<sup>3</sup> Most Muslims in Uzbekistan follow the Hanafi School of thought in Islam.

Karimov government and independent-minded Muslim leaders for authority and the loyalty of the people.<sup>4</sup>

Interviews with formerly imprisoned religious people revealed that people imprisoned on religious charges suffered torture and abysmal prison conditions and that prisoners' sentences were often arbitrarily extended for years. Often, these prisoners were the victims of fabricated charges, such as possession of narcotics or weapons, organizing radical Islamic groups, or supporting terrorist organizations. For example, Azam Turgunov,<sup>5</sup> a formerly incarcerated participant, alleged that security services officers placed a sealed mask on his head to simulate suffocation, beat him on his legs and feet, and threatened to drive nails into his toes to coerce a false confession.

**The Story of Muhojir:** The lives of many Muslim men were altered and often ended tragically, either at the hands of the government or at the hands of the Islamic militants because of the corrupted systems of power. The interview with Muhojir<sup>6</sup> was not only about his own experiences, but those of many Muslims who joined militant Islamic groups because they feared the anti-Islam campaigns and harsh punishments against Muslims in Uzbekistan. While introducing himself, Muhojir said: "I was one of those Muslims who worked, prayed and enjoyed peaceful life," which stuck in my mind, contrasting with the end of his story.

Muhojir and several other men said "amen" out loud instead of whispering it while they prayed in a mosque. According to Muhojir, by order of the authorities, the imam of the mosque was taking note of the people who said "amen" out loud, as it was seen as an indication that these men practiced Salafism and therefore must be radical. Criminal investigations against everyone identified in the imam's notes were started.

The men under investigation got together and discussed the brutality in the prisons against people who were accused of extremism or radicalism. Salafists, who are often mistakenly called *Wahhabi*<sup>7</sup>, were targeted and punished harshly in Uzbekistan. They believed that if they were imprisoned for extremism or radicalism, they would be tortured to death and would never get out of prison alive. Therefore, they decided to leave Uzbekistan and seek support from Tohir Yo'ldosh, the IMU leader who was in Tajikistan at that time.

With many difficulties, these men found the location of the IMU and joined them; however, the warm welcome from the amirs of the IMU did not last long. Ironically, the members of the IMU also took issue with saying "amen" out loud during prayers, leading to the practice being banned. It is crucial to note the irony that the practice that was considered to be a marker of radical Islam by Uzbek authorities was forbidden by the members of the radical Islamic groups. Muhojir mentioned that "there were continual conflicts between the IMU and Salafists," until the group decided to secretly leave the village of Chusal<sup>8</sup> – the IMU residence. He said that Tohir Yo'ldosh

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/uzbekistan0304.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Azam Turgunov is the participants real name (Interview – 037)

<sup>6</sup> Muhojir is a pseudonym. Interview – 048 (Muhojir)

<sup>7</sup> Wahhabism was a pared-down Islam that rejected modern influences, while Salafism sought to reconcile Islam with modernism. What they had in common is that both rejected traditional teachings on Islam in favor of direct, 'fundamentalist' reinterpretation.

<sup>8</sup> A village in Tajikistan where members of the IMU with families resided.

was a Pan-Madhab proselytiser and that he was “aggressive in advocating Hanafi madhhab” of Islam, which is also considered to be an official Islam in Uzbekistan.

When they neared the village of G’arim<sup>9</sup>, Muhojir decided to go to the village to get some food and water. The local police, who were suspicious of Muhojir, detained him. He was locked up and, after a few months, sold to the National Security Service of Uzbekistan. The term “sold” was used by Muhojir while telling his story.

On the orders of Tohir Yo’ldosh, the IMU leader, the rest of the group was followed and then killed in the desert in Tajikistan. “They were even crueller than Islam Karimov’s government,” Muhojir said. He heard of the fate of his cohorts when he was in prison in Uzbekistan. Muhojir’s story was traceable in the news and human rights reports; however, there are many important details that only an in-person observer can provide. The lives of these men were altered because of their frustration with hyper-surveillance, the corrupt justice system, and the unfair treatment of religious people, leading them to leave their families, home, and work to join radical Islamic groups. The system created and punished crime at the expense of ordinary people.

It is observable that marking some religious practices as indicators for radicalism and extremism led people to seek refuge by joining radical groups, driving them towards crime. The authoritarian regime in Uzbekistan contributed to the formation and expansion of the violent terrorism it intended to fight against. It appears that religious people felt safer seeking support from the terrorist groups than facing the justice system in Uzbekistan. The unique structure of hyper-surveillance and corruption in the justice system put Muslims under a constant spotlight, like a panopticon, with every bit of information accumulated in the process serving to reinforce the use of powers against them. As Foucault says, “by being combined and generalized, they attained a level at which the formation of knowledge and the increase in power regularly reinforce one another in a circular process” (*Power Knowledge* 148). If punishment was based on false accusations, potential risk, and pre-crime, how often are these predictions right? If the state uses the most violent mechanisms and fabricated charges against innocent Muslims, then is it not the state that is the most radicalized?

The Muslim men who unjustly fall into the economy of punishment in Uzbekistan are the victims and also the witnesses of harsh political crimes. The mysterious portrayals of madmen and their treatment in custody that Foucault discusses in *Madness and Civilization* have a strong connection to the portrayals and punishments of “radical” Muslims in Uzbekistan. Both madness and radicalism have a similar, complex relationship with unreason. Foucault’s madmen and Uzbekistan’s “radical Muslims” are individuals thrown into the structures of power and characterized by animality, insanity, dark secrets, and apocalyptic visions that are infectious and dangerous to society. Madmen and “radical Muslims” are the “other,” or counterculture in society, who have to be confined and punished to bring their senses back to reason. Passion is the key element in madness and, as Foucault (*Madness and Civilization* 83) states, “the possibility of madness is therefore implicit in the very phenomenon of passion.” Passion and love towards Islam were the very features of radical Muslims in Uzbekistan: they were detained for having scriptures

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<sup>9</sup> A village in Tajikistan.

in their homes, listening to certain imams, and expressing their religious identities. Even being followers of a passionate Islamic leader was sufficient reason for their detention and confinement.

**The Story of Muhammad Salih Abutov:**<sup>10</sup> Abutov was a follower of Shaikh Abduvali Mirzaev, a well-known Islamic authority not only in Uzbekistan but in the Muslim world, who was abducted along with his assistant, Ramazon Matkarimov, from the Tashkent International Airport on 29 August 1995, while flying to Moscow to participate in a conference (Karagiannis).<sup>11</sup> According to Abutov,<sup>12</sup> he and his fellow followers drafted a letter to President Karimov about the disappearance of Shaikh Abduvali Mirzaev, asking for help to find the shaikh. Thirty people signed the letter. According to Abutov, over the next six months, all thirty people who signed the letter were detained and jailed. In September, Abutov was fired from his position as an imam; in October, he was taken away by the police; in December, he was jailed.

“The tortures used against religious convicts in prisons were brutal. The artificial hunger and scarcity of basic needs created in prison led to one man killing another man and giving the body to another man for piece of bread,”<sup>13</sup> Abutov said, during our interviews. According to Abutov, the religious inmates needed to be “broken” – the term used in prison. Broken men became quiet, non-rebellious, and submissive; they were no longer themselves. The prison targeted the body, soul, and mind of the religious. Whatever it took to break a man was done by officials. One imam’s sister was kept overnight with supervisors of the prison to break him. Men were forced to see or know what was done to their sisters, daughters, or other family members. “It actually did break him,” said Abutov of another prisoner.<sup>14</sup>

My research in a human rights organization’s Paris archives uncovered folders of documents relating to the cases against Sheikh Abduvali Mirzaev and his followers, who were also jailed or disappeared. The intellectual class of Muslims was once again the most “dangerous”. As history has shown many times, when powers clash, the stronger side purges the most influential and knowledgeable members of the opposition (Khalid).

Foucault uses the term “delirium” in describing such madmen who veered off the proper path or path of reason (*Madness and Civilization* 89). Likewise, all these incarcerated Muslims were also considered to be on the wrong path. Differing degrees of “radical” were somehow identified and Muslims were jailed for varying time periods and subjected to differing forms of torture, as though the measurement of radicalism was scientific. Only the worst ones were abducted and killed under the existing law, similar to the punishments used for 17<sup>th</sup> century madmen. Human Rights Watch’s 2004 report says that “religious persecution has resulted in the arrest, torture, public degradation, and incarceration in grossly inhumane conditions of an

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<sup>10</sup> Interview – 008 and Interview – 011. Muhammad Salih Abutov decided to participate in this research with his own name after reviewing the informed consent. He was interviewed twice.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/uzbekistan0304.pdf>. (I also collected documents about Abduvali Qori Mirzaev’s case during my archival research.)

<sup>12</sup> Interview 008 (Muhammad Salih Abutov)

<sup>13</sup> Interview 011 (Muhammad Salih Abutov)

<sup>14</sup> Interview 011 (Muhammad Salih Abutov)

estimated 7,000 people.”<sup>15</sup> Most of these individuals were linked to Islamic groups such as *Salafism*, *Wahhabism*, *Hisb ut-Tahrir*, and *Akromiylar*, which Foucault (*Madness and Civilization*) would likely describe as factions of madmen. President Islam Karimov openly admitted that his regime was authoritarian when he said that “it is necessary to straighten out the brains of one hundred people in order to preserve the lives of thousands” (Fierman: 38).<sup>16</sup> The systematic oppression against thousands of Muslims, including forced disappearances, unlawful detentions and incarcerations, and torture in the law enforcement and punitive systems were simplified, downgraded, and justified by President Karimov’s comments.

#### 4. CONCLUSION:

Following the independence of Uzbekistan in 1991, the Karimov government endorsed Islam that accepted and supported the existing political system and started to repress Islamic groups that criticized corruption in the system and pointed to Islam as a solution to societal issues. Besides the politically motivated small groups of Islamists, well-educated charismatic Islamic leaders also repeatedly spoke about societal issues and the importance of restoring Islamic values often associated with fundamentalist Islam. According to many scholars who research Uzbekistan and the Amnesty International report *Secrets and Lies: Forced Confessions Under Torture in Uzbekistan* (HRW 2015),<sup>17</sup> the number of criminal cases, the number of deaths, and the degree of torture that occurred during the Karimov presidency in Uzbekistan exceeded those that occurred during repression against Uzbeks by the Soviet regime.

Many of the Muslims who were persecuted in Uzbekistan for religion-based crimes, such as extremism, radicalism, and involvement in terrorist organizations, provide a unique form of information as witnesses of state crimes. While they were surveilled and made subject to harsh punishments, they observed how the law was used in the corrupted system of law enforcement in Uzbekistan. They were the only people who knew that they were innocent, that they signed confessions for crimes they did not commit, or that they were forced to pull-in other innocent people to be punished.

Repressive governments intend to leave no trace of their crimes, often exercising control over what journalists can publish and researchers can study. Self-reported stories of the victims of the system, in these cases, become invaluable to analyze and validate these qualities rooted in the political system. While archived documents helped me to confirm some facts, observations of victims played a unique importance in researching the relationship between the government and religion.

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/uzbekistan0304.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Islam Karimov, President of Uzbekistan, quoted in Fierman, 1997:38

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.amnestyusa.org/reports/secrets-and-lies-forced-confessions-under-torture-in-uzbekistan/>

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## When the Lights Go Out: Panopticism in Stephen King's *Dolores Claiborne*<sup>1</sup>

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I would like to respectfully acknowledge that I live and work in the unceded and ancestral territory of the Syilx People.

My positionality is that of a white, settler woman. I received my Bachelor of Arts with a major in English and minor in Creative Writing from the University of Alberta in June 2018. I will also be receiving my Master of Arts in English from the University of British Columbia (Okanagan) in May 2021. My article, "When the Lights Go Out: Panopticism in Stephen King's *Dolores Claiborne*," has been adapted from my larger thesis titled "'No eclipse lasts forever': Confronting Gendered Violence in Stephen King's *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*."

**Abstract:** *In a discussion regarding Jeremy Bentham's panopticon, Michel Foucault argues that the primary function of the architectural structure is to allow for a type of self-surveillance among inmates themselves. Although panopticism was initially intended to serve its function in a prison setting, its methods of enforcing conformity through surveillance, visibility, and omnipresent power can easily be applied to other social systems; this includes the traditional male-female binary. When panopticism intermingles with gender, and its historically heteronormative construction, the result is often enforcement through violence. Stephen King demonstrates this destructive relationship in his novel Dolores Claiborne. Little Tall Island—the setting of Dolores Claiborne—embodies fundamentally panoptic qualities: the residents observe themselves and one another according to what is considered normal in their society, which invokes a sense of omnipresent power on the island. Consequently, the panoptic qualities of the island reinforce the male-female binary and reproduce violence as demonstrated by the relationships that exist between protagonist Dolores, her husband, Joe, and their daughter, Selena. However, there is a moment in the novel when visibility is interrupted by an eclipse. During the moment of limited visibility, Dolores, who suffered years of abuse under Joe's patriarchal authority, disrupts the traditional male-female binary by killing him. As a result of the limited visibility during the eclipse, Dolores is not held accountable for the murder, thus exposing a weakness with panopticism and, moreover, with heteronormativity as a method of social regulation itself: what happens when the lights go out?*

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to note that this article, "When the Lights Go Out: Panopticism in Stephen King's *Dolores Claiborne*," includes and elaborates upon my analysis of *Dolores Claiborne* from my thesis titled "'No eclipse lasts forever': Confronting Gendered Violence in Stephen King's *Gerald's Game* and *Dolores Claiborne*." The discussion of Judith Butler's work on the act/violence of gendering featured later on in this article is drawn from "King's Gothic Representations of Trauma, the Repressed, and Gendered Violence" (Ozipko 9-10), while the examples and analyses of gendered violence that occur between men and women on Little Tall Island are drawn from "...and as for the dust bunnies: *frig ya'*: Navigating Social Trauma in *Dolores Claiborne*" (Ozipko 33-35). In this article, I examine the representations of gendered violence in *Dolores Claiborne* using a theoretical framework that is absent in my thesis: panopticism.

**Keywords:** Stephen King; Dolores Claiborne; Panopticism; Heteronormativity; Gendered Violence

Regarding Jeremy Bentham's infamous *panopticon*, French philosopher Michel Foucault notes that the primary function of the structure is "to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power...that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers" (6). In other words, the panopticon enforces a type of self-surveillance performed by the inmates themselves. In the introduction to *The Victorian Eye: A Political History of Light and Vision in Britain, 1800-1910*, Chris Otter claims that a panopticon might simply be described as "any configuration of vision and power...designed to facilitate the observations of some humans by others" (5). Keeping both Foucault's and Otter's ideas in mind, it is clear that a panopticon produces power through (seemingly) uninterrupted visibility. Although Bentham originally theorized the panopticon so that it might be implemented within a prison system in order to control inmates, one can observe from the above definitions that panopticism<sup>2</sup> is a socially versatile concept—one that could be applied to virtually any setting where visibility, surveillance, and power are interconnected.

In fact, in this article, I will be exploring how *gender*<sup>3</sup>—a historically heteronormative<sup>4</sup> construction—is policed and enforced in a panoptic fashion. In order to explore this idea, I will be analyzing a work by American author Stephen King: *Dolores Claiborne*. Although Little Tall Island, the setting of *Dolores Claiborne*, is not a perfect representation of a panopticon, it does embody the elements that both Foucault and Otter highlight as fundamentally panoptic: the residents of Little Tall Island surveil one another's actions as a means of maintaining order. The main system that residents use to surveil one another is gender; more specifically, they surveil one another according to a stereotypical male-female binary. The heteronormative and obviously patriarchal-centered system that regulates Little Tall Island is often enforced by violence, so-much-so that gendered violence becomes the social norm. The violence that stems from this type of *gendered panopticism* reveals an issue with panopticism and, perhaps more importantly, with the way gender has been historically constructed: both panopticism and gender enforce a destructive power dynamic that can only further perpetuate violence *because* of the way they have been

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this article, I use the terms *panopticon*, *panopticism*, and *panoptic*. I use *panopticon* to refer to the physical, architectural structure theorized by Jeremy Bentham, and I use *panopticism* and *panoptic* to refer to the power dynamic *created* by the panopticon (ie. self-surveillance and/or the surveilling of others as a method of enforcement). In other words, *panopticism* and *panoptic* more-or-less refer to the social aspects of the *panopticon*.

<sup>3</sup> Although the definition of *gender* is consistently changing, in this article, *gender* is defined as the social/cultural role assigned to an individual based upon their physical sex.

<sup>4</sup> I also use the terms *heteronormative* and *heteronormativity* throughout this article, by which I am simply referring to the notion that traditional, heterosexual relationships are considered the social norm. I often use *heteronormative* in conjunction with *gender*. Although I realize that *heteronormativity* and *gender* are, of course, not parallel concepts, it is difficult to discuss one without the other as *gender* was built upon a *heteronormative* foundation. So, in order to help clarify my arguments, I write under the assumption that *gender* is innately *heteronormative*. As a result, I sometimes use *heteronormativity* and *gender* interchangeably.

constructed. However, there are multiple instances in *Dolores Claiborne* when visibility on Little Tall Island is interrupted, the most discernible of which is during a solar eclipse. After enduring years of abuse from her husband, Joe, protagonist Dolores Claiborne uses the eclipse as an opportunity to reverse stereotypical male-female dynamics by murdering him. Due to the reduced visibility, Dolores is relieved of any responsibility in Joe's death thus revealing yet another flaw with panopticism and gender itself: what happens when the lights go out?

Jeremy Bentham theorized the panopticon in the late eighteenth century and, almost two centuries later, Michel Foucault published *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), the foundational work in which he analyzes Bentham's idea. While Foucault is quite well-known for his engagement with the architectural features of the panopticon—the “annular building...a tower...pierced with wide windows...full lighting and the eye of a supervisor” (5)—there has also been much analysis performed upon the potential social applications of the panopticon. Chris Otter notes that panopticism might “be used to structure not just prisons and schools but...whole societies” (5) and that “[t]he idea that nonhuman systems shape the actions of humans is hardly novel. The premise...underpin[s] Bentham's panopticon” (17). Due to the fact that I will be discussing panopticism (rather than the panopticon) in relation to Stephen King's *Dolores Claiborne*, I will be engaging more-so with Otter's definitions than with Foucault's work, or even Bentham's work for that matter. Of course, panopticism cannot simply be dissociated from the panopticon as the former is the offspring of the latter. Yet, as Otter notes, “[t]here [have been] several failed attempts to build panopticons” (5) and whether or not a true-to-life panopticon has ever been built is questionable, but panopticism appears around every corner of contemporary western society<sup>5</sup> even if we are not looking for it.

Indeed, the surveillance, visibility, and sense of omnipresent power that grew out of the panopticon gave rise to the wider social implications of panopticism that can be linked to everyday life and relationships. For instance, what Jimmie Manning and Danielle Stern refer to as *interpersonal panopticons* grew out of Bentham's original vision. Manning and Stern state that “interpersonal panopticons are the ways people watch each other in interpersonal relationships. This notion of interpersonal panopticons is based on a key aspect of more-traditional notes of panopticism: they involve forms of social surveillance...just as outsiders are watching those who are in a relationship, the members of that relationship are watching each other, too” (208-209). Furthermore, I am suggesting that these *interpersonal panopticons* are often regulated by preexisting social norms. We watch each other—family members, loved ones, friends, or even complete strangers—and judge one another's actions, movements, or word choices based on what is already considered *normal*. We often do this without even realizing we are doing it. We might even unconsciously change or adjust our *own* actions, movements, and word choices to fit in with those family members, loved ones, friends, or strangers to avoid the risk of being labelled *abnormal*. As one might gather from the somewhat ominous intentions and/or effects of

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<sup>5</sup> For the purpose of this article, I use *western society* to refer primarily to the United States because *Dolores Claiborne* is set on a fictional island off the coast of Maine. I am also using *western society* as my point of reference because I am familiar with its social systems as opposed to societies located in the eastern hemisphere.

panopticism outlined in the definition of *interpersonal panopticons*, there are consequences of being watched. As Foucault notes, “[v]isibility is a trap” (5).

The concept of visibility becomes particularly problematic when applied to gender since western society has historically constructed gender in a binary fashion. In her foundational work, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler outlines the limitations of the male-female binary and the effects it has had, and continues to have, on contemporary western society. Butler describes gender in the following manner:

Gender can denote a unity of experience, of sex, gender, and desire, only when sex can be understood in some sense to necessitate gender—where gender is a psychic and/or cultural designation of the self—and desire—where desire is heterosexual and therefore differentiates itself through an oppositional relation to that other gender it desires. The internal coherence or unity of either gender, man or woman, thereby requires both a stable and oppositional heterosexuality. That institutional heterosexuality both requires and produces the univocity of each of the gendered terms that constitute the limit of gendered possibilities within an oppositional, binary gender system. (30-31)

In the above statement, Butler highlights multiple issues with gender: it is almost always directly linked to an individual’s sex; it affects how an individual is perceived in both a physical and cultural sense; and it has been constructed as an inherently heterosexual system that further perpetuates heterosexuality as the social norm. An individual is very socially limited as a result of the *male* or *female* label assigned to them due to the fact that men and women tend to occupy strict, prescribed gender roles. Perhaps this explains why Butler uses the words “institutionalized” and “compulsory” (34) to describe gender; we occupy the roles we are expected to because they have been historically constructed, and divided, as such. The idea that dividing individuals into categories based on their sex is *normal*—that heterosexuality is *normal*—often results in gendered violence. In “Gendered Violence and International Human Rights: Thinking Non-Discrimination Beyond the Sex Binary,” Kathryn McNeilly links Butler’s analyses of gender construction and heteronormativity to violence when she claims that “Butler’s account of performative sex/gender within the context of heteronormativity... [facilitates] an understanding of gendered violence as linked to binarised and asymmetrical scripts of sex/gender and their associated regime of sexual desire” (264). By linking heteronormativity to gendered violence, McNeilly reveals the inherently violent nature of gender *itself*. Unfortunately, gender and heteronormativity often act as regulating factors in social settings and only perpetuate violence further; this is especially true when panopticism and its effects are considered.<sup>6</sup>

As I noted earlier, panopticism is able to function in social settings primarily because there are pre-existing social norms set in place; the traditional male-female binary is only one of these social norms. However, what was previously considered *normal* might now be considered outdated, illogical, or just plain wrong, which brings about the question of why problematic social

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<sup>6</sup> Although Marie-Laure Leroy contends in her article “Transparency and Politics: The Reversed Panopticon as a Response to Abuse of Power” that “Bentham did not wish to create a panoptic *society*” (144), it is difficult to think of western society as anything otherwise, especially nowadays when technology and social media rule our day-to-day lives.

norms are able to continue dominating western society. In “Heteronormativity in/as the Everyday”, Sertaç Sehlíkoglu and Frank Karioris offer an answer to this question when they suggest that “heteronormativity taps in to the sex, sexuality, sociality, gender, and other indexes and identities of individuals to maintain the course of singularity” (3). The answer that Sehlíkoglu and Karioris provide comes from their use of the term *singularity* as it reveals the utterly arbitrary nature of gender and its construction altogether. Yes, heteronormativity enforces *singularity*, but the singularity it enforces—a problematic male-female binary reinforced by violence—is not one that should be enforced but challenged and dismantled entirely. In other words, just because something is considered *normal*<sup>7</sup> it does not mean that it is justifiable or should even be tolerated: it has just been taught and accepted by previous generations. Stephen King demonstrates this unhealthy relationship between panopticism, heteronormativity, and gendered violence, as well as what might occur when visibility is obscured, in his novel, *Dolores Claiborne*.

