POLIS

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Letters from the Team

It has been an honour to lead this team together. As two of the founding members of the journal we have had the absolute pleasure of watching this journal evolve over the past two years. We have undergone constant adaptation in order to find a balance between efficiency and making the journal a welcoming environment for people to grow and gain publishing experience. But above all, POLIS has been a place of community. We have made so many memories: playing pool, lime scootering because the bus didn't show up, sharing pizza on commercial drive, and spending long days together editing our final volumes. These moments have solidified POLIS as so much more than a journal for us, it has become a group of friends.

We would like to thank all the team members over the past year who have contributed to this volume. We have all spent hours on the uncomfortable couches in the Ellen Gee room, burnt out and exhausted from classes, working, and witnessing the global rise of fascism (thanks neoliberalism for setting us up for that). Yet week after week, this team has constantly shown up. This team has put their blood, sweat, and tears into the journal, and in response we have created bonds with each other that will last long into the future, both inside and outside academia. POLIS represents a project that was created by undergraduates, for undergraduates, and on the terms of undergraduates. We are so grateful for the opportunity to build community, friendship, and our own Polis at SFU.

—Xander & Ariana, Co-Editors-in-Chief

These last two semesters as an Editor, have allowed me to work alongside the most dedicated, hard-working, and thoughtful team, who all share a vision to uplift and amplify interdisciplinary undergraduate researchers. It has been a privilege to work on this issue of POLIS, as this experience has allowed me to grow as a person and a scholar-in-training. I am so excited for everyone to read this issue, and I look forward to continuing my work as Editor in the coming semesters! ***—Tejas, Editor***

It has been a joy having the opportunity to have been a part of the POLIS team for the past year! I feel really lucky to have met and learned so much from such a brilliant group of students. ***—Maria, Reviewer***

Having the opportunity to be part of POLIS has been a great experience. Not only was I part of an amazing group of intelligent and kind-hearted people, but I also had the opportunity to engage with the research interests of fellow undergraduate students. Being part of such an amazing team allowed me to learn about what others are passionate about, giving me a deeper sense of what is happening in the world and how different people make sense of it through their work. ***— Juan Pablo, Editor***

My experience at POLIS has been a crescendo of academic dedication and true community. The experiences in the spaces and pathways within the journal are a direct manifestation from the amazingly passionate POLIS team. The POLIS team has grown to be one of my favourite circles in my academic journey! If you love brilliance, friendship, and dedication, POLIS is where you should be. ***—Grace, Designer***

I have learned so much from my peers during my time in POLIS. Authors and journal staff are so knowledgeable, so passionate, and I am in awe of them every day. Thank you for showing up and teaching each other! ***—Ny, Admin & Reviewer***

In the two years I've been a part of the POLIS team, we have accepted and published a range of works that I'm proud to put forward. I'm also ecstatic to have seen the journal grow, with this term having the largest editorial team so far. It has been an honour to have worked with such passionate, dedicated students and to see the product of our collective efforts, and I can't wait to see what future volumes hold. ***—Sofia, Editor & Reviewer***

I'm truly grateful for my experience working with POLIS over the past few semesters. Not only have I gained experience in editing, reviewing, and publishing academic works, but I've made new friendships which I will cherish forever. Cheers to all the amazing people who put in countless hours of work to make this journal possible! ***—Sadie, Reviewer***

The opportunity to work with POLIS this semester has been a rewarding endeavour that both challenged me and was a great joy to participate in. The team has been wonderful and fostered a true sense of community. It is my sincere wish that readers find as much felicity in engaging with this volume as I did in helping bring it to fruition. ***—Henry, Reviewer***

Being part of the POLIS team has allowed me to engage with academic literature in ways I haven't previously. The members of the team have been inspirational and provided fantastic insight and friendship through my learning process. I feel pride in being part of this journal that allows for undergraduate voices to be shared in academia. I'm feeling stoked for the future of POLIS, so please submit your papers!! ***—Kaelan, Reviewer***

Being part of POLIS' first and second publication is such a special experience. I've learnt so much about the publishing process from the perspective of different positions and our intelligent journal members. To be grateful for POLIS, as a platform for amplifying student voices and discussing current social issues, is truly an understatement during the rise of fascism in the West. Thank you to our co-editors in chief, Xander and Ariana, for steadily guiding us to our second publication. ***—Allyson, Editor & Designer***

Being a part of POLIS has been, without a doubt, one of the best parts of my university experience. From starting the journal from the ground up to being around for each new "generation," I'm so proud of the intellectual space we have created for undergrads and more importantly, the foundations of a caring and vibrant community. POLIS forever and ever! ***—Erin, Editor & Designer***

My time as a reviewer with POLIS has provided me with unique opportunities to critically engage with academic work focused on social issues that student authors connect with. I thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to review student works that apply a scholarly lens to prevalent social issues, sparking passion and provoking further curiosity within the reader. The people behind POLIS are wonderfully creative and insightful, fostering a collaborative and inclusive space. I would like to express my gratitude towards the team for their kindness and the positive community they continue to create while pouring incredible amounts of time and effort into the amplification of student voices in academia.
—Claire, Reviewer

Anti-Colonial Resistance and Resurgence

The Weight of Silence: Colonial Erasure and the Politics of Being Silenced. POLIS: Journal of Society and Culture, Vol. 2, Issue 1, 2026. © Urvi Ghose

The Weight of Silence: Colonial Erasure and the Politics of Being Silenced

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Abstract

This paper explores the political dimensions of silence in Indigenous resistance and mourning, particularly among Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQ+ people in Canada. Drawing on the concept of quiet theatre (Kazubowski-Houston, 2018), anonymous care (Stevenson, 2014), refusal (Simpson, 2014), and Granek's (2014) analysis of activist grief, it examines how silence can be both a survival strategy and a symptom of systemic violence. The REDress installations and public vigils serve as an example of the ways in which silence is used to expose injustice while simultaneously reflecting the failure of institutions to listen. This paper critiques how symbolic gestures of "listening" can be assimilated by settler states as performances of empathy rather than meaningful responses, and why pain has to be performed in order to be acknowledged. Silence, whether chosen or imposed, must be

understood as political; true justice means to dismantle the conditions that demand silence in the first place.

Keywords: Silence, resistance, colonialism, mourning, refusal

Silence can be understood as the absence of action, speech, or protest, which I argue is a form of passivity in mainstream settler-colonial spaces. But, for many marginalized communities, particularly Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQ+ people in Canada, silence is anything but empty. Silence is both a chosen practice of resistance and an imposed form of colonial violence. It can be a strategy of survival, and sometimes, the only form of resistance left. Ethnographer Magdalena Kazubowski-Houston (2018) refers to this expression of resistance as quiet theatre: a mode of engagement where stillness and waiting can carry grief, memory, and defiance. Her work with older Romani women in Poland shows how meaning can be created through gestures and pauses when traditional activism or speech is not safe or possible. Like Indigenous Peoples in Canada, Romani communities in Europe have historically faced systemic marginalization, forced displacement, and the suppression of their cultural practices by dominant state structures, conditions that make more conventional forms of protest dangerous or inaccessible. This shared experience of structural silencing across different colonial and racial contexts is exactly what makes quiet theatre a useful framework for thinking about how Indigenous Peoples in Canada navigate grief and resistance when speech alone is insufficient or unsafe.

Kazubowski-Houston's (2018) framework of quiet theatre can help conceptualize how Indigenous communities across Canada use absence as a way to expose violence. Memorial vigils for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and 2SLGBTQ+ people (MMIWG2S) are an example of absence as resistance. While silent forms of resistance can be powerful, the necessity of such forms of resistance, reflects the structural abandonment they respond to. Honouring silence means not just hearing it but dismantling the conditions that make it necessary. To do this, I critique how symbolic gestures of "listening" are often assimilated by settler states into performances of empathy rather than structural change. I argue that silence operates both as a survival strategy and as evidence of systemic colonial violence. To explore the political dimensions of silence in these contexts, I examine four contrasting scholarly approaches, Kazubowski-Houston's (2018) quiet theatre, Stevenson's (2014) anonymous care, Simpson's (2014) refusal, and Granek's (2014) activist grief, and relate them to Indigenous-led practices such as the REDress Project and public vigils.

Positionality and Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge that this work was researched and written on the unceded, ancestral territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) Peoples. Simon Fraser University, where I study, is also located on the lands of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish), and səl̓ílwətaʔɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. Unceded means that this land was never surrendered, relinquished, or handed over in any treaty, and that its occupation is ongoing and settler-colonial in nature.

As a second-generation immigrant who is not of Indigenous ancestry, I benefit from systems and structures that continue to dispossess Indigenous Peoples. Writing about silence, mourning, and resistance in Indigenous communities as a settler means being cautious not to appropriate or speak over the lived experiences of Indigenous Peoples,while also being aware that these issues are not abstract, they are ones that people live through every day. It also means using my position to amplify the urgency of Indigenous-led calls for justice, land back, and systemic change.

I also recognize that land acknowledgements must go beyond words and reflect a commitment to action that challenges colonial systems in both scholarship and daily life. This work is not intended to speak for Indigenous Peoples, but to reflect critically on how settler-colonial systems produce the very conditions that make silence as a form of resistance necessary. My aim is to contribute to larger efforts of decolonization and accountability.

Silence as Indigenous Resistance, Survival, and Refusal

Quiet Theatre: Silence as Political Expression

Kazubowski-Houston's (2018) concept of quiet theatre developed from her long-term fieldwork with older Romani women, particularly one participant, Randia. Rather than using traditional interviews or observation, Kazubowski-Houston (2018) and Randia co-created improvised theatrical scenes, many of which blurred the line between reality and fiction. In these scenes, Randia often played Córka, an older woman abandoned by her family, while Kazubowski-Houston (2018)

played secondary roles like neighbours. The performances were not about extracting information but sharing space, producing meaning through silence, waiting, and gesture (Kazubowski-Houston, 2018).

Quiet theatre challenges the expectation that activism must be loud or that ethnography must revolve around speech (Kazubowski-Houston, 2018). In one scene, Randia (as Córka) quietly prepares food while a clock ticks in the background, no words are spoken, but the atmosphere is full of longing and grief (Kazubowski-Houston, 2018). Eventually, Córka speaks, not to explain the silence, but to reveal that she's waiting for someone, anyone, to break her loneliness, maybe even the ghost of her daughter who died of hunger (Kazubowski-Houston, 2018, p. 411). The silence makes Randia's (and Córka's) grief and abandonment understandable on her own terms (Kazubowski-Houston, 2018).

Through these encounters, Kazubowski-Houston (2018) rethinks what counts as political engagement. Listening, witnessing, and simply sitting with another person becomes radical acts. Quiet theatre shows that silence can also make space for presence, an alternative to traditional ethnographic methods of interviewing and note-taking. Its power is necessary because marginalized people are forced to turn to silence for their survival, and the desire to seek visibility in this way reflects the failure of existing systems to hear them otherwise. While quiet theatre demonstrates how silence can hold grief and meaning within intimate ethnographic encounters (Kazubowski-Houston, 2018), Indigenous artists and communities similarly mobilize absence in public space to expose colonial violence and demand accountability.

Grief Made Visible: Indigenous-Led Performances of Absence

Indigenous artists and communities have created performances that reappropriate this absence through symbolic and spatial acts of resistance. Jaime Black's REDress Project features empty red dresses hung in public spaces, representing missing women (n.d.). The dresses do not speak or explain. They simply hang, fluttering in the wind, inviting witnesses to feel what words cannot convey. Like scenes in quiet theatre, their power comes from restraint. But, unlike Kazubowski-Houston's (2018) work, these performances are born not only from personal grief, but from systemic neglect.

Acts of mourning, such as the REDress Project and community vigils, can also be understood through Granek's (2014) concept of Mourning Sickness Type III: Activating Grief. In this model, grief becomes a political tool, mobilized to push for justice, reconciliation, and social change (Granek, 2014). Instead of remaining private, grief is made public and collective, like the red dresses fluttering in the wind, offering an alternative to state-sanctioned silence. As Granek (2014) notes, this kind of mourning turns personal and shared loss into a "powerful catalyst toward demanding and instituting positive social change" (p. 66). These Indigenous-led performances are not only responses to violence but expressions of survival, resilience, and hope; grief made active to demand visibility and justice.

Indigenous Silence as Strategic Refusal

Not all silence stems from being silenced. Audra Simpson (2014) draws an important distinction between recognition and refusal. Recognition demands visibility, testimony, and exposure to be deemed worthy of support, while refusal rejects these terms altogether (Simpson, 2014). Refusal does not seek validation from the settler state, it asserts sovereignty by disengaging from structures that

demand participation on unequal terms. In this sense, refusal can resemble silence, but it is a strategic silence. Drawing on Simpson's framework, we can understand Indigenous families who decline to participate in inquiries or commemorative events as enacting a form of refusal; their absence is critique, not disengagement. Refusal interrupts the settler-colonial narrative that reduces Indigenous life to either victimhood or reconciliation. It demands that communities be seen not for their suffering, but on their own terms.

Refusal complicates the politics of silence. It shows that silence can have meaning, not because it invites interpretation, but because it withholds it. Refusal challenges the idea that justice requires storytelling, and asks why pain has to be performed to be acknowledged (Simpson, 2014). The politics of refusal also force us to consider what counts as presence. Participation in state-led processes can be seen as evidence of engagement, while silence is seen as disengagement or apathy. This view privileges settler timelines and systems. Refusal suggests that real engagement might look like non-participation (Simpson, 2014). It asks whether it is possible to build justice without always performing grief, and whether communities can assert sovereignty by choosing absence (Simpson, 2014). This perspective challenges us to rethink how we measure responsiveness, and who benefits from being listened to. At the same time, silence as refusal is vulnerable to misinterpretation when placed in public, settler-dominated spaces. For audiences without the historical or political literacy to read refusal as critique, these gestures can be misread as aesthetic, passive, or even symbolically apathetic through a perceived lack of action. This interpretive gap shows how refusal can be powerful while still being assimilated or flattened by settler spectatorship. Rather than expecting visibility or narratives of pain as

proof, allies must learn to respect silence without demanding explanation. This includes creating space for absence, discomfort, and non-response as its own form of presence, and allows refusal to become an invitation to rethink how we view support.

Silence as Colonial Violence and Structural Erasure

State-Imposed Silence and Structural Neglect

The silence in quiet theatre echoes the silences imposed on Indigenous communities by settler-colonial institutions. *The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls* (National Inquiry into MMIWG, 2019a) details how families are met with silence at nearly every level of , from law enforcement and social services to media and government agencies. This is illustrated through reports of being ignored by police, left out of investigations, or forced to conduct their own searches and vigils (National Inquiry into MMIWG, 2019a). Here, silence is not chosen; it is enforced.

The Inquiry's report emphasizes that the silence Indigenous families experience is not accidental; it is the product of institutions that are structured to dismiss them (National Inquiry into MMIWG, 2019a). Policing, health care, and child welfare systems all operate through embedded racism and sexism. They do not just fail to act, they actively produce silence by discrediting complaints, withholding information, and denying access to justice (National Inquiry into MMIWG, 2019b). The result is a silence that harms.

The experience of imposed silence is also an exhausting one. The cycle of explaining, testifying, and proving their pain to an unresponsive system becomes its own kind of violence. Silence is not only what institutions impose; it is also what communities must retreat to in order to preserve themselves. When each vigil, protest, or inquiry fails to deliver justice, the burden of advocacy increases. Silence is not only the language of loss but that of repeated erasure.

Anonymous Care: Performative Listening and Managed Grief

Lisa Stevenson (2014) introduces the concept of anonymous care to describe how the Canadian state governs through affect. In her work with Inuit communities, Stevenson (2014) shows how bureaucracies perform care through paperwork, wellness checks, and gestures of support, while leaving structural violence intact. This logic of care replaces justice with documentation (Stevenson, 2014).

This dynamic is visible in how Indigenous families are treated in the aftermath of violence. Institutions may offer condolences or host commemorative events, but these often become performances of concern rather than commitments to change (Stevenson, 2014). As Stevenson (2014) notes, care can be a way of managing grief without addressing its cause. Silence becomes institutionalized, not through absence, but through the performance of empathy to avoid accountability (Stevenson, 2014).

Like quiet theatre, this performance of empathy relies on restraint, where quiet theatre resists erasure, bureaucratic silence protects power (Kazubowski-Houston, 2018; Stevenson, 2014). The state

appears to listen, but it listens selectively, absorbing grief into inquiry reports, public statements, and reconciliation frameworks that ultimately leave core systems untouched (Stevenson, 2014).