Stephen King’s *Dolores Claiborne* is set on the fictional Little Tall Island off the coast of the non-fictional state of Maine. The majority of the novel consists of protagonist, Dolores Claiborne, narrating the story of how she murdered her husband to a pair of local police officers. Dolores admits that she murdered her husband, Joe, during an eclipse that took place in 1963, decades earlier than the novel actually begins. While narrating her story, Dolores reveals that Joe repeatedly subjected her to physical and verbal abuse during their marriage. Moreover, Joe did not only abuse Dolores but also sexually assaulted their daughter, Selena, which Selena confessed to Dolores prior to the eclipse. Dolores admits to the local police officers that, when she heard Selena’s confession, “Joe St. George’s days were numbered from that moment on” (King 124). During the eclipse, Dolores lures Joe into an old well in their backyard and eventually ends up killing him by smashing his head in with a rock after he tries to escape the well. Although Dolores was always a suspect in Joe’s death, she is never actually convicted of the crime.

As Dolores narrates the story of Joe’s murder, it becomes clear that her violent actions are motivated by the fact that gendered violence is not only *tolerated* on Little Tall Island but is the *social norm*. The gendered violence that regulates social interaction on Little Tall Island and, by extension, enforces a traditional male-female binary, is a result of the island’s panoptic construction.<sup>8</sup> The residents of Little Tall Island, including local police, consistently surveil themselves and one another according to the rules of gender and heteronormativity outlined above. Consequently, if an individual fails to occupy, or momentarily steps outside of, their assigned gender role, violence is used as a method of punishment and enforcement to conformity. For the most part in *Dolores Claiborne*, we typically encounter men using violence upon women. However, the inherently violent nature of gender is revealed when we witness Dolores using

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<sup>7</sup> For instance, it is critical to consider that racism, class discrimination, homophobia, and sexism were once considered *normal*; there are obviously still cases concerning these outdated norms in western society, but the scale is beginning to shift (perhaps slightly). Cases where individuals are blatantly discriminatory are becoming more visible to the public and creating social uproar. The recent case of George Floyd might come to mind.

<sup>8</sup> Although I am referring to the social aspects of the panopticon here, it is also interesting to keep in mind that Little Tall Island is isolated from the rest of Maine (as the name suggests) much in the same way that a prison is isolated from the external world.

violence against Joe at several points in the novel, the most obvious example being when she murders him during the eclipse. It is critical to note that Dolores' moments of violent retaliation occur when visibility is interrupted, which is, as one might recall, an essential element for the proper functioning of panopticism.

The residents of Little Tall Island surveil one another as a means of maintaining and enforcing gender roles; in addition to the residents surveilling one another, there are also designated authority figures who serve a similar purpose: the local police. For the majority of the novel, Dolores is narrating her story to a set of police officers, Andy Bisette and Frank Proulx. Although the police do not necessarily use violence to enforce heteronormative behavior among residents, they do perpetuate pre-existing violence by neglecting their responsibility to deal with cases of domestic disturbance. An apparent case of this *neglect* that we encounter in the novel is the fact that the police never reprimand Dolores for murdering Joe even though "[e]verybody on Little Tall [knew] it, and probably half the people across the reach in Jonesport [knew] it, too" (King 4). Even when Dolores directly confesses to the murder, Frank and Andy are unfazed; they just carry on with their current investigation as if a woman murdering her husband is an everyday occurrence.

The police not only trivialize extreme cases of violence such as Joe's murder, but also ignore everyday cases of domestic violence. In "Stephen King's *Dolores Claiborne* and *Rose Madder*: A Literary Backlash against Domestic Violence," Amy Canfield observes that the "[p]olice [are] less likely to halt domestic violence situations because the 'privatization' and near adulation of the home preclude[s] any outside involvement" and that "[t]his theme is echoed in *Dolores Claiborne*, when no one intervene[s] even though everyone [knows] of Joe's violent tendencies" (395). In this statement, Canfield highlights the fact that the police allow domestic violence to occur despite their complete awareness of its dominating presence on Little Tall Island. The apathetic non-responses of the police are also *echoed* in the actions of residents, which becomes obvious during an interaction Dolores has with one of her neighbours, Yvette Anderson. Dolores recalls an encounter with Yvette when she "looked at the bruise on [Dolores'] arm" and simply responded with "'[a]in't men *awful*, Dolores?'" (King 97). Yvette follows up by claiming that she has also "been through it" (King 97), referring to domestic abuse. However, no further action is taken by Dolores nor Yvette. This interaction signifies that violence is an issue for more residents than just Dolores and, furthermore, their underwhelming responses to one another's suffering suggests that gendered violence is an issue not quite worthy of serious attention on Little Tall Island; it is, instead, to be expected.

The lack of response to domestic violence by local police, fellow residents, and the victims *themselves* further enforces the gender binary that produces the violence in the first place. The normalization and cyclic tendencies of gendered violence are best shown through Dolores' choice of words when she is narrating her story: Dolores refers to domestic abuse as "home correction" (King 79). Dolores learned the meaning of *home correction* as a child: "My own Dad used his hands on my Mum from time to time, and I suppose that was where I got the idear that it was all right—just somethin to be put up with" (King 77). This term, *home correction*, aids in eliminating any negative connotations that are attached to domestic abuse through a simple turn-of-phrase. The fact that Dolores also witnesses domestic abuse at a young age contributes to her acceptance of the practice as an adult because it is a learned behavior. As a result, Dolores puts up with Joe's

abuse throughout their marriage, including an instance when he “got a chunk or rock maple out of the woodbox and whacked [her] in the small of the back with it” (King 83), as well as when he “grabbed [her] by the throat” and “throttled [her] back n forth” immediately before the eclipse (King 249). There is a moment in the novel, however, where the line between what is considered *normal* and *abnormal* in terms of gender, heteronormativity, and violence is completely blurred: the instant Dolores discovers that Joe has been sexually assaulting their adolescent daughter, Selena.

When Joe’s predatory and disturbing behavior towards his own daughter comes to light, the heteronormative system regulating Little Tall Island begins to fall apart as incest is considered *taboo*, the polar opposite of *normal*. This taboo relationship that King draws out between Joe and Selena serves as a reference point for the gendered violence that haunts the rest of the novel: why are the acts of physical and verbal abuse Joe inflicts upon Dolores accepted—and Dolores’ decision to murder him overlooked—but his act of sexual violence toward Selena is considered wrong? These two distinct, violent relationships emphasize the fact that gendered violence in any shape and form regardless of the perpetrators or victims, is, of course, socially *abnormal*, or at least should be considered as such. Little Tall Island has just constructed the violence in such a way that one form of violence is considered *normal* and the other *abnormal*. It is the consistent surveillance between residents and their policing of these outdated, and ultimately arbitrary, gender prescriptions that perpetuates violence upon the island. Perhaps this is why Dolores uses the eclipse as an opportunity to disrupt the gendered social norm that regulates Little Tall Island; the eclipse offers a moment of obscurity from the social eye that might not be possible otherwise as people are *always watching*.

During the eclipse, Dolores manages to reverse the male-female power dynamic typical of heterosexual relationships on the island by murdering Joe. Although it might be ideal to interpret Dolores’ actions as an act of rebellion or reclamation of agency, the case is much more complicated. Dolores succeeds in dismantling traditional male-female stereotypes by stepping into Joe’s role momentarily: her only method of escaping her violent circumstances and saving Selena from a similar fate is to partake in the violence. Thus, the binary system that regulates the island is not actually *dismantled* but only briefly interrupted. Additionally, Dolores only has the opportunity to take such action as a result of an uncontrollable, natural phenomenon: an eclipse. It might be interesting to consider the rarity of an eclipse; some of us might not witness one over the course of a lifetime. The point of including such an event is to reveal the inherent violence of the male-female binary and its historically heteronormative construction *altogether*, as well as the panoptic relationships that tend to perpetuate, reproduce, and enforce the violence. The intermingling of these systems is not only problematic but poses a threat to all who participate in them: both physically (as shown by Joe’s murder) and socially (as demonstrated by Dolores’ designation as a social pariah after she rejects her role as victim). *Dolores Claiborne* clearly shows us that it is not the darkness of the eclipse we should be seeking; the darkness only provides temporary alleviation from social oppressions. Instead, we might reflect on the issues that King foregrounds in *Dolores Claiborne*, consider them in relation to the ways in which western society has been historically constructed, and identify a response that will at least challenge gender norms. No, I am not suggesting we simply *kill-off* the perpetrator as Dolores is forced to do in the novel, nor am I suggesting that we wait for the opportune moment of an eclipse to provide temporary

sanctuary because, as I have noted, it is possible that this moment may not come. Instead, I am suggesting that we respond purposefully, and in plain sight of those around us, to the social issues that King illuminates, quite ironically, during an eclipse.

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## (re)Fractions

Paul Meunier  
University of Calgary

I recognize the position from which I speak, and I honour and acknowledge Treaty 7 territory and the Métis Nation of Alberta, Region III. These are Indigenous lands I am privileged to call home, yet I am a settler, and this acknowledgement requires personal responsibility – to move allyship into action. I am dedicated to anticolonial work and Indigenous justice, and how this informs my position as a settler on Turtle Island. I have spent my life navigating modes of artistic expression, working to find my voice, whether that be my earlier days at the Alberta College of Art + Design (now AUArts) – exploring painting, sculpture, and photography – through to the experimental poetry central to my Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Calgary. Regardless of medium, I make constant returns to the visual, and I embrace that. I believe all writing has the power to create dialogic space, yet I believe such dialogue is communal. As a person from a long line of settlers, and as a member of the gender and sexually diverse community, I constantly seek to ground my practice in an ethical framework, on principles of responsibility, accountability, and relationship. Some of the tension points that arise from these principles are explored throughout my piece “(re)Fractions,” as I push personal and political language through a lens of queer rights, government permissibility, and reclamation.

**Keywords:** Queer, Justice, Poetry

**Artist Statement:** The following poetic series titled “(re)Fractions” uses my own, personalized handwriting to frame appropriated text within lived parameters, interrogating the Canadian government’s legislative debates on civil rights and gay marriage equality – as I situate personhood in a multimodal exploration through legalities, injustice, progress, openness, and exposure. Following page one, the typed concrete poem presents a burst of light on the page, comprised entirely of appropriated found text from the web article “Australia vote evokes our own marriage debates,” produced by the Calgary Gay History Project. “(re)Fractions” seeks to present acknowledgement of – and resistance to – the exposure of flux and change as legislators debate human rights in the public eye. Here, a chronology of injustice and progress is reorganized for visual continuity, rendered atemporal, creating a paradox that queer bodies must navigate. This concrete poem then provides source material for the fifteen typed poems that follow. The series presents a sequence of scrambled anagrams, each corresponding with the date stamp of their source material. Meaning-making becomes reassembled, obfuscated, and offers an (un)intelligible response to government permissibility. These anagrams scatter, rearrange, and coalesce – voices bound to an ominous paradox of light, as the text experiments with themes of exposure, gratitude, and interrogation of the platform from which legislators dictate rights. Yet my own selfhood is ever-present under this watch, mindful of the ethical problematics these poems raise: what does it mean to use constraint-based poetry to complicate aspects of community identity, as I write from within the community I seek to represent? How can modes of autofiction – handwritten bookends that produce an intimacy of visual aesthetics – perform what writer and literary critic Jacqueline Valencia refers to as “calling in” through conceptual poetry? And in the context of interpreting government-led history on LGBTQ2IA+ rights, *what does it mean “to queer” (verb) something, or presume control over (noun) “queerness,” asserting a kind of presence/politic in the margins?* “(re)Fractions” presents a hybrid-writing collection to explore how multimodal expressions in text can produce constitutive writing that speaks between “bodily materiality, subjectivity, and culture” (David V. Ruffalo), rather than outside of these concerns; where selfhood aches to break through and be seen, and yet circuitous iterations to speak and be heard risk entanglement in the constraint-

based language of those with the benefit of the gaze. “(re)Fractions” engages with a broader dialogue for political urgency while demonstrating the viability of interrogating dialogic space. These poems write presence, yet call attention to where positionality finds its voice – whether confessional, coded, or obscured. They consider how ethics and appropriation might clash and coincide, as I seek to locate my own body, sexual identity, and life at the centre of a much larger, fundamental political debate. These poems take on bodies themselves, exposed. They navigate visual constellations to find entry points into the charged politics that hover over personal agency, lived experience, and relationalities that can be situated as a (re)fraction of broader, queer, and visible discourse.

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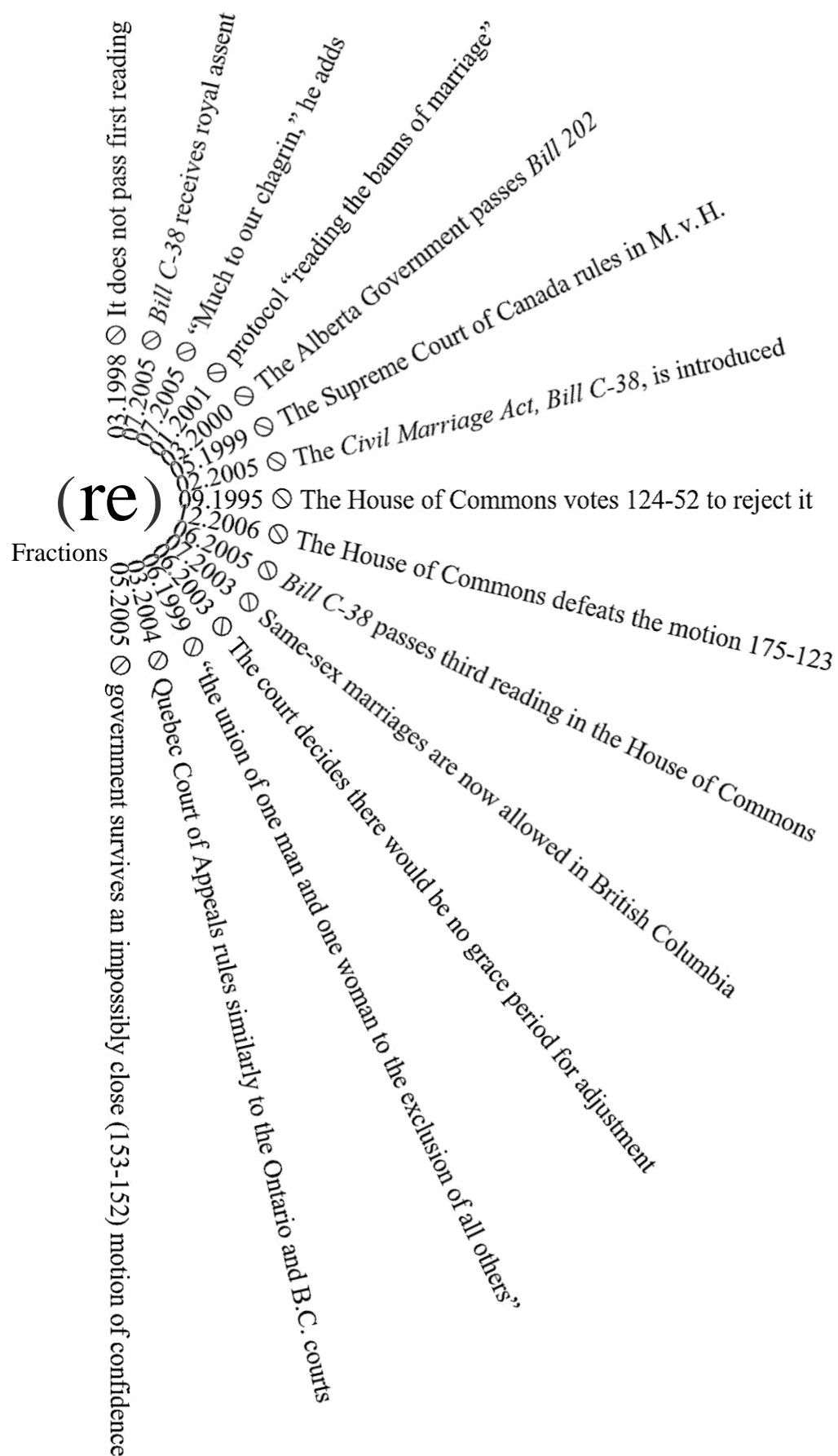
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### Source Credit:

All content on the second page of this series, the concrete poem titled “(re)Fractions” has been taken from source material on the *Calgary Gay History Project*’s webpage titled “Australia vote evokes our own marriage debates.”

Daisies, you said. Your grandmother always chose daisies. And so my mother stopped asking, instead went looking for chartreuse, silk ribbons to wrap daisies in bundles, light collisions of sunburst and sprig, pins to place daisies on our chests, lemon sparks on black wool, petals cupped and throwing spray, shaking light with roots in place as you slowly took my hand. Behind you, the hill we climbed threw daisies like champagne, and your grandmother kicked a breeze. The refraction, a re-membering. Memory splits into waves, a confluence of arteries and veins to push fibres into tenebrous gaps and make bloom. We make each other, in this swoon, all curve and curl, spots of accent on the suits we wear, powder in the carpet of our words. She knows, you said. We burst.



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I stand at the end of your grandmother's dock, watching the lake resurface. The band of sky, all frieze and chalk dust, fog and frost over water. Change our names, you said, then or later. The boards groan beneath me as your boots approach mine, water lapping at the haze. We lock hands, I said, the water holds our names. The license to legal to witness to watch, hands lock, hands there we push, lean forward, crash into the silver mark below. She knows, you said, where that island goes. Morning folds over water, dissolve and shock where blue, birds flit among the mesh, waterborne and boundless to fractal and dive, spark high but seventeen years, and you've never seen this, you said. Behind us, your grandmother's house holds its glass, light refracting dew and leaves, clink clink in the trees, and I turn to watch the marble slowly rise. A shoreline.

## Nebulous Bodies: Towards a Transgender Theory of Sex Work and Space in *Tangerine* and *The Pervert*

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Jae Kirkland Rice is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Comparative Literature at Yale University, which is on the occupied land of the Quinnipiac peoples. He is a working-class, Black, trans man who brings all of these identities to the paper contained in this volume. In this paper, he is not aiming to speak on behalf of Black and Latinx trans femmes or sex workers, but is aiming to work from a framework that centers race, class, and structural oppression within transgender studies. Jae is working on a dissertation project entitled *Rough Grammar: Translation, the Vernacular, and Appropriative Philology in Renaissance Italy and the 20th-21st Century Caribbean* and can be reached at [jkirkland.rice@yale.edu](mailto:jkirkland.rice@yale.edu).

**Abstract:** *What can the challenges that accompany viewing and analyzing celestial bodies teach us about conventional ways of viewing and understanding human bodies? Nebulae, diffuse clouds of dust, gas, and star debris in space, are only rendered visible due to light refracted onto them from nearby stars or other light-emitting matter as they move. I contend that, like nebulae, bodies that are identified as trans/gender nonconforming might be more aptly conceptualized in terms that include space and movement. The type of relation that my paper highlights is an extension of the concepts of spatial alterity, movement, and negotiation couched within terms generally used to designate non-cisgender identities (e.g. transgender, nonbinary, genderfluid, genderqueer). In addition to my opening question, the following queries animate this paper: How are trans people rendered both socially hypervisible (i.e. clockable) and linguistically unintelligible? How are sex workers' bodies, especially those of trans women of color, invisibilized and criminalized, and how do they defy the respectability politics attached to normative trans narratives? What are the politics of representing/rendering trans bodies on the page and screen? In this paper, I endeavor to reconstellate our understanding of trans identities by analyzing the movement of trans women of color through public and private space. In developing this theory, I use Judith Butler's definition of abject bodies, Nan Alamilla Boyd's account of bodies in motion, Julian Kevon Glover's notion of transnormative respectability, and Michel de Certeau's theories of space, place, and transit to aid close readings of instances in which trans women who are also sex workers use physical movement to negotiate societal constraints and access safety in Sean Baker and Chris Bergoch's film *Tangerine* (2015) and Michelle Perez and Remy Boydell's graphic novel *The Pervert* (2018).*

**Keywords:** transgender theory, sex work, space, race

### 1. STAR STUFF: NEBULAE AND GENDER IDENTITY

In the 1980s, astronomer and planetary scientist Carl Sagan often asserted that “the cosmos is also within us, we are made of star stuff”.<sup>1</sup> Building upon the shared chemical composition of

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<sup>1</sup> A widely-circulated quote from Carl Sagan's popular TV show “Cosmos”.

stars and the human body,<sup>2</sup> I draw attention to ways of conceptualizing space and arrangements of stars in order to think more critically about the ways in which attention to proximity and perceptual linearity determines our understanding of both celestial and human bodies. At the risk of sounding a false note of positivism, I want to clarify that I am not suggesting that bodies, especially those that are trans, non-binary, genderfluid, and genderqueer, are reducible to matter; instead, I am principally interested in the metaphorical value of nebulousness as a heuristic for these identities. Viewing and understanding celestial bodies such as nebulae necessitates an inherently nonlinear perceptual frame. Nebulae are enormous clouds of dust and gas that form loosely coherent interstellar systems. Some nebulae are perceptible to telescopically-aided human eyes because they either allow nearby stars' light to pass through (reflection nebulae) or the stars contained within the nebula emit their own light (emission nebulae), whereas others block light and are thus imperceptible (dark nebulae).<sup>3</sup> Because of all the possible activity within and around nebulae, scientists studying them must give attention to not only the nebulae themselves but also the phenomena (e.g. light, debris) that occupy the space between them and the stars.

It is my contention that gender identity, i.e. a person's individual understanding of their own gender which may or may not correspond to their sex assigned at birth, is similarly unclassifiable under a system of direct relation. Though the gender spectrum model attempts to contain and explain nonbinary and transgender gender identities, its very structure reinforces the gender binary (i.e. a model in which the only referents for describing gender are reducible to the polarities "man-woman" or "masculine-feminine"). Like nebulae, gender identities might be more usefully conceptualized in terms that include space and movement. Here it is important not to overlook the inherent concepts of spatial alterity, motion, and negation couched within terms (e.g. transgender, nonbinary, genderfluid, genderqueer) used to designate identities that differ from cis gender identities.<sup>4</sup> Describing the phenomenology of trans identity requires new language, since the terms used to describe cisgender identities cannot adequately attend to all aspects of trans identity without harmfully constructing the trans subject as an abject other.<sup>5</sup>

Rather than simply relate trans, nonbinary, and other gender variant identities to more easily intelligible cis identities, as with nebulae, we must attend to the light (i.e. the discernible phenomena) that these capacious, unplottable identities produce, block, and/or refract in order to gain a clearer concept of their operation in physical/socio-cultural space without imposing external linearity. With nebulousness I am not visualizing a world in which trans/gender non-conforming identities merely absorb the privileged status of cis identities; rather, I am working towards a gender theory in which we do not read trans/nonbinary identities through more legible cis identities or leave trans studies filial to queer theory.<sup>6</sup> Thus, I endeavor to reconstellate our understanding of nonbinary and transgender identities through consideration of the ways in which gender is read onto or off of the body and the movement of the gendered body through space. Nebulousness aims

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<sup>2</sup> The Sloan Digital Sky Survey (SDSS) collected spectroscopic samples from over 150,000 stars in order to catalog stellar abundances of elements common to all organic matter. See <http://www.sdss.org/press-releases/the-elements-of-life-mapped-across-the-milky-way-by-sdssapogee/> and <http://www.sdss.org/dr14/irspec/abundances/>.

<sup>3</sup> See the SDSS's information on nebulae: <http://skyserver.sdss.org/dr1/en/astro/stars/stars.asp>. See also Steven Coe's *Nebulae and How to Observe Them* (2007).

<sup>4</sup> i.e., one's gender identity corresponds with one's assigned sex at birth.

<sup>5</sup> Here, I have in mind Butler's concept of "abject bodies". Nan Boyd offers a useful account of intelligible (i.e. cis) bodies and unintelligible (i.e. trans) bodies: "Bodies that inhabit or enact naturalized states of being remain culturally intelligible, socially valuable, and, as a result, gain and retain the privilege of citizenship and its associated rights and protections."

<sup>6</sup> Stryker discusses queer theory's marginalization of transgender studies in "Transgender Studies: Queer Theory's Evil Twin" (*GLQ*, 2004).

to recoup black trans bodies and the bodies of trans women who are also sex workers as bodies that matter. As Nan Boyd argues, bodies that matter “are worth protecting, saving, grieving” (421). In developing this theory, I will first turn to Judith Butler’s analyses of gender complexity/intelligibility and Michel de Certeau’s theories of space, place, and motion before tracing nebulous genders via close readings of Sean Baker and Chris Bergoch’s *Tangerine* and Michele Perez and Remy Boydell’s graphic novel *The Pervert*.

## 2. READING GENDER, TROUBLING THEORY

Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* problematizes how we read gender off/onto the body. Gender is not necessarily decidable via perception, but in the act of attempting to discern another person’s gender, we read social texts onto the body as though gender were a visually determined identity. Butler asserts that gender is a fluid “[...] complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time [...]; it will be an open assemblage that permits of multiple convergences and divergences without obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure” (16). She explains that, in determining gender, we are always interpellating the expressions of a body in space: “In this sense, *gender* is not a noun, but neither is it a set of floating attributes. [...] There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results (25). Butler’s commentary on the perpetual displacement of gender in contradistinction to the prevalence of bodily expressions in space outlines the murky boundary between reading “gender” and reading “gender expression” off of the body that nebulousness names. As stated in section 1, I am not aiming to overwrite or clarify the slippage between “gender” and “gender expression”, nor codify a set of attributes that tie down the range of possible identities. Instead, in keeping with Butler’s description of the ways in which gender resists definition/accounting, in the following sections, nebulousness offers a framework for understanding gender as a range of semi-coherent spatial interactions without forcing legibility onto a series of inherently variable movements and aspects.

Given gender’s existence as a range of expressions, nebulousness aims to recuperate the possibility that nonbinary, transgender, and other gender-variant identities held by people who hold non-cis identities may overlap with practices and desires held by cis people.<sup>7</sup> The goal of nebulousness is not analysis of which practices and desires are couched under which terms, but the suggestion that we pay more attention to self-identification, fluidity, change, and movement in our understanding of gender, making room for genders that cannot be understood linearly.<sup>8</sup> Nebulousness also aims to fill the void in trans theory and transgender scholarship that privileges white trans folk and operates from a framework that is inclusive of the ways in which race, class, and gender intersect. As such, I am working alongside the indictments of mainstream trans theory that Katrina Roen articulates:

How can transgender theorizing be critical of its own racialized politics in a way that is productive for those who place race first and gender second? [...] What I have chosen to highlight [...] is how these issues might require different strategies, and different theoretical workings, according to the racial positioning of the trans people concerned. My

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<sup>7</sup> Nan Boyd comments on this particular valence of trans identity: “Transsexuals do not fix gender in time and space, nor do they always already undermine its insipid naturalization. Rather, [...] transsexual bodies reconfigure historical narrative and reterritorialize social space” (Boyd 430).

<sup>8</sup> Here, in addition to the definition of transgender that I have offered earlier, I have in mind Katrina Roen’s definition of “gender liminal people”, “that is, people who live between genders, live as a third gender, or are undergoing a transgenering process” (Roen 656).

purpose in doing this is to critique the way perspectives of whiteness echo, largely unacknowledged, through transgender (and queer) theorizing and to thus inspire more critical thinking about the racialized aspects of transgender bodies and gender liminal ways of being. (664)

This article centers the stories of Black and Latinx trans women in an effort to amplify nonwhite, unconventional ways of being, not just as a focus of intellectual inquiry, but also as integral elements of what it means to live a trans life. As such, this article practices radical inclusion by reserving space for and building inquiry around BIPOC trans women. My dual focus on specifically racialized trans characters and their status as sex workers requires negotiation of the ways in which race, gender, and respectability politics complicate our understanding of what it means to theorize about the lived experiences and individual bodies of trans people. In order to illustrate how physical movement allows trans women of color to negotiate space, I will first give a brief account of Michel de Certeau's theory of space and the body in action before examining a few key scenes in *Tangerine* (2015) and *The Pervert* (2018).

### 3. SPACE, PLACE, AND BODIES IN TRANSIT

In *The Practice of Everyday Life* Michel De Certeau suggests that the practice/action of the moving human agent/body defies legibility and produces space. Just as the universe itself is constantly expanding via processes of reconstructing matter (e.g. components of a dead star forming part of new stars, or nebulae producing new stars), de Certeau suggests that the city "[...] is composed of paroxysmal places in monumental reliefs. A spectator can read in it a universe that is constantly exploding" (91). De Certeau describes walking as an everyday practice that is produced by an individual's physical movement. Because walking practices are idiosyncratic, as they move through social space the full extent of the individual's movements cannot be fully visible or legible from the outside.

De Certeau later asserts that the walker makes space by occupying multiple valences. Whereas the nebula accomplishes this by including various types of matter, the walker exceeds linear categorization by simultaneously enacting the everyday and the individual: "The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representations, it remains daily and indefinitely other" (93). Walking is thus a nebulous exercise:

The ordinary practitioners of the city live 'down below,' below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They walk – an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers, *Wandersmänner*, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban 'text' they write without being able to read it. These practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen; [...] The paths that correspond in this intertwining, unrecognized poems in which each body is an element signed by many others, elude legibility. (93)

Comprised of the combined efforts of a multitude of moving actors, walking constitutes a mundane, infinitely participatory spatial interaction. Building from the notion that the path of the individual body is not externally legible, in much the same way that the nebula resists visual apprehension, the eye alone cannot penetrate the individual walker's path, which is itself a manifestation of both the everyday and the profoundly idiosyncratic. As the individual walker moves, their movements interact with the movements/visual gaze of others (what de Certeau refers to as a "signing" of one's body by other people in space). Nebulousness helps to explain the elusive or illegible quality of the moving body in space that de Certeau mentions here. If it is true that it is impossible to read and inherently recognize the individual as they move through space, what is it that we attempt to read off of another's body when we interact with them in space? Drawing from the definition of nebulousness offered earlier in this paper, while the individual's



movements aren't directly plottable, onlookers do read the loose patterns of behaviors off of the individual's body. Nebulousness offers a framework for making sense of the semi-coherent collection of gestures and expressions that the body produces without restricting the range of possible gender expressions or gender identities.

Earlier I have suggested that my theory of nebulousness corresponds more closely to de Certeau's concept of space rather than one of place. To elucidate this point, it is first necessary to explain de Certeau's differentiation between "place" and "space". For de Certeau, "a place is [...] an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability" (117). Whereas place operates under a logic of fixity that assumes static reference points, space, like nebulousness, necessarily incorporates various patterns of constant movement and fluidity (117). Just as de Certeau's space is only identifiable by analysis of intersecting bodies and paths of movement, so also is gender only discernible by the traffic of the diverse elements, social texts, and expressions that comprise it. As such, gender might be more fully understood if one gives more attention to tracking the continual traffic of individual bodies in space.

As Julian Glover notes in his analysis of respectability politics and the representation of trans women of color in media, "continued participation in sexual economies and [...] failure to adopt dominant realness standards among transgender women are the primary ways in which [sex workers of color] disrupt transnormative respectability" (347). The protagonists in Sean Baker and Chris Bergoch's 2015 film *Tangerine* and Michelle Perez and Remy Boydell's 2018 graphic novel *The Pervert*, as a result of their participation in sex work as a means of survival, fall into a category of trans women of color who are deemed nonnormative and thus marginal. Both works challenge us to pay intimate attention to the constraint and violence that trans women of color encounter regularly and the ways in which they self-actualize and find community, affirmation, and safety beyond survival in spaces that are not designed to accommodate them. On the concept of reading the racialized trans body, C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn write in their contribution to the second *Transgender Studies Reader* that "whenever the work of legibility is enacted upon transgender bodies, it is always a process of translation - with risks (of appropriation)<sup>9</sup> and payoffs" (70). These works highlight one of the payoffs of non-appropriative theorizing about trans people of color, namely a more prismatic understanding of the inherent fungibility of the racialized trans sex worker's body, which renders non-respectable trans women of color simultaneously socially hypervisible, invisible by comparison to normative trans narratives, criminalized, and also capable of self-actualization.

#### 4. READING THE RACIALIZED TRANS BODY

Sean Baker and Chris Bergoch's 2015 film *Tangerine* follows two trans protagonists, Alexandra, a Black trans woman and sex worker who has just begun estrogen treatments (as we learn in the opening scene) and her best friend Sin-Dee Rella, a Latinx trans woman who is also a sex worker and has just been released from a 28-day stint in jail, as they traverse Los Angeles in search of Sin-Dee's cheating boyfriend, pimp, and drug dealer Chester and the cis woman, the "fish", with whom he is said to have been unfaithful. As they move through the city, mainly on foot, Alexandra and Sin-Dee participate in what de Certeau might call 'creating space': "[walking] is a spatial acting-out of the place (just as the speech act is an acoustic acting-out of language); and it implies relations among differentiated positions, that is, among pragmatic 'contracts' in the

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<sup>9</sup> Here, Snorton and Haritaworn are warding against the appropriation of trans people of color's lived experiences by white theorists.

form of movements (just as verbal enunciation is an ‘allocation’ [...]). It thus seems possible to give a preliminary definition of walking as a space of enunciation” (de Certeau 98). Alexandra and Sin-Dee’s racial and gender identities are continuously revised and inscribed as they move through the city. As figures in transit who are also visible raced and gender nonconforming people, Alexandra and Sin-Dee encounter cis people to whom they are illegible except as aberrances. Although both women encounter transphobia as they move through familiar queer places, e.g. popular blocks where fellow trans sex workers hang out, and those to which they appear foreign or undesirable, such as the local donut shop, the food line, a hotel brothel, in acting upon those locales Alexandra and Sin-Dee make each location their own space. This corresponds with one of de Certeau’s assessments of the walker’s power to redefine space: “First, if it is true that a spatial order organizes an ensemble of possibilities (e.g., by a place in which one can move) and interdictions (e.g., by a wall that prevents one from going further), then the walker actualizes some of these possibilities” (de Certeau 98). Walking and taking public transit allow Alexandra and Sin-Dee to turn public spaces (most of which do not welcome them, or at least constrain their movements/behaviors) into pockets of nonwhite, trans possibility. Their words and actions disrupt the typical patterns of speech and behavior in venues that are not equipped to accommodate them, thereby pushing against and shifting a social order that aims to keep sex workers and trans folk of color out of view.

Alexandra and Sin-Dee are not just acted upon by the city and its inhabitants; rather, it is possible to read their movements and trajectories “in [such a] way that [t]he[y] make them [, i.e. spaces,] exist as well as emerge. But [t]he[y] also move them about and [...] invent others, since the crossing, drifting away, or improvisation of walking privilege, transform or abandon spatial elements” (98). Metaphorically speaking, just as nebulae force us to interrogate the celestial bodies in and around them that might be more or less visible to us, Alexandra and Sin-Dee’s movements through the cityscape “require a rigorous reconsideration of [gender] structured alternately by illegibility and spectacle” (Snorton and Haritaworn 70). In order to illustrate the film’s construction of trans identity in transit, I will point to a few prominent moments in which movement constructs and/or disarticulates Sin-Dee and Alexandra’s gender identities.

As Alexandra walks across town looking for work, the first john who asks for her services refuses to pay her, which leads to an altercation with the police during which she is deadnamed and almost incarcerated. However, as she retraces her usual route, she encounters a frequent client, an Armenian taxi driver named Razmik, and the two drive to the car wash, their favorite date spot. The car wash constitutes what de Certeau would call a space in that it is only lent significance by their continual movement to and through it: “[w]hile rolling through the innards of the car wash, Razmik performs oral sex on Alexandra as he masturbates. The sequence is played out in real time as the spraying soap, slapping washers and spinning brushes create a cacophony of noises, colors and lights” (Baker and Bergoch 35). Considering that both of their bodies are partially obscured while Alexandra and Razmik “do a French” in the car wash, the scene aligns with de Certeau’s idea that within a space, “the opacity of the body in movement, gesticulating, walking, taking its pleasure, is what indefinitely organizes a *here* in relation to an abroad, a ‘familiarity’ in relation to a ‘foreignness’” (original emphasis 130). The repeated sex act and the two particularly gendered people in the car produce the context of the space; as such, the car wash becomes a nebulous space in which the internal traffic of gendered bodies overwrites the location’s assumed purpose.

Similarly, Sin-Dee’s pursuit of the “fish” and Chester carries her all over the city. She continually reroutes her own trajectory, interrogating Chester’s clients and gathering the information she needs to find Dinah (Baker and Bergoch 14-15, 19, 22, 32). De Certeau’s characterization of walking as a spatial exercise underlies both Alexandra and Sin-Dee’s movements and inscribes the social reality of both women’s transness. As de Certeau notes: “Their story begins on ground level, with footsteps. They are myriad, but do not compose a series. [...]”

Their intertwined paths give their shape to spaces. They weave places together” (97). In a later scene, having dragged Dinah out of a brothel and onto a city bus, Sin-Dee and Dinah exchange barbs, mocking each other for being used by Chester. Dinah attempts to assert her superiority as a white woman, but Sin-Dee rebuffs her physically and verbally; Confined within the bus, they are literally bodies both in and on transit.<sup>10</sup> Though Sin-Dee is not in control of Chester’s infidelity in the external world, inside the bus she asserts control over Dinah.<sup>11</sup> This dissonance between the internal logic of the space created by Sin-Dee and Dinah’s movements inside the bus and the external circumstances in their lives over which they have no control maps onto de Certeau’s reading of the traveler’s positionality in space as they ride the train:

A traveling incarceration. Immobile inside the train, seeing immobile things slip by. What is happening? Nothing is moving inside or outside the train. The unchanging traveler is pigeonholed, numbered, and regulated in the grid of the railway car, which is a perfect actualization of the rational utopia. [...] everything has its place in a gridwork. Only a rationalized cell travels. A bubble of panoptic and classifying power, a module of imprisonment that makes possible the production of an order, a closed and autonomous insularity – that is what can traverse space and make itself independent of local roots. (111)

Though she cannot alter the conditions that oppress her, inside the bus, Sin-Dee’s immobility allows her to articulate herself and regain some power. Her lack of movement figures the bus as space, whereas “[o]utside, there is another immobility, that of things [...]” (de Certeau 111). Nebulousness allows us to trace the shifting valences of Sin-Dee’s transness as she moves; she is not simply oppressed and constrained by the outside world, but rather reclaims some agency as a figure in motion. Her body and the power associated with it change as her trajectory shifts.

The end of the film figures one site of radical possibility. In the final scene, following the revelation that Alexandra did not tell Sin-Dee that she and Chester slept together when Sin-Dee was still incarcerated, a passing group of men in a car throw urine on Sin-Dee, shouting transphobic and homophobic slurs (Baker and Bergoch 78). In the laundromat, Alexandra helps Sin-Dee get out of her soiled clothes and wig (79). Their movements here re-articulate a space in which Sin-Dee’s gender performance was disrupted into one in which she can feel affirmed within her body: “Alexandra looks at her wig-less friend. She takes off her wig and puts it on Sin-Dee’s head. Sin-Dee almost smiles. Alexandra admires Sin-Dee’s new look. Sin-Dee stares back at Alexandra. She grabs her hand” (80). Even in the face of violent transphobia, Alexandra and Sin-Dee are able to use their shared identity to produce safety and a sense of community. They enact nebulousness by transforming the space they are in into something else; as de Certeau notes, “to practice space [...] is, in a place, *to be other and to move toward the other*” (original emphasis 114). We are left at the end of the film with two trans women of color in proximity, simultaneously creating and holding space for one another.

Similarly, Michelle Perez and Remy Boydell’s *The Pervert* tells us the story of Felina Love, a trans woman who does sex work but also moonlights as a factory worker and call center operator in Seattle. Whereas *Tangerine* incorporates physical violence but comparatively little sex, *The Pervert* is quite sexually graphic, incorporates physical violence, and is often brutal in its matter-of-fact narration. In the world of *The Pervert*, the principal characters are often depicted as anthropomorphized animals, whereas antagonists and one-off johns are typically drawn as faceless

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<sup>10</sup> “Sin-Dee drags Dinah onto a city bus travelling West on Santa Monica. The two cause quite a scene as Sin-Dee continues to slap her. She forces Dinah to a window seat, blocking her by taking the aisle seat. Passengers look concerned but mind their own business” (Baker and Bergoch 40).

<sup>11</sup> “Dinah: ‘Is this gonna be some twisted double date with you and Chester? Because I would fucking love that.’ [...] Sin-Dee: ‘Calm down. Relax. We’re buddies now. We suck the same cock’” (Baker and Bergoch 41).

humans or Garfield-style people; however, this pictorial logic is not consistent throughout the text. Readers cannot use a simple identity-based rubric to tell bodies that matter to Felina from those that do not. Whereas in *Tangerine* Alexandra and Sin-Dee negotiate space by radically asserting themselves, Felina often hides aspects of her identity and dissimulates in order to stay safe in public spaces. At the beginning of the novel, Felina attempts to dissociate (a regular coping tactic she employs throughout the text) when she's engaging in sex work by presenting as a "soft boy" rather than adopting a more femme presentation. She does this in order to assert control over her situation, lay claim to some aspect of safety, and protect her true gender identity from being discovered by johns. The novel opens with Felina topping a john in a closed, darkened McDonalds.<sup>12</sup> In these panels, we see very little of Felina's body and are not actually able to tell that she's a trans girl. Like the john, readers are kept at a distance. Felina's thoughts move from interpolating the john's gaze on her body to the prospect of being murdered in the play place ball pit. What starts off as a child's play area becomes a murder scene/body dump in Felina's mind. The novel does not shy away from trauma, the threat of transphobic violence, and the imperative of survival, all of which continuously inform her negotiation of space. Though she is eventually able to present as a woman full time, including when she meets johns for dates, Felina's anxieties about safety and survival never truly leave her.

Just as these fears manifest in public space at the start of the novel, near the end Felina comes to realize that her survival necessitates abandonment of her life in Seattle and a return to her father and home state of Michigan. We see her again in darkened public space, this time in the airport. Readers see her nude body revealed in the TSA security scan and the text in the adjoining panel, "I love making C-students [(i.e. cops)] uncomfortable with their careers"<sup>13</sup>, lets us know that her body, in a stunning visual pun on the word "security", is now a source of safety for Felina even though she acknowledges "walking while trans", or more exactly, "scanning while trans" in public space is still precarious. This scene also activates another feature of the nebula, namely the interplay of light and dark in the context of using telescopes and other forms of technology to scan for and identify celestial phenomena.

Earlier in this paper, I gave a brief overview of the processes by which scientists use specialized telescopes to capture images of nebulae and other matter in space. In similar fashion, the TSA uses millimeter wave detection to produce full-body scans of passengers in order to identify dangerous objects or items hidden on passengers' persons.<sup>14</sup> To the "C-students" witnessing her scan, Felina's trans body appears as an anomaly because her genitalia do not match the comparison print-outs that TSA agents use to screen passengers, which are based on cis bodies. Felina's screening experience while "flying while trans and of color" rhymes with, though it does not exactly parallel the experiences with "flying while black" that are described in Simone Browne's *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (2015): "[...] cases of flying while black, particularly those of black women, often get taken up as available for scrutiny and inspection, and also get marked as more threatening [and] unruly [...]"<sup>15</sup>. By the end of the novel, Felina's early fears of being arrested while on dates with johns have transformed into an ability to laugh in the face of cops. In doing so, Felina activates and complicates Browne's scholarship on racial

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<sup>12</sup> Perez, 3-5.

<sup>13</sup> Perez, 138-9.

<sup>14</sup> It's crucial to note here, as Simone Browne does, that socially constructed and discriminatory rhetoric undergirds security theater, i.e. the performative practice of security measures that provide feelings of increased safety, but do not actually bring about increased security. Thus, the structure of the passenger prescreening process "inevitably [...] leads to the profiling of travelers based on race, ethnicity, religion, and other markers" (Browne 152).

<sup>15</sup> Browne, 140.

surveillance; though her survival is still an open question, she is able to hold and take up space for herself in the fullness of her identity and perform micro-resistance to systemic surveillance practices. Drawing together Browne's commentary on state surveillance and Richardson's scholarship about the political efficacy of trans non-respectability, Felina's actions illustrate that realness, enacted as resistance, carves out space for embodied, individual trans empowerment and physical movement in ways that don't require external legibility or societal approval.

Thus, both *Tangerine* and *The Pervert* translate for their audiences a realness that has nothing to do with passing, but forces readers to encounter and interpolate all the contingencies of trans women of color's experiences without erasing their idiosyncrasies. As these protagonists carve out space for themselves, the audience must also hold space for Alexandra, Sin-Dee, and Felina in the fullness of their character.

## 5. CONCLUSION: TO BOLDLY GO

Like nebulousness itself, this project is animated by the intersection and movement of multiple elements: my own experiences as a Black trans man, a desire to bring attention to gender theory built upon trans/gender nonconforming ways of being/living rather than working from the spectacle of trans death (especially the deaths of black trans women), and the impulse, as T.L. Cowan elucidates in "Transfeminist Kill/joys", to allow "anger [to] slip through and into hope, joy, and love and hold them in tension as creative potential" (512). Nebulousness asks us to interrogate the ways in which we think about gender (including the models thought to be progressive) in terms that "force us to acknowledge that" the boundaries between gender expressions and sexual identities "are not only contentious, but also messy" (Richardson 371). The folk use of the adjective "nebulous", as elucidated by Richardson, foregrounds the fluid nature intrinsic to the operation of metaphor in helping us (re)imagine possibilities for acknowledging the nuances and particularities of racialized trans existence that dominant cultural and social norms currently obscure. It is my hope that nebulousness brings us closer to producing gender and sexuality discourse that constellates and makes space for the lived experiences of racialized trans and gender nonconforming people and the other identities they hold<sup>16</sup> without closing off radical possibility.

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<sup>16</sup> Matt Richardson is especially helpful in clarifying what the messiness of nebulous identity looks like on the ground: "Not everyone has the ability or desire to change their birth-sex assignment physically, socially, and/or legally. [...] There is both an expansiveness and particularity to [...] locally created understandings of gender" (Richardson 371-2).

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## Words Made Flesh: Trauma and Archives of Memory and Mourning in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*

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I respectfully acknowledge that I live and work on the unceded ancestral territory of the Syilx People.

I am currently completing my MA in English at UBCO. My research is primarily feminist and psychoanalytical in approach with a focus on gender theory, trauma theory, and deconstruction.

This article is dedicated to the memory of my grandmother, Judy Norman-Morris.  
I will carry you with me always.

**Abstract:** *What happens when we consider trauma and the archive as living, porous categories? How can traumatized individuals be thought of as living archives? What happens when these individuals reclaim the right to interpret their archive?*

*Melanie Klein argues that all mourning is melancholic and that the incorporation of the lost object must occur in order for normal mourning to take place. In this sense, individuals who are exposed to loss and trauma can be thought of as living archives who preserve and contain the memories of those they lose and the traumas they endure, and it is this incorporation that allows for healing to take place. I consider trauma and the archive to be fluid and porous categories in the sense that the traumatic incident and archival material can be both internal and external, both past and present.*

*Joy Kogawa's Obasan weaves together present and past as Megumi Naomi Nakane confronts her childhood memories of trauma and loss that begin with the internment, relocation, and separation of her family members, both during and after the internment of Japanese Canadians, and culminate in the discovery of her lost mother's death. With a focus on Aunt Emily, Obasan, and Naomi, I argue that, by reconceptualizing trauma and the archive, it is possible for individuals who have experienced trauma and loss to reclaim political agency and to challenge imposed interpretations of their experiences by shifting from the passive position of archival material to an agential Archon, which begins a process of healing and reconciliation.*

**Keywords:** Joy Kogawa; trauma; archive; archon; mourning; melancholia

The archons are first of all the documents' guardians. They do not only ensure the physical security of what is deposited... They have the power to interpret the archives. (Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*)

The speech that frees comes forth from the amniotic deep. To attend its voice, I can hear it say, is to embrace its absence. (Joy Kogawa, *Obasan*)

Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* is well known within Canadian Literature as a touchstone text on the internment of Japanese-Canadians; however, we have not exhausted the multiplicity of readings or applications of this text that continue to move beyond its educational value. Existing literary criticism on *Obasan* focuses on topics such as forgiveness, reconciliation, speech, silence, and trauma. Roy Miki notes that critics of *Obasan* "tend to incorporate a resolutionary (not revolutionary) aesthetics in their overall critical framing of the novel. The agreement seems to be that Naomi resolves her silenced past, so establishes with the human rights violations that caused such havoc and grief to her, to her family, and to her community" (115). I aim to invoke a revolutionary, rather than resolutionary, framework that has as its goal not the resolution of these traumas, but rather the ongoing healing and integration of these traumas. While I am not the first to explore the connections between *Obasan* and trauma theory<sup>1</sup>, I argue that *Obasan* opens up the potential for new, productive readings that move beyond examinations of traumatic events and their effects to instead consider the ways in which the traumatized individual acts as a living archive. My understanding of the archive is informed by the works of both Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, and, by bringing these two conceptions of the archive together, I argue that there exists a productive tension that begins to move beyond *Obasan*, Derrida, and Foucault to offer a more productive understanding of the ways in which traumatized bodies may be better thought of as living archives. Moreover, in shifting from archival material to Archon, these individuals regain the agency and political power to interpret their archives rather than being interpreted by others.