Witnessing and the Limits of Symbolism

Recently, silence has become something to witness, display, and commemorate. From art installations to moments of silence at public events, there is growing attention to symbolic listening. But as Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) caution, such gestures can become "moves to innocence" actions that make settlers feel involved without confronting power. The risk is that silence could become aestheticized and lose its power and intention as a form of institutional critique (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Hunt (2014) warns that Indigenous presence can be reduced to a 'triviality' or 'trinket' within settler institutions, highlighting how representational engagement can displace the material responsibilities that decolonial action requires. When red handprints or empty red dresses are circulated widely, their meanings can be diluted and diminished, inducing sympathy, not action. This is not to dismiss the importance of art or protest, but to question how easily they can be taken up by systems that focus more on emotions and affective politics than real change. Another risk is that as silent protest becomes more common in media and public institutions, it risks being stripped of urgency. Silence can lose its edge when it is no longer followed by demands for change. Repetition can dull meaning, especially when those in power treat witnessing as an endpoint rather than a beginning. Without a clear path from recognition to action, symbolic gestures risk becoming rituals of forgetting rather than remembrance (Tuck & Yang, 2012). This is not an argument against symbolic protest, but

a reminder that symbolism without transformation can ironically reinforce the systems it aims to challenge (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

This concern aligns with Granek's (2014) critique of how grief can be depoliticized when absorbed into symbolic or aesthetic gestures. What she describes as the pathological uses of grief, such as nationalizing or individualizing collective mourning, risks turning the gaze away from social injustices and toward narratives of healing that leave structural violence unaddressed (Granek, 2014). When state-led responses absorb mourning into performances of empathy without changing the systems that produced the loss, grief can be neutralized instead of activated (Granek, 2014).

Even symbolic silence can become a trap, requiring marginalized communities to perform grief repeatedly, and penalizing those who choose not to (Granek, 2014). It echoes the same burden Kazubowski-Houston (2018) documents in her work; the pressure to be heard and to offer pain as proof. True justice should not require silence or performance at all.

The Future of Silence

Silence is never empty. It can be survival, resistance, defiance, or evidence of structural violence. In quiet theatre, it is reclaimed as a radical form of witnessing (Kazubowski-Houston, 2018). In Indigenous communities, it is often imposed by the systems meant to protect them. Whether performed, protested, or refused, silence is political. Across these analyses, quiet theatre, anonymous care, refusal, and activist grief, I have shown how multiple theoretical frameworks help explain the layered political work silence performs in Indigenous resistance and mourning (Kazubowski-Houston,

2018; Stevenson, 2014; Simpson, 2014; Granek, 2014). Refusal further reminds us that justice cannot depend on constant visibility or performance, and that silence may itself assert sovereignty.

It is important to remember that celebrating silence as resilience without questioning the structures that make it necessary in the first place, ends up making abandonment seem acceptable. The challenge is not just to listen, but to ask why silence is the only way to be heard. As long as silence is the only option left to the grieving, the marginalized, and the dispossessed, our responsibility is not just to see and hear it, but to end the conditions that demand it.

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Nothing Without Us: Indigenous Resistance During the Colombian Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición. POLIS: Journal of Society and Culture, Vol. 2, Issue 1, 2026.

Nothing Without Us: Indigenous Resistance During the Colombian Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición

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Abstract

The Colombian *Acuerdo Final* marked a crucial moment in the country's attempts to establish long lasting peace and reparation for the victims of the violent armed conflict that had been raging in Colombia for decades. However, the signing of this accord brings up many questions about the government's historic disregard for Indigenous, Black, and Campesino voices. This paper inquires about the methods employed by the *Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición* to research the impacts of the armed conflict and make amends with the victims, many of whom belong to Indigenous communities throughout Colombia. Through a comprehensive

literature review, the author aims to shed light on the less recognized history of Indigenous resistance that runs parallel to *Acuerdo Final* and continues to define the government's plan for restitution, reconciliation, and lasting peace.

Keywords: Indigenous activism and resistance, Colombia, *Acuerdo Final de Paz*, research methodologies, armed conflict and truth, literature review

Positioning: Who I Am, Where I am From, and Why it Matters

It is not common practice within Western academia for a researcher to introduce themselves, but positioning oneself within one's research *is* paramount within Indigenous research methodologies. Tsalagi (Cherokee) scholar Jeff Corntassel writes that:

> Awareness of colonial realities requires... a call for justice and the return of stolen lands/waterways to the Indigenous Peoples[1] who maintain special relationships to these places... a responsibility-based ethic of truth-telling to identify and act upon new pathways to Indigenous resurgence. (Snelgrove, Dhamoon & Corntassel, 2014, p. 6)

It is important for me to acknowledge the Nations whose lands I grew up in as well as the Nations whose lands I do this research upon. I am grateful to the səl̓ilwətaʔɬ təməxʷ (Tsleil-Waututh), kʷikʷəƛ̓əm, Hul'qumi'num Treaty Group, Stz'uminus, Qayqayt, Skwxwú7mesh-ulh Temíx̱w (Squamish), šxʷməθkʷəy̓əmaʔɬ təməxʷ (Musqueam), Cayuse, Umatilla, Walla Walla, and S'ólh

Téméxw (Stó:lō) whose land I have the privilege to study and reside on. Colombia does not have a practice of land acknowledgements, but I still want to recognize the Emberá Peoples whose land my home is located on. I recognize that none of these lands were willingly ceded by these Nations and that I must hold myself responsible through my continued effort towards Indigenous resurgence. I start my article this way to decolonize not only Colombian perceptions of history but the actions that erase Indigenous voices.

This research is very close to my heart. It matters to me because I am a proud Colombian. I am proud of where I come from, my culture, and my identity. But, in that pride there is also space for shame, pain, and a desire for change. I have seen the way Indigenous Peoples are treated in my country. I recognize the corruption, segregation, and genocide arising from this colonization.

Without realizing it, I continued my education in Indigenous Studies to gain a deeper understanding of my country and its complex history. The privilege of growing up as a light skinned mestiza was made clear to me in my upbringing, but I did not understand what being mestiza truly meant. I felt a sense of defeat and helplessness that accompanied my identity as a Colombian. I now know more of the historical context that led to this prevalent feeling in my country. I am coming to understand the complexities of colonization and how it impacts my life and the lives of the people around me, how Latin America has been and continues to be exploited by colonial and imperial powers, and how Indigenous Peoples are among the most affected by these realities. This drive to learn

about the impact of colonial and imperial powers in Colombia led me to research the role of Indigenous Peoples in an important historical moment for Colombia, the *Acuerdo Final*.

I am still learning. Part of why this research has been so important, yet difficult for me, is because I am faced with how much more I have left to learn about the history of my family and my country. Being in contact with diverse cultural practices and decolonizing my own has been liberating and has allowed me to reclaim myself. To me, taking charge of my education means bringing Latin American Indigenous cultures to the forefront of my academic journey. I want Colombia to better understand and appreciate the lives of Indigenous Peoples past, present, and future. I am thankful for the opportunity to uplift Indigenous voices and to bring attention to the daily struggles of Indigenous communities in Colombia; and I will remain receptive to criticism of any mistakes, because I know I am bound to make many.

The idea to research the *Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición (the Comisión for short),* and its process of collecting testimonies and stories from Indigenous communities all over the country, came to me earlier this year. I was thinking about Gregory Younging's *Elements of Indigenous Style* and writing about the potential for a Latin American version of the text. As exciting as the idea was, it was a highly ambitious one that required a large amount of research to comprehensively capture the diversity of Indigenous communities in Latin America. So, I turned my attention to more familiar contexts. I set myself forth to know more about

the *Acuerdo Final,* its context, and the histories that surrounded its creation. Most of all, I focus on Indigenous involvement in the creation of this accord to unveil the ways in which colonialism has been institutionally encoded in Colombia's quest for peace.

I was still in high school when the *Acuerdo Final* was taking place and was somewhat unaware of it. Reflecting upon this now, I question the methodology of the research conducted by the *Comisión* which intended to establish the 'Truth' surrounding decades of conflict between the state and rebel armed forces. The fact that the vote against the original *Acuerdo Final* won left me with questions. The results indicated a disparity between what the government had negotiated (in the name of the Colombian people) and what the people wanted. This left me with questions concerning what the role of Indigenous communities was in the process of establishing the Truth, Peace, and Restitution that 'culminated' in 2016, a process which had been in the works since before 1982 when the first peace talks between illegal/rebel armed forces and the state occurred.

As I began this process, I did not have a specific research question. Instead, I had a multitude of questions that guided my learning. I had minimal knowledge of the current literature and the potential research gaps. However, what was clear was that it mattered whose voices and perspectives were considered to inform the 'Truth' of decades of armed conflict and violence in Colombia which had disproportionately impacted Indigenous, Black, and Campesino communities. This work had to be undertaken with a decolonial emphasis by focusing on the diverse voices of Indigenous Peoples in

Colombia to ensure that this research was not extractive or exploitative. Thus I ask, did the Colombian government use *testimonio* as their primary research methodology in a way that honours Indigenous communities and breaks away from harmful colonial research practices, thereby practicing genuine reconciliation instead of performative actions?

Terminology

Mestizaje

Scholar Catelli (2021) introduces Mestizaje as an "elastic concept" (p. 71) which I find to be a helpful way to understand the term because it has changed both in its definition and its cultural implication through time. To this day, many people throughout Latin America have varying understandings of it. Mestizaje has its roots in the colonization of Latin America. This fact cannot be ignored when bringing this term into conversation as a racial identity, as "mestizaje originates in racist colonial hierarchies that sought to demarcate clear racial boundaries and differences" (Pérez-Torres, 2013, p. 25). Mestizaje is characterized by the mixing of Indigenous, Black, and Spanish people resulting in a different 'race category'. The Latin American Mestizo "is an affirmative recognition of the mixed racial, social, linguistic, national, cultural, and ethnic legacies inherent to Latino/a cultures and identities. It highlights the idea that cultural mixture represents a dynamic, driving component of Latino/a literature" (Pérez-Torres, 2013, p. 25). I would argue the term is not only evocative of "the very real constraints imposed upon mestizo bodies, not the least of which are the racial hierarchies

generated during colonialism and passed down a legacy of discrimination and violence" (Pérez-Torres, 2013, p. 25), but implies the discrimination and violence inflicted specifically upon Black and Indigenous communities by the colonization of the Americas. Therefore, Mestizaje adds another racial layer to the complexities of Latin American discourse.

Acuerdo General para la Terminación del Conflicto y la Construcción de una Paz Estable y Duradera (General Accord for the Cessation of the Conflict and the Construction of a Stable and Long-Lasting Peace)* or *Acuerdo Final

The peace talks began in 2012 in La Habana between the delegates of the Colombian government, represented by the president Juan Manuel Santos, and the delegates of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo (FARC)[2] (Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz, 2016, p. 1). The intention of both parties was to end the more than 50 year long armed conflict that devastated the country and left approximately 8.5 million victims (Amnistía Internacional España, 2017). As a result of the peace talks, an accord was drafted, leading to the signing of the *Acuerdo Final* on November 24, 2016. The signing was done under the scrutiny of many national entities, as well as international ones such as the delegates of the Republic of Cuba and the Kingdom of Norway who served as primary witnesses and guarantors (Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz, 2016, p. 1). Nevertheless, the original version of the *Acuerdo Final* is not the one that stands today. The original accord was subjected to the scrutiny of the Colombian people by plebiscite. The result showed the votes against the *Acuerdo Final* won by a small margin (Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz, 2016, p. 2). This led to

modifications of the previously signed accord, and ultimately led to the creation of a revised one (Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz, 2016, pp. 1–2) which stands to this day.

The current *Acuerdo Final* has six sub-accords, each with the purpose of accomplishing one element of its general missive: ending such a prolonged conflict requires an accord that guarantees a ceasefire and provides new opportunities for the Colombian people, in particular for those who have suffered the most during the conflict (Cancillería Colombia, 2016, p. 8)[3]. The sub-accords are as follows:

1. Put an end to the war: "*Acuerdo sobre Cese al Fuego y de Hostilidades Bilateral y Definitivo y Dejación de las Armas entre el Gobierno Nacional y las FARC"* (Cancillería Colombia, 2016, p. 11).
2. Truth, Justice, No Repetition, and Reparation to the victims: "*Acuerdo sobre las Víctimas del conflicto: "Sistema Integral de Verdad, Justicia, Reparación y No Repetición*" (Cancillería Colombia, 2016, p. 17).
3. Against Drug Trafficking: *"Acuerdo Solución al problema de las drogas ilícitas*" (Cancillería Colombia, 2016, p. 25).
4. Better Opportunities for farmers/Campesinos: "*Acuerdo Política de desarrollo agrario integral. Hacia un nuevo campo colombiano: Reforma Rural Integral (RRI)"* (Cancillería Colombia, 2016, p. 31).

5. More participation and democracy: "*Acuerdo Participación Política. Apertura democrática para construir la paz*" (Cancillería Colombia, 2016, p. 35).
6. Carrying out the final accord: "*Acuerdo Implementación, verificación y refrendación*" (Cancillería Colombia, 2016, p. 41).

La Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición (Commission for the Elucidation of the Truth, the Coexistence and the No-Repetition)

La Comisión was a state entity that aimed to discover and clarify the reasons behind the internal armed conflict to satisfy the right of the victims and the society to the Truth. The *Comisión* also intended to acknowledge the history of violence in Colombia and promote peaceful coexistence while focusing on preventing future conflict through a process of thorough, ample, and diverse collaboration to construct stable and long-lasting peace (Comisión De La Verdad, 2022a, para. 2). The *Comisión* was composed of 11 people who were elected through a public call due to their expertise in the armed conflict (Comisión De La Verdad, 2022b, para. 1). Of the 11 members of the *Comisión*, none identified as Indigenous. The three main goals of the *Comisión* were to first, research and explain the years of violent conflict between the state and the FARC, to establish a nation-wide understanding of this shared and painful history. Secondly, to promote and contribute to the acknowledgement of all human rights violations by both parties; thus empowering victims by creating a shared 'Truth' and preventing future human rights infringements. Lastly, to promote the coexistence and *buen-vivir*[4] of

the Colombian people in different territories, and to move towards a peaceful resolution of all further conflicts (Comisión De La Verdad, 2022a). Because the *Comisión* was established as a temporal and extrajudicial mechanism (Comisión De La Verdad, 2022a, para. 4), its jurisdiction came to an end in 2022 (EVA Función Pública, 2022, para. 15). My research analyzes the methodologies employed by the *Comisión* in the pursuit of Truth and interrogates the mechanisms employed to deliver on these so-called promises.

La Comisión Etnica para la Paz y los Derechos Territoriales (The Ethnic Commission for Peace and the Ethnic Chapter of the Peace Accords)

Gruner (2017) highlights the need for an "effective 'ethnic' verification mechanism" (p. 176) that will guarantee that the terms of the *Acuerdo Final* are carried out in accordance with the wishes of the ethnic communities in Colombia, where many of the victims are from. Therefore, the existence of *the Ethnic Commission for Peace* (the Ethnic Chapter) marks a victory for the many Indigenous, Black, Campesino and other ethnic groups who had to fight for a place at the peace talks. This part of the process was based on the multi-generational and multi-ethnic efforts of "popular Indigenous and Afro-Colombian political and territorial organizations who have rallied to have a voice since 2012, when the talks began" (Gruner, 2017, p. 175). Nevertheless, the government and the FARC barely acknowledged ethnic voices, evidenced by the last minute integration of the Ethnic Chapter into the accord despite the intense efforts from ethnic voices to be included since the inception of the peace

talks (Gruner, 2017, p. 176)[5]. This lack of inclusion is a lived reality in Colombia for Indigenous and Afro-Colombian people, which the Ethnic Commission intended to address by creating inclusive spaces for the "articulation of perspectives of ethno-territorial organizations" and calling attention to the noticeable gaps in the peace talks and the accord; for example, the lack of consideration for the implications and effects of the [*Acuerdo Final*] on Afro-Colombian and Indigenous rights (Gruner, 2017, pp. 175–76). Unfortunately, this reality is one that prevails to this day.

Peace and Truth in the Colombian Context

The basis for the peace negotiations was "predicated on the idea that the guerrillas [could] demobilize and engage without weapons in the political process" (Gruner, 2017, p. 179). However, "in some parts of Colombia, there is a terrible divide between the truth on paper and the truth in practice" (Bailey, 2016, p. 11). The Peoples facing this reality are rural Campesino, Indigenous, and Afro-Colombian communities. I refer to the state's construction of truth and peace through the work of the *Comisión* as 'Truth' and 'Peace'. Capitalizing these words speaks to a collective construct of the terms created to establish peace in Colombia. These terms do not intend to negate that truth comes with multiple facets and peace has different definitions throughout Colombia. How the construction of both these terms was carried out during the peace talks pertains to my inquiry when thinking about the ways in which the diversity of Indigenous voices in Colombia had a chance to shape these definitions, or the ways in which they were left out of the conversation.