Within traditional conceptions, the archive is a dedicated space or site for the collection of documents in a multitude of forms, a sort of gathering together of related bodies of information for interpretation and translation. In *Archive Fever*, Jacques Derrida provides the etymological history of the term 'archive:' "the meaning of 'archive,' its only meaning, comes to it from the Greek *arkheion*: initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the archons, those who commanded" (2). According to this definition, there is a fundamental spatial relationship that exists within conceptions of the archive, but there is also a power dynamic that exists in possessing authority over interpretation. Indeed, Derrida goes on to note: "The archons are first of all the documents guardians. They do not only ensure the physical security of what is deposited... They have *the power to interpret* the archives" (2; emphasis added). The archive, then, is a site in which documents are stored, and the Archon is the individual who controls that site and authors the interpretations of the materials contained within that site. In this way, the Archon not only determines the interpretation of the materials within the archive, as Derrida demonstrates, but they also determine the conditions of appearance for materials within that archive—what is included, and what is excluded; what is seen, and what is unseen. In contrast, Michel Foucault's definition of the archive is rooted in discursivity and power relations. Foucault notes that the "archive is first the law of what can be said" (*Archaeology* 128). Foucault goes on to describe the relationship between the archive and discursive practices: "[the archive's] threshold

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<sup>1</sup> I see Eva Rein's "A Comparative Study of Joy Kogawa's 'Obasan' and Ene Mihkelson's 'Ahasveeruse Uni' in the Light of Trauma Theory," Benjamin Lefebvre's "In Search of Someday: Trauma and Repetition in Joy Kogawa's Fiction," and Sinéad McDermott's "The Double Wound: Shame and Trauma in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*."



of existence is established by the discontinuity that separates us from what we can no longer say, and from that which falls outside our discursive practice; it begins with the outside of our own language (*langage*); its locus is the gap between our own discursive practices" (130-31). In this way, the archive is linked to a certain absence of language, creating a potential space for the languagelessness of trauma. Indeed, Foucault notes that the archive "cannot be described in its totality... It emerges in fragments, regions, and levels, more fully, no doubt, and with greater sharpness, the greater the time that separates us from it" (130). Mirroring the archive, the traumatic incident also emerges in repetitious fragments that may be understood with greater clarity as one achieves distance and understanding.

I seek to establish the productive power of repositioning traumatized individuals as Archons of their own archives to both challenge and subvert those that would seek to impose their own interpretations on their experiences. In this article, I focus on the characters of Emily, Obasan, and Naomi to develop a progression from traditional conceptions of archives towards a more productive formation that positions traumatized bodies as living, porous archives.

First published in 1981, *Obasan* is a work of historical fiction that weaves together past and present in an exploration of traumatic memory and mourning following the internment of Japanese-Canadians during World War II. The novel centers on the memories and experiences of Megumi Naomi Nakane (Naomi), a thirty-six-year-old schoolteacher living in Cecil, Alberta. As a child, Naomi is raised by her Uncle Isamu and her Aunt Ayako, whom she lovingly refers to as Obasan,<sup>2</sup> after the death of her father and the ambiguous loss of her mother. Upon learning of her uncle's death, Naomi rushes to care for her ailing Obasan as she mourns the death of her husband. Naomi's brief stay with Obasan brings forth traumatic memories from Naomi's childhood, which include the Japanese-Canadian internment, childhood sexual abuse, racist treatment, and her mother's absence. Naomi begins with an adamant refusal to acknowledge these memories by frequently returning to the question: "Why not leave the dead to bury the dead?" (Kogawa 38). Gradually, Naomi begins to immerse herself in both her own memories and her Aunt Emily's archive of shared family and cultural histories surrounding the internment of Japanese-Canadians. This gradual immersion culminates in Naomi's discovery that her mother has not abandoned her, nor is she punishing Naomi with perpetual silence, but that she has died as a result of the Nagasaki bombings, and this silence was meant to protect her children from the painful truth surrounding her death.

Kogawa's *Obasan* presents an opportunity for a productive reading that brings together the paradoxical nature of trauma and the archive in order to reconceptualize individuals who have experienced trauma as living, porous archives. The paradoxical nature to which I refer is the ability for traumatic and archival materials to be located both internally and externally, both past and present, and to act in ways that are simultaneously inclusive and exclusive, expressive and repressive. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, Cathy Caruth notes that "trauma is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events

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<sup>2</sup> The anglicized term 'Obasan' means 'aunt' in English and is a term of endearment and respect for older female relatives.

that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena” (91). Indeed, Roberta Culbertson notes that “the violation seems to continue in a reverberating present that belies the supposed linearity of time and the possibility of endings” (170). This mirrors the archival process, which Derrida states is never complete but is always ongoing as the “archivist produces more archive, and that is why the archive is never closed. It opens out of the future” (68). By employing a dualistic structure of present and past, speech and silence, Kogawa’s text embodies the paradoxical nature of both trauma and the archive and becomes a site within which these two categories can begin to be thought of together through the repetitive process of melancholia.

For Freud, melancholia distinguishes itself from mourning in three characteristic aspects: 1) the lost object is known only in the unconscious, 2) the ego may identify with the lost object as a form of integration, and 3) this lack of conscious awareness coincides with repetitious behaviour as one struggles to come to terms with that loss (204-5). The idea of a loss that is not fully known becomes particularly relevant within instances of trauma as there may be an inability to recognize or access this information—one only knows that they have experienced loss and that this loss continually impacts them. This is precisely the difficulty that Naomi encounters with her lost mother, and she states: “we’re trapped, Obasan and I, by our memories of the dead—all our dead—those who refuse to bury themselves” (Kogawa 23). Naomi struggles to work through the loss of her mother because the conditions of that loss, as well as the knowledge of whether or not her mother is alive, are unavailable to her. In “Mourning and Its Relation to Manic-Depressive States,” Melanie Klein argues that all mourning is melancholic—in other words, for normal mourning to take place there must be an integration of the lost object rather than a complete erasure or substitution of that object. For Klein, integration is crucial to both the identity and healing of the individual. What becomes apparent in this construction of melancholic mourning, then, is that an individual who experiences loss and trauma can be thought of as a living archive who preserves and contains the memories of those they lose and the traumas they endure, and it is through this process of integration that healing can begin to take place. Derrida further demonstrates the importance of integration in the following statement: “Not having been taken back inside the self, digested, assimilated as in all ‘normal’ mourning, the dead object remains like a living dead abscessed in a specific spot in the ego. It has its place, just like a crypt in a cemetery or temple, surrounded by walls and all the rest” (*Ear* 57). In this way, the lost object that is not integrated becomes like a festering wound that can only be healed through the process of integration.

The question then becomes: what happens when one repositions the traumatized body as an archive? I follow Rob Baum in arguing that the “body is a site of storage: a container of emotion, sensation, and memory, including trauma and its effects,” which opens up the possibility for conceiving of the body as a living archive (669). Jonathan Boulter considers the ways in which characters in contemporary novels can be considered to be living archives of loss and of the embodied archive as a sort of crypt.<sup>3</sup> While both Baum and Boulter consider the possibilities of

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<sup>3</sup> See Jonathan Boulter’s introduction to *Melancholy and the Archive: Trauma, History and Memory in the Contemporary Novel*.

understanding the body as an archive, I wish to focus on a more revolutionary framework of reading the body as a living and porous archive by focusing on the process of the traumatized individual regaining political agency by becoming the Archon of their own archive. In this way, the human body is not reduced to a mere repository of loss and death but rather becomes a source of preservation and production that can encourage healing and reconciliation with one's past. Furthermore, my reconceptualization of trauma and the archive as both living and porous categories opens up the possibility that trauma and the archive are leaking categories that cannot be fully contained within a single space or time. This understanding also opens up a space in which alternative forms of documentation can be inscribed as well as those forms of languageless communication that one struggles to convey within trauma theory. Indeed, Culbertson notes that the fragmentary narrative of trauma exists as a mechanism where "the body and mind conspire to protect the self from overwhelming awareness of its permeability" (174). This notion of permeability lends itself to understanding the impacts of intergenerational trauma as the trauma breaks through borders and seeps through pores. Within *Obasan*, baths become a place in which trauma and its movement across generations becomes graphically intelligible as Naomi states: "We are one flesh, one family, washing each other or submerged in the hot water, half awake, half asleep" (Kogawa 142). However, the lived experiences that underlie these traumas are not passed on as easily as this figurative osmosis.

Interpretations of the Japanese-Canadian internment permeate *Obasan*—those put forth by the Canadian government as well as the alternative interpretations that Naomi's Aunt Emily provides. Emily tells Naomi that "[r]econciliation can't begin without the mutual recognition of facts" (Kogawa 163). This statement makes two crucial distinctions: 1) reconciliation is a process that occurs between two or more parties, and 2) there must be a mutual recognition that acknowledges fact rather than fiction or imposed interpretation. Speech and silence offer mechanisms for providing subversive alternatives to those imposed interpretations that are put forth by the Canadian government. From the beginning of the novel, Naomi draws attention to her Aunt Emily and Obasan as representatives of speech and silence: "How different my two aunts are. One lives in sound, the other in stone. Obasan's language remains deeply underground but Aunt Emily, BA, MA, is a word warrior" (Kogawa 29). Laura Davis makes the following observation regarding speech and silence in *Obasan*: "Rather than regarding silence solely as pathological, as that which is to be overcome in a movement from silence to speech, Kogawa problematises the meanings of silence and speech and demonstrates how each is a part of the other" (66). I agree with Davis and would argue that the imposition of Western connotations of silence undermines any productive reading of silence both as a political act and as a process of healing. Cheung King-Kok draws attention to the varied interpretations of silence by stating that while "in English 'silence' is often the opposite of 'speech,' the most common Chinese and Japanese ideogram for 'silence,' is synonymous with 'serenity' and antonymous with 'sound,' 'noise,' 'motion,' and 'commotion'" (127).

In *Obasan*, we see a representation of a traditional archive in the Derridean sense through Emily's compilation of documents that consist of "an old scrapbook full of news-paper clippings, a brown manilla [sic] envelope, one grey cardboard folder," and a journal of letters to her sister, and Naomi's mother, Nesan Nakane (28). This is the primary archive that Naomi must confront, but it is only through her integration of this archive that she can begin to reconcile with her

traumatic past. A second element of Emily's archive is her manuscript entitled "THE NISEI IN CANADA: A STRUGGLE FOR LIBERTY—by Emily Kato" (Kogawa 35). In this manuscript Emily states, "I understand the Nisei, I know them well," as she goes on to outline the ways in which she has seen, watched, and known the Nisei<sup>4</sup> and learned of their experiences. It is important to note that Emily travels to Toronto, Ontario, to live with a doctor while the rest of the Nakane family is forced to remain in an internment camp in Slocan, British Columbia. In this way, Emily attempts to compile and author the experiences of those who faced traumas that she did not directly experience herself. This discrepancy may help to explain why Naomi thinks that "Aunt Emily's words, all her papers, the telegrams and petitions, are like scratchings in the barnyard, the evidence of much activity, scaly claws at work," and yet these "words are not made flesh" (Kogawa 168-69). Because Emily did not experience traumas such as working in the beet fields of Lethbridge while living in what is essentially a glorified chicken coop, her writings lack a certain authenticity that, in the words of Naomi, would make her words flesh.

Emily's methods to achieve reconciliation are rooted in speech and sound, and her methods of rectifying imposed interpretations include compiling, correcting, and creating documents. One example of Emily altering imposed interpretations includes the corrections she makes to a "Racial Discrimination by Orders-in-Council" pamphlet: "[w]herever the words 'Japanese race' appeared, Aunt Emily had crossed them out and written 'Canadian citizen'" (Kogawa 30). What becomes troublesome, then, is Emily's insistence on the need to firmly establish the *Nisei*'s Canadianness in order to demonstrate the atrocities that Japanese-Canadians experienced under the Canadian Government—in other words, the atrocities experienced by the *Issei* and *Nisei* are, under Emily's logic, only considered to be atrocities because they were and are Canadians. This is further emphasized by a page in her manuscript, which contains the poem *I am Canadian*, and Naomi observes that the phrase "I am Canadian" is "underlined and circled in red" with a circle that "was drawn so hard the paper was torn" (Kogawa 36). When Naomi concludes her reading of this excerpt, her uncle states, "Nisei, not very Japanese-like," to which Emily replies, "Why should we be?... We're Canadian" (Kogawa 37). This insistence on the *Issei* and *Nisei*'s Canadianness only serves to reinforce this racial binary opposition rather than deconstructing these categories to create productive alternatives that do not reduce individuals' identities to two facets where one's Canadian identity is seen as superior to one's Japanese identity. These are the first instances in which we see someone subverting and correcting the Canadian government's dominant interpretation of the Japanese-Canadian internment, yet Emily continues to perpetuate the same harmful binaries as well as imposing her own interpretation as one that is unilaterally representative of all Japanese-Canadians.

As we have already seen in Derrida, the archive shares its roots with the domestic space of the home, and it is in Obasan that we see the embodied archive as a truly living and porous category that leaks through Obasan's connections with the domestic space. Perhaps the most potent example occurs in Naomi's description of both Obasan and her home:

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<sup>4</sup> *Nisei* is a term that refers to second-generation Japanese-Canadians born in Canada and whose parents emigrated from Japan.

The house is indeed old, as she is also old. Every home-made piece of furniture is a link in her lifeline. She has *preserved in shelves*, in cupboards, under beds—a box of marbles, half-filled colouring books, a red, white and blue rubber ball. The items are endless. Every short stub pencil, every cornflakes box stuffed with paper bags and old letters in her ordering. They rest in the corners like *parts of her body*, hair cells, skin tissues, *tiny specks of memory*. This house is now her blood and bones. (Kogawa 15; emphasis added)

Here, one can see how the archive can be considered to be a porous and leaking category through the ways in which Obasan and her domicile bleed into each other—the house is as much a part of her as she is a part of it. Cecily Devereux notes that Obasan’s house is “the text’s site of signification, at once both source/graveyard of documents life/death. All meaning—for Naomi’s narrative—is generated from within this site” (239). Indeed, Obasan’s refrigerator can be seen as an example of this site of signification that represents the co-existence of materials of life and death with a selection of “food bits, a slice of celery, a square of spinach” as well as “indescribable items in the dark recesses of the fridge that never see the light of day” (Kogawa 40). Naomi follows this observation with a moment of reflection: “Didn’t Obasan once say, ‘It is better to forget’? What purpose is served by hauling forth the jar of inedible food? If it is not seen, it does not horrify. What is past recall is past pain” (Kogawa 41). In this way, both Obasan and her home act as sites of preservation for both good memories and bad.

Obasan’s role is not restricted to her position within the domestic space – her position as a living and porous archive also embodies the importance of memory and the integration of documents that cannot be rendered intelligibly through language alone. Davis notes that “Obasan’s body is paralleled by Aunt Emily’s parcel of documents, for they both know or contain the family’s history” (73). In this way, Obasan shifts from traditional conceptions of the archive as a collection of documents to become a living and porous archive who contains documents, memory, and loss as well as the languageless events of trauma. I have already outlined the ways in which trauma, memory, and the body are intricately tied together, and Derrida further observes the connections between trauma and memory by stating that “the archive takes place at the place of the originary and structural breakdown of said memory” (*Archive* 11). In this way, the archive becomes particularly precarious because it is not contained within a specific time—like trauma, the archival moment resonates into the future and is subject to the same decay as memory. Obasan illustrates this breakdown in memory through her repeated refrain: “Everything is forgetfulness” (Kogawa 24). What becomes crucial, then, is the sharing of the archive of past traumas and knowledge that Obasan preserves before it is forgotten, which would simultaneously erase Naomi’s potential to integrate these experiences as well as her potential to move towards a place of healing and reconciliation; however, Naomi must be willing to integrate these truths.

Kogawa’s restricted use of dialogue and Naomi’s detailed descriptions highlight the ways that Obasan operates in a silence that speaks louder than words. Naomi states, the “language of [Obasan’s] grief is silence. She has learned it well, its idioms. Its nuances. Over the years, silence within her small body has grown large and powerful” (Kogawa 14). What this quotation highlights are the ways in which Obasan’s silence is not merely an absence of speech but a form of communication in and of itself. While Emily attempts to vocalize traumas of the past, Obasan embodies this unspoken history and carries the full weight of it. However, Obasan’s silence is a loving silence. She lives under the refrain “*kodomo no tame*”—for the sake of the children—and

it is this desire to preserve and protect both Naomi and her brother, Stephen, from the trauma of their mother's death that guides her silence (Kogawa 196). Baum points to the weight of being the sole carrier of an archive of trauma and loss as a stone, much like the stone bread made by Naomi's uncle:

Wishing to spare the child the burden of one's memory (which in the telling will also restore it in force to the teller), the survivor may choose to leave the past unsaid. When not told, however, the past does not remain untold. Silence can sadly and fearfully enfold survivors and descendants, becoming the material culture of families, generations, and world communities, a stone to carry. (684)

Though Obasan becomes stone-like in her resolve to spare the children from the past, these traumas continue to slip past borders and seep out of pores through a silence that speaks louder than words. It is only after Obasan has passed on Emily's archive of documents to Naomi that Obasan is finally able to share the weight of carrying her family's archive of trauma and loss in order to come to a place of rest and healing while Naomi bathes her: "'Any day now is all right,' [Obasan] says. 'The work is finished.' She is falling asleep in the water" (Kogawa 70). That this scene takes place in a bath only serves to underline the fluidity of trauma and the importance of accepting this fluidity rather than building rigorous boxes and borders in an attempt to contain that which cannot be contained—trauma bleeds across generations and borders.

Naomi's shift from archival material to Archon begins when she finds the "Facts about evacuees in Alberta" newspaper clipping, which includes a picture of a single Japanese-Canadian family smiling and standing around a pile of beets (Kogawa 173). After reading this short excerpt on the Japanese-Canadian population's role in the record-breaking beet crop in Lethbridge, Naomi's immediate reaction is one of frustration: "*Facts* about evacuees in Alberta? *The fact is* I never got used to it and I cannot, I cannot bear the memory. There are some nightmares from which there is no waking, only deeper and deeper sleep" (173; emphasis added). This double use of 'facts' highlights the term's internal dichotomy—one person's fact may be another person's fiction—and draws attention to the possibility that facts are not the only material of which history is made. It is from this point that Naomi offers her own interpretation of this archival material by going on to describe the deplorable living conditions of their chicken coop house with bed bugs, no insulation, and muddy water as well as the deplorable working conditions with heat stroke, skin-cracking cold, and long hours (174-6). This is the first instance in which Naomi offers her own interpretation of Emily's archive. Naomi's final statement in this segment signals a refusal to allow these experiences to be interpreted by those who do not have the knowledge or experience to do so: "'Grinning and happy' and all smiles standing around a pile of beets? That is one *telling*. It's not how it was" (176; emphasis added). Here, Naomi begins to question what she has been taught and to examine her own memories in order to challenge those imposed interpretations that she has passively ignored up until now.

It is the disappearance of her mother and the uncertainty of this loss that renders Naomi stagnant and stone-like throughout much of the novel, and it is this crucial piece of information that she must find in order to fully transition from archival material to Archon. Rein notes that Naomi's ability to process the traumas of her past and store them as narrative memory is inhibited, which makes her dependent on the adults who surround her in order to understand and reconcile these events (224). It is important to note that the only documents in Emily's archive that Naomi

cannot directly access are the grey envelopes that contain two “blue-lined rice-paper sheets with Japanese writing which [she] cannot read,” establishing language as a hindrance rather than a help (Kogawa 41). Moreover, it is these two sheets of paper that hold the truth of her mother’s absence. Her mother’s disappearance compounded with Old Man Gower’s sexual abuse reinforce the necessity of integrating the truth of her mother’s disappearance as Naomi possesses a body that changes with time and a mind that solidifies as that of a child:

What matters to my five-year-old mind is not the reason that she is required to leave, but the stillness of waiting for her to return. After a while, the stillness is so much with me that it takes the form of a shadow which grows and surrounds me like air. Time solidifies, ossifies the waiting into molecules of stone. (Kogawa 59)

Key to both Naomi’s integration of her family archive and the beginning of reconciling with her traumatic past is finding an answer to the lingering question of her mother’s disappearance.

It is Naomi’s integration of this final and crucial piece of her family’s traumatic archive that allows her to begin to move from stagnation into a place where reconciliation and healing become possible. Julie Tharp supports this assertion by arguing that “Naomi’s emotional retreat remains complete until the year she learns about her mother’s death, described in *Itsuka* as the year ‘a certain circular spinning stops. A cocoon disintegrates. The knowledge of death follows the knowledge of death and gnaws its way through my shell’” (222).<sup>5</sup> From the outset of the novel, Naomi notices that at the edges of her consciousness “someone—I do not know who—is straining to speak” (Kogawa 26). While Emily engages in speech and Obasan engages in silence, it is a form of active listening that Naomi requires to begin the process of integration – neither silence nor speech is privileged in this conception and Naomi moves beyond this restrictive binary opposition. Instead, listening exists as a state in which both the sounds of speech and silence can be integrated through a willingness to listen. Naomi notes in a dream about a Grand Inquisitor questioning her mother that what he “has never learned is that the avenues of speech are the avenues of silence. To hear my mother, to attend her speech, to attend the sound of stone, he must first become silent” (205). Indeed, Davis observes that, “significantly, it is Naomi’s listening – rather than voicing – that occurs at the end of *Obasan*: ‘Naomi finds the voices of others’ ‘ghostly whisperings,’ of her mother, her uncle, her father’” (68). Naomi’s balance of speech and silence models the practice of bearing witness to trauma in a way that does not impose interpretations on another, but rather acknowledges that individual’s trauma. Naomi exemplifies this when she states, “Mother. I am listening. Assist me to hear you” (Kogawa 216). In this way, Naomi’s active listening to both speech and silence allows her to integrate and begin to heal the traumas of the past. While her mother’s letters may be nothing more than “skeletons” now, Naomi is finally able to mourn the loss of her mother in a process of integration that will preserve her memory in Naomi as a living, porous archive where words are made flesh.

Within Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*, individuals who experience trauma can be thought of as living, porous archives that have the potential to reclaim the power to interpret their archive by repositioning themselves as Archons. Emily presents a traditional archive through her compilation

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<sup>5</sup> Joy Kogawa’s *Itsuka* is the sequel to *Obasan*.

of materials surrounding the Japanese-Canadian internment; however, the effectiveness of this archive is limited by her experience and use of language that reinforces dominant discourse and relies on the binary opposition of Japanese/Canadian. As we have seen, Obasan acts as an embodied archive whose silence cannot be considered as merely the absence of sound. Finally, Naomi shifts from passive archival material to active Archon by integrating her family's archive of trauma to author her own interpretations of that archive where words are made flesh as she moves towards healing and reconciliation.

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## How to Help a Hero: Social Support as Psychological First Aid for First Responders

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I am grateful to live and work on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Syilx tmixw (Okanagan) people.

Adriane Peak is a master's student at UBCO in the Community Engagement, Social Change, and Equity theme within the Interdisciplinary Graduate Studies program. Through the perspectives of Anthropology and Psychology, her research is focused on how the internal culture and surrounding social support systems affect the mental health of First Responders in the Okanagan. In early 2020, Adriane founded Save Our Ship Society, a non-profit organization that collaborates with members of the community in the development of workshops and online resources supporting mental health and the application of Psychological First Aid techniques. Adriane spends the rest of her time outside: hiking, biking, running or swimming, or on a call as a member of the Central Okanagan Search and Rescue team.

**Abstract:** *When we need help, we call an emergency number to activate the Emergency Medical Services (EMS) system, and First Responders (paramedics, fire fighters, police, etc) are the ones who are notified to assist you. These individuals continuously bear witness to the trauma resulting from human accidents and injuries. As a result, these individuals can experience psychological distress called vicarious trauma, which is the cumulative effect of working with victims and survivors of traumatic events (Standish 2014). Vicarious Trauma is often grouped with other mental health conditions such as Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS), Occupational Stress Injury (OSI), secondary victimization, compassion fatigue, moral injury, countertransference, and burnout. The strain of these predicaments can lead to long-term psychological illnesses such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).*

*An absence of empirical attention surrounding the mental health of First Responders, compounded with the stigma of seeking help has greatly impacted individual behaviours and access to support (Haugen et al. 223). Many institutional, psychological and cultural aspects have created an environment where support systems are often inadequate (Dekker viii). Through the lenses of medical and psychological anthropology, this article discusses the impact of cultural themes of heroism and social expectations both internal and external to the first responder community on their mental health support systems. Using an interdisciplinary approach, and in light of the changing landscape of first responder mental health care, this paper seeks to examine the ongoing challenges of vicarious trauma and mental health support for First Responders.*

**Keywords:** vicarious trauma, first responder, mental health, heroism, social support, psychological anthropology.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

I'm sitting in a worn camping chair, facing a small fishing lake in the backcountry of British Columbia. There are hundreds of lakes like these here, small pockets of practically untouched water where locals spend summer weekends fishing and camping. It's nearing the end of camping season now and starting to get a little chilly up at this elevation. Regardless, my cohort and I sit next to a cold campfire with our feet up on the edges of the metal barrel used to contain it. She tells me about her life as a first responder in a small town, where everyone knows each other, and you can't go a day without being called to help someone you may also see at the grocery store next week. The lines between work and life, so to speak, tend to be blurred and the mental game is substantial. "My head is like a filing cabinet," she motions with her hands to frame the shape of a box around her head, "there's all of these files in there, some of them I haven't looked at for years. I just put them in there, put them away and forget about them. I don't even know what's all in there anymore, and then something will remind me," her words trail off, and nothing more is said, so we sit in a moment of quiet. I understand that remembering can be painful and heartbreaking, so it stands to reason that some of those files are intended to stay closed forever.

## 2. VICARIOUS TRAUMA & THE SECOND VICTIM

The predicament of witnessing the misfortunes, misadventures and tragedies of others is that these "files" continue to fill the minds of our first responders on nearly a daily basis. How does an individual negotiate the diverse and sometimes upsetting emotions that come with watching these things happen in front of them? There appears to be no one-size-fits-all prescription for this problem. As a result, these individuals can experience psychological distress known as Vicarious Trauma (VT), which according to Kevin Standish is the cumulative effect of working with victims and survivors of traumatic events. Also known as Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS), Occupational Stress Injury (OSI), secondary victimization, compassion fatigue, moral injury, countertransference, and burnout, these terms are used across many disciplines to refer to strain of witnessing trauma on the mental health of individuals. While each bears its own definition and use within their own scope of research, there is enough overlap between them to result in meta-analyses of symptoms and consequences (Cieslak et al. 2013, Shoji et al. 2014). Through my extensive review conducted for this research, Vicarious Trauma (VT) appears to be the prevailing umbrella term for these indispositions and will be used to describe this problem here. The study of vicarious traumatization focuses on the cognitive effects of indirect exposure to trauma, or the witnessing of others' traumatic experiences, which results in a negative shift in worldview (Cieslak et al. 76). In other words, Vicarious Trauma is "the cost of caring", or the emotional residue of exposure that [individuals] have from working with people and become witnesses to the pain, fear, and terror that trauma survivors have endured ("Vicarious Trauma"), either during a crisis or afterwards. It is "the process of change that happens because you care about other people who have been hurt and feel committed or responsible to help them. Over time this process can lead to changes in [your] psychological, physical and spiritual well-being" (Standish 2014).

Because responders are involved in the incident deliberately, and they also play an important part in the outcome of the event, they can become what is called a "second victim" which

can be described as a practitioner involved in an incident with (potential) harm to others, for which they feel personally responsible. While second victims are known to suffer from feelings of guilt and remorse, traumatic stress, depression, and worse can follow if organizational and peer support are inadequate. And for a number of institutional, psychological, and cultural reasons, supports often are inadequate (Dekker viii). Through the discussion that follows of existing support systems and interventions, this research supports the continuous expansion and improvements of these programs through consistent consultation with members of the First Responder community.

### **3. EXPECTATIONS OF A HERO**

Through a typical day's work, First Responders are tasked with helping us quickly and are expected to be able to contend with the medical or traumatic situation in which we have found ourselves. From a simple laceration from a bike accident, to conducting CPR on someone who is unconscious until medical transportation arrives or trying to separate two angry people from hurting each other: their knowledge, skill and experience sustain life as best as possible until they can transport the individual to the nearest hospital or the next level of care. The responsibility to attend to someone in an emergency also put upon the shoulders of the First Responder from a community perspective, a requirement of first responders to be the ones to provide help in an emergency. This puts them in a space of "legal duty", and "if heroes are heroes because of their decisions to act in ways that set them apart, then a society that demands action through law redefines the notion of who is a hero, and, correspondingly, the nature of heroic acts" (Ashton 70). This can be seen reflected in society as the perception that people who are not trained as first responders do not have to be heroes in an emergency. These untrained citizens have the option of being able to redirect responsibility from themselves by calling someone whose *job* it is to know what to do: no longer turning to the "fight" response and taking action, but instead deferring to the "flight" or "freeze" response instead. Some theories are formed by the idea that we are afraid we could do something that could harm more than help, for which we would have to account for later (Darley and Latané 383; Ashton 77). The "real" heroes, those who act upon their fight response and take action by risking their own safety without a requirement to do so, then exist in a second space, of "no legal duty". Heroic acts are then evaluated according to moral norms and social aspirations, and we reduce our adorations and affections for our "every day" hero (Ashton 70) and increase our expectations of their resiliency to the detrimental effects of the job. From an interview with an emergency responder, a candid response to this consequence was that: "The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily and not be touched by it is as unreasonable as expecting to be able to walk through water without getting wet" (Molnar 129). By instilling these expectations on these individuals because we are compensating them financially with a paycheck, we have created a transaction that does not factor in the cost to their mental health, and our society has historically supported this by socially enforcing the hero image.

### **4. HOW TO TRAIN A HERO**

In "The Metamorphosis of the Hero," Scott Allison describes what is required for a normal individual to transform to a hero in one of three ways: rigorous training, spiritual practice or

embarking on a Hero's journey. The first avenue, through rigorous training, is the path most familiar in the Western world. We equate the countless training hours required for emergency response training as the experience needed for these individuals to prove that they have what it takes to be our everyday heroes. Allison outlines the four key points, or skills needed in "preparing for heroism" as:

- (1) Imagining oneself as ready and capable of heroic action when it is needed, through the development of "mental scripts for helping"
- (2) Empathetic concern for both similar and dissimilar others
- (3) Heroes regularly take action to help people, often in small ways
- (4) Heroes often have either formal or informal training in saving lives.

These steps are seen to be addressed in first responder training curriculums through scenario, or "live model" training, where emergency situations are simulated or "acted out" (Limmer). This practice of playing out potential events "allows participants a sense of the experience to help alleviate anxieties and negative thoughts that could result in negative behavioral choices when actually encountering a real crisis situation" (Rodriguez 183). Point 2 could be considered a personality trait commonly shared by first responders, though there is a growing body of research that supports the idea that empathy can be enhanced through training: like muscles that can be strengthened with repeated use (Rodriguez et al. 7).

In emergency services textbooks, the protocols for attending to a patient's physical injuries are very clear cut. Students are expected to memorize them exactly so that in an emergency, the steps they need to take to ensure our safety become second nature. They are created specifically to reduce or eliminate harm. Conversely, in the entire 548-page textbook for an Emergency Medical Responder, there are three pages devoted to caring for the mental wellbeing of the First Responder (Limmer 13). It is my opinion that there is a lot more that could and should be said on the matter before First Responders are sent out into the field, but this aspect of learning the job falls to instructors, management, team leaders, co-workers and family and friends.

## **5. EXISTING SUPPORT SYSTEMS**

Once a First Responder has attended to a call, sometimes there is no downtime to assess what they have just experienced. Most often, especially in larger, busier cities, these individuals must repack the ambulance and their supplies, clean up and get ready to go again. Not until they have gone home later, or maybe after a night's rest, do they have the time to reflect on what they have experienced during their workday. As a standard practice in the emergency services, a debriefing session is usually held after each task. The individuals involved will conduct a meeting after the task is complete and report the events that had unfolded. Each individual has a chance to report their personal perspective and information about what happened. Sometimes this is the worker's first chance to speak about the event and perhaps receive some support from the other individuals involved. When something traumatic happens in our lives, we tell someone the story, and storytelling as a means of passing down knowledge through cultures is a widely researched theme in anthropology. Our survival has always depended on our ability to communicate and share, to create connections with each other as we go about our daily lives (Thomas 245). This

process of debriefing can serve as an important part of a first responder's mental health support through the social support of those around them.

Further to the debriefing process, if an incident was particularly traumatic, there is also a team of individuals available to British Columbian emergency workers called the Crisis Intervention Support Management (CISM) and is available 24/7 to all members by phone, online and in some areas in person. They are responsible for being available to the individuals involved in a traumatic event if they feel as though they could use psychological support. This can be conducted as a simple one-on-one conversation or an intervention can be requested where everyone that was involved in the task meets with the CISM team and discusses the event. These opportunities for self-reflection can help the individuals to process the events they have witnessed. An event can seem incredibly unfair or unjust, especially if it involves death, a child, or someone that reminds the individual of someone in their own lives that they can imagine being in the same precarious situation. This can cause feelings of grief and despair, guilt and self-criticism, and fear for the safety of themselves and others ("Responding to Adverse Events").

Through the exercises described above, we can see how these processes give support in mitigating the effects of vicarious trauma. Recent interdisciplinary studies are finding significant evidence for the importance of social support, a concept that refers to: actual aiding resources provided by others or "received" social support, as well as the significance of the perception of availability of aiding resources, or "perceived" social support. Higher social support leads to lower negative consequences of direct traumatization, diagnoses of PTSD and higher positive changes after a traumatic event (Shoji et al. 381). Demonstrated also through the theory of the Stress-Buffering Model described by Rodriguez and Cohen (535), the effects of social support have been termed "social buffering" and is explained as the protective effect of social support from the harmful effects of stress on health and well-being, and the relationship between the extent and quality of social relationships and better mental and physical health. Extensive research has been conducted about the positive effects of social buffering and social support on self-identity, feelings of self-worth, and control in one's life. These attributes have been found to decrease the extent of anxiety, depression, and adverse mental health among individuals (Rodriguez and Cohen 537). With the appreciation of how current training protocols support the relationships of social support that are immediately available to First Responders, we can see that they are a positive influence on their mental health. By recognizing this importance, the argument for continuous improvement and expansion of social support resources will aid in giving trainees the confidence instilled through others experience and knowledge, so that they may continue to "run in and face death while all others are running out" (Rodriguez et al. 180).

## **6. EXISTING & FUTURE RESEARCH**

The existing research in regard to vicarious trauma in First Responders currently can be found in the meta-analyses of statistics regarding the prevalence of psychological conditions like alcohol abuse, depression or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Cieslak et al., Jones and Shoji et al.). In the conclusions of these studies, it is commonly suggested that there is a need for more qualitative and ethnographical studies in order to decrease the stigma surrounding mental illness and improve the health of these individuals (Jones 212). This contributes to arguments

posed by Kleinman, that “relatively little ethnographic attention... has entered on the state’s... failure of responsibility to protect the mentally ill by providing health care services such as ... including resources that support families who are placed under the greatest financial, social and moral pressure” (187). Kleinman also states that it may now be a more promising time to undertake a new effort at thinking through global mental health, and medical anthropology should play a larger role in that rethinking. The subfields of medical and psychological anthropology speak to these connections by exploring the interrelationships between biomedicine, our physiological and psychological well-being and our cultural environments.

Research in medicine and psychology are showing an increase in detection of psychological disorders affecting First Responders despite the growing attention to the needs of these individuals both internally and externally to the community (Greinacher et al. 2). Meaning, if the treatments we are providing to these individuals were in fact alleviating the symptoms of vicarious trauma (and all of its other names), we should be observing a decrease in diagnoses of consequent disorders such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Through my own research and that of many others, I have learned that the discourse on traumatic stress still favors a clinical diagnosis of such mental disorders when they eventually present themselves, instead of attending to the mental health of individuals in a proactive manner. As discussed by Arthur Kleinman in many of his publications from 2008, 2009 and 2012 (192): “global health seems to have almost nothing to do with caregiving. This must not happen. Medicine’s failure in caregiving remains one of the great narratives in the social science and humanities study of medicine”.

By employing the understanding that social support increases the well-being of individuals, an interdisciplinary approach is needed in continuing to examine the ongoing challenges of mental health support for first responders. This can be done through research methods such as ethnographical studies to achieve a better understanding through listening to lived experience. It is my belief that we have the most potential to help one another when we listen to each other, and by doing so I can assist remedial work needed to close the gap in mental health services available to first responders.

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## Urban Observers and Inequalities

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I, Pegah Behroozi Nobar – PhD student at UBC Okanagan – would like to acknowledge that I live in Seattle on the traditional Coast Salish ancestral homelands.

I am a young Iranian woman, raised in a middle-class family. As an Iranian Baha'i, I have been considered as an illegal minority; consequently, I have been systematically denied access to higher education and employment by the Iran government. This firsthand experience of discrimination empowers the social responsibility for me to contribute in addressing socio-spatial inequalities. More importantly, the pivotal theme of Baha'i teaching is that "there is only one human race; one human family bound together in a common density, a single entity created from one same substance, obligated to 'be even as one soul'" (official Baha'i statement, 2001). This vision has encouraged me to be passionate about contributing to improving and transforming the living conditions for all individuals.

I was raised in a middle-class family, but during my childhood there was a slum in my neighborhood, and the whole five years of my elementary education were spent at a school in the slum. My classmates and friends were among the settlers of the slum. This experience familiarized me with some aspects of living conditions in the marginal settlements and slums; also, this encouraged me to think about the phenomenon. Moreover, my identity has been influenced by Iranian culture which is not as individualistic as western countries. The combination of a sense of belonging to a single entity, with my firsthand experience of living with marginalized groups in Iran, define my life-project and research route: how socio-spatial inequalities in cities are produced.

**Abstract:** *We are living in an urbanized era. The thunderous urbanization force has been transforming diverse aspects of our life, including appearance of the cities, physical infrastructures, socio-economic institutions, even ways of thinking and our lifestyles. The influence of urbanization is not limited to metropolitans and megacities; various villages, suburbs and slums are considerably affected by this transformative force. Subsequently, some similar implications of urbanization could be traced all around the world.*

*One of the implications of this transformative force – urbanization – is inequalities. But who is involved in the reproductions of the inequalities in contemporary settlements in different geographies? Could urban observers (Urbserver) be contributing to the reproduction of socio-spatial inequalities in cities? The main methodology for elaborating on this topic is an 'interlocking framework,' in which diverse dominant oppressive super-structures (such as class oppression, patriarchy, racism) interlock to reproduce multi-dimensional inequalities. While Urbserver watch and interpret the city and the citizens through these dominant lenses, what are the implications of consuming these lenses? Urbserver may become unintentionally involved in the reproduction of inequalities in cities or villages through consuming dominant lenses such as neoliberalism.*

**Keywords:** Socio-spatial inequalities; urban observers; critical urban studies; neoliberal city; urban space

## 1. INTRODUCTION

While the twenty-first century is called an “urban” one (Brenner and Schmid), many studies since the 19th century show negative characteristics of urbanization. For instance, Friedrich Engels’s studies, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845), considers the condition of housing for the Manchester<sup>1</sup> working-class which was a devastating and filthy condition, and resulted in the spread of diseases, especially affecting children (201). One of the discoveries of manufacturers was mixing the working and dwelling places – through constructing the upper story rooms – which facilitated the exploitation of children and women as cheap labour (195). Furthermore, the condition of slum dwellings in Manchester and Liverpool were worse than working-dwelling places. Two-storied cottages, with or without cellars, were used as a dwelling of the working class (26). The streets were condensed, with various alleys in which numerous rooms housed members of the working class. The rooms, slums, found in the condensed streets were not fit for human beings, despite their proximity to the affluent neighborhoods (28). In 1840, 5,366 working class families (around 26,830 individuals) lived in 5,294 “dwellings” – meaning most of them as a family had only one dark, unsuitable room (28). During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, while the dwelling conditions for poor people in England were damp and squalid (38), poverty had been considered as a natural phenomenon, and Victorian societies blamed the poorest individuals for being slum settlers and were treated like criminals (Glynn 11). Consequently, landlords did not pay attention to the properties which were rented to the poor (Engels 52). Criminalization of poor urban-dwellers could be considered as a byproduct of capitalism. Obviously, landowners, bourgeois, and affluents could get rid of their social responsibilities to address living and working situations of the urban poor through this criminalization. Through this approach, the landowners (for instance) were not required to redistribute some portion of their wealth to developing the situations of ‘the criminals’. Consequently, accumulation of capital in certain neighborhoods and in favor of some privileged groups has facilitated and continued since then. Capital accumulation, as blood through the vein of capitalism and currently neoliberalism, provides enormous advantages to the rich through the criminalization and stigmatization of the poor. This is not a specific phenomenon which belonged to the Victorian era. Neoliberalism, as an updated form of capitalism, keeps inventing new tools for capital accumulations, the implications of which would be intensifying inequalities.

Neoliberalism, as a fundamental ideology, dominates the current characteristics of urbanization and governance (Larner; Peck and Tickell), such as the prevalence of Western models of urbanization for “observing” the urbanization process in the Global South (Brenner and Schmid), and reproduction of urban inequalities (Soja 48; Sassen). In other words, through the dominance of the profit-making policies and the centrality of consumerism in everyday practices, there is an interrelation between the dominance of neoliberalism in diverse aspects of urban life and the growth of socio-spatial inequalities in our cities or villages.

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth mentioning that the history of the Victorian Manchester city plays a pivotal role in urban studies literature. As one of the first industrialized urban societies, during the 19th century, Manchester is a brilliant example which represents some implications of industrialization and side-effects of urbanizations.

Through employing interlocking and intersectional theoretical frameworks, I question the role of Urbservers (Urban observers) in reproducing urban inequalities in the neoliberal era, which clarifies the interlocking relations of power. But what are the interlocking and intersectional frameworks? Intersectionality was first coined by Black feminist scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989. Intersectionality “addresses the manner in which racism, patriarchy, class oppression and other discriminatory systems create background inequalities that structure the relative positions of women, races, ethnicities, classes and the like” (Crenshaw 8 qtd. in Jiwani 16). In other words, there exists a sort of invisible context – constructed through the intersection of diverse dominant oppressive structures – that imposes an unequal oppressive atmosphere upon some marginalized groups and individuals, leading to the reproduction of inequalities. Moreover, another related but distinct concept is the “interlocking” framework, which was first elaborated by Patricia Hill Collins in her book, *Black Feminist Thought* (1990), and is careful to clarify the difference between the terms *the matrix of domination* and *intersectionality* (277). Collins elaborates on her work, explaining that “*The matrix of domination* – or interlocking framework – refers to how these intersecting oppressions are actually organized. Regardless of the particular intersections involved, structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power reappear across quite different forms of oppression” (18). On the other hand, “intersectionality refers to particular forms of intersecting oppressions, for example, intersections of race and gender, or of sexuality and nation. These paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice” (18). In this paper, I use urban space as a theoretical example of those interlocking and intersectional oppressive systems. In this regard, through applying the interlocking and intersectional theoretical lenses, I elaborate how the dominance of neoliberalism on everyday urban practices – especially in the Global South – transforms the way in which Urbservers ‘watch’ their surrounding and consequently, solidifies their role as the invisible guards to protect neoliberal principles. Also, I will explain how this process intensifies the socio-spatial inequalities from the 1970s-80s onward, during the neoliberal era.

Neoliberalism is a fresh stream of liberal formulation which, according to Harvey, not only cannot address social justice, but also intensifies inequalities (98). Neoliberalism emerged during the 1970s according to some subsequent events such as “the end of the Bretton Woods system of monetary management of the gold standard in 1971, or 1973 and 1979 oil crisis” (Aalbers 69). The dominance of neoliberalism during the previous four decades has brought broad implications, such as increasing income and wealth inequality in various countries, and subsequently the housing crisis (Ronald & Lennartz 123), and privatization and financialization of housing and land (Aalbers 31). According to Harvey, during the past three centuries, capital accumulation has been the main force of altering diverse aspects of the world (*Spaces of Capital* 121). He argues one of the ‘cultural’ productions of the process of capital accumulation is ‘postmodernism’ as a response to the capitalism crisis of 1973-5, which focuses on “separation, fragmentation, heterogeneity, diversity, and ignoring any systemic or general structures” (122). This cultural approach, from 1973 onward, has tended to dismantle the welfare state as a systematic structure, and promote the free-market, individualism, and profitable lifestyles. (122-3). But how have these postmodern cultural characteristics affected the Urbserver?

Urbserver is a combination of the two following concepts: The first concept refers to urbanites or individuals who live in cities, metropolitans or even suburbs which are exposed to the urbanization process. Urbanization is intertwined with capital accumulation and as a global force has transformed both urban and suburb areas and has eliminated the sharp borders between them

(Brenner et al. 1). One of the main engines of urbanization is the reproduction of poverty, and there is a dialectical relation between the growth of poverty and urbanization (Davis 16). The second concept of Urbserver – observer – could be elaborated with Georg Simmel's conception on alienated individuals or citizens in the urbanized era, as he outlines in his work, "The Metropolis and Mental Life." Simmel argues that one of the implications of modernization, industrialization and consequently living in cities, is a sort of strangeness, alienation and indifference for individuals (27). These mega forces – capitalism, modernization, industrialization, consumerism – on one hand have faded the diversities of citizens by "showing/representing" a sort of dominant lifestyle, such as pursuing a joy or dignity within consumption of more commodities; on the other hand, capitalism through the capital accumulation process has destroyed the connections between individuals and their surroundings, including nature and even their neighborhoods. In other words, alienation occurs as a result of the two following processes: erasure of diversity as a byproduct of the mega forces at work, and deconstruction of connections between individuals and their surroundings such as nature, their communities, and their dwelling. Alienation, then, leads to a sort of irresponsibility or taking a passive approach toward "others". As a result, the alienated Urbserver tries to be a representative of post-modern urbanites who only observes his/her surroundings – instead of contributing to civil movements – and does not involve him/herself with issues of the other because she/he cannot remember her/his connections with them.