Historical Context: Prelude to a Lasting Peace

Armed conflict in Colombia is rooted in the violent colonization of the Americas by the Spanish, and the many genocidal and assimilatory policies that implemented "a model of geopolitical relations sustained by a racial axis of colonial origin that has superseded the nominal end of colonial domination" (Catelli, 2021, p. 71). In discussing how colonial domination has established itself within the systems that rule us today, Gruner (2017) states that:

> Much of the violence [ethnic groups] have faced historically and during the internal armed conflict in Colombia has been directly or indirectly linked to dominant legal and illegal economic production relations within a logic of often unfettered capitalist accumulation, dependent on systematic exploitation and dispossession, undermining other productive economic forms with particularly brutal effects on women. (p. 175)

Over the decades of violent armed conflict, there were multiple attempts by presidents and ethnic groups to forge a lasting peace, but efforts by Indigenous, Black and Campesino communities to establish peace are under-recognized. Indigenous resistance movements have been pushing for decolonial policies in government and protection for their communities ever since first contact with imperial colonial powers and have had to continually adapt to the everchanging landscape of violence.

The various attempts to advance civil rights have been marked by confrontations between two opposing forces—Conservatives and Liberals—with different nuances, within which native

populations including Indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and Campesino[6] communities have been deeply affected. This historical dynamic between the two opposing forces has resulted in increased marginalization of these groups, requiring them to respond to their unmet needs through peaceful and sometimes violent confrontation. Such conditions have facilitated the rise of revolutionary movements that take advantage of these marginalized communities via exploitation, displacement, abuse, and murder. The history of almost half a century of gruesome violence in Colombia is nuanced. There are multiple armed groups that clash against the Colombian government causing the general public, especially the members of the different ethnic groups in Colombia, to endure years of conflict.

Violence is nothing new for the Colombian people, but neither are attempts at peace. Marco Palacios (2000) attempts to map out the history of peace negotiations in Colombia leading up to 2012. He is a Colombian mestizo scholar who speaks about the 'performative' motivation behind many peace attempts. When referencing the legitimacy for the *Acuerdo Final*, Palacios (2000) writes about all the different attempts at peace agreements, why they were unsuccessful, and how they provide context to understand this agreement. Every recorded peace process undertaken since 1982 has presidential origin and depended on the president's political standing. Despite the various attempts at peace made over 17 years, by the time of his article's release, guerillas (like the FARC) had never been stronger and there had been an accelerated growth in the paramilitary groups' activities. One of Palacio's main arguments is that most peace processes in Colombia took place as political tools for presidential

legitimacy and re-election (Palacios, 2000). Palacios shows how presidents like Barco (1986-1990), and Gaviria (1990-1994) talked with some armed groups to gain credibility for the Constitution of 1991 (Palacios, 2000, p. 21). Peace accords, motivated by hopes to gain political renown and capital, historically resulted as failures, utilizing little to no community involvement or any consultation with the victims.

The peace talks for the original *Acuerdo Final* in 2016 took place in La Habana (Havana, Cuba), a neutral territory with the supervision of international agents (Vanegas et al., 2019, p. 14). Despite the apparent success of this accord, the government under President Santos attempted to pass a referendum to ratify the agreement through the Colombian voting system (Vanegas et al., 2019, pp. 14–15). Unfortunately, the referendum failed (with 63 percent of voters abstaining from the vote) in part due to "disconcerting tactics by right wing political groups" (Gruner, 2017, p. 178). This forced the government to quickly renegotiate the terms, which ultimately led to the revised *Acuerdo Final* getting recognized by the Colombian Congress (Vanegas et al., 2019, p. 15) which stands to this day. Gruner also speaks to the opinion of the ethnic groups in Colombia, a majority of whom voted in favour for the original agreement, and the need to listen to Indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and Campesino voices as they "represented the strongest civilian peace protagonists, given what they have endured and what they have to lose if the [*Acuerdo Final*] is usurped by institutional and economic

interests, or if the threats of paramilitary and 'illegal groups' continue to amplify" (Gruner, 2017, p. 178).

It is of utmost importance to remember that the sustained effort and activism by Indigenous and other ethnic groups shaped the *Acuerdo Final* we have today. I argue that there is a less recognized history of Indigenous struggle and resistance that shaped the *Acuerdo Final*. This history of Indigenous struggle and resistance before, during, and after the peace talks stands as a testament of the ways in which these communities continue to push back against colonial policies and violent institutions. This less recognized history gives insight into a long history of discrimination against Indigenous, Afro-Colombians, and Campesino Peoples, and a pervasive presence of colonization and forced assimilation since the arrival of Spanish colonists to the American continent. This history holds real life implications for Indigenous and Afro- Colombian communities in Colombia. Their voices should have been present at the table from the onset of the peace process in 2012 given the special legal status of Indigenous and Afro-Colombian people established in the 1991 Constitution. Unfortunately, the inclusion of ethnic voices in the accord "required considerable internal and external political pressure" (Gruner, 2017, p. 177). A major part of this conflict has been about the control of land and the struggle over the natural resources the land possesses (Bailey, 2016, p. 11). Moreover, Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities have been the most affected, caught in the crossfire between the Colombian Armed Forces and the rebel groups (the government refers to them as 'criminal bands').

Constructing National Peace would require recognition and remuneration to the affected communities by returning their territories as well as guaranteeing their safety, which presents economic risks for both the government and the rebel forces (Bailey, 2016, pp. 11–12). Therefore, on account of this territorial struggle (for the government and the armed groups), it was (and continues to be) convenient to exclude opinions that highlighted the "political–territorial character" (Gruner, 2017, p. 177) of the conflict, in which these communities pose an "obstacle" (Gruner, 2017, p. 177) for both sides in the development of their peace plans.

Introduction: Indigenous Resistance and the *Acuerdo Final*

President Santos announced in September of 2012 the start of the peace talks with the FARC. At the time these peace talks began and concluded, I was young and was not engaged with the political and social atmosphere in Colombia. I recognize this lack of engagement with the political and social atmosphere as a facet of my privilege, as my life was not constantly threatened by this conflict, unlike the reality for many Indigenous people in the country. However, I am now able to reflect not only on how the peace talks were carried out, but also how peace in Colombia has progressed since the signing of the *Acuerdo Final*. I recognize that a successful negotiation, construction, and implementation of country wide policies that guarantee peace, justice, reconciliation, and non-repetition of violent conflict is needs to prioritize Indigenous voices because "the violent actions of paramilitary and other

illegal groups see collective territorial rights as obstacles to 'development and progress'" (Gruner, 2017, p. 176). Thus, a considerable number of resources need to be invested to construct the Peace around the restitution of these lands and the reconciliation with the Indigenous groups who have been taking care of their territories for centuries.

I knew the colonial legacy in Colombia remained strong, and achieving a commission guided by Indigenous voices was unprecedented in the country:

> Displacement, violence, and related atrocities in ethnic communities have been endemic in the 52-year conflict, although have more profound historical roots spanning centuries from the arrival of Europeans; this merits much broader and focused attention, as ethno-territorial organizations work to put discussion of historical reparations on the national agenda. For the purposes of the current peace process, ensuring that these communities have a strong voice for implementation and monitoring of the accords is a minimum they must be afforded. (Gruner, 2017, p. 179)

Additionally, I wanted to research how much the government understood the importance of incorporating Indigenous research methodologies in gathering testimonies from the victims, many of whom are Indigenous, in their objective of establishing a collective Truth. I wondered whether the *Comisión* considered incorporating decolonial guidelines into their research and their subsequent actions. I knew that the search for the Truth and subsequent policies developed by the *Comisión*

needed to be rooted in Indigenous epistemologies, but I wanted to know the extent of decolonial, and Indigenous knowledge incorporated in government policies addressing the armed conflict. My research concluded what I initially suspected: that "ethno-territorial movements have fought hard to have these perspectives included in public debate and policy despite having lived with the consequences of violence, displacement, [and] systematic discrimination based on race, the ecological destruction of lands, and political and cultural erasure throughout [Colombian history]" (Gruner, 2017, p. 174).

It has been nine years since the *Acuerdo Final* and four years since the *Comisión*'s jurisdiction ended, and I still have many questions. How was the *Acuerdo Final* structured and carried out as a continuation or a disruption of the colonial paradigms present at the core of Colombia's institutions? How do the actions of the government since the signing of the *Acuerdo Final* reflect the compromises agreed on? To what extent do these actions prioritize Indigenous leaders and Indigenous methodologies? Did the government implement a peace agreement, a truth recording process, and a reconciliation initiative starting from Indigenous (ethnic) communities and extending beyond? Or did these processes occur outside of Indigenous communities and only end in them? What do the answers to these questions teach us about what we can do better in the future to prioritize Indigenous communities in order to ensure a more inclusive future for Colombia?

Literature Review

Pardo (2000), a Colombian mestizo scholar, is a rich source for background information, but some of his word choices when writing about Colombia make me question the biases present in his thinking. Advocating for US involvement and speaking about people working the fields, usually called Campesino or Indigenous communities, as "peasants" (p. 68) reiterates colonial and imperial language that has dominated US opinions of 'the Colombian problem' (Pardo, 2000). Despite my concern about the author's biases, Pardo (2000) eloquently summarizes the Colombian history of drugs and war, making key connections between pivotal events in Colombian history and the 2016 Truth and Peace process which aimed to understand and resolve this history of violence. Pardo (2000) also anticipated the need for a larger scale peace agreement, highlighting his knowledge of Colombia's complex and multifaceted internal conflict, as well as the gaps of the *Acuerdo Final*.

Jackson (2016), a US settler scholar, provides useful information to this issue as her work focuses on the perspective on Indigenous Peoples within the accord's development. Jackson's article is a helpful place to start my inquiry as her background in researching Colombian Indigenous movements presents a valid source of information, but further investigation into her research methods is required to ensure she utilizes a community led approach to research with Indigenous groups. Jackson (2016) mentions that this *Acuerdo Final* was the culmination of years of work, more specifically the last four years, but even though Campesino, Indigenous, and Black communities have been the most affected by the prolonged war, consultation with them remained minimal. Furthermore,

she highlights Colombia's colonial legacy in action and shines a light on the contradictions present in the process, indicating that the *Acuerdo Final* will remain a performative act until the promises made to Indigenous communities are delivered and continued efforts by the government are made to actively decolonize its practices and structures.

Weiss (2020), a US settler scholar who examines discrimination against women in Colombia, makes a point central to my analysis: signing this agreement does not equate to Peace (p. 100). Even though this article is not limited to Indigenous women's experience of discrimination, Weiss (2020) reexamines violence against women as an intentional weapon of community displacement to take control of the land (p. 105), an experience shared by many Colombian Indigenous women at the hands of armed forces—both government sanctioned and rebel-led. Gruner et al. (2018) is a good place to continue with this line of inquiry. Gruner is a Canadian settler scholar accepted by Indigenous communities in Colombia for her extensive research *with* them and her access to publishing platforms, making her a valuable ally. Gruner et al. (2018) makes comparisons between Canadian and Colombian contexts which prove helpful for my understanding and knowledge as a Colombian student in Canada. Although this paper is not focused on the *Acuerdo Final,* it has a section about it. This article is useful for its research into the history of colonization, its legacy today, and the importance of territory in Indigenous identity through the Americas (Gruner et al., 2018). In the article, Gruner et al. (2018) reveal the realities of violence against racialized bodies, including Indigenous Peoples who have a strong

connection to their ancestral territories. This information informs my research as these dynamics come into play in the peace talks. Violence against racialized bodies will continue to be perpetuated if not otherwise opposed. In Colombia, there can be no Peace, Truth, or territorial autonomy without ethnic voices. The *Acuerdo Final* could not have happened without the ethnic voices spearheading the fight for justice, despite constantly being overlooked. A peace agreement that aims to be inclusive and to end violence should not make decisions about justice, truth, and territorial autonomy without Indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and Campesino voices (Gruner et al., 2018).

Meertens (2016), a Colombian mestiza scholar, suggests that peace negotiations in Colombia started without Indigenous women voices and that the *Acuerdo Final* has ambiguous language which makes it harder for Indigenous communities to engage with and advocate rights on their terms. For example, in terms of guaranteeing women's safety through the restitution of titles to land for Indigenous and Campesina women, land titles represent a formal recognition of their autonomy. But it does not guarantee their safety or a change in the discriminatory behaviours that led to their dispossession. Therefore, the promise of land restitution creates the impression that justice is being fully delivered, when in reality it is more limited (Meertens, 2016, p. 93). This makes it harder for women to keep advocating for their rights when the government believes what has been promised has been delivered. Hence, Meertens (2016) calls for a redistribution of power through empowering Indigenous women to reconstruct the fabric of society (Meertens, 2016, p. 92). Reading the work of

Meertens (2016) made me view my research questions in a different way. I wanted to look more closely into the methods applied by the government in the collection of testimonies from the different Indigenous communities in the country, and whether these methods were decolonial in nature or if colonial research was utilized to extract information from the Indigenous communities in Colombia during this process.

I was excited to encounter the work of González Villamizar et al. (2021), Colombian mestizo scholars who incorporate the perspectives of Arhuaco Indigenous Women in examination of the peace process surrounding the *Acuerdo Final*. González Villamizar et al. (2021) propose an "ethnic methodology" (p. 166) approach to research and peace, where "the documentation process and methodological design ... must be agreed upon with ethnic traditional authorities and women belonging to ethnic groups, in order to consider their experiences and knowledge, as well as those of their communities and organizations, with regard to the... information gathering in their contexts" (González Villamizar et al., 2021, p. 166); and call out the Colombian government for their past and present failures to keep Indigenous women safe. They mention that the ethnic approach to peace needs to focus on racial discrimination against Indigenous, Afro-Colombian, Raizal, Palenquero and Rom people (González Villamizar et al., 2021, p. 166), and also consider oral literature as a fundamental source of information, thus, "recognizing cultural diversity and value forms of production, narration,

and dissemination of ethnic groups' knowledge and experience by means of the cultural and artistic expressions manifest in their worldviews" (González Villamizar et al., 2021, p. 166).

Ruiz Moreno and Postigo Gómez (2023) write about the experiences of Nasa Indigenous women in the implementation of the *Acuerdo Final* and what they have to say about the lack of resources promised. This article is important because it uses Indigenous women's *testimonios* for community-oriented research to show that almost everything this group of women have achieved after the *Acuerdo Final* and the work of the *Comisión* has been of their own initiative. A variety of community-wellness projects have been successfully created through the efforts of the community members themselves and the support of allied external entities without the government (Ruiz Moreno & Postigo Gómez, 2023, pp. 15–16). Thus, this community has been positively transformed through community led initiatives guided by women rather than the implementation of the *Acuerdo Final* (Ruiz Moreno & Postigo Gómez, 2023, p. 16). In doing so, they call attention to the unfulfilled promises the government made and criticize not the accord itself, but the ways in which it has or has not been carried out.

The book *Des/Dibujando el Pais/aje: Aportes para la Paz Con los Pueblos Afrodescendientes e Indigenas. Territorio, Autonomia y Buen Virir [Drawing/Blurring the Landscape: Contributions to Peace with Afrodescendent and Indigenous People]* by Gruner et al. (2016) is a valuable source for my research. This book is a compilation of articles, interviews, statements and stories of Indigenous, Black

and Campesino voices pertaining to the peace talks and the ways in which Truth and Peace were conducted and constructed (Gruner et al., 2016). In Gruner's (2017) *Territory, Autonomy, and the Good Life* she strongly suggests that the different ethnic groups not only successfully fought for their place at the table during the 2012-2016 peace talks (which they should have already been a part of), but that they fought against capitalist and colonial ideas upheld by the government and thus proving that the need for uplifting and centering Indigenous voices is only one step towards a decolonial Colombia:

> In the face of policy, resource, and security challenges, the organizational capacity of Indigenous and Afro-Colombian ethnoterritorial movements and communities is nonetheless astounding ... reached in the midst of violent internal conflict that has produced mass physical and cultural displacement, and ongoing threats posed by illegal and legal capitalist accumulation processes aligned with racist, neocolonial, and patriarchal ideological logics. Grassroots, territorial communities affected by war have the ability to change the dynamic in the post-accord period if afforded the opportunity." (Gruner, 2017, p. 180)

Conclusion: Criticism in the Times of Post-Accord

Bailey (2016) reminds us that "agreements are often just paper. Harassment, inequality and racial discrimination are the overwhelming reality" (p. 17). This, unfortunately, is the reality many Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities still face in Colombia. The violence has not stopped. The promised restitutions, along with other actions intended to help the victims of the violent armed

conflict, have not been delivered in full. The Peace in Colombia has stalled (Ruiz Moreno and Postigo Gómez, 2023, p. 10), but it is not gone. Like Gruner (2017) writes, "the overall number of displacements and deaths linked to the conflict has substantially decreased since the unilateral and subsequent bilateral ceasefire agreements (...), which is an important indicator for the success and potential for peace in Colombia. Yet the systematic and selective attacks on leftist, Afro-Colombian, Indigenous, and campesino leaders have led to deep concerns for the post-accord period" (Gruner, 2017, p. 179). There is still much work to do. And how we act will determine the ways in which we move forward. We need to understand the implications of our current actions for Indigenous and other marginalized communities. Colonial powers may seek to renegotiate and reclaim power and the groundwork done here can shape the ways we face those battles in the future. This is why my inquiry matters; the process is ongoing and the ways in which we move forward as a country need to center Afro-Colombian, Indigenous, and Campesino voices so that we can collectively build a future for all.