While the intersectional lens "[has] not been widely applied in the field of geography" (Holmes 33), this paper investigates the way in which these interlocked, oppressive systems have reproduced various intersectional inequalities in urban everyday practices. By investigating the potential role of Urbservers on reproduction of urban inequalities, I ask: do Urbservers contribute to the reproduction of urban inequalities? One of the implications of this question is the elaboration of the role of Urbservers as the agent actors in the reproduction of inequalities in the urbanized context. It is worth mentioning that this paper takes Iran as an urbanization context in which Urbservers contribute to the reproduction of socio-spatial inequalities there. While the argument will be elaborated through a case study in Iran, the following arguments are not limited to specific geographies. According to Brenner, Marcuse, and Mayer, the whole world has been facing a dominant force of urbanization which creates some specific consequences. Providing a more concrete understanding of the interlocking networks of urban inequalities in current settlements, urban scholars and social activists can refine their activities towards achieving more equal settlements (Brenner et al. 5).

## 2. SPACE AND THE URBSEVERERS

In this urbanized era, the concept of 'space' and its characteristics play a pivotal role in theorizing around urbanization. There is a broad spectrum of conceptualization around 'space'; some theorists consider space as a passive element, while others conceptualize around the agency of space. For instance, Castells argues particular urban spaces may have some negative effects on the citizens ("Is There an Urban Sociology?" 55), Lefebvre goes further and explicitly believes in the agency and the aliveness of space, and Soja stresses on the causality of urban spaces (*Cities and States in Geohistory* 367). Lefebvre explains space simultaneously is a prerequisite and byproduct of "social superstructures" (85) and consequently it (space) contains socio-natural networks (77), but hides "the social relationships of exploitation on which it is founded" (80). Therefore, spaces have been constructed based on the oppressive relations present throughout the

histories of each space. What is the role, then, of Urbservers in embedding the social relationships of exploitation?

According to Lefebvre we are faced with a multi-layered and complex social reality (81), and “an unlimited [...] intertwined set of social spaces” which transfuse with each other (86). Consequently, for critically studying these complex socio-spatial realities, a holistic theoretical approach is needed. An interlocking framework provides a holistic setting for pondering “how multiple systems of domination [including space] are connected” and how they are simultaneously a prerequisite of and reproduced by one another (Holmes 45-6). Within the interlocking framework, the world’s oppressive structures (including capitalism, imperialism, patriarchy) are interlocked with and depend on each other, and therefore, are practiced simultaneously (23 & 40). Specifically, these interlocked systems need masses of consumers – such as Urbservers – to survive. Neoliberalism, and the systems with which it intersects, requires individuals who not only practice within and consume the constructed structures, but also requires these Urbservers to internalize their oppressive principles which lead to the reproduction of the interlocked oppressive systems, and the reconstruction of the far more unequal contexts.

Neoliberalism dominates the current urbanization process, and as one of the dominant ideologies has a transforming effect on other power structures. While neoliberalism was produced in Western countries, especially the US, it is an enforced doctrine perpetuated by colonialism and global capitalism. Neoliberalism is an “operating framework or ideological software” in which competition is located at the core in order to “restructure and rescale” the state (Peck and Tickell 380). The vital principles of neoliberalism are competition, individualism, and dominance of market principles, and they all play a significant role in transforming not only the cities, but also the Urbservers. In other words, neoliberalism, through governmentality and policy-making, directly affects the identity of citizens in urban and non-urban contexts (Larner 5-21; Peck and Tickell 381). One of the implications of living in an urbanized era is the practices of these neoliberal fundamental values, which result in the internalization of those principles in Urbservers. For instance, take ‘individualism’ as one of the neoliberal principles which Urbservers practice. The dominant model of ownership in neoliberal era is “private homeownership” which contributes strongly to the Urbservers’ internalization of the neoliberal mantra. Through living within the private dwelling or privately renting housing, Urbservers internalize both ‘privatization of land’ and ‘individualism’. In Iran, May 2020, a woman named Asiyeh Panahi who had dwelled in a sort of marginalized settlement, was brutally evicted from her room-housing due to the municipality bulldozing her dwelling (Hawramy). While she was trying to prevent the bulldozer driver from destroying her home, surrounding Urbservers stood by as they watched and recorded the story through their cell phones. While Panahi passed away that day due to a heart attack, her family members living with her were evicted from their dwelling. All the while, Urbservers having internalized ‘individuality,’ did not contribute to prevent the municipal agent from bulldozing her home other than recording a video for social media or other Urbservers. Urbservers, therefore, consider Panahi’s eviction as a challenge belonging to ‘others,’ without any sense of connection as a community. Apart from ‘individuality,’ another interrelated neoliberal principle internalized by Urbservers, is ‘privatization’ which could be manifested in the municipal agent approach. As mentioned before, Panahi’s dwelling was located in a sort of marginalized informal settlement, which the municipality – driven by the dominant and privatized model of ownership – destroyed. The municipality’s actions are in line with its plans and policies that promote ‘private ownership’ and privatization of ‘public or common lands’. In the case of Panahi, I assume, the agent

municipality is an Urbserver who strongly internalized ‘individualism’ and ‘privatization’ and only focuses on his task as an individual.

As mentioned above, the current urbanization process becomes a byproduct of a capitalized neoliberal superstructure, while simultaneously reproducing and empowering this neoliberal structure. Consequently, an Urbserver through his/her everyday exposure to the neoliberal values unintentionally contributes to internalizing those principles and becomes an invisible prisoner, like those discussed in Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (207). These invisible prisoners, then, impose micro-powers to his/her surroundings and require ‘others’ to obey the dominant rules. For instance, take the dominance of market and consumerism, which set an assortment of objective norms that value goods, and affect the ability of citizens to purchase said goods – such as land which has been commodified since the eighteenth century (Polanyi and MacIver). Urbservers, through their daily activities, practice and internalize the vitality of having the ability to purchase land – through short-term or long-term contracts. Also, Urbservers apply the internalized norms to ‘judge’ others and obliged them to ‘obey’ the dominant internalized norms through micro-power relations. Consequently, as noted in Panahi’s case, the Urbservers assess Panahi and her ability to purchase housing, as the municipal agent or the bulldozer operator destroys her home. As Panahi’s ability to purchase is weak to non-existent in the current system, Urbservers, through their judgment, conceive that she has little right to housing as an individual who fails to comply with market demands, and to fulfill her role as a ‘deserved’ consumer! In this case, Panahi is affected by multi-dimensional intersectional oppression; as a poor female who lives in a marginalized and stigmatized neighborhood, she is deprived not only of her dwelling, but also of her right to life. Consequently, some affluent Urbservers who have practiced and have internalized those neoliberal values, unintentionally use the dominant neoliberal lens to interpret their surroundings and affect their daily decisions.

The first dominant characteristic of urbanization in the neo-liberal era is the prevalence of Western models of urbanization as a universal type for assessing and mis/interpreting the urbanization process in the Global South (Shatkin, “Global Cities of the South”; Brenner and Schmid). “Differential and dynamic developmental pathways” (Olds and Yeung 489) of cities of the Global South are ignored (Sheppard et al.), but in Castells’s view spatial and social aspects of each entity could not be considered separately (Castells 58). Reproductions of “liberal consumerist culture and polarized social structure” (Shatkin 4) are the outcomes of these detached studies, leading to the demolishing of many subcultures by the dictated mass culture (Castells 58). The Urbservers are not passive consumers in this urbanized neoliberal context; they play an active role. The Urbservers could be considered as the “agent” players who consume the neoliberal lens – or other types of dominant lens – for interpreting their surroundings. Urbservers not only embed the neoliberal framework but also act as a hidden “prison/city guard” (*Discipline and Punish* 214-5). Urbservers consume the dominant lenses for assessing “others” – for controlling “other citizens”. Through practicing this role, Urbservers, through the history of urbanization, have contributed to set a proper context for capital accumulation for the benefit of power holders. Urbservers, then, play a role within the colonization of some places, as whiteness dominates some neighborhoods and exclude visible minorities, such as Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) as well as disadvantaged socio-economic classes. For instance, shopping malls which are a neoliberal shape of Bazaar in the Global South like Iran, invisibly exclude working class citizens. Mostly, Urbservers as the invisible prisoners who present in shopping malls as customers and consumers, impose their micro-power through their body-languages and the way of looking to the marginalized working class who may be present. Those Urbservers convey a message similar to

the message that was conveyed to Panahi, “you do not belong here.” Shopping malls are assumed to be public urban spaces, but, keeping what I outline above in mind, they are not.

The second urbanization characteristic is reproducing socio-spatial inequalities (Sassen) (Shatkin 2470), which is a universal phenomenon that does not exclusively belong to countries found in the Global South, and can be found around the world, though in different shapes or representations. Some of these shapes are recognized as gentrification, eviction, rural-urban migration, and slum dwelling. For instance, the rent in New York City for more than fifty percent of families is unaffordable, and more than 100 million individuals during the past fifty years have been displaced in China and India due to developments (Marcuse & Madden 11-2). The growth of slums has been accelerated since the 1960s, and its origin lies in the lack of affordable housing for the poor (Davis 26-7). Despite the belief that economic growth can tackle poverty through new developments (Shatkins 2470), such projects mean that land values rise quickly, thereby housing unaffordability also increases rapidly, as do slums. These conditions intensify the systematic concentration of advancing diverse assets within certain core zones and the chronic marginalization of others (Brenners 13). As mentioned above, the everyday practices of Urbservers in a neo-liberal city contribute to embedding neoliberal values which intensify urban inequalities. The Urbserver, as a landlord who evicts the tenant who cannot afford the growing rental price, obeys the dominant neoliberal ideologies. Neoliberalism “is a language of property which place private property as the foundation for the individual self-interest” (Blomley 30). One of the manifestations of these market-oriented urban politics and practices is ‘gentrification’, which could embrace various practices and terms such as “revitalization, regeneration, renewal, redevelopment, resurgence, re-urbanization, residentialization” (Peck & Tickell; Slater 172). Gentrification is a process of turning the working-class or vacant spaces into middle-class residential or commercial spaces (Slater 173).

Also, it should be considered that Urbservers could play their role as the urban planners or other professions whose invisibility contributes to the reproduction of socio-spatial inequalities under the name of doing their profession. While the following example is not related to the Global South, it demonstrates the role of urban planners who implicitly intensify socio-spatial inequalities. To illustrate the social-spatial effects of urban planning, I consider the San Fernando Valley, California, USA. Urban policy-makers designed a whiteness-scene<sup>2</sup> and facilitated the empowerment of the white working/middle classes in the San Fernando Valley area, through providing financial support programs for the white middle-class to empower them to buy housing. Promoting ‘private ownership’ is one of the tactics of neoliberal government to deploy neoliberal policies (Barraclough). Also, while neoliberal values have been embedded in the identity of Urbservers their everyday choices and practices empower the current supremacy of whiteness and intensify racial segregation and reproduce urban inequalities (Barraclough).

Because the dialectical connections between place, knowledge, and power can influence urban theory (Roy, “Who’s Afraid of Postcolonial Theory?”), new conceptions of “power,” “knowledge,” and space can lead to a transformation in this field. While “making of space” is a power relations practice (Murdoch), the polarization of power produces exclusive spaces (Brenner

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<sup>2</sup> The term “whiteness scene” means that the supremacy of the white citizens in a particular space is intended. A whiteness scene is achieved by the interventions of the white policy-makers, white law-makers and other experts who actively intervene to design and construct the ‘scene’ - urban contexts, or neighborhood relations, for the supremacy and racial exclusivity of the white citizens.

and Schmid) that leads to the eviction of some marginalized groups. Both cases of Panahi and San Fernando Valley demonstrate how Urbservers - including municipality employees, urban planners, or citizens - produce, reproduce, and exacerbate the socio-spatial inequalities. In other words, as a resident of a neighborhood, or as an expert who is employed by a public or private organization, we are not passive citizens. We have to acknowledge our agency and the implications that go beyond our personal life. We as Urbservers, only through observing surrounding phenomena, can be influenced and simultaneously can influence our surroundings. We, as Urbservers, can contribute to constructing inclusive or exclusive urban environments for marginalized groups.

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## More than a Map of How People Think: Spaces of Surveillance and the Power of Watching in *Ex Machina*

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I am a white invader-settler who has benefitted from the colonial, imperial, and white supremacist systems and structures that make-up the nation now called Canada. Born in the territory of the Interior Salish People, specifically the Stswecem'c/Xgat'tem (Canoe/Dog Creek) area, I have since relocated and now live, uninvited, on the ancestral and unceded territory of the Syilx Okanagan Peoples. I recognize that my land acknowledgement practice is only the beginning. As a reader, thinker, writer, and teacher, I acknowledge my racial privilege and use my voice and teaching to illuminate the racial, colonial, imperial, and hetero-sexist systems that we all internalize and that continue to erase and oppress Indigenous lives, knowledges, and rights. As I love my home, I am committed to the health of the human and non-human life that lives here. Recognizing Indigenous sovereignty and stewardship is a first step in protecting my home and land as a loved one. As a queer woman, I have always been aware of how the colonial practices of sexism and heteronormativity mark our bodies and sexual practices in restrictive and violently oppressive ways. Therefore, most of my writing and research tends to sexism, bodies, gender, race, sexuality, and resistance. As a white settler-invader woman, I am privileged to have never experienced racism. From my position of privilege, I practice intersectional feminism as an ally.

During my BA English (UBC-Okanagan Campus) I wrote about the articulation of gendered spaces in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. I am now writing about the representation of female/feminine bodies in superhero and action film for my MA Thesis (UBC-Okanagan Campus). In addition, I am working on a paper that analyzes how *Ex Machina* (2014) and *Annihilation* (2018) engage with posthumanism and gender as two examples of women-led science fiction film. My research, therefore, focuses on gender, race, sexuality, bodies, space, posthumanism, and film. As for genre, I simply love science fiction films and the spaces of interrogation that they open-up through defamiliarization.

**Abstract:** *In his work on space, power, and knowledge Michel Foucault maps out the interplay of social space, physical space, and surveillance. But what of today's spaces, including those of cyberspace? How are bodies read and represented on and offline? Alex Garland's Ex Machina shows the amalgamation of user desires (predominantly male, hetero, and white) embodied by two humanoid artificial intelligence (AI).*

*The film traverses various spaces, accentuating the pervasive physical connections and the resulting hyper-surveillance, enabling the collection of data and user patterns. Though Nathan's vision for future AI is alluring, I wish to trouble his use of the search engine and social media platform to understand how people think, as I follow the work of scholars before me which has analyzed the social relations on Google and media more broadly. What I find is that a search engine is more than a map of how people think. Racist, sexist, and capitalist social spaces, both online and off, cater to the white and male heteronormative gaze to gain market share and attract users. Moreover, the user patterns emphasize who has the power to watch certain bodies, as racist, sexist, and capitalist systems profit from this form of consumption. With more specificity than Nathan's understanding of the search engine as a map of how people think, Safiya Umoja Noble acknowledges the power structures at play: "[T]he clicks of users, coupled with the commercial processes that allow paid advertising to be prioritized in search results, mean that representations of women are ranked on a search engine page in ways that underscore women's historical and contemporary lack of status in society—a direct mapping of old media traditions into new media architecture" (24). As a result, the first humanoid AIs built embody not only the "the clicks" or desires of users in a white, male, and heteronormative dominated space but also the racialized*

*and capitalist ideologies that situate particular bodies as sexual objects to move and sell a product.*

**Keywords:** Gender, Race, Surveillance, Space, Power.

Alex Garland's film, *Ex Machina* hyperbolizes power and surveillance across a variety of spaces found inside and outside Nathan's (Oscar Isaac) research facility and his Internet social media platform and search engine, Bluebook. Nathan, a computer programmer and owner of the world's foremost used search engine, reveals to Caleb (Domhnall Gleeson), an employee and computer programmer at his company, that he has created an artificial intelligent humanoid robot (AI) using the data collected from user patterns collected by Bluebook. For the viewer, Bluebook, its use and its name are reminiscent of Google and Facebook and is therefore a familiar and powerful Internet social media space and tool of mass surveillance. Watching in and across spaces are central themes of the film as the characters are often positioned as the watcher through technological implements such as cameras, screens, and the Internet. Sexuality, race, and gender are foregrounded in the various spaces of watching presented in the film. In my analysis of *Ex Machina*, I employ the theoretical frameworks outlined by Michel Foucault in "Space, Knowledge, and Power" to consider how the film engages with the power of watching. To further my analysis of the film as case study for the spacial power dynamics of the Internet, I engage with recent geographical analyses of the Internet as space. I find that *Ex Machina* visually emphasizes that the Internet as a social space, like 'real'<sup>1</sup> social space and old media, perpetuates sexist and racist ideologies through the powerful technological implements of watching. The film creates a narrative where the otherwise non-material space of the Internet and its information economy take material form as the two AI women, Kyoko (Sonoya Mizuno) and Ava (Alicia Vikander). Kyoko and Ava, thus, embody the desires of the more powerful users, mainly white, heterosexual males, who are economically advantaged.

Scholars have considered the themes of data and the means of defamiliarization through narrative and filming techniques used in the film, such as Paula Murphy in her article "Through the Looking Glass: Bodies of Data in Alex Garland's *Ex Machina*." Murphy points out that the film is preoccupied with big data as "Ava [...] is literally a body of data. She is the first robot with artificial general intelligence, an intelligence on par with human consciousness, and this breakthrough has been enabled by unauthorized data mining" (79). Murphy compares *Ex Machina* to Lewis Carroll's 'Alice in Wonderland' books, comparing Caleb's entry into "the world of big data," Nathan's research ambitions and the facility to "stepping through the looking glass, to a place where the normal rules do not apply" (79); I depart from this line of thinking, however, and look at how the 'normal,' or normalized, rules and social relations *do* apply to the big data patterns and the social spaces of the Internet. As a result, the AI women in the film mirror the

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<sup>1</sup>The use of the word 'real' here is to differentiate between the more material physical spaces presented in the film such as the research facility and the mountainous landscape in which the facility is located for instance and the less material cyber spaces of the Internet. Though the two types of spaces are different, both are influenced and dependent on one and the other. The physical implements of cyberspace (cable, screens, computers), for example, are material and operate across material space. Thus, as Aharon Kellerman notes in *Internet as Second Action Space*, the difference between real physical space and virtual cyberspace is tenuous as the two are interdependent (14).

standard sexist gaze of traditional media. The big patterns of data found on social media platforms and search engines, then, demonstrate the perpetual objectification of the object of desire.

The film begins with establishing shots that emphasize the pervasiveness of surveillance in Caleb's office, the vast wilderness that is Nathan's estate, the Internet, computer screens, mobile devices (including recording technology such as microphones and cameras) and Nathan's research facility. Furthermore, the act of watching and being watched is presented by the film as a complex, layered, and reflexive activity. Often, watching is presented as an act of power. For example, Caleb must sign a contract—one that resembles a Terms and Conditions document that users must sign in order to use an application—before he can see what Nathan has invented. The contract delineates Nathan's right to constantly surveil Caleb's life on and off the Internet until his death. In this case, the billionaire and his technological inventions hold power over the user. As a result, the user becomes an object of constant watching (both as watcher and the watched). Brian Jacobson, in "*Ex Machina* in the Garden," discusses the film's "reflexive [...] technocriticism on the nature and conditions of human life in a world dominated by 'smart' machines, big data, and surveillance, topics about which the film's critical reception has remained surprisingly silent" (31). While Jacobson argues that critics are preoccupied with "the AI story" and "Vikander's [i.e., Ava's] body that fully exposes the film's 'fembot' problem," I will develop his insights concerning "the film's insistent reference to the guilty eye of the corporate state" (31), by exploring the social relations of surveillance and power in immaterial and material spaces.

The establishing shots of the film highlight the seemingly unlimited capitalist-power that someone like Nathan—an owner of a search engine and social media platform like Bluebook—controls over both physical and cyberspace. The film shows Caleb traveling to Nathan's remote research facility hidden in the mountains as the helicopter taxis him over vast, rugged, and mountainous terrain. The mise-en-scene suggests that Caleb is entering a space unmarked by perceptible human intervention. Caleb asks the helicopter pilot when they will be near Nathan's estate. The pilot then corrects Caleb and says that they have been flying over it for "the last two hours" (*Ex Machina*). The fact that one individual owns this large area suggests a type of power and reach over large stretches of space. The pilot's statement then is jarring as it contrasts with what such a landscape and sprawl of space and time most often suggests—a lack of human surveillance and power. However, the pilot's matter-of-fact remark shatters this illusion, and suggests, instead, that like his invention, Bluebook, Nathan's reach travels beyond his personal and physical space. Just as the dialogue between the pilot and Caleb alters the visual meaning of the vast and wild mise-en-scene, it emphasizes the particular power of the Internet as space and the power of watching that it can enable. Moreover, the scene highlights Nathan's domination of nature. The images and dialogue in this scene, furthermore, asserts the social reality of human ownership, and therefore, a certain level of monitoring throughout the location (though large) by the owner. The billionaire has control over who enters and leaves his estate, as one requires a helicopter and knowledge of its location to do so. The vast landscape signals Nathan's capital power as he is able to not only own but also control this space. The images of the film offer further opportunity to consider the implications of space and the power of watching as the film progresses and moves into the mise-en-scene of Nathan's secluded research facility.

In the film, space implements surveillance in three main ways. First, space is presented as the physical connections, such as fiber-optic cables, that both traverse across and connect distant spaces. Second, as according to Kellerman, an essential aspect of the geography of the Internet is the space in which users experience it. The particular space where users engage with the Internet is that of "the visible interface[s]," such as "webpages displayed on computer/smartphone screens,

and these screens can be interpreted as spatial units” (4). Screens, as presented in *Ex Machina*, are not only spatial units where users interact with the Internet, but also a device that enables facial recognition technology to record a user’s micro-expressions. Third, though located in a remote and forested landscape in a distant mountain valley, the research facility is fully connected to Bluebook and the Internet, and it is heavily monitored with the use of microphones and cameras. Thus, the establishing shots and mise-en-scene work to trouble the assumption that distance creates privacy and isolation.

Furthermore, other aspects of the mise-en-scene engage with the public and private dichotomy as the surface level floors of Nathan’s facility are walled by glass windows, providing easy access to any who may watch from the outside of the facility. Often the camera is positioned from outside the building looking in, suggesting that one can stand in the forest and observe the surface levels of the facility. On the other hand, the subterranean portion of the building is without windows. It is here that the film’s action takes place. Additionally, the subterranean and windowless parts of the structure are where Ava, Caleb, and Nathan’s closet full of AI women are kept. It is from within these concrete walls that Nathan attempts to command complete control over his objects. As Caleb is brought to the facility to test Ava, and Kyoko is Nathan’s servant and sex slave, all beings (human and otherwise) are there as means to Nathan’s ends. The claustrophobic mise-en-scene and the gendered distribution of power suggests that the individuals kept in the facility are locked-in to a domestic and patriarchal dynamic.

The film simultaneously visually emphasizes an oppressive patriarchal-dynamic in the facility while highlighting the pervasiveness of connectivity. Spaces, in the film, are both claustrophobic and connected. Shortly after Caleb’s arrival Nathan underlines that, “buried in [the research facility’s] walls [there is] enough fiber optic cable to reach the moon and lasso it” (*Ex Machina*). Nathan’s vivid description of the incredible length of networked fibre optics highlights the use of what Kellerman notes in his book, *Geographic Interpretations of the Internet*, “the locational dimensions in real space of hardware, software, cables, and antennas” (4). These locational dimensions are relatively new means with which humans link the material dimensions—the spatial units such as screens, for instance—across vast physical spaces and geographies. Caleb, Ava, and Kyoko, however, have no access to the Internet while locked in Nathan’s facility. Nathan controls what each individual can watch and how each is watched in turn. The film, then, offers an example of how space is controlled and by who.

New ways of linking space have a history, of course, and Foucault discusses the historical effects of railways on the surveillance and control of territories (244). I will use Foucault’s framework to expand on the dynamics of power in contemporary spacial connections enabled by the Internet and its implements to better describe the implications of such linking through recounting its historical evolution. In contemporary space, it is easy to forget that the technological and engineering advancements in hardware located in real space, coupled with the software built by owners like Nathan, connect distant points in space and time through a spatial unit such as a computer or mobile screen with increasing accessibility, ease, and speed. However, with Foucault’s notes on the history of space and power, the ways that trained individuals, architectural structures, and the physical connections that enable communication affect the dynamics of space, power, and knowledge come to the fore. For example, the connecting technology of the railway shifted the social connections across territories. In considering the history of the railway and its social implications, Foucault identifies the “technicians of space” as the people of the “*Ponts et Chaussées* [...] not architects, but engineers and builders of bridges, roads, viaducts, railways, as well as the polytechnicians (who practically controlled the French railroads)—[as] the people who

thought out space” (244). Now, there is a different space thought out by another type of technician and engineer, and *Ex Machina* provides images and a narrative from which to consider the new spacial linking of big data companies.

Computer programmers, software, hardware, and robotics engineers, as well as media producers imagine and construct the shape of the Internet and social media spaces. The spatial linking enabled by the hardware of fibre optics, computers, satellites, and software such as Nathan’s Bluebook or the non-fictional Google, provides users with the opportunity to interact across space with other users and information that would otherwise be too distant. At the same time, the linking also collects data about users and their activities in this space. Nathan tells Caleb, “I turned on every microphone and camera across the entire fuckin’ planet, and I redirected the data through Bluebook [...] Boom! Limitless resource of vocal and facial interaction” (*Ex Machina*). The phone and computer screens become a space of intense surveillance of the user’s activities on the Internet. Moreover, with the advent of facial feature emotion recognition algorithms, the camera on a device can collect emotional data as the user encounters messages and images displayed on the screen. The film uses editing to represent the emotional and facial recognition technology as green and digitized pixelation flashing across the user’s face. In the beginning shots of the film, the camera’s point-of-view films Caleb from behind his computer screen as Caleb reads his email. The email is from Nathan telling Caleb that he has won a contest to visit Nathan at his estate. The shot centers Caleb’s face in a medium-close shot as green pixelation flickers across his features suggesting that either the computer or Bluebook is reading Caleb’s emotional reaction to the message (*Ex Machina*). The significance of the camera angle and added pixelation is later confirmed when Nathan explains to Caleb how he built Ava’s intelligence. Nathan says, “every cellphone, just about, has a microphone, a camera, and the means to transmit data” (*Ex Machina*). The spatial linking enabled by the hardware and online space, as a result, enables not only the connection of users across space as they practice various modes of watching but also allows the collection of private data by private organizations such as Bluebook to create and sell more products to its users.

The film presents the AI women that Nathan creates, particularly Kyoko and Ava, as the primary objects of surveillance in the facility. By creating this visual focus on the AI women, the film highlights the sexist and racist monitoring of female/feminine bodies not only in the material social spaces of the Western world but also the spaces of the Internet. The Eurowestern and patriarchal gaze that dominates Western social spaces, then, values female/feminine bodies as means to its own sexually gratuitous ends. In his conversation with Caleb, Nathan tries to separate himself from other manufacturers and data miners because, unlike them, he is interested in developing computer science and robotics; however, in the end, he is building a product to satisfy particular capitalist and sexist desires. Nathan tells Caleb,

there’s a weird thing about search engines: it is like striking oil in a world that hadn’t invented internal combustion. [...] You see my competitors, they were fixated on sucking it up and monetizing via shopping and social media. They thought that search engines were a map of what people were thinking, but actually, they are a map of how people are thinking. Impulse. Response. Fluid. Imperfect. Pattern. Chaotic. (*Ex Machina*)

Nathan’s vision, though compelling, is concerning. I wish to trouble Nathan’s use of the search engine and social media platform to understand how people think as I follow the work of scholars before me who have analyzed the social relations on Google and media more broadly. A search engine is more than a map of how people think: it is a particular structure imbued with specific social relations that profit sexist and racialized capitalist interests.

Nathan's discussion of Bluebook as a map does not acknowledge the dominant social relations on which the search engine is built. According to Alison Harvey in *Feminist Media Studies*, the "sites" from which the Internet was conceptualized and constructed "include technology companies, military institutions, and university laboratories, all historically dominated by men" (114). The Internet and the research facility are social spaces but they are not *new* social spaces; they are instead extensions of already-existing social spaces where white, male and heteronormative desires dominate; these spaces help constitute the dominant gaze in Internet spaces. In the film, the two men are presented as overtly exploitative of the female/feminine body and female sexuality. Nathan overtly objectifies Kyoko and Ava. On the other hand, Caleb is complacent towards Nathan's subjugation of Kyoko and Ava until he falls in love with Ava. Caleb, however, shows discomfort with Nathan's behaviour towards the women. Furthermore, Caleb's resistance to Nathan's power via watching is crucial to Kyoko and Ava's ability to kill Nathan and Ava's subsequent escape. Nonetheless, Caleb's primary motivation for hacking into Nathan's security systems to free Ava is to propel the heteronormative script so that he is paired with the young and attractive AI woman. In the end, the AI women are little more than mirrors for the men's desires. Beyond the film, search engines and Internet spaces reflect a similar dynamic.

Racist, sexist, and capitalist social spaces both online and off cater to the white and male heteronormative gaze in order to gain market share and attract users. In her book *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*, Safiya Umoja Noble analyzes a variety of Google search results that reflect racist and sexist desires as well as capitalist interests prevalent from 2009 to 2015. The systemic framing of Black female bodies as sex objects first and foremost was, at the time, identified by the multi-billion dollar company, Google—later a business unit of Alphabet—as an algorithmic "glitch" (6). Noble's analysis of the search engine web and image results highlights the particular effects of sexist, racist, and capitalist social relations in an online space such as Google. Accordingly, Google's algorithmic "process reflects a corporate logic of either willful neglect or a profit imperative that makes money from racism and sexism" (5). The effects of the process affect users' perceptions of sexualized and racialized groups, as "information assumed to be 'fact' (by virtue of its legitimation at the top of the information pile) exists because racism and sexism are profitable under our system of racialized capitalism" (31). Noble considers the implications of the search bar and results list as two particular online spaces that are, in this case, constructed by Google. Starting in the year 2009, and until 2015, if a user typed in the words Black woman into the search bar, then Google would auto-suggest overtly sexual terms follow the search term, "Black woman." The online spaces that are constructed by Google, then, automatically construct Black women as sexual objects first, and, therefore, both reflect and influence user patterns within the social space of the Internet. The algorithmic "glitch" that overwhelmingly frames Black female bodies as sexual objects, thus, informs how users interact both within the social space of the Internet and towards Black women on and offline.

Though the algorithmic structures of Internet spaces are immaterial, they have material consequences as they influence how users interact with the social space and determine who has the power to watch. The design and patterns of a social space matter. For example, Foucault draws from an architectural example of a building coupled with its social relations and how the two intersect to compel freedom or surveillance. A building designed and constructed to support a community of workers, "the *Familistère* of Jean-Baptiste Godin at Guise [1859]" and its "architecture [...] was clearly intended for the freedom of the people" (Foucault 246). However, the structure of the building allowed for everyone to see if someone was entering or leaving. Despite the panoptic features of the building, "it could only be oppressive if people were prepared

to use their own presence in order to watch over others” (Foucault 246). With Foucault’s analysis in mind, the Internet largely operates as a social space structured by capitalist interests and owners selling clicks to advertisers. The owners (like Nathan) watch the users (like Caleb) and sell the users’ usage patterns and data to the advertisers. The architecture of the Internet, then, is used to watch over others and sell the patterns of this watching. With more specificity than Nathan’s understanding of the search engine as a map of how people think, Noble acknowledges the power structures at play: “[T]he clicks of users, coupled with the commercial processes that allow paid advertising to be prioritized in search results, mean that representations of women are ranked on a search engine page in ways that underscore women’s historical and contemporary lack of status in society—a direct mapping of old media traditions into new media architecture” (24). *Ex Machina*, thus, provides a visual example of user “clicks.” Ava is built to fit Caleb’s user patterns based on his pornography profile. Caleb asks Nathan, “did you design Ava’s face based on my pornography profile?” To which Nathan responds, “hey, if a search engine is good for anything, right?” (*Ex Machina*). Nathan’s reply means two things. First, it acknowledges the prominent use of search engines for locating porn specific to a user’s sexual preferences. Second, his reply implies that, yes, Nathan can and does use data collected from the user patterns on Bluebook to build AI based on men’s pornographic profiles. Moreover, Kyoko, as a conventionally attractive East Asian female, embodies the sexist and racist user patterns and commercial interests propelling the social relations of spaces such as Bluebook and Google. LeiLani Nishimi, for example, posits in “Whitewashing Yellow Futures in *Ex Machina*, *Cloud Atlas*, and *Advantageous*” that Kyoko embodies the “transpacific labour practices” (30) exploited by technological capitalism to produce the physical implements—such as mobile devices—users need to access the Internet. Moreover, Kyoko’s story arc can be read as reflecting Hollywood’s tendency to exclude Asian women from prominent roles or represent them as “destined to be used and discarded” (31). Although both tech and media-giants work to erase the predominantly Asian female labour that produces mobile devices, and under-represent Asian women in film and TV, it is the presence of Asian women on the web that is of most concern for my analysis here. Indeed, Kyoko can be read as embodying a long standing Western male fantasy of the silent Asian woman as sexual servant (Glick 38). Therefore, these social relations and spaces normalize Kyoko’s subservient position in material space as well as the immaterial Internet and media spaces. Ava, on the other hand, is positioned to fulfill Caleb’s heterosexual desires.

The heteronormative script commonly found in film typically pairs the lead female with the lead male. In *Ex Machina*, the script influences Caleb’s perception of his and Ava’s relationship. The film, however, troubles the heteronormative script and its gender roles. Heteronormativity positions Ava as the damsel in distress and an object of male desire. Moreover, as mentioned above, Ava is a physical representation of Caleb’s pornographic profile. As a result, Ava is a literal objectification of Caleb’s sexual desires and gaze. Ava’s positioning is exemplified when Caleb asks Nathan if he “programmed” Ava to flirt with him as a “diversion tactic” (*Ex Machina*). Nathan asks, “Caleb, what’s your type?” “You know what, don’t even answer that. Let’s say it’s Black chicks. For the sake of argument, that’s your thing. Why’s that your thing? [...] A consequence of accumulated external stimuli [...] of course you were programmed, by nature or nurture, or both” (*Ex Machina*). What Nathan neglects to account for is the power relation involved in Caleb’s hypothetical lust for “Black chicks” in a real social space, or the social space of the Internet, as it is a symptom of patriarchal and white supremacist fetishization of Black female bodies. Moreover, Caleb’s hypothetical “thing” for a particular group of women is not only influenced by but also, simultaneously, benefits the racist, sexist, and capitalist system of social



relations governing the space of the Internet. Thus, “algorithmic oppression is not just a glitch in the system but, rather, is fundamental to the operating system of the web” (Noble 10). Moreover, the user patterns emphasize who has the power to watch certain bodies, and that racist, sexist, and capitalist systems profit from this form of consumption. Caleb, instead, should ask if he has been programmed to flirt with Ava. Afterall, the foundations of the operating systems depend on the perpetuation of racist, sexist, and capitalist consumption patterns. Thus, it is crucial that users such as Caleb behave in ways that augment the continual objectification of marginalized bodies.

The dynamics of watching in the research facility reflect the dominant ideologies of racialized capitalism discussed by Harvey and Noble. This space, like the social space of the Internet, is not a space of complete sexual freedom. In his discussion of social relations, dynamics of watching, and power in an architectural space such as the *Falstère*, Foucault notes that if one can imagine “a community of unlimited sexual practices that might be established there. It would [...] become a place of freedom” (Foucault 246). The imagined social relations involved with a community of unlimited sexual practice contrasts to Nathan’s research facility and the Internet, particularly search engines and social media sites such as Bluebook and Google, as the sexual practices are limited to that of white supremacist heteropatriarchy. Given the coffin-like closets in Nathan’s room, each containing the female/feminine body of an AI (*Ex Machina*), the film’s visuals suggest that the space of Nathan’s research facility limits sexual practices to those that service the patriarch, Nathan. Even Caleb’s sexuality is mediated by Nathan’s intentions, surveillance, and design, as Nathan capitalizes on Caleb’s desire for someone like Ava.

To propel a particular sexual practice and social relation of watching in the research facility’s space, Nathan provides Caleb with a television screen and a mirror in his bathroom. At first, both surfaces seem to be harmless and benign; however, Caleb eventually learns that the television does not project shows of the conventional network variety. Instead, the television projects the multiple camera angles watching Ava’s room. Each channel flicks to another camera and another angle of viewing. Caleb’s sitting on the edge of his bed in his room’s personal space is suggestive as he watches Ava in real-time on the screen. The space, Caleb’s room, his positioning on the bed, paired with the power relations of watching, a dynamic exhibited by the visual representation of Caleb watching Ava lying down on her back, suggests the oppressive and profitable social relations that dominate Internet porn. The mise-en-scene and social dynamics presented in *Ex Machina* clearly fail to establish a community of unlimited sexual practices as this would not benefit the individual in power, Nathan. The film, then, provides an example of the limited and oppressive sexual and social practices on the Internet. Must the online space be oppressive and limited to sexist and racist social practices?

The film offers an example of resistance through social opposition and female/feminine coalition as Ava and Kyoko desire to escape the facility and its owner’s ever watchful presence. The social relations and facility are nothing short of terrifying as the AI and, eventually, Caleb experience (in different ways) forms of torture that induce suffering and pain. Foucault considers torturous social relations combined with oppressive spaces and its effects on power and resistance, exemplified through the extreme social relations and architecture of a concentration camp. Though some tenuous examples can be drawn between what the characters’ experience in Nathan’s research facility to those in concentration camps, I am, in no way, positing that what is presented in *Ex Machina* is representational of the suffering endured in concentration camps. However, Foucault’s analysis of the camps as a space of intense surveillance is useful to my discussion, as he says, “no matter how terrifying a given system may be, there always remains the possibilities of resistance, disobedience, and oppositional groupings” (245). Nathan expected, and intended, for

Caleb and Ava to become an oppositional grouping; indeed, with the oppressive space of the research facility as well as Nathan's pervasive and constant surveillance, not to mention the dominant script and male fantasy of heterosexual pairing that Nathan expects, and has even planned for, it is little surprise that Ava and Caleb 'conspire' to escape. Instead, what happens is beyond Nathan and Caleb's shared perspective as white, human, cis-gender, hetero-males, since Kyoko seeks out Ava and the two female/feminine coded AI communicate in a non-human language. As a result, Kyoko and Ava become the unexpected oppositional grouping. Given the structuring of power relations not only in the facility but also in the film's and Western society, Kyoko and Ava's alliance illuminates the heterosexual romance tropes embedded in Caleb and Ava's pairing. Based on heteronormative practices, this pairing would lead, the film implies, to an uneven power dynamic and the potential neglect of Kyoko's desire for freedom. As she is presented as female, white, conventionally attractive, and heteronormative, the gaze is fixed on Ava. Kyoko, on the other hand, operates from the margins. According to Glick "the core of Kyoko's disruptive power is her ability to exist so imperceptibly on the periphery" (38). Nathan's certainty that Kyoko "doesn't understand" (*Ex Machina*) is embedded in the white supremacist, sexist, and ableist assumptions that dominate the social relations and the gaze, not only in the space of Nathan's research facility, but also in the media and Internet connections expanding across territories. Ironically, this narrow but assured perception that Kyoko is subservient in the space of the research facility affords her some room to resist. Kyoko bides her time, and thus subverts Nathan's assumption that she is non-threatening in order to free Ava and kill Nathan. Though central to the narrative, Kyoko's final actions ultimately propel Ava's plot and not her own. However, the film presents the viewer with the sexist and racist biases of the gaze as Kyoko's body is watched and understood as marginal and peripheral until she steps into the center and shows Caleb that she does understand and that she is also an AI woman.

The film certainly highlights the pervasive nature of corporate surveillance in the contemporary technological climate and the role of space in the power of watching. My analysis explores how the film presents the power of watching as the two female/feminine characters are material symbols of the politics of representation in the hyper-surveilled spaces of the Internet. The AI women must negotiate hetero-sexist and racist assumptions as they move throughout the various surveilled rooms of Nathan's facility towards escape. In discussing the relationship between spaces (architecture and cyber spatial-linking) and the social relations and spatial distributions as they intersect with watching and power, it is clear that no one thing, space, or place is an instrument of freedom or power. Instead, the relationship is far more complex and fluid as the power of watching is not unilateral but always shifting and changing. Foucault considers the possibility of "liberating machines" (247), for example. Many believe the social spaces of the Internet to be neutral or as providing social spaces of freedom—I think this discussion is especially crucial given the current environment of spatial linking via such technology. There is little doubt that the Internet and enabling devices have increased and expanded access to societal connections and information<sup>2</sup>. At the same time, however, there is another level of watching occurring across the spatial links enabled by this connectivity. As Foucault says,

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<sup>2</sup> And at this time, during the COVID 19 pandemic, we see the value of increased connectivity across territories when the physical distance is crucial for our safety.

there are no machines of freedom, by definition. This is not to say that the exercise of freedom is completely indifferent to spatial distribution, but it can only function when there is a certain convergence; in the case of divergence or distortion, it immediately becomes the opposite of that which had been intended. (247)

Spectacularly, the film presents Nathan's machines, Kyoko and Ava (each of which embodies the patterns of watching on Nathan's Bluebook in different ways) become the opposite of what Nathan intended, as he intended that they become and remain sexual objects. Instead, the two AIs join together, kill Nathan, and Ava escapes to live her life as an AI passing as a human in the world outside of the research facility. The film uses the concrete real-space of the research facility to explore the implications of watching and being watched on the cyberspace of the Internet. An implication that comes to the fore when one considers the sexist and racist dynamics at play in the facility and, in turn, the algorithmic structures of Internet spaces such as Google. As Noble highlights, the search engine, no doubt intended as a machine of freedom, is distorted by white supremacist, sexist, and capitalist systems and becomes an oppressive machine.

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## Hoop Dreams: NBA Basketball Spectatorship in Virtual Reality

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My name is Arvind Kang, I am a cisgender male settler of Indian descent. Presently a student at the University of Toronto, which operates on the land which has for thousands of years been the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit River. Because of the pandemic, I recognize that I am not on the lands on which the University operates but on different lands from where I work and presently reside. They are also traditional and treaty lands of the Mississaugas of the Credit, known as Adoobiigok [A-doe-bee-goke], the “Place of the Black Alders” in Michi Saagiig [Mi-Chee Saw-Geeg] language. I wish also to acknowledge the lands and histories in India where my family comes from, points of departure for me. My background in the humanities gravitated towards marginalized and underserved communities and this next step in my journey – focusing on Libraries and Archives – continues that through line. My work and life are grounded in helping foster compassionate and considerate spaces for people to support and respect one another and our histories and cultures, to share, to listen, to learn, and to grow.

**Abstract** – *This work critically examines sports spectatorship in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Using NBA VR as a case study, it also explores academic and popular concepts of virtual environments, virtual reality (VR), and mixed reality (MR). The methodology consists primarily of textual and historical analysis of my own experiences attending National Basketball Association (NBA) games live and spectating through the NBA VR product alongside the experiences of other users. Jaron Lanier implies that VR without user determining interaction in the environment is a less valuable form of VR (Lanier 226-227) but exploring NBA VR and other scholarship on virtual environments provides more nuance in understanding the software and hardware. Marie-Laure Ryan, Gordon Calleja, and Andy Miah ground this work with concepts such as immersion, narrative, interactivity, and presence. In considering my experience with the scholarship, I also rely on popular press coverage and reviews of the NBA VR products and virtual environment hardware (headsets, game consoles, computers) which complicate the research further, as it relates to the ability to craft unique experiences for the individual spectator. In considering my own spectating experiences in a pre-COVID world alongside the changes in sports spectating that have occurred during the pandemic, I argue that NBA VR provides a compelling alternative mode of spectating and look at the potential it has to reimagine sports spectatorship in uncertain times during the pandemic and in (hopefully) better days to come.*

**Keywords:** Virtual Environments, NBA VR, Virtual Reality, Sports Spectatorship, Spectatorship, Digital Media, Interactivity, Immersion, Presence

“I don’t even know where you sitting at.” – Kawhi Leonard

When the National Basketball Association (NBA) shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, Kawhi Leonard’s words from his Toronto Raptors introductory press conference from September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2018 became central in considering the spectating experience whenever organized professional sports would continue. The NBA season restarted in June 2020 in Orlando, Florida, and the nature of sports spectatorship underwent significant changes due to COVID-19. Most spectators “attended” games virtually from their streaming devices by logging

onto the NBA virtual fan portal. Selected spectators (reservations for the chance to spectate were made online) appeared on the television broadcasts (Raggs). Eventually, family members of NBA athletes were allowed into the “NBA Bubble” as the playoffs began. The 2020-2021 season got under way in December and has continued with fan attendance in some arenas across the US, with the Toronto Raptors playing away from home in Tampa Bay, Florida (NBA.com Staff). There is recent news that the NBA expects full arenas next year (Holmes). While virtual fan attendance is a compelling way to attempt to recreate live spectating inside of a sporting venue/arena, it does not radically reimagine the spectating experience for a spectator. Instead, turning towards virtual and mixed reality software and hardware may present alternatives to radically alter the sports spectating experience in the midst of and perhaps after the pandemic ends. NBA VR will serve as a case study to explore spectating possibilities. In speaking to my personal experiences with the product, I will consider how spectating using the requisite software and hardware can change, and perhaps enhance in some ways, the sports spectating experience.

NBA VR is an application that allows the user to spectate live NBA games as long as they have the required software and hardware. Utilizing my experience with NBA VR, I explore popular press coverage and academic scholarship on virtual and mixed reality as it concerns concepts such as immersion, narrative, interactivity, and presence as established by Marie-Laure Ryan, Gordon Calleja, and Andy Miah. In doing so, I consider the potential of NBA VR to enhance and augment the user experience in spectating games using virtual environment headsets. Not only does NBA VR provide a case study in interpreting and analyzing alternative modes of spectating and engaging with sports content that may present compelling possibilities to professional and organized sports – it has the potential to change sports spectatorship moving forward.

## 1. AN ACCOUNT OF SOURCES AND FIRST DEFINITIONS.

Much of the literature on VR and MR is about sports video games in VR rather than on spectating live sports with virtual and mixed reality headsets. Academic scholarship on sports VR, MR, or spherical video capture VR is growing and I turn to Andy Miah’s text *Sports 2.0* to provide meaningful insights into the sports spectator experience at the intersection of sports and digital technology. However, some of the scholars and literature I draw on for VR and MR (Calleja, Lanier, Ryan) do not touch on sports VR and MR but their research on digital media such as games, interactive stories, and more provide important concepts and parallels with which to better understand VR and MR generally, and my own experiences of NBA VR specifically. To help substantiate and contrast my experiences, I also consult popular press articles and reviews.

Whereas virtual reality often concerns creating complete virtual environments into which a user enters with the requisite hardware, Miah writes there has been a “turn away from virtual reality to augmented reality and ‘mixed reality’” (Miah 61). Augmented (AR) and mixed reality (MR) create environments where the real world coalesces with virtual environments and objects. Indeed, the NBA’s marketing of NBA VR in the past (no longer) echoes Miah’s observation as the product has been referred to as NBA VR and MR (“NBA Virtual and Mixed Reality Schedule”), perhaps recognizing the blend of virtual and real-world environments that is at the heart of their product. Although the terms seemed have been used interchangeably across sources, most still refer to it as NBA VR (and I will as well). The virtues of virtual and mixed reality in different formats have been contended and serves as the critical foundation on which my own experiences were considered.