I want to remember the words of Filomena Rodríguez from the Pijao community in Tolima as she speaks about the tragic realities of the war in Colombia and how it has affected the lives of her loved ones (Canal Trece Colombia, 2022, 14:15). She talks about the struggles of displacement: we know how to keep ourselves and our families alive in the countryside/campo, but in the city we don't know how to live and we are threatened into those spaces without care for our lives (Canal Trece, 2022, 14:15). Visitación Chanchi, from an Indigenous community in Putumayo, shares: where we are now is

not where we have always been (Canal Trece, 2022). Carlos Ponare, from an Indigenous community in Vichada, asserts: we don't have anywhere else to go, we are from this territory and here are our lives (Canal Trece, 2022, 22:00). Carlos Ponare's (Vichada) words stay in mind:

> All we can do is work to open doors so that we have a future. We work for a collective benefit, for the guarantee of life with dignity in the future. We educate our future generations to know who we are and what we have been through so that they can use the doors we have fought to keep open. (Canal Trece, 2022, 13:35)

As I hear the voices of these Indigenous leaders who have lost so much, I remind myself of the reasons why this research matters. It is not only about Peace and Truth, but also about life. What work are we doing as a country after the conclusion of the *Comisión* to support these communities in navigating the challenges ahead? How can we continue to put pressure on the government to deliver on what was promised and create new policies that continue to address systemic issues of racial and gendered discrimination beyond the *Acuerdo Final*? We know that "unresolved issues related to land restitution and victims' reparation policies for Indigenous and Afro-descendent communities are clear indicators that the legal and policy arenas need significant attention" (Gruner, 2017, p. 180). As Cree and Saulteaux scholar Starblanket (2023) argues, Indigenous Peoples have to "contend with the often prohibitive choice between immediate needs and long-term political visions" (p. 87). For the Indigenous communities in Colombia, the fight happened in multiple stages: they fought for space at

the peace talks, and then to continue living in their ancestral territories. Challenging our perception of this important historic moment for Colombia matters now, maybe more than ever. The Colombian Congress provided a 10-year estimate for delivering on the promises made to the victims (Meertens, 2016, p. 95); the progress to this day leaves a lot to be desired.

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[1] Indigenous Peoples are in capital and plural form to counter colonial writing that would have capital E in English or W in Western but not in I for Indigenous, furthering the colonial hierarchy of Indigenous bodies as inferior to those of Western origin. Peoples is plural to dignify the multitude of Indigenous people that belong to a diversity of Nations. In sum, 'Indigenous Peoples' stands as a challenge to Western grammatical laws, as well as PanIndigenous terminology.

[2] Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia

[3] Some of my sources are exclusively in Spanish. Going forward, if you find a direct citation in English from a source originally in Spanish that means I have done the translation myself.

[4] An expression meaning 'good living'. It has its roots in Indigenous worldviews.

[5] The Ethnic Chapter was being signed at the end of August 2016 in preparation for the plebiscite in October 2016

[6] Campesinos is a word that loosely translates to farmers. They have strong connections to the land and Indigenous worldviews which inform their living.

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Digital Deconstructions of Womanhood

From Girl Boss to Girl Math: Social Media's Role in Domesticating the Modern Woman.
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From Girl Boss to Girl Math: Social Media's Role in Domesticating the Modern Woman

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Abstract

This research paper investigates the nuances of so-called feminist social media trends that have emerged alongside the political shift towards traditional conservative values. Specifically, I will interrogate the "girl boss" feminist movement of the 2010s in comparison to 2020s terminology such as "girl math," "tradwives," and "bimbo feminism," demonstrating a noticeable ideological shift concerning a woman's place in society. These conceptions of modern-day feminism are not what they claim to be; they are roles rooted in stereotypes that the patriarchy creates and reproduces. Because of this, they are inherently anti-feminist. However, through careful language construction and intentional marketing strategies, corporatized (neoliberal) feminism masquerades as progressive, ignoring and simultaneously contributing to the consequences of adopting these beliefs. Executives of billion-dollar media conglomerates profit from attention-grabbing trends that foster a false sense of identity among women

that sustain and reaffirm the patriarchal values of male supremacy. Since women are often presenting and engaging with these trends, viewers may perceive them as inclusive and empowering. Collective liberation cannot exist when it is poisoned with patriarchal values.

Keywords: Feminism, choice feminism, patriarchy, social media, neoliberalism, intersectionality, conservatism, domesticity

New, catchy terms seem to arise from the depths of social media every few weeks, and it is not long before they transgress beyond the boundaries of our phones and into our everyday conversations. The specific vernacular I challenge in this paper is the use of the terms "girl boss," "girl math," "tradwives," and the reclamation of the term "bimbo" as acts that supposedly further the feminist movement. I argue that these terms support and reinforce patriarchal hierarchies rather than pursuing a radical feminism that seeks to liberate all. Despite social media's relatively short history, it is widely understood that our vocabularies have become permeated by ideas we engage with online. Language has the power to shape our social lives—just as our social lives have the power to shape social media.

There are a few prominent stances on this issue: the conservative perspective that is against the so-called "policing" of language, the liberal perspective that understates language's importance altogether, and the leftist perspective—or what has been deemed as "woke"—that believes in deconstructing language in an effort to realize its impact on social life. In this way, language is a portal

to understanding our own oppression, and the goal of analyzing it is to liberate ourselves from such marginalization. This paper lends itself to the latter perspective. By employing Foucault's (1976) idea that discourse(s) inherently affect social life, I emphasize why it is notable that patriarchal language has crossed into the popular vernacular of *both* social media and our daily lives. My perspective varies from Foucault's, as I argue that these shifts in discourse are intentionally produced by institutions and claim-makers seeking to benefit from certain ideologies gaining popularity in the public sphere. These claim-makers include executives and stakeholders of billion-dollar social media platforms who profit from increased engagement, as well as political parties who benefit and gain power when their ideological beliefs are affirmed by popular trends (Giroux & Bhattacharya, 2017). First, I will explore how a new genre of terms entered mainstream vocabulary during the COVID-19 pandemic. I will then compare them to once culturally accepted pre-pandemic liberal feminist trends, highlighting why these contrasting perspectives may have shifted in popularity to respond to changing political and economic values. Next, I will trace how these trends have garnered popularity and tangibly impacted individuals' lives. Seemingly, a big misconception within both conservative and liberal perspectives is that language (and the critical analysis of it) is unimportant, or, according to many young internet users, is "not that deep". This paper demonstrates precisely why language *is* important and why we should be paying attention.

"Girls," "Girlbosses," and Negotiated Political Identities

The term "girl boss" and its accompanying movement are strong examples of language that is deemed empowering but, in truth, upholds patriarchal values. As a result of fourth-wave feminism, "girl boss" emerged on social media during the 2010s to describe women who are successful in male-dominated occupational spheres. The term saturated popular culture and became integral to the modern feminist movement by creating its own designation under the umbrella of choice feminism. Girl boss feminism is embedded in neoliberalism in that it defines liberation solely on economic terms, such as celebrating the female CEO and idolizing the female billionaire, rather than challenging capitalist structures that perpetuate systemic violence and oppression against women (Alexandersson & Kalonaityte, 2020). This form of feminism is still centred around the lives and experiences of men in how its solution to all oppression is simply to include women within the (exploitative) labour force.

Feminist movements have long excluded marginalized groups for this same insistence on capitalist reproduction. Consider the example of Marie Howland, a 19th-century feminist scholar who was ahead of her time in vehemently advocating for women's economic independence (Blake, 2015). However, Howland has now been discredited because her activism only extended this privilege to white women. We can see how the very idea of "economic independence" is based on a white, heteropatriarchal idea of capitalistic success—one that does not challenge systemic hierarchies but instead seeks to climb to the top of them. Feminist theory cannot be all-encompassing or liberatory when its scope is limited from the start.

In this way, the liberal focus on identity politics ignores any semblance of reorganizing social hierarchy and instead maintains and obscures how the oppressed perceive the material conditions that keep them marginalized (Alexandersson & Kalonaityte, 2020). While a successful woman in a male-dominated field is the epitome of liberal feminist empowerment, these gendered dynamics are not challenged in ways that would collectively liberate women (or anyone involved in the labour exchange). As Byrne and Giuliani (2025) state, "the girlboss merges a complex blend of masculine entrepreneurial heroism and feminine care, sparking profound tensions" (p. 14). Neoliberalism blends the traditionally male-dominated spheres of employment with a new kind of "radical" femininity where women are transgressing labour-based gender roles without changing men's anticipated responsibilities (Alexandersson & Kalonaityte, 2020). While this girlboss shift was initially embraced, the economic downturn of the early 2020s led to a reactionary response from North American governments, where conservative policies were reinstated and favoured (Giroux and Bhattacharya, 2017). Instead of looking to corporations or governments for the fault of the pending recession, it is much easier to scrutinize the actions of individual women. Today, amidst diluted feminist ideals, we see similar trends prioritizing the ideals of individual choice that illiberally favour conservative values. It is no coincidence that "girl" discourse rose to popularity as authoritarian governments (re)gained control in North America, which stands to challenge the so-called empowering intent of girl boss feminism. I keep this in mind as I examine today's terms such as "girl math", "tradwives", and "bimbo feminism", in the North

American context. If girl boss feminism was supposed to liberate women through economic advancement, why did it not work?

"I'm Just a Girl"

The word "girl" is a portal into understanding how women's place in society is viewed. Many examples can be found on social media, including the beloved phrase "I'm just a girl". The phrase first originated in American rock band No Doubt's 1997 hit single "I'm Just a Girl", where Gwen Stefani sings about the frustrations of being continuously belittled in a male-dominated society. Decades later, the phrase is most commonly used to justify a woman's personal inadequacies, which are seemingly attributed to her unavoidable, inherent femininity. When searching for the phrase on social media platforms, one will find countless TikTok videos of women displaying the aftermath of their poor driving skills or imperfect behaviour, all while No Doubt plays in the background. The constructed identity of the patronized "girl" shields women from responsibility, accountability, intelligence, and competency, deeming them incapable while suggesting that these are inherently masculine qualities. Similar online terms like "girl dinner" depict women engaging in small, erratic, and disorganized meals and eating patterns—an ironic act of infantilization given the prolific stereotype of women's domesticity. Internet users have also developed a tendency to tack the word "girl" onto any profession performed by a woman in a given instance (for example, "girl doctor", "girl pilot", "girl philosopher"). There is even a trend to "colour" occupations and labour into "pink" or "blue" jobs, where domestic

tasks are defined as pink while duties that require physical labour are identified as blue (MegantheDoula, 2015). This "pink job" trend returns us to gender essentialism, reinforcing the belief that certain tasks are supposedly hardwired in our biology and, thus, should be satisfied to achieve a harmonious society. Perhaps one of the most damning terms to emerge is "girl math", which *The Cut* (2024) defines as women engaging in "fiscally questionable behaviour that is risky but mostly harmless in the big picture" (Cohen, 2023). However, the online embrace of the term ignores the societal implications of re-gendering the concept of the economy and the modern woman's place within it, overlooking how these prefixes are misogynistic in the first place. Not only does the use of a feminized prefix sustain harmful gender roles, but the word "girl" is problematized in this context because it implies a particular age and intelligence level of the woman in question. Alexandersson and Kalonaiyte (2021) aptly point out that the "commercialization of girlhood [may be] a problematic neoliberal co-optation of its non-threatening features" (p. 417). When the word "girl" is used in an infantilizing manner, it depoliticizes the female experience. A "girl" is more docile than a woman who might demand agency, recognition, and systemic change.

Reclamations of Femininity: Bimbo Feminism and Choice Feminism

Another concept recently embraced online is "bimbo feminism", a supposedly well-meaning attempt at reclaiming the term "bimbo" which has long been negatively associated with the idea of "an attractive but unintelligent or frivolous young woman" (The Commonwealth Times & Matthews, 2023). However, "bimbo feminism" is implicated in reproducing the harmful patriarchal stereotypes

that it claims to critique by representing women and their endeavours as intellectually inferior to those of men. A fascinating case study of "bimbo feminism" can be found in the famous TikTok creator Nikita (@nikitadumptruck). Boasting nearly one million followers on TikTok, the young, fashionable, and conventionally attractive Nikita has amassed online popularity by explaining current events through stereotypically feminine metaphors and interests, such as shopping and gossip. Her online persona revolves around intentionally speaking with an "upspeak"—an inflection associated with unintelligent women and a necessary element of the bimbo archetype. Though Nikita's content is amusing, educational, and appears harmless, her bimbo feminist schtick reinforces the oppressive belief that women are incapable of comprehending knowledge and logic to the same standards as men (or are simply uninterested in complex topics). @nikitadumptruck's content is celebrated under the guise of female empowerment, but its implications are more dire: women are not smart enough to grasp politics, so we must dumb it down for them to understand.

A common defence of "bimbo feminism" (as with all of the slang terms discussed in this article) is that women should get to *choose* how they engage with their femininity. While true at its core, these conceptualizations of femininity are inherently patriarchal and ignore why conforming to gendered stereotypes is harmful. Conforming to stereotypes *is* an exertion of agency, however it is *not* liberatory. These internet-derived terms, while appearing as a bold act of reclamation, do not change how women view oppressive forces. It instead perpetuates the same problems that it claims to

challenge. While choice feminists believe that a woman's right to choose is inherently feminist because it is an exertion of agency and, therefore, a path to liberation itself (Sykes & Hopner, 2024), Ferguson (2010) explains choice feminism as "motivated by a fear of politics":

> [Choice feminism] arises in response to three common criticisms of feminism: that feminism is too radical, too exclusionary, and too judgmental. In response, choice feminism offers a worldview that does not challenge the status quo, that promises to include all women regardless of their choices, and that abstains from judgment altogether. Moreover, it enables feminists to sidestep the difficulties of making the personal political: making judgments and demanding change of friends, family, and lovers. Yet judgment, exclusion, and calls for change are unavoidable parts of politics. (p. 247)

Perpetuating choice feminism contributes to a culture that depoliticizes the actions of individuals under institutional control and assimilation (Ferguson, 2010). It is important to note that "bimbo feminism" is not explicitly anti-feminist in the way that misogyny is, but conceals a persistent *layer* of misogyny. Just because a movement is pursued by a woman does not mean it is feminist.

"Tradwives" and the Manipulation of Optics

The development of the term "tradwife" (an abbreviation of "traditional wife") has continued the trend of promoting gender essentialism—specifically, women's return to domesticity. Online, the "tradwife" is typically depicted through lifestyle content where stay-at-home mothers detail their

homemaking practices by way of short-form, skillfully edited TikTok videos (West-Rosenthal, 2024). Sykes and Hopner (2024) define the "tradwife's" characteristics:

> All Tradwives shared a rejection of feminism and identification as feminine, not feminist. [...] The role of women in society, as interpreted by Tradwives, is to be and act as a feminine woman should (to cook, clean, bear children, and support her husband). [...] [They] advocate for a societal reinvigoration of conservative religious and/or traditional heteronormative beliefs about sex and gender. (p. 474)

Nara Smith (@naraazizasmith), a 23-year-old influencer with over twelve million followers on TikTok, has been celebrated and critiqued in popular discourse for her "tradwife" content in recent years. She initially garnered attention for making all of her children's meals and snacks from scratch while dressed in elaborate, expensive clothing. Smith's appeal relates to her carefully-curated aesthetic, part of what makes "tradwives" enticing is the 1950s nostalgia they evoke (Sykes and Hopner, 2024). This nostalgia is trapped in the perpetual romanticization of a time before modern feminism: a fantasy that survives because it commodifies white, Western feminine ideals into a culturally and historically protected package (Estey-Burtt, 2024).

Aside from her domestic tasks, Smith is also an ultra-thin professional model who dons luxury fashion that is typically modest and conforms to the traditional housewife aesthetic. This portrayal of perfect domesticity—always "done up" to do simple household chores—is not only unrealistic but also

contributes to an unattainable standard of motherhood and femininity for women to live up to. Online "tradwife" content is also rife with an (un)subtle tone of condescension relating to what constitutes a "good" mother. Because these "tradwife" influencers are stay-at-home moms, they position themselves as more present, active, and loving caretakers than so-called liberal, career-motivated women. One must remember that "tradwife" influencers selectively curate and perform their lifestyles for the attention economy of the internet. This conveniently conceals that influencers like Smith are typically wealthy and privileged enough to live on one stream of income (their husband's), ignoring the many class-based obstacles that would lead mothers to balance a family and a career.

The purpose of Smith's lifestyle content is to encourage and glamorize homemaking, promoting a return to the white nuclear family who follow conservative (Christian) family values. It is also important to note that Smith is a mixed Black woman in a biracial relationship with a white man. This modern conception of the nuclear family would be generally unacceptable in the 20th-century pre-feminist nostalgia that she is promoting, a tension she does not address (Samuelsson, 2025). While it might seem that Smith is remodelling the idea of what a traditional family can look like, her depictions of femininity and motherhood are based on the model white housewife, leaving white heteropatriarchal ideals and aesthetics unchallenged.

However, while Smith may be subscribing to the patriarchy in ways that are visible to the public, the fact remains that she earns an income from her social media content—she ironically

benefits from a dual-income lifestyle that is branded as "liberal". In a 2025 interview, Smith denounced her status as a true "tradwife" by admitting that her paid labour in modelling, brand deals, and social media content restricts her ability to devote herself entirely to homemaking and childcare (Jay Shetty Podcast, 2025). She elaborates that her and her husband have a more egalitarian relationship than what may be deduced from her online content (Jay Shetty Podcast, 2025).

Social media is a burgeoning and relatively opaque form of employment. Algorithms and brand deals obscure the public from knowing exactly how much Nara Smith and other influencers earn from their content, allowing Smith to fly under the radar as a high-earning woman while sustaining a facade of passivity and unchallengeable femininity (Sykes & Hopner, 2024). Though Smith has led the "tradwife" online wave in recent years, her recent attempt to divorce herself from this identification discloses that this was apparently accidental. Naturally, this provokes me to wonder: why did Smith separate herself from the "tradwife" label when she undoubtedly profits from it? Does it benefit her brand to distance herself from the archetype, or could Smith herself be feeling like she is failing to live up to these unattainable standards of femininity and motherhood? Regardless of the reason behind Smith's public distancing from the "tradwife" label, her choice to do so reifies and substantiates it as an identity marker, which is monumental in itself.

Trend Adoption and Shifting Ideologies

Having explored the terms and their positions within contemporary discourse, I now turn to the genesis of these trends and investigate how users engage with and adopt certain identities and dominant ideologies. Sun and Ding (2024) define an influencer as someone who "[gains] followers and fame by producing content on platforms" (p. 1). Not only do influencers promote products through brand deals, but endorse *themselves* and their lifestyles by "self-branding [...] and selling it on the labour market" (Sun & Ding, 2024, pp. 1–2). Influencers themselves are the product which people buy with engagement. Sun and Ding also note that influencers encourage subliminal messaging surrounding gender politics). This is illustrated in the content of both @nikitadumptruck and @naraazizasmith, who promote patriarchal archetypes of women. But who leads this shift in ideology: the figureheads or the audience?

In Zhang et al.'s (2016) longitudinal study examining how trends reach mainstream audiences and patterns of engagement, they found that while a term might originate from one or two users, mass engagement is what creates a widespread trend. The authors observed that there are two chances (or two "spikes" in collective usage of a word) for a new term to "receive collective attention and become a trend", which occur approximately 103 days apart (p. 3). An initial spike in word usage suggests that a term did achieve some traction, but eventually fizzled out. However, a second spike confirms that the term gained another wave of popularity among additional users who continue using it. With the case of "bimbo feminism", it is not solely because of influencers like @nikitadumptruck that the movement

achieved widespread attention. While singular influencers may introduce their audiences to words and phrases in a specific context, a larger crowd must validate the use of a term for it to become a trend.

It is important to emphasize that trends do not become widespread without capitalist support; social media platforms are not neutral (Cunningham, 2024). "Girl boss" and "girl math" emerged during periods when the terms could be of the most benefit to the hegemonic sociocultural narrative, both deeply tied to the economic conditions of their time. While "girl boss" discourse was popularized during a wave of liberal power where identity politics (rather than structural change) were a main priority (Hetland & Goodwin, 2013), "girl math" has developed during a conservative and fascist resurgence that uses fear-mongering as a form of social control (Giroux & Bhattacharya, 2017). Cunningham (2024) states that when "girl boss" language took over the feminist landscape around 2017, it allowed capitalist beneficiaries (large corporations, political parties, and the 1%) to reap the benefits of the paid labour of women while neglecting structural inequalities. This model of feminism claims that women and men will be equal when women are allowed a seat at the boardroom table (Cunningham, 2024), while dismissing how a focus on identity politics conceals the realities of material inequality based on the characterization of labour itself (Hetland & Goodwin, 2013).

If "girl math" discourse recognizes women as socially and economically inferior to the male sex by playing into stereotypes of the financially irresponsible woman (Matthews, 2023), policymakers can easily exploit this by suggesting women return to the home and become "tradwives", allowing so-called

deserving men to continue accumulating economic and social capital. Sykes and Hopner (2023) argue that "tradwife" content accelerates the societal return to a more traditional, conservative culture. Similarly, Mitchell (2021) stresses that when women perform sustained unpaid domestic labour, men are offered more opportunities for economic success, which continues to limit opportunities for women. In the case of Nara Smith, there is a unique irony in engaging with *paid* labour through the promotion of her *domestic* labour. Smith is an example of how the lines of economic and domestic labour become necessarily blurred by neoliberal cultural norms that work to transform domesticity as a position financially feasible in itself (Sykes & Hopner, 2024). However, she has not publicized (until recently) that social media is a source of her income because this income is contrary to everything she claims to stand for. Smith benefits from the core of liberal feminism—the ability to join the workforce—while subliminally progressing the ideology of choice feminism and traditional gender roles (Sykes & Hopner, 2024). "Tradwife" influencers reveal the performance of domesticity while simultaneously concealing themselves behind the curtain of the digital marketplace.

Oftentimes, "tradwife" influencers eventually launch their own companies or brands, which directly contradicts their self-proclaimed domesticity. The young Mormon women of MomTok, a collective of influencers who have enjoyed mainstream attention through their hit reality program *The Secret Lives of Mormon Wives* (2024), are worth exploring. These mom-influencers initially gained notoriety through fun and well-crafted lifestyle content, later shifting to advertise themselves as personal brands funded by corporate sponsors. This employment arrangement—social media

influencing as a primary source of income—is only available to women with the material conditions and aesthetic for an enviable lifestyle (Samuelsson, 2025). MomTok consists of thin, economically privileged, conventionally attractive, (mostly) white women with their white husbands, maintaining the same heteropatriarchal family ideals that "tradwifery" promotes. Upholding an external appearance of a certain lifestyle is more important than what occurs behind the scenes; this kind of content sells because it is attractive and pleasing for viewers to engage with. It offers an ideal to live up to, ignoring the disconnect that makes this lifestyle possible for some and not for others.

An individual's economic conditions drastically impact the strength of the feminist movement. As bell hooks (2004) discusses, when some reformed feminist women "[gain] power, and especially economic parity with the men of their class, they [...] pretty much [lose] interest in feminism" (p. 110). In response to a period of polarization, economic precarity, and the proliferation of right-wing politics, the gendered roles we inhabit in society are up for debate once again. Forces that benefit from patriarchal hierarchy, such as the government, the corporate elite, and claims-makers, adapt to extract as much labour and capital as possible while maintaining the conditions for this extraction through obfuscation. It is no coincidence that "tradwife" culture "commodifies the politics of division and intolerance that inevitably threatens social cohesion" (Sykes & Hopner, 2023).

Identity Markers, Social Media, and Politics

But are these discourses really changing anyone's politics, or are they simply reigniting previously held beliefs? In researching the link between a young adult's social media behaviours and political affiliation, Morales (2021) finds that young adults are especially "skeptical of mainstream institutions" and, therefore, rely on social media as their primary news source (pp. 14–15). A key influence in the development of a young person's political framework is the sense of community that they feel when engaging with others online; in this case, the terms "tradwife", "girl dinner", or self-describing as "just a girl" become ways to engage in camaraderie with their fellow internet users and form an emotional bond that sustains these political frameworks over time. This phenomenon is researched by Ozymenko and Larina (2021), who investigate the psychological and emotional response to particular kinds of media. The authors attribute the mass media's effect on society to a manipulation of fear among audiences, stating that "emotional events are recalled better than neutral events" (p. 748). By using inflammatory language, the media can inflate topics or manufacture panic around the sanctity of the traditional nuclear family. This coincides with the rise of conservative governments and their intentional use of affective politics: the use of fear for control and manipulation of the population (Giroux & Bhattacharya, 2017). This is a classic symptom of populist discourse; fear is used as a mobilization tactic by privileged individuals against vulnerable groups to facilitate precarity and reassert power. Giroux and Bhattacharya (2017) describe the conditions of this language:

> Anti-democratic tendencies, extending from the militarization of everyday life to the takeover of the commanding institutions of society by the financial elite, work in tandem to neutralize

> dissent, eliminate antagonisms, and create spectacles to divert the masses from real social and political problems. In addition, empathy is paralyzed by the mobilization of hate, and sympathy for the other is replaced by a culture and politics of vengeance. (p. 505)

Populist discourse is dangerous, not only due to how it restricts individual choice into traditional conservative frameworks, but also for how it mobilizes mass hatred and precarity. It eliminates the capacity for nuanced discussion and healthy debate by exacerbating fear. This sort of language is exactly what sells on social media; it is click-worthy, attention-grabbing content that social media companies encourage. More time spent on their platforms means more money in their pockets, regardless of the social and individual consequences of having this information at our fingertips whenever we desire.

Research identifies that mass audiences adopt these patriarchal ideologies due to intentional, spectacle-oriented algorithms and the profit-oriented gaze of media executives. Discourse shapes our understanding of ourselves, the world, and our place in it as we reify our senses of self through performance and imitation (Foucault, 1976). Terms like "girl boss" and "tradwife" give form to abstract political and economic patriarchal motivations, turning domination (and relation to it) into aesthetic identity markers to ascribe to. This is why it matters that women are only offered a subordinate identity if they want to belong. Rharzouz et al. (2024) state that a woman's self-efficacy is directly linked to her achieved success. If successful in promoting "popular" patriarchal ideas, these social media platforms push misogynistic expectations of *in*capability onto women, presumably to

alter actionable behaviours and life trajectories. If women can make well-informed economic decisions and feel confident in doing so, these narratives may not hold as much weight. When women see themselves as capable, agentic individuals, femininity can go beyond "just" girlhood.

Implications for Sociological Knowledge and Practice

It is important to be conscious of how the narratives presented to us become the truths we live by. I perceive the playful and seemingly harmless nature of terms like "girl math", "girl dinner", and phrases like "I'm just a girl" as a facade that distracts internet users from understanding these trends as reconstructions of oppressive ideals. Despite research establishing that social media trends gain traction through authentic, widespread audience engagement, it is also true that platforms and corporate actors benefit from these profit-maximizing tools of capitalism; if something's gaining traction, someone's making money.

Literature demonstrates that popular internet trends and the influencers who market them emerge in response to prevailing societal attitudes, as larger audiences must adopt them in order for them to cross into the mainstream. One must remember that social media platforms are not neutral tools—they are used by political parties and individual claim-makers to promote viewpoints that sell or benefit their political projects. Popularity is profit, and social media platforms have no true stake in either side of an argument except for the profit that the executives can extract (Cunningham, 2024). Women are affected by these patriarchal, oppressive discourses in varying ways, which differ based on class, race, and location, especially in the realization of a single-income 'traditional' lifestyle.

In the wake of "bimbo feminism", "tradwives", and "girl math", the liberal feminist "girl boss" is replaced because the concept is no longer marketable in a time when conservative politics dominate governments and popular culture alike. It is more beneficial for domestic womanhood to be positioned as a normative and *satisfying* prospect so women can better fulfill their destined role as a mother and wife, rather than question why those are their only options. Even though these trends are often presented *by* female influencers, it is vital to identify how these women are (perhaps accidental) agents of the patriarchy by endorsing them. If feminism is supposed to interrogate patriarchal systems and norms, it is only successful when its analysis is targeted and comprehensive. It should challenge widely accepted norms and call for structural changes that destabilize and overthrow the patriarchy. Choice feminism—the ethos that enables the patriarchal internet phrases analyzed in this paper—is a neoliberal attempt at avoiding these systemic issues and simply reducing liberation to a matter of individual choice. Every slang term examined conceals a combination of misogynistic elements with an underlying capitalist stance. The term "girl boss" both demeans and encourages a woman's place in the paid workforce, bimbo feminism and "girl math" patronize women as simply incapable and unintelligent individuals, and "tradwife" is an attempt to return to mid-century conservatism and domesticity. Coining or defending these terms as "feminist" within patriarchal, capitalist structures is a futile effort. We cannot "girl math" our way to collective liberation.

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Dichotomous Indulgence and Resistance: Analyzing Female Players' Response to *Love and Deepspace*'s 3.0 Update

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Abstract

Love and Deepspace is an immersive gacha Otome game, a genre focused on story-driven romance games marketed to women. On January 22, 2025, *Love and Deepspace* unveiled its 3.0 update live on YouTube, including an in-game period tracker. This feature allows users to input their menstrual cycles, prompting their chosen husbando (love interest) to respond with personalized care like stomach massages and comforting dialogue (*Love and Deepspace*, 35:30). This update comes amid rising concerns over data privacy and bodily autonomy, especially in light of anti-abortion laws in the U.S. and growing backlash against period tracker apps. As many women delete these apps in protest, the warm reception to *Love and Deepspace's* tracker introduces an intriguing contrast. Using the frameworks of period tracking apps/feature as sites of biopolitical negotiations and Zuboff's (2019) &

Gidaris (2019) concept of surveillance capitalism, this research explores the fandom's seemingly dichotomous decisions of indulgence and resistance through the examination of fan connection, discourses, and practices through social media fan communities on TikTok and Reddit. The results reveal how fans engage in curating narratives of protection to rationalize their indulgence but also attempt to use the period tracking feature to negotiate resistance against US surveillance and other period tracking apps. This article asserts that despite the seemingly contradictory stances, the fandom's prior active mobilization and apparent concern presents intriguing potential for resistance against the threats of surveillance capitalism and biopolitical negotiation that the game itself poses.

Keywords: *Love and Deepspace*, data privacy, bodily autonomy, menstrual cycles, biopolitical negotiation, surveillance capitalism

As you step into the shoes of the main character (MC), you notice that something has indeed gone wrong. This is not the world you know. Usually, you are a fierce deepspace hunter who fights to rid your futuristic city, Linkon, of Wanderers, an invasive alien race that threatens the world. Now the world you knew is disregarded, in this alternate story where the world is in ruins, a mysterious phenomenon occurs that breaks down the psyche of people turning them into feral praedators. As the MC in this post apocalyptic world, you must solve the mysteries that will release the world from the danger of praedators. These 'praedators' were known—loved even—by you in another

universe, yet in this one you must interrogate them, get them to trust you with their secret, and then you must tame them. Only then can you save this world from the spread of this insanity.

You are forced to confront one praedator of your choice, Sylus, who is caged in an iron structure akin to a large bird cage with one hand cuffed to the bars overhead. You pick up a pair of handcuffs and step into the cage facing a feral Sylus, scantily clad in a tight leather harness that displays his lean and muscular chest and abs. He lunges at you, aiming for your neck before you step back. His deep voice taunts you to act quickly. He is tied up, yet his usual confidence and haughty demeanor remain as he snipes at you. He lunges for you again and you grab his free hand and handcuff it to the cage. The power you hold over him is palpable. Sylus, the figure of authority, now answers to you. You feel the unexpected weight of the situation, and as you execute the MC's actions, a strange thrill tinges your own response.

You follow the instructions on the screen, dragging your thumb to examine his body, the perspective shifts as you circle his lean torso, watching his abs contract with each deep breath. You scan his body to detect the activator needed to 'tame' him. In this series of touches to his waist you detect the activator on his body. You trace your hands slowly over Sylus's upper body, the tension building as you wonder, "Is the activator here?" Sylus' breaths become laborious as your hand wanders, sensuous moans between his words as he says "that feels... good." The intensity of the moment makes you hesitate for a split second, which is all he needs to escape from his confines and pull you into an embrace as he whispers in your ear. Your heart races, but you break free and when he lunges for you

again, you push the activator located in his right eye. As his wild nature recedes his embrace now feels like a triumph, not just for the MC, but for you, the player steering her actions.

As you read the scene unfold, a thought must run through your mind, mirroring the reaction of a streamer's: "What is this? What did I stumble on to?" It is a moment from *Love and Deepspace's* Tomorrow's Catch-22 event, an event that has circulated widely on social media. Similarly, intimate scenes have been used in the game's promotional ads fostering a community of female players who through the game are able to engage in themes of control, vulnerability, and fantasy in ways that feel both provocative and empowering.

Introduction

Love and Deepspace is an immersive gacha Otome game, a genre focused on story-driven romance games aimed at women, where the player takes on the role of a female protagonist (Wikipedia). Gacha elements encourage players to spend in-game or real currency for rewards (Wikipedia). Set in a futuristic sci-fi world, the game follows the main character (MC), a deepspace hunter who combats alien Wanderers with the help of her chosen husbando (love interest). With rich lore, detailed graphics, and intimate first-person moments, *Love and Deepspace* offers an addictive experience featuring combat, five distinct love interests, and a mystery surrounding the MC's backstory meant to cater to its target audience: women. On January 22, 2025, *Love and Deepspace* unveiled its 3.0 update live on YouTube, exciting fans with new features including an in-game menstruation tracker. This is an extension to the game's "Remind Me" feature that allows users to input their periods,

prompting their chosen husbando to respond with personalized care like stomach massages and dialogue aimed at easing discomfort (*Love and Deepspace*, 35:30; Diaz, 2025). During the displays of these interactions, the live chat was a constant stream of messages —a chorus of 'That's so cute', and 'That's cool'—all sharing positive feedback from its users. Meanwhile, viewers also referenced distrust of other menstruation tracking apps, particularly Flo, which is currently facing a Canadian class action lawsuit for sharing sensitive health data.

This update comes after the June 2022 overturning of *Roe v. Wade* which returned to state authority the right to regulate abortion, resulting in many state criminalizations. This update also comes after the Canadian class action lawsuit against Flo, which bolstered concerns of data privacy and bodily autonomy (Duguay et al., 2024). As many women delete menstruation tracking apps in protest, the warm reception to *Love and Deepspace's* tracker produces an intriguing contrast (Duguay et al., 2024). I argue that through the production of defense narratives, fans negotiate their dichotomous desire for indulgence and need for resistance. Female players undergo the seemingly contradictory task of attempting to minimize concerns of harm while maintaining their opposition to US and Canada's biopolitical surveillance and potential data misuse. Additionally, I argue that the biopolitical inclination of players in conjunction with broader fan practices such as fervent mobilization and boycotts signals a potential for active resistance against Infold and its parent company, PaperGames if the perceived 'safety' of the game, pertaining to data privacy and misuse, is disrupted. This is especially pertinent if the professed trust between players and the company is breached in service to the U.S./Canada state or corporations like Meta Platforms, Google etc. Overall, *Love and Deepspace*

presents an intriguing case study into the intersection of women's reproductive rights and data privacy and its pervasive extensions into everyday life.

Methodology

To collect data for this study, I employed several qualitative methods including media analysis of *Love and Deepspace* and the player's community primarily through TikTok, given the platform's influential and active fan community on the application. However, other social media platforms such as Reddit and Twitch were utilized. Additionally, participant observation of gameplay on TikTok and Twitch was transformed into fieldnotes from quick jottings, and two semi-structured, transcribed interviews with players of the game. Lastly, my personal experience of playing the game for approximately two months also contributed to the information used to build this paper.

Interviews were conducted in two formats: one online via Zoom and the other in person, each lasting approximately one hour. Given the nature of the study, a casual, conversational approach was adopted to encourage openness and authentic responses. To maintain anonymity, the interviewees are referred to as "Jane" and "Doe." The data and media analysis collected focused on recurring and conflicting themes regarding players' emotional connection to the game, community belonging, and perceptions of the period feature in the game's 3.0 update. Additionally, literature research was undertaken to provide context on Otome games, as well as the broader issues surrounding data privacy and the protection of women's sensitive health information.

Findings: Community Belonging

Doe, a Canadian participant, attributes the fan community especially on TikTok to be incredibly important to player engagement, noting that "usually, the communities draw me in first... and then I'll go to the app." She suggests that the fandom's size and energy often attract new players, saying, "The noise of the fandom makes people interested." The online fan community surrounding *Love and Deepspace* is generally described as "kind and respectful, most of the time," and while X (formerly Twitter) is noted as a more contentious space, the community is largely perceived as a safe environment for women. One participant notes, "I don't see a lot of personal attacks or threats... it's mostly people engaging positively or neutrally over the series." Another participant, Doe, emphasizes that the community fosters self-appreciation and love for womanhood: "It's a very 'appreciate yourself' kind of environment, like love your womanhood." In this way, the space has been constructed by participants as an empowering space for women. The community's practices of sharing, helping, and mutual enthusiasm contribute to a sense of safety and connection. As Jane states, "there's a lot of sharing and helping, and people are just excited to talk about how good something is."

Emotional Connection & Empowerment

Jane and Doe demonstrate contrasting approaches to engaging with *Love and Deepspace*. Jane, who works from home, incorporates the game into her daily routine, stating she always "has it running." The interview was not an exception to this, as Caleb, one of the husbandos, was working next to her on her second screen. She plays daily for at least two hours, stating, "I guess I really like seeing the characters, it's funny. I like seeing Caleb, I like [him] being there, and so even if it's just for the study or work feature, I just like his virtual presence." A key feature of the game is the ability to

interact with your husbandos outside of the in-game storyline. Doe adds, "The male love interests always appearing on your screen once you open the game... creates an emotional bond. [It] makes you become familiar with them." These recurring interactions help deepen their familiarity and attachment to the characters.

In contrast, Doe, who describes herself as 'moderately' invested in the characters, primarily engages with the main story and the mystery of the MC's backstory. She logs in daily for 15-30 minutes to collect rewards, playing more extensively only when time permits. The login reward instills an aspect of discipline that encourages Doe, despite her casual status to engage with the game daily (Gidaris, 2019). Doe highlights the MC's storyline as her main investment. Doe values the MC's goal-oriented character and the focus on her personal journey: "I'm mostly invested in the main story because the way that they wrote the main character is really nice. I didn't expect them to write her with such a goal oriented mindset." Doe highlights how the MC's agency and independence differs from the typical characterization of women in the Otome genre: "...in *Love and Deepspace*, you're not using all your emotional energy on, like, fixing like their [the husbandos] trauma. You're trying to get to the bottom of your story and they're there along the way. You navigate your own lives together and I like that."

The MC's characterization is a key reason why women not only connect with the game but feel empowered by it. As Jane states: "I do think that her boldness is having, like, a positive, reaction in players. I've heard from people within the community who've stated that they've been sort of inspired by the MC and their interaction with romance and initiating aspects of intimacy." Similarly, Doe views

the MC to be less of a self-insert, stating that while the MC is more "confident", she is "a little bit more timid" and the MC is more of a "role model" than a reflection of herself. In these cases, women don't feel connected/represented but empowered by the MC to be more agentic actors in their own lives. Women are able to navigate romantic/sexual themes through a character that is as bold, confident, goal-oriented and independent with romantic/sexual relations as she is with protecting Linkon City from Wanderers.

Overall, the fan community surrounding *Love and Deepspace* is described as "deeply passionate about their favourite guys," with ongoing conversations about preferred characters and their integration into everyday life. Fieldwork observations reveal that this emotional investment is not limited to the main story but extends to the game's broader elements as corroborated by both participant's interest in the mini-games and combat. The community's intense connection to the game is attributed to both the narratives of romance, sexuality, and agency as well as the mechanisms of the game itself.

Period Tracker Reactions

The overwhelmingly positive reactions to the inclusion of a menstruation tracker in the 3.0 update of *Love and Deepspace*, as observed in the YouTube livestream's comment section, were also reflected in the perspectives of the interviewees. Jane, an American player, initially expressed hesitance due to living in a "post-Roe v. Wade world." However, she came to view the tracker as a natural extension of the game's previous engagement with periods. She stated:

> One of the audios that [Sylus] does is [where] MC is on her period, and he takes care of her. ...This game has already kind of brought the idea of normalizing periods and integrat[ed] [it] into the characters [and] the game. So I guess this is a natural progression, especially along with it having reminders.

Doe, a Canadian player, expressed her positive reaction to the inclusion of period tracker, discussing how, in her cultural context, menstruation is not openly acknowledged:

> I really like the implementation of this feature because as a woman who grew up in, [and] around Asian culture, periods aren't something that you ever talk about, except with your mom when you finally have it. And then you never mention it again. I've never heard my brothers talk about it at all... It's just something you learn through osmosis, [by] being around women. I really appreciate them taking the step to make it more normal for you to want your partner -fictional or not- to be in tune with ... your health because it's really important.

For Doe, the inclusion of the period tracker was significant due to the cultural absence of menstrual discourse. She particularly appreciated how the feature depicted male characters as knowledgeable about menstruation and considerate towards women's experiences. Both interviewees state that the game empowers women to ask their partners to learn more and be more involved with their health. According to Doe, the game has a normalized menstrual discourse, which, as observed by Jane, has already taken effect.

> I have heard some good stories from people who are in relationships saying that their boyfriends have played the game and have learned. Or that they themselves have shown them certain things and have opened up those conversations to their boyfriend or spouse. And I think that it's nice; [the period tracker] could be a positive influence on things.

As time passed, the inclusion of the period tracker gained increased appreciation among players, enhancing their sense of being catered to. Jane theorized that this progression was largely due to the feature's thoughtful execution: "I'm sure a lot of other people didn't expect it to be so robust, in terms of the conversations that were within the game. [For example] Zayne [is] speaking like a doctor, but still being very comforting… So, yeah, it helps women feel, like, really catered to."

This perspective is shared among feminist Chinese Otome gamers where one participant stated that, besides fulfilling women's emotional needs that are unmet in patriarchal societies, Otome games are also instrumentalized to experiment with non-normative lifestyles and envision women's non-reproductive futures" (Liu et al., 2024, p. 13). The husbando's focus on the player's health, emotions, and well-being essentially distances menstruation from reproductive governance and biopolitical threat/negotiation, a feat not available with the use of dedicated period tracking apps. The community's actions might seem contradictory given their awareness of sociopolitical dangers, however, these choices to platform also reflect the "minimal but nonetheless legitimate form of protest"… in women's everyday lives" (Liu et al., 2024, p. 11).

Data and Privacy Concerns

In spaces of fervent fan activity, such as TikTok, the period tracker feature in *Love and Deepspace* does not appear to occupy a particularly controversial space within game discourse. In broader conversations about the game, privacy and data concerns regarding the menstruation tracker are rarely discussed in depth. As one interviewee observed: "I think people are mostly focused on the reaction from the character with the, with the period tracker 'cuz like I haven't seen any concerns about the data sharing..."

However, concerns regarding data privacy are not entirely absent. These concerns tend to emerge more frequently in spaces like Reddit, where players, particularly those in the United States, initiate discussions about potential risks. One user, in response to a query asking for reactions to the new update, expressed the following: "I don't want to share any personal medical information with an Otome game for them to on-sell to market researchers." Though the concerns are rare, some users across forums state their refusal to use the period tracker, with an even smaller minority describing it as "sick" or "gross" (u/MathematicianKey8235, 2025). Doe, reflecting on this issue, commented: "A lot of people think, 'oh, the data I put on this app isn't gonna harm me. It's not taking anything deeply personal.' Despite women's health being a deeply personal thing that they shouldn't be selling, I do think a lot of people would brush it off like it's not a big deal."

This view aligns with the predominant perspective in Reddit discussions where many players dismiss the possibility that the American government would use *Love and Deepspace* as a source of data about women's menstrual cycles, considering such concerns to be "fearmongering" (u/Otome_Chick,

2025). Several rationales are typically provided to defend the feature's inclusion in the game.Firstly, many fans believe the company would not risk betraying fan trust and loyalty. This perspective is shared by Doe, who, prior to the interview, had not considered the potential risks of Infold's access to this data. However, after reflecting on the matter, she stated: "I can't see them doing anything to directly harm the people that they're making a game for because a lot of the games are catered towards women, so it'd be surprising to me for them to directly contribute to any harm."

Many fans share this perspective, stating on forums that Infold would be unlikely to participate in data sharing or selling due to the risk of losing their primarily female audience. Fans claim the company has no incentive to do this as *Love and Deepspace*, being a gacha game, already has numerous monetization strategies that are highly profitable. They believe that the menstruation tracker is a simple reminder function that collects unverified information which would not be valuable enough to justify the sharing or selling of data (u/TheCrazyOutcast, 2025). Regardless of the apparent risk, this discourse reveals an undercurrent of constructed trust between the company and the players. The company is received positively by fans as one that would not cause harm to their fanbase.

Another argument put forth is that because Infold Games is of Chinese origin, the U.S. government could not easily demand or request user data, particularly given the worsening political tensions between the two countries. Fans believe that the company's nationality offers a safeguard. One Reddit user summarized this point by stating: "It's just really weird and funny that, right now, if you want to track your periods, the app with the lowest possibility and least amount of incentive to sell you out is a Chinese Otome gacha game" (u/Daiontearose, 2025).

With this logic, corporate data ownership is encoded as inevitable and there is deep rooted in distrust and disapproval of U.S.'s reproductive governance and biopolitical surveillance. This logic is described by Westerlund (2021) as bi-directional distrust, where he notes that "public trust in government has declined in developed countries dramatically over recent decades, while surveillance has not decreased, but rather increased" (p. 36). A pervading connotation in this discourse however is the assumption that American and Chinese corporations are distinct and opposing in the realm of digital data. Under this logic, they engage in the use of the period tracker feature as an act of resistance against one surveillance state (the U.S.) over another (China). Players attempt to creatively weaponize this dichotomy as using the app to track one's menstruation is positioned as a way to undermine the digital surveillance and biopolitical regulations of the American state. Thus, players' distrust in the U.S. government and concerns of data privacy with other menstruation tracking apps actually encodes the game's feature as a 'safer' alternative.

A recurring point among players is that the data collected by the menstruation tracker is not verified, allowing users to input whatever information they wish, thus reducing the potential for misuse. Overall, Jane, the American player, shares the sentiment that while there may be risks, these are not perceived as significant enough to deter her use of the feature. She explained:

> You know, again, there is the risk, and it's real. I acknowledge it and anyone who doesn't wanna use it for those reasons is smart. Maybe there's a bit of pessimism there. Maybe there's a bit of feeling like my information is being taken all the time. And this is one little thing that brings

> me joy. So I'm like, 'you know what? Let's give it a go.' Will I use it [the] next time I'm on my period? Probably.

Discussion

A review of *Love and Deepspace's* Privacy Policy reveals the company's practices regarding the collection and use of player data. Specifically, the policy outlines how the game collects information when users opt to use the "Remind Me" feature, which includes the Period Tracker. It states:

> If you choose to use the 'Remind Me' feature in-game, you provide us with the information you enter/edit while using this feature. [For example...] when using the 'Period' feature, you provide us with the date and cycle you input. We will access your system date and time, and invoke your notification permissions to realize the reminder feature in the 'Remind Me' feature in-game. The aforementioned data you provide is solely for the purpose of recording/setting reminders when using this feature, and we will not verify/validate the authenticity or completeness of the aforementioned information, nor will we use the aforementioned data for any other purpose or share it with any third party. The data you provide to us through the use of this feature is completely at your discretion, and we advise you not to use this feature to record sensitive personal data or data related to your privacy/property security. If you refuse to provide the aforementioned data, you will be unable to use the 'Remind Me' feature, but this will not affect your normal use of other features in *Love and Deepspace*.

Though the policy claims to protect user data, it is important to note that despite a similarly robust Privacy Policy, Flo is currently under a class action lawsuit in Canada for violating user privacy

agreements. They allegedly share sensitive health data with third parties like Google and Facebook (Kaur, 2025). Thus, while *Love and Deepspace's* Privacy Policy states that it does not share its menstruation feature's data with third parties, precedent suggests that such risks should not be dismissed outright.

A recurring point among players is that the data collected by the menstruation tracker is not verified, allowing users to input falsified information, thus reducing the potential for government misuse. The surveillance capabilities of companies are severely underestimated as this narrative assumes that there is no method to make this data verifiable. In fact, no evidence showcases that anonymizing this data is "meaningfully achievable" (Zuboff, 2019, p. 158). This exemplifies the high level of surveillance reflexively embedded in devices and applications, with little concern for the attainability of anonymity and privacy that many companies promise its users. While the option to input false information into the period is viewed as a "smart" decision and some users do abstain, it seems that the majority of players who chose to use the period feature have inputted their menstrual cycle data, regardless of whether or not they continuously use or depend on the feature. Doe, for example, doesn't use the period feature often, however, she has used the period tracker before and chose to input accurate information. Many claim in Reddit forums that they prefer to use the period feature as a replacement to period-tracking apps like Flo. Though, according to the policy, the unverifiable narrative holds some truth, as when using the period feature it does ask users to verify if the reminders

of your menstruation's beginning and end are correct. Another significant note is Infold's advice to players not to use the feature to record "sensitive personal data." This warning is contradictory to their advertising of the feature and the actual use of players.

Many players believe the company would not risk the sharing or selling of sensitive health data. Many dismiss the claims as "fearmongering," but is it? Surveillance capitalism refers to the way in which data collection has become an increasingly powerful commodity that allows users to engage in apps for free (Gidaris, 2019). According to Gidaris, surveillance capitalism operates "by abstracting human bodies into data flows that can be exchanged, purchased, and sold in the digital economy, these companies look to the body as a digital site, one whose value is predicated entirely on its capacity to yield profitable information." (Gidaris, 2019, p. 137). Menstrual tracking applications operate in the space of surveillance capitalism as sites of biopolitical negotiation; where the "the politics of life itself" are managed by the state-corporations using digital surveillance and data collection (Rose, 2017, p. 15). In this context of menstruation apps as a site of biopolitical negotiation, ownership, and collection of women's menstrual health records can be understood as an especially profitable commodity. The economic orientation of data, however, is a trojan horse often disguised behind a web of digital spheres (Zuboff, 2019).

Love and Deepspace's profitable gacha inclusions does not deny the incentives of the sale of women's health data especially given the lack of legal protections in Canada and the US from non-medically administrated health devices and apps (Gidaris, 2019). Thus, the constructed defense narrative of 'risk' is more bound within players' trust in Infold rather than the presence of preventative

measures such as legal consequences or lack of incentives. User faith is thus a part of Infold's competitive edge that enables them to bypass the criticism that period tracking apps face. The responsibility is placed on the company to stay honourable to this trust despite the opportunity to maximize profits. This necessitates users to be active labourers in managing the safety of their data in the absence of governing bodies and regulations. Users must consistently demand transparency and adherence to the privacy policy of the company. Thus, health and data privacy becomes a neoliberal project where, due to government mistrust and state deregulation, citizens must manage and control their health through the use of non-medical apps (Gidaris, 2019). Users are also forced to navigate the complex, interconnected and mystified ecosystem of data to advocate for data security with companies. As Dijck (2014) aptly states "what is at stake here is not simply our "trust" in specific government agencies or single corporations, but the credibility of the entire ecosystem" (p. 204). The 'ecosystem of data' not only refers to the digital sphere but the underlying operational logic that enables data ownership, deregulation, and surveillance capitalism to be in service of state or company profit.

The community deploys a theory that the company's nationality offers a safeguard, however, further investigation into the Privacy Policy showcases the exemptions to their policies which debase the belief that nationality is a safeguard against government data appropriation. Firstly, Infold Games is a Singaporean company, however its parent company, PaperGames, is Chinese. A pervading assumption in this rationale is the segregation between China/Singapore and US's data spheres but also a separation between corporations and state. However, data and digital identity is mystified

through an interconnected, global web of connections. Data is stored across privately owned corporations and transferred through global partnerships impossible to track (Dijck, 2014; Varoufakis, 2023). In this way, data is a mysterious global ecosystem "where no single institution is in command but which credibility is disputed in a number of public debates, court struggles, and political skirmishes" (Dijck, 2014, p. 204). This is exemplified by Infold's global operations, as the game and parent company both have servers storing user data in several locations across the globe including in the U.S. Additionally, this rationale positions that due to geopolitical tensions between China and the U.S., data collected would not be made available to the U.S. even if requested, even though the policy states: "We may collect and use certain personal data without your authorization and consent in compliance with the relevant laws, regulations, and national standards in the country where you use our services, as well as to meet the request of judicial authorities and law enforcement agencies." (Infold Games, 2024)

The clause above states that at the request of local authorities player data can be used without consent. The policy further notes that personal information may be processed on servers located in various regions, including Virginia, USA. Reiterating that while state-corporation relations are impacted by geopolitical tensions, they have developed and sustained connections beyond them. Legal experts have expressed concerns about the potential use of digital data trails such as those created by period tracking apps to incriminate individuals suspected of obtaining illegal abortions (Kelly & Habib, 2022). Although it is unclear whether the data collected by *Love and Deepspace* would be

substantive enough to pose a risk in such cases, the potential for governmental requests to access this data remains a significant issue for American players.

While some players dismiss such privacy concerns as "fearmongering," it is worth noting that even under the assumption that Infold Games is committed to safeguarding user data, the risk remains present. As the Privacy Policy itself acknowledges:

> "You understand that, due to technical limitations and various malicious means that may exist, we cannot guarantee 100% security of your data, even if we have done our utmost to intensify our security measures" (Infold Games 2024).

Such disclaimers expose the inherent uncertainties of data security, particularly for users who may be unaware of the full scope of the risks involved. Yet, irrespective of risk awareness, many players have already signed "I agree" to accept these risks. Despite this, it's important to note that the game does not penalize or pressure players into inputting this information; it's an aspect that one can simply choose not to engage in. Furthermore, this aspect of the game is not heavily advertised or pushed in *Love and Deepspace* advertisements. However, more should be done to showcase this advisory and to inform players of their right to delete previously inputted/stored information regarding the tracker. This lack of proaction might be attributed to the relative lack of concern regarding the feature's invasive potential. Thus, data privacy practices of *Love and Deepspace* should be critically examined and continuously monitored to ensure that players are fully informed of the potential risks.

Dichotomous Indulgence and Resistance

The game's explosive popularity within North America is not coincidental but is rather intertwined with women's dissatisfaction with broader sociopolitical contexts, particularly the intensification of conservative political movements that heightened the vulnerability of women's reproductive health. *Love and Deepspace's* inclusion of the period feature and the unexpected 'robustness' of its emotional care departs from typical association of menstruation in relation to reproduction. This encodes *Love and Deepspace* as a rare space within the video game community where women are catered to and feel empowered to be more agentic actors in the assertion of their desires. The community's indulgence in the period feature is not a matter of ignorance. Though the Canadian participant did not previously consider the risk, her knowledge did not change her view of the company or the feature. She maintains that the company in its acknowledgement of periods has gained more of her 'respect' as it normalizes menstruation as an important topic of conversation with partners and family. Jane, the American participant, as well as other American players in Reddit forums showcase an awareness of the risk of data privacy and deep distrust in the U.S. government yet she—and many commenters—shared that she would still continue to use the feature. Both Doe and Jane's perspectives imply that the positives—such as empowering women to talk about their periods—outweighs the risks.

The construction of defense discourses showcases an effort to navigate these risks while maintaining their connection to the game. However, *Love and Deepspace* players also actively mobilize acts of resistance against the game. The 2025 fan boycott of *Love and Deepspace* was initiated by the Chinese fanbase, but participation spread through social media to international fanbases. The boycott

was organized around fan outrage at a myriad of complaints including raised gacha prices that were allegedly "trying to milk the fans for more money instead of giving, like, free opportunities to get cards and more of [Sylus's] story." There were even threats of lawsuit against the games' parent company, PaperGames, for alleged false advertising. Both Jane and Doe were aware of the boycott despite their different levels of involvement. Jane, the avid player, participated while Doe, who states she usually only logs in for free rewards, did not. On the boycott, Jane reports:

> It was less than a week, maybe like 4-5 days, so it wasn't too bad... There was a heads up on the boycott... that gave international fans some time to prepare and to know what to do. [But] there was a lot of confusion around it. Are we not logging in at all? Are we logging in to get, like, the free gifts? Are we just not spending money? Or are we using our pre-existing diamonds? I just did not touch it at all. Because I know that they keep track of the engagement... that they could always use probably for investors.

While both participants stated they weren't sure about the outcome of the boycott, it is remarkable that fans were able to organize their resistance across language barriers and differing social platforms as seen by the mobilization of avid players like Jane and the targeting of corporate milestones such as investments and shareholder value. Additionally, the in-game survey enables fans to actively and routinely report their thoughts on very specific details of the game. In this way, players impact the game's mechanisms and inclusions showcasing the fans' willingness to resist against the game itself.

This mobilization around outrage is what is needed to resist against companies in the wake of surveillance capitalism and the threat of state-corporate weaponization of period trackers as sites of biopolitical negotiation (Zuboff, 2019). Given the fan community's inclination to mobilize against the company's allegedly brazen monetary extraction and false advertising, it is the hope that a similar level of—or more—mobilization would occur in the case, it is revealed that the company engages in sharing or selling their health data.

Conclusion

Love and Deepspace provides a unique space for women where they can explore their desires, engage with characters who validate their experiences, and assert their agency in the face of a male-dominated gaming space. In my analysis of the TikTok fan community and interviews, I showcase how *Love and Deepspace* uses game mechanics and features such as "Remind Me," and daily login rewards to embed itself in players' daily lives. This was corroborated by the interviewees, Jane and Doe, who despite differing player status, casual versus dedicated, both play the game daily. This daily embeddedness builds a strong connection accelerated by the game's innovative ways of catering to and empowering its female fanbase. While more interviews are needed to form conclusive claims, from my results, both interviewees assert the characterization of the MC and the inclusion of the menstruation tracker as examples of the many intricate ways the game empowers women by inspiring them to be more agentic and assertive of their desires and expectations, especially pertaining to romantic and sexual partnerships.

In response to concerns of data privacy and reproductive governance in the U.S. and Canada, many fans actively construct or reproduce rationales of protection in order to preserve their indulgence in the game. The period tracker is constructed as a radical inclusion within the fan community, one that allows menstruation distanced from regulation and reproduction, centers women's care and pleasure thus empowering them to assert their needs in intimate relationships and is "outside" of U.S. government reach due to its plausible deniability and Chinese origins. The inevitability of data ownership, collection, and sharing is a recurring logic undercutting these rationales instead the probability of harm is what is often debated. While Infold's Privacy Policy attempts to assure the protection of user data, precedent showcases the fragility of such policies and the lack of preventative measures. The mystification of digital databases aids this deregulation, as users are enlisted to be active, consistent, and mobile in ensuring companies are transparent and compliant to the policies they set. Players have become the regulatory body for companies and their trust must become the 'risk' that companies dare not to breach. However, what is at stake is certainly more than trust, as some users face the weaponization of digital surveillance in the biopolitical management of women's reproduction which the criminalization of abortion across multiple U.S. states emphasizes. Canadian users who seem less actively involved in data concern discourses, also confront danger at the probability of Infold sharing/selling data to third parties seeking to market/influence/modify human behaviour (Varoufakis, 2023; Zuboff, 2019).

Indeed, what is truly at stake is the very essence of human agency and sovereignty. According to Zuboff (2019), "surveillance capitalism [is married to] behavior modification and the technological means to automate its application" (p. 189). Data privacy in the grand scheme becomes a matter of resistance in order to assert one's agency and sovereignty of one's life and behaviour. There needs to be a "rebirth of astonishment and outrage" not only at the prospect of data commodification but at the very prospect of naturalized state-corporate ownership of digital data and identity (Zuboff 2019; Varoufakis 2023). Though players' choice to share sensitive health information given awareness of current sociopolitical tensions does pose substantive risks, the positive reception of the feature within *Love and Deepspace's* fan community could be contextualized within larger cultural and political contexts in which women's enjoyment and self-care is recognized as acts of resistance (Liu et al 2024). However, *Love and Deepspace* players engage in resistance beyond indulgence as showcased by their prior boycott against Infold and their attempts to negotiate resistance against the biopolitical surveillance of the U.S. and Canada using the *Love and Deepspace* menstrualtracker feature. The results showcase the complex dynamics of indulgence and resistance players must navigate to both enjoy and mitigate risks. Overall, current fan discourses and practices point to a possibility in which users are willing to mobilize in demand for transparency, the right to data security, and privacy.

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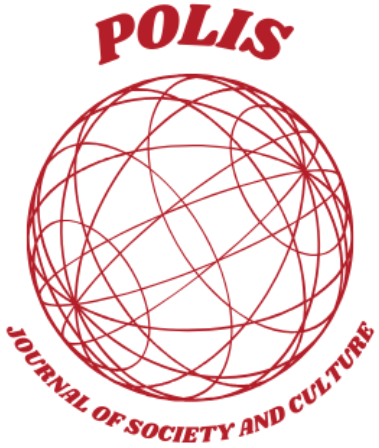

Politics of Representation

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Moby Dick Loves the Gays: An Analysis of Queer Representation in Moby Dick

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Abstract

This paper seeks to answer a series of questions revolving around Queer representation in Herman Melville's work, arguing that Melville's investment in queerness is evident in *Moby Dick (2009).* Engaging with the work of Stephen B. Herrmann, Kellen Bolt, Robert K. Martin, and Robin Shulman, I analyze both Melville's own life and the passages of his texts. I first analyze how Melville's personal life may have influenced his views of masculinity and sexuality. Next, I observe Melville's apparent disavowal of the Western, American way of life, and its relation to Queerness. Lastly, I turn to the pages of *Moby Dick* (2009) to show Ishmael's de-patriation from American nativism in clear view. The goal of this paper is to add to the discussion of Queerness in 19th-century literature.

Keywords: Queer literature, queer representation, Moby Dick, Herman Melville

While nineteenth-century literature is not the first place one might think to look for Queer representation, it is imperative that we do. Analyzing the past of 2SLGBTQ+ (afterward referred to as Queer) communities and media representation is a crucial step in understanding our history and securing our future. As one of the most famous authors in history, Herman Melville, intriguingly, does not appear to shy away from depicting same-sex relationships and interactions. In this paper, I ask the question: Does Melville say it is okay to be gay? To better answer this question, I engage with the work of scholars before me who have sought to answer similar ones. The time Melville lived in would have made it very hard for one to open a page of his book and find a passage stating openly and enthusiastically that homosexuality is acceptable, so this question requires both care and precise analysis of his work. Through close analysis of Melville's work–mainly *Moby Dick* (2009)–and relevant aspects of his personal life, I seek to inch closer to a question that has piqued the curiosity of literary scholars for decades. In a time where Queer rights and belonging are constantly being questioned, it is imperative that we continue this work. While much effort has been put into painting Queer people as an attack on 'American culture,' Melville's American classic offers itself as testament to both our belonging and our persistence.

Island Influences

Melville's early life was very typical for his affluent background. He enjoyed a comfortable childhood prior to his father's death in 1832, which financially ruined his family and left twelve-year-old Herman and his elder brother to pick up the pieces (Maxwell, 2026). By the end of his life, after enjoying success as an author until 1860, Melville was once again quite poor, working as a customs clerk and dying an irrelevant poet in 1891 (Maxwell, 2026). Melville's fast and loose relationship with high-class America had made him cynical. Writing became his outlet to critique the puritan values instilled in him by his father, using metaphor for deep-cutting social commentary while remaining wary of the watching eyes of his publishers and patrons.

After his father's death, Melville took to sea, first as a cabin boy and later as a whaler in the South Seas, where he would go on to abandon ship as Tommo does in *Typee* (1968) (Maxwell, 2026). Among Melville historians, it is widely agreed that this experience was formative for the author. As a white man deeply disgruntled with his country, exposure to a culture so vastly different from the busy-ness and shame he had come to know throughout his youth intrigued Melville; perhaps leading him to romanticize what he saw as a better way of organizing society. Melville's own sentiments appear to have been seeping into his character Ishmael when he wrote "here I prospectively ascribe all the honour and glory to whaling; for a whale-ship was my Yale College and my Harvard" (Melville, 2009, p. 121). It is difficult not to read this passage as Melville's own beating heart taking shape in his writing.

As such, I seek to demonstrate how Melville's time at sea and on the Marquesan island of Nuku Hiva served to influence his attitudes towards masculinity and homosexuality.

In his work "Melville's Portrait of Same-Sex Marriage in Moby-Dick," scholar Steven B. Herrmann (2010) uses the framework of Jungian psychology and collective psyche to dissect homosexuality and homoerotic symbolism in *Moby Dick*. Herrmann argues that "Melville's vision has everything to do with homosexuality from asocial, political, religious, and human rights [points] of view," asserting that Melville sought to make a social argument of sorts through his writing (Herrmann, 2010, p. 65). Herrmann (2010) dissects the characters Kory Kory and Marnoo as *tayos* (i.e. customary titles of gay men or closely bonded male companions) that serve as friends, aides, and partners. The two introduce Tommo,whom Herrmann takes to represent Melville's own experiences of homosocial bonds surpassing those of Western society (Herrmann, 2010, p. 73). Herrmann details an alternate first contact of sorts, where the foreign Melville meets a group of Indigenous Peoples and quickly realizes that the Typee people "enjoyed an infinitely happier ... existence, than the self-complacent European" (Herrmann, 2010; Melville, 1968, p. 207). Once again, it is difficult to imagine a young Melville at his desk, writing statements as bold as this without gritting his teeth. Herrmann (2010) makes the assertion that the same-sex relationships depicted in *Typee,* as well as in Melville's other works, are not to be taken as spiritual or symbolic, but "[speak] out of a core belief in the American psyche concerning the *inalienable rights of human beings to couple in sacred unions,*

regardless of one's sexual orientation" (p. 72). Herrmann places Melville's disavowals of Western thought within the parameters of American freedoms, an idea he later backs up with *Moby Dick*. Herrmann's perspective on Melville's Polynesian influences, however, is far from the only one.

In his study *Hero, Captain, and Stranger: Male Friendship, Social Critique, and Literary Form in the Sea Novels of Herman Melville* (1986), the trailblazing Queer scholar Robert K. Martin illuminates the importance of genre in *Typee*'s subversion. Martin (1986) explains the prevalence of the travel narrative in Victorian literature and culture, and how Melville was able to manipulate its conventions to his own ends. Furthermore, he shows how the travel narrative also served as a form of "genteel pornography" for the otherwise prim and proper Victorian society, as the anthropological aspects of these accounts thwarted reservations around depicting nudity and sexual themes (Martin, 1986). Martin (1986) argues that this tradition of travel novels and "the claim of authenticity permitted Melville to demonstrate the hypocrisies of the Christian missions and the arrogance of the colonizing impulse" (p. 19). Martin (1986) then takes a different stance on the role of Western and colonial ideas in *Typee*, arguing that Tommo is transported from his Western confines and shown a society in which close male friendships are uplifted. Instead of this foreign society and place being hostile, as originally expected by Toby and Tommo, it offers the protagonist a way to explore male relationships outside of the boundaries deemed acceptable by Western society. Melville's argument in *Typee* can be taken as one in favour of distancing oneself from Western ideals of bonds.

Herrmann (2010) and Martin (1986) offer different interpretations of the role that the Typee people played in informing Melville and Tommo's attitudes around homosexuality. Herrmann (2010) argues that freedom of sexuality is inherently American, and that religion has caused a "split" in the American psyche that allows the cognitive dissonance of preaching freedom and homophobia in the same breath. Regardless, the influence of Melville's personal life is explicit in *Typee*. The relationship between Tommo and his aide/bedmate Kory Kory diverges from the norms of "proper" Western society. I offer the scene in which Kory Kory "lights a fire" for Tommo as an example (Melville, 1968). Melville chooses to write this scene with Tommo observing Kory Kory as he first "mounts astride" of a large stick, "drives the stick furiously along the smoking channel, plying his hands to and fro with amazing rapidity" until "he approaches the climax of his effort," and "pants and gasps for breath" (Melville, 1968, pp. 186-187). Melville's (1968) subtle but highly sensual description of Kory Kory's handling of what he likens to a "little viper" is difficult to read as anything other than innuendo (p. 187). As Martin (1986) suggests, Melville utilizes the less-than-proper tradition of travel narratives to depict sexuality in a way that deviated from the heterosexual norms Western readers were accustomed to. The relationship between Tommo and Kory Kory remains obscured throughout the narrative, especially as the narrator's infatuation with Fayaway and his fear of remaining trapped in the valley muddy things for readers. That being said, the relationship between the white sailor Tommo and

Indigenous Kory Kory seems to replicate itself in *Moby Dick*'s (2009) Ishmael and Queequeg, implying that Melville had not yet finished exploring these ideas.

An All-American Myth?

As a nineteenth-century writer still championed globally in the twenty-first century, Melville represents both the literary prowess and the progressive attitudes that contemporary audiences seek. This progressivism can then be understood as a divorce from what was, and still is, seen as traditional American/Western ideals. Consistent among many of Melville's works, including *Moby Dick* , *Benito Cereno* (1855), and *White-Jacket* (1850) is the disdain they hold for systems of any kind. Why is it that this "all-American" writer, and his "all-American" myth, *Moby Dick*, seem to harbor so much disdain for their homeland? Is the overt and implicit Queerness found in Melville's work a fist raised against the American flag? Or is it as Herrmann (2010) says, that Melville saw the "split" in consciousness causing freedom of sexuality and identity to be excluded from American freedom? Melville was clearly no stranger to social commentary and criticism; through analyzing his work, it may become clearer what his intentions were.

Melville's habit of social commentary has long been linked to his tendency towards the phallic and Queer. Writing for *American Literature* in 1961, Robert Shulman brings to attention "The Serious Functions of Melville's Phallic Jokes" in his article on *Moby Dick.* Shulman (1961) gives an overview of the many harder-to-catch sexual/phallic jokes throughout Ishmael's narration, urging

readers not to assume that they are without purpose. He argues that "sexual jokes and imagery are ... a vehicle of social satire" (Shulman, 1961, p. 185) through which Melville explores antinormative views of society. Shulman (1961) takes the interesting stance that "Ishmael conveys his rejection of–and deliberate isolation from–social norms" (p. 184) through these jokes, purposefully aligning himself with homosexuality. Furthermore, he points to moments in "Cetology" and "Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish" to exemplify Ishmael's general distaste for systems, which he argues extends to "proper" contemporary views of fraternity and sexuality (Shulman, 1961, p. 183). The crux of one of Shulman's (1961) arguments is that Ishmael's rejection of systems in these ways is linked to Melville's own thoughts. In this model, the phallic jokes found in *Moby Dick*'s chapters "A Squeeze of the Hand" and "The Cassock" serve the serious function of allowing Melville an outlet through which to express his frustrations with both society and the creative process. Though Ishmael's own Queerness is given little outright discussion in the article, it does take the popular stance that Ishmael's sexuality is a form of commentary or rebellion against the ideals of Western society.

In her article "Squeezing Sperm: Nativism, Queer Contact, and the Futures of Democratic Intimacy in *Moby-Dick*," Kellen Bolt (2019) sets out on a similar path. Bolt (2019) rejects the "pessimism" of many Queer analyses of *Moby Dick*, asserting that Ishmael undergoes a "Queequegification" throughout his lifetime, distancing himself from American nativist ideals through interacting with Queequeg. She affirms Melville's "investment in Queerness" and Queer

futurity, showing how Queequeg and Ishmael's relationship can be read as a divorce from American nativist ideals around both foreignness and Queerness (Bolt, 2019 p. 297). She further argues that Ishmael's concept of a "joint-stock world" serves as an antithesis to nativist ideals, which serve to protect good, white, Christian families from foreign influence (Bolt, 2019, p. 306). Her argument is that Ishmael's introduction to Queequeg is a catalyst for questioning American nativist ideals, including those around same-sex friendships and relationships. Through this lens we can observe how Ishmael goes from a "good Christian ... born and bred in the bosom of the infallible Presbyterian Church" to seeing that "Christian kindness has proved but hollow courtesy" (Melville, 2009, pp. 68-69). Ishmael's initial reaction to Queequeg as a "terrible bedfellow" is shortly dispelled by his matrimony with the harpooner, giving weight to Bolt's (2019) argument that Queequeg is the one to spark Ishmael's "de-patriation" (Melville, 2009, p. 41). Through Bolt's argument, Queequeg's role in the story of *Moby Dick*, his relationship with Ishmael and Melville's intentions become clearer. That being said, Queequeg's endearment for Ishmael goes beyond the language used to describe them.

Another important aspect of Queequeg's character is his status as "Other" throughout the novel. Queequeg's Indigeneity and implicit queerness both shape his othering and his relationship with Ishmael. The intersection of these two identities makes Queequeg particularly interesting in deciphering the novel's attitudes towards contemporary American social norms. At the Spouter Inn, Ishmael is fed such tales about Queequeg;that through his own prejudices, he affirms "it was now quite

plain that he must be some abominable savage" (Melville, 2009, pp. 42-43). Queequeg becomes entwined in the dehumanizing cannibal narratives about Indigenous Polynesians that were incredibly prevalent in travelogues at the time, which also played a significant role in *Typee.* Marsha Vick (1992) notes in her paper "Defamiliarization and The Ideology of Race in '*Moby Dick*,' that Melville uses Ishmael's evolving relationship with Queequeg to discredit prevalent ideas of (white) racial superiority. Ishmael enters the Spouter Inn fully bathed in American hegemonic social norms and hierarchies, and leaves with Queequeg as a "cosy, loving pair," declared married by Queequeg himself (Melville, 2009, p. 70). Ishmael positions Queequeg to challenge white supremacy, humanizing him in a way "that Americans generally tried to keep from their awareness in order to maintain their personal equilibrium and the national status-quo" (Vick, 1992, p. 333). Ishmael's relationship with Queequeg becomes a way for him to question that status quo which placed him above his fellow man along colour lines, working towards more egalitarian ideals.

Ishmael's investment in a "joint-stock world" is intimately tied to his relationship with Queequeg and his questioning of hegemonic ideals (Bolt, 2019). As he leaves behind American soil to venture aboard the Pequod, Ishmael discovers ways of living and relating to others in a way that "replaces the mocking gaze of Americans, a gaze that polices the intimacies between men along racial and national axes" (Bolt, 2019, p. 306). In his nautical travels, Ishmael's encounters with the racialized "Other" and Queer sexuality leads him to question his Christian-American roots; this change in his

narration becomes visible as the novel progresses. The events experienced by the Pequod crew are far from 'normal,' but for Melville, the abnormal is a wealth of meaning.

Should We All Squeeze Sperm?

Perhaps the most overt of what Shulman (1961) calls "phallic jokes," the erotic scene in "A Squeeze of the Hand"–in which Ishmael and his fellow sailors passionately squeeze the sperm (whale oil) out of globules of whale blubber–is crucial to understanding Queerness in Melville's (2009) work. I found myself wondering when reading this chapter: what could Ishmael, and by extension Melville, have meant when he wrote "let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness" (Melville, 2009, p. 400)? This avocation for universal participation in what appears to be a circle of mutual masturbation intrigued me. Does Ishmael truly mean that the entire world should join each other in such activities? Does he mean that all men should explore their sexuality as he did aboard the Pequod? These are the questions that informed this paper. To conclude my argument, I analyze the text for any hints Melville may have left.

As Ishmael's partner, Queequeg plays an important role in my analysis and a formative role in the narrative of *Moby Dick*. After falling ill, Queequeg requests a coffin be made for him, upon which he later inscribes tattoos containing the "complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth" (Melville, 2009, p. 456). Ishmael does not fail to point out the irony of Queequeg being unable to fully decipher the meaning of his back tattoos, which were done by

a "seer of his island" (Melville, 2009, p. 456). Many consider Queequeg's tattoos and coffin to depict an interpretation of the meaning of life through the lens of his culture. If we are to accept the idea of Bolt (2019) and Herrmann (2010) that Queequeg plays a crucial role in influencing Ishmael's attitudes around society in general, then this coffin has interesting implications.

The Ishmael that survives the wreckage of the Pequod is vastly different from the Ishmael that first cuddled into bed with Queequeg at the Spouter-Inn. Having experienced "such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling" in the blubber room of the Pequod, Ishmael's introduction to Queequeg subsequently leads to a sense of unity among humanity through his experience of Queer sexuality (Melville, 2009, p. 399). Ishmael's survival by Queequeg's coffin—engraved with his "meaning of life"—is where Melville's investment in Queerness shines most (Melville, 2009, p. 540). Readers are presented with the final image of Ishmael atop the wooden coffin of his wedlock Queer lover which saved him from ruination. As the rest of the Pequod crew sink in the hearse whose "wood could only be American," Ishmael survives atop the coffin of his Polynesian companion (Melville, 2009, p. 583). Using Bolt's (2019) interpretation that Queequeg played an integral role in de-Americanizing Ishmael, particularly through their exploration of Queer sexuality, the image becomes clear. Melville (2009) leaves readers with a man who has been transformed by his exposure to the Queer and the "Other." No longer destined to sink with the American hearse, Ishmael is sustained by what Queequeg has shown him on their journey. As always, Melville's social commentary is molded

from the clay of metaphor. It may be impossible to say for sure whether Melville says "it is okay to be gay;" however, his elevation of Queequeg and non-orthodox exploration of sexuality imply partiality.

Overall, Melville's work will remain a topic of literary discussion so long as there are people to discuss it. I believe the importance of analyzing Queer representation in literature cannot be understated. *Moby Dick* is among the most well-known books in the world. Furthermore, both Melville and this work enjoy status as American icons, making critical reading a crucial tool in questioning American identities. Melville's lived experiences, frequent use of metaphor to question dominant narratives, and long history of Queer exploration in his writing all seem to point to a strong investment in Queer futurity. Such a reading of America's beloved novel stands to shake up an ever-revolving status quo. If Herman Melville was disgruntled with the America of 1951, he would surely retreat to the bottom of the ocean if he saw where it stands today. As vitriol is spewed at Queer people by their fellow humans, investment in a "joint-stock world" is more important than ever (Bolt, 2019). To understand the experiences of Queer people today, it is important to look to the past for representations and validations that we have always been here and always will be.

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"Stinky Lunch Trauma" and the Bind of Diasporic Media Representation

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Abstract

What does it mean to represent marginalized people and their experiences in media? What is its purpose, what does it accomplish, and who is it for? What is it meant to make us feel, not only as audience members, but as people meant to be represented by these portrayals? This paper critically analyzes emerging tropes found in film, television, and media that are meant to represent the Asian diaspora and the diasporic experience. Such tropes can be found in the Canadian independent film *Riceboy Sleeps* (2022), which paints an intimate portrait of a Korean immigrant family while also employing a common narrative known to some in the Asian diaspora as the "stinky lunch trauma" trope. Through analyzing Asian audiences' responses to *Riceboy Sleeps*, I uncover the ongoing predicament of representing marginalized groups in media: how on-screen portrayals of racial experiences can simultaneously resonate with audiences yet also flatten real-life racial experiences into tropes.

Keywords: media representation, Asian identity, media tropes, diaspora politics, identity politics

> "As I try to move beyond the [racial] stereotypes to express my inner consciousness, it's clear that *how* I am perceived inheres to *who* I am" (Hong, 2020, p. 64).

What does it mean to represent marginalized people and their experiences in media? What is the purpose of it, what does it accomplish, and who is it for? What does it make me feel, not only as an audience member, but as someone meant to be represented by these stories? I have long pondered these questions as a third-generation Chinese settler raised, educated, and socialized in Canada. As Stanley (2011) reminds us, the concept of "race" is socially constructed, historically produced, constituted by language, and relational. Race is not naturally or biologically occurring but is continually made through the process(es) of racialization. Media forges the racialized self and tells our stories back to us (Hall, 1996); we should understand media representations as a part of the process of constructing how race is perceived and embodied. Recent American blockbuster films such as *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), Marvel's *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021), and Best Picture-winning *Everything Everywhere All At Once* (2022) have been celebrated for their portrayals of the (East) Asian diaspora, as well as attaining widespread commercial success. These films meant a lot to me, and still do—they mark important moments of social progress. They also served as launching pads for intra-community discourse about mainstream media representations of the Asian diaspora, nuancing the discussion on the politics and limitations of representation as a whole. The Canadian independent film *Riceboy Sleeps* (2022) rests upon the backdrop of these films as an intimate portrait of a Korean single mother and son

that deeply resonated with some viewers, while also eliciting frustration with the film's use of clichés to depict the immigrant experience. Through analyzing Asian audiences