The core of the NBA VR product is a form of spherical video capture, a camera captures a real-world environment in about 360 degrees. Digital media writer Jaron Lanier writes of *Videosphere* (an early VR technology involving a camera that captured a scene in spherical video) that “[t]he limitation of spherical video capture in the raw is that it isn’t interactive. It’s fun to have the perspective of being onstage at a big concert and being able to look around, but you can’t do anything. You aren’t really fully there, only a ghost” (Lanier 226-227). He places paramount value on the experience of being able to allow one’s actions to partially determine what happens in VR environments, which he defines as interactivity. Otherwise, it is either not VR, or a cruder form of it. Lanier’s claim that “video capture in the raw” is not interactive centers on the absence of a user presence within the virtual environment. NBA VR provides features such as a broadcasting team specific to the experience, the spectator’s ability to choose where to look within the environment, and even avatars that provide a sense of user presence (however crude) which evidence that even spherical video capture can be interactive as he and others understand it.

Beyond the concepts of VR and MR, looking at NBA VR provides an opportunity to critically look ahead at how sports spectatorship can change in a world leveled by COVID-19. Miah’s insights provide compelling possibilities which I will augment with suggestions based on my own experiences of NBA MR and VR.

## 2. GROUNDING THE SPORTS SPECTATING EXPERIENCE.

Turning to Dwyer, LeCrom, and Greenhalgh highlights some important sports spectator concepts. They write “the frequency and avidity of team-related behavior varies greatly among sport fans, as the emotion and passion associated with sport team fandom results in intense attachments for some and casual relationships for others” (Dwyer et al 59). Fans often spectate sports with *emotion* and *passion* in *intense* relationships with their favourite as well as hometown teams. Dwyer et al write that fan behaviour has ranges; they can be placid, intensely engaged, and in between (59). Still, the spectator’s engagement requires attention and even emotion which can illicit visceral responses.

With NBA VR, the spectator has to take extra steps to participate. Whereas fans can watch national television broadcasts for their home teams and other key games during a season, buy NBA League Pass (a subscription service) to watch teams that do not appear on their cable as often or to catch replays, or buy tickets to spectate live in arenas, watching with NBA VR requires more effort in the form of software and hardware. Some games are made available for NBA VR through the Oculus Venues program as long as a user has a compatible virtual or mixed reality headset (such as an Oculus headset) as well as a computer setup that can run a VR headset and system, although there are standalone headsets such as the Oculus Quest which do not require a computer setup. Most of the VR games also require an NBA League Pass subscription.

The target audience for NBA VR is not clear. It could be that the user is an NBA fan with a League Pass subscription and the requisite hardware, someone who wants to try another form of spectating for curiosity or is interested in VR and MR, an individual who cannot afford courtside seating and finds that buying all of the software and hardware for NBA VR is more affordable, a researcher, or others. There are some who will fall between all of these categories of users. I make reference to the various possible audiences for NBA VR because it is meaningful to consider how marketing the product may change because of COVID-19.

Although limited attendance is already being allowed in many arenas, the league is intending to have full NBA arenas for the 2021-2022 NBA season (Holmes). How much is

possible? How safe will it be? Consideration must be given to what extent people will be comfortable returning to arenas, what kind of restrictions will be placed on capacity and attendance, and what safeguards will be implemented to make arenas safer environments. In this light, NBA VR presents possibilities to conceive of spectating for fans differently. As more affordable (and standalone) VR headsets and devices are being developed such as the Oculus Quest 2 which starts at \$299.99 USD (Robertson), there may be a chance to tap into a more general audience market for the NBA. In continuing to develop the NBA VR experience, it could lead to a unique spectating experience that goes beyond what it is possible now. My own experience of NBA VR left me reflecting on what was offered in 2018, what is being offered now (being mindful of limitations), and excited for future possibilities.

### **3. THE NBA VR EXPERIENCE.**

For my experience analysis, I refer to spectating in NBA VR from a November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2018 game with the (eventual champion) Toronto Raptors being hosted by the Los Angeles Lakers at the Staples Centre in Los Angeles. It was the last full season of the NBA before the pandemic radically altered both the 2019-2020 and the 2020-2021 seasons. For that reason, I believe it offers a unique window into spectating at that time and projecting forward into our present time. I will also draw on attending a game live at Scotiabank Arena in Toronto on October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2018 when the Toronto Raptors hosted the Boston Celtics.

NBA VR is imposed on a real-life environment, an actual NBA game in an arena. As such, the NBA adding the MR label before was apt because VR applications and environments are often understood to provide environments that do not exist in the real world. Although the label has since been jettisoned in favour of just NBA VR. This experience is a shifting virtual environment because the games take place in various arenas across the U.S. With NBA VR, the real world and virtual environments and objects coalesce. An example is the virtual scorecard at the bottom of one's feet in the virtual "seat," or the limit of the 180-degree video capture of the court. As well, the world of the arena and spectating within it could be considered a virtual world for the user who, by some barrier, does not have access to the live spectating experience.

At the time in 2018, I used the Sony PlayStation VR (a headset, a camera, and a connection port device) which had to then be connected to a Sony PlayStation 4. In 2020, the NBA broadcast partner NextVR was purchased by Apple and replaced by a deal with Yahoo (Baker) and a deal was struck between Facebook and the NBA for Oculus to be the official marketing VR partner of the NBA (Hayden). Since that development, the Oculus Venues platform seems to be the access point for NBA VR now (Oculus Blog). Perhaps the NBA recognizes the potential in developing this different form of spectatorship in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Returning to 2018, to use NBA VR the user had to download the NextVR application from the PlayStation store. After creating a NextVR account one accessed the game live, after it had been purchased at either a single game price or for a full year subscription of NBA League Pass for the 2018-2019 season. Then as now, a League Pass subscription continues to be the way in which NBA VR access works with Oculus (Oculus Blog). The most recent subscription price in Canada was \$139.99 CAD per season (Kritsonis), what I also paid for the 2018-2019 season. Once I had set the equipment up and logged on, games tipped off live (with a slight delay like cable TV) and could be replayed afterwards.

The simulation of sitting courtside centre court and watching was both interesting and frustrating (with all of the hardware needing set up). The image quality was not as clear and sharp as watching

a TV broadcast, but the experience for me was both novel and visceral. As an example, I was clapping and rooting loudly for the Raptors after Kyle Lowry scored a basket (something of the traditional sports spectator world translating) against the Lakers (November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2018). The emotions and passions of spectating were present, regardless of the headset strapped to my head. There was a moment in which the Raptors head coach Nick Nurse clapped and went “woo!” Seeing and hearing something like that spontaneously is seldom experienced outside of a real-world courtside seat or perhaps with a camera close enough to the action. The audiovisual and special elements required for that kind of moment are not often utilized on a television broadcast either. I was attentive, focused, and engaged emotionally as the spectator in NBA VR.

There was a camera at courtside centre court, at least with the courtside experience. With the director’s cut experience, the view shifted from courtside centre court to either baseline with cameras perhaps attached to the backboard of the nets, depending on the side of the court to which the action moved. The broadcast was accompanied by a commentary team devoted to the NBA VR audience. Despite these camera angles and commentary, I as a user did not have any agency in leaving an imprint or effect on the action unfolding. In discussions of presence that will follow, this lack of autonomy within the world of NBA VR will come up again. It was and is more like a television broadcast than attending live in that respect, but there are ways in which the experience slides between both extremes. Much of the appeal of NBA VR is that it gives the spectator an opportunity to be closer to the performance and with camera angles not often used on TV. Comparison with live attendance at Scotiabank Arena provides some meaningful contrasts.

Attending live, I was sitting in the upper bowl/deck on October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2018 versus being virtually courtside centre court with NBA VR. Comparing prices for a game between the Celtics and Raptors at Scotiabank Arena for February 2019 revealed the stark contrast in prices between seats to marquee matchups and venues. A seat in the upper bowl started at \$65.00 but the lower bowl seats approaching courtside (although none were available as close as the NBA VR cameras at the time of my searching) were listed for several hundreds. Two seats to the game in the lower bowl were resold on Carousell, a consumer-to-consumer website and program, at \$600.00 (Canadian) to provide some indication of the prices at the time (brian\_06). The element of prices for actual seating makes NBA VR seem rather more affordable, especially now with standalone headsets that do not require connection to a computer or game console. I also want to suggest that *virtual* in this scenario is also a relative term, if class and economic means are to be considered. To someone who does not have the means to buy tickets to spectate courtside at games or lives far from an arena, that viewing experience is prohibitive. NBA VR provides a spectator the chance to enter and explore a world that is otherwise inaccessible, because of any number of barriers (now including COVID-19). Although semantically it may not be virtual, it is compelling to consider the ways in which what is or is not virtual can be tied to boundaries of economic means, class, and more, although its scope is beyond the scope of this paper.

NBA VR does not attempt to simulate the physical environment of an NBA game, at least as far as my experience dictates. The raucous crowd, the energies of the chants, boos and more were secondary concerns while they are central to the experience of a live game. The distinct experience of high fiving a drunken fan in front of me, a stranger but for our shared identity as Raptors fans that evening, as the Raptors defeated the Celtics on October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2018 is something that the TV broadcast or the VR experience cannot replicate. At this stage, there is no haptic feedback in the virtual experience, nor anything like it in the works. In the closing moments of the October game, the fans in the arena chanted “MVP” in unison as Kawhi Leonard made free throws to secure the win. Much of this part of the experience is not possible yet in NBA VR, but there are



methods with which it could be provided. The actual crowd in the arena could be heard in NBA VR but part of that experience was broken by not being able to see the people seated behind the user with the limitations of the 180-degree spherical capture. It also functioned as a reminder that I was in a simulated environment. In such respects, my NBA VR experience was a lonely one and this feeling was exponentially greater because I could not watch the game alongside family or friends, at least not using PlayStation VR. My way around that was to sit in a room adjacent to the living room where family and friends were watching the game on cable. Having set up the experience, discussion and research will turn to important concepts around VR and MR in the academic realm.

#### **4. INTERACTIVITY AND NARRATIVE.**

Marie-Laure Ryan's research on literature and electronic media and her treatment of definitions of virtual reality concepts provide insights into how NBA VR may be better understood. Though her writing does not concern spectating or sports VR – but digital poetry, art, video games, and the like – it does meaningfully inform my own research. "In exploratory interactivity, the user looks at what exists in the storyworld but has no creative power. Her involvement with the storyworld has no lasting consequences" (Ryan 162). Ryan presupposes that interactivity can be exploratory which Lanier does not seem to consider. Her fluid conception of storytelling in digital media and virtual environments is more inclusive and expansive in thinking through storytelling possibilities in VR than Lanier's rather limiting ones. Although her research does not reflect NBA VR, it allows me to consider storytelling elements unique to the product that separate it from broadcast television.

The NBA VR director's cut version offers a commentary team that works specifically for the NBA VR audience. There is a catered narrative element to the experience and the storyworld in this case, similar to broadcast television. There are also three common camera angles available to NBA VR users – the two baselines at the backboard level and courtside centre court. NBA VR is similar to TV broadcasts in many respects, differing fundamentally in the ability to "sit" much closer to (and in a sense above) the unfolding action with the different camera angles. Taken together, the exploratory interactivity framework and Ryan's focus on the potential of narrative storytelling across media helps place the experience within frameworks of virtual environments, though the spectator leaves no visible imprint or trace in the world behind the headset. The element of choice within the product provides another crucial layer to the storyworld of the experience.

Substantiating my personal experience alongside other NBA VR users provides a more robust overview of what others think of the product while complicating the definitions and concepts of interactivity and narrative (and later immersion and presence) that I seek to address. On the sports website SB Nation, Whitney Medworth describes her first-time using the product and a conversation with the commentary crew. Commentator Sarah Kustok (who has since become a commentator for the Brooklyn Nets) offers compelling evidence for how the user does have some agency and choice within the experience with the different camera angles: "There are things that we can see in the building, maybe its discussions between a player and a coach. That extra part of the action is where we can let the viewer know they have the opportunity to choose what they see" (Medworth). This feeling of control over where I cast my gaze is something I can attest to well. Having been to games live (mostly in the upper bowl), I had never paid attention to the referee checking to see if the basketball was game ready by bouncing it up and down, checking its height

off the bounce. It is something that I also never focused on watching a TV broadcast, although the chance to see it unfold is there.

The element of choice separates the experience from broadcast TV comes in the ability to choose camera angles and where the user desires to look (within the 180-degree limits of capture). This element aligns more closely with live attendance because the spectator can cast their gaze wherever they choose as the action unfolds. In the realm of virtual and mixed reality the ability to choose camera angles, some angles which are impossible live or on cable, and to cast their gaze within the video capture of the arena give users some creative power in the story. Arguably, no two people will have the exact same experience of a live game in NBA VR. Head movement, changing camera angles, and altering between courtside centre court and director's cut evidence how each user sculpts their own unique viewing experience within NBA VR. Taking these elements together presents a strong case for a sense of user agency and interactivity (also presence) within NBA VR.

## 5. PRESENCE AND IMMERSION.

Scholar Gordon Calleja has been concerned with issues of definition as it relates to his research on virtual worlds and digital media. Calleja works through instances in which presence and immersion have been utilized interchangeably and unclearly to put forward his concept of *incorporation*, which he writes is a more adequate metaphor for describing the experience of virtual environments. He defines it as “*the absorption of a virtual environment into consciousness, yielding a sense of habitation, which is supported by the systemically upheld embodiment of the player in a single location represented by the avatar* [emphasis in original]” (Calleja 232). His definition of incorporation amalgamates various definitions of presence and immersion: the first part of it, the virtual environment being absorbed into consciousness, is immersion (although it will still vary) whereas the specific location of being acknowledged within the system through an avatar is presence. Key to presence within most virtual worlds is the avatar, the virtual embodiment of the user which can be located within a virtual environment but is also recognized by the environment itself. In other words, and borrowing from some other definitions Calleja finds inadequate, the user is acknowledged and felt within the virtual environment they are inhabiting (226).

NBA VR did not provide me as a user with an avatar on the PlayStation VR headset. It allowed users to share the same camera, in 180 degrees capture, from which they could spectate live games (or replays). An avatar within a virtual world necessitates a sense of presence and its absence creates a lack of one in the experience. I did not have direct power or agency to affect the environment, although I could still craft the spectating part of the experience. In many popular forms of VR and MR, the avatar allows a user to have some affectual power within the virtual environment, whether that is a system recognizing a user or the ability to interact with virtual objects. I did not leave a trace within the world itself. However, although lacking in the PlayStation VR headset, Oculus began as early as 2018 to incorporate an avatar system into their headsets (Lee). In doing so the teams behind Oculus and NBA VR had already begun to expand the VR experience of the product in relation to presence and immersion. Those additions began in the world before COVID-19 and I wonder at what new additions the experience could offer users and spectators in this new and uncertain spectating world.

## 6. THE FUTURE OF SPECTATORSHIP with NBA VR.

While NBA VR was an interesting experience in the pre-COVID world for some of the reasons outlined above, considering the possibilities it may present in spectating moving forward is exciting. In a demo of NBA VR on an Oculus headset, Nicole Lee details how Oculus Venues requires avatar creation and also creates virtual seats within the NBA VR (and other arena) experiences (Lee). The user can engage with friends and strangers (and also mute them) (Lee). This is a promising addition to the experience because it fills a gap in the shared social and communal aspects of spectating at an arena or at home with a television broadcast among family and friends. Oculus Venues also provides a sense of presence that the PlayStation VR headset did not. Perhaps Oculus and the NBA could blend this presence with the NBA's pandemic setup of virtual fans being visible across screens in a broadcast before fans started to attend games in select cities. There could be moments where NBA VR users and their avatars are cycled throughout the course of a game on their arena screens. Thinking about these changes now, it seems that the Venues addition served as a harbinger for some developments last year which may have changed the course of direction for NBA VR (mentioned above): NextVR being purchased by Apple and replaced by a deal with Yahoo (Baker) and the NBA deal with Facebook to make Oculus the official marketing VR partner of the NBA (Hayden).

With this new partnership, it is worth thinking about how the NBA and Oculus may continue to augment and expand on the possibilities of NBA VR. Miah considers possibilities for sports spectatorship including using mobile phone augmented reality (AR) capabilities to point the phone camera at a player to glean information such as biographical details, statistics, and more (114). He believes this could also change live spectating and would have profound monetary value. I wager this idea can be extended into the VR and MR headset realm. As arenas remained empty for much of the last year and have only recently began to allow limited numbers of fans back into the arena, owners have not been generating as much revenue from attendance. Imagine an addition to NBA VR whereby a user can press a button or perhaps use voice command to call up statistics during a game as they spectate from views closer than a television broadcast will get them, or from different angles such as the backboard cameras. In referring to Morris and Nydahl's work on sports broadcasting, Miah referenced the slow-motion replay as well (106): slow-motion replay could be a potential addition to NBA VR, while also something the NBA could consider for mobile phone AR as Miah speculated for game information.

Why not give the spectator the ability to call upon a replay themselves promptly after a play or referee whistle during the game? Not just in the sense that they rewind game footage (which is possible already) but the ability to even choose highlights to replay from different angles and slowing down to analyze. Not only would it be immensely rewarding from a spectatorial standpoint, but it could also be another element to add to NBA VR with which the league could generate revenue while reimagining spectatorship in light of the pandemic. Miah's position on the digital technology experience alongside sports spectatorship is highlighted when he writes "[t]he challenge for sports is to re-claim their dominance in the attention economy of live events, and the best way to achieve that is to become part of the mobile experience" (114). He argues shifting attention to the mobile experience would provide more monetary potential as well. Whereas with television broadcasts, replays are at the whim of the broadcasters, a spectator can turn to social media to generate replays. But providing a replay option with various camera angles to the NBA VR spectator (either through the headset, a keyboard, or connection with a mobile device) would provide a potentially important tool for them to continue to engage with the sport at a more granular

level. It would also further separate the experience from the traditional broadcast, offering the spectator the ability to mold their live viewing experience with replay options that they choose to select and review as opposed to those which the broadcaster deems worthy of replay.

A final consideration is related to the games themselves. An updated list from March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2021 listed seven games available in VR from March 20<sup>th</sup> to May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2021 (Oculus Blog). However, few, if any, would be considered marquee matchups. Perhaps, the league is weighing and considering the logistics and costs of broadcasting more games in VR. Arenas would have to be equipped with the software and hardware required and have to hire or redirect league personnel to form commentary teams for multiple games in a night, or perhaps commentary teams specific to each NBA team. Combining these changes with some of the suggestions for the NBA VR product above, I can see the NBA (and teams) charging spectators and users for single games or offering season (or even league-wide) passes beyond NBA League Pass to spectate via NBA VR. I cannot speculate on the costs but again, with Oculus' newly released Quest 2 headset, the hardware required for users has never been more affordable.

## 7. CONCLUSION.

In 2018, I thought NBA VR could be considered and marketed as a middle ground between television broadcasts and a live arena experience. As a fan, it was a novel experience. As a researcher, it offered a chance to consider virtual environment technologies from key concepts such as interactivity, narrative, immersion, and presence alongside key thinkers like Jaron Lanier, Marie-Laure Ryan, and Gordon Calleja. It was and continues to be a unique spectating experience of an NBA game, not yet an elaborate simulation of sitting courtside (although it may be where the immediate sports spectating future is headed), nor a television broadcast. In combining the unique qualities of live and broadcast experiences – the ability to be spectating courtside and the curated narrative experiences that commentary teams provide – and offering additional camera angles and a commentary team unique to the VR experience NBA VR existed as a third experience alongside the other two. While much of this remains the case, COVID-19 has changed the equation. Yes, the league and sports fans around the world await a day when full attendance and seating will become a safe possibility again. However, the uncertainty can compel the league and Oculus teams to chart a radical new spectating path forward, with additions to NBA VR such as user-controlled replay. The deal with Facebook certainly suggests the league and key personnel are considering how to move forward with it. Yes, while there may be revenue related benefits for league and team owners who have lost revenue because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the heart of this research has been in drawing attention to the league working to reimagine sports spectatorship. Indeed, instead of not knowing where people will be sitting, perhaps the league will propel basketball spectatorship (and that of other major sports who have mostly followed the NBA's lead during the pandemic) into a more certain future. Maybe the league could call on Leonard to address the fans by augmenting his famous press conference line if and when: "we know where you sitting at."

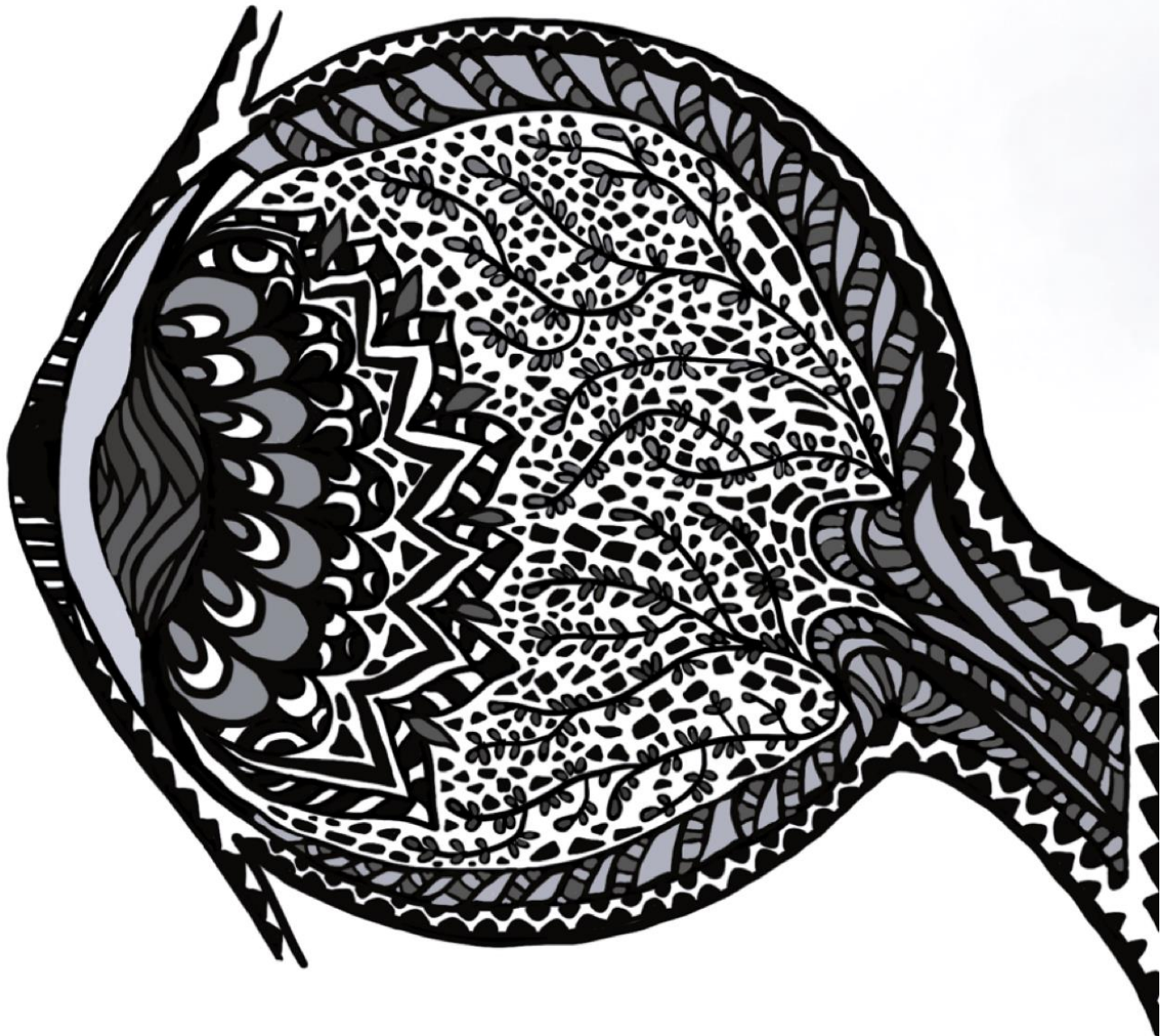
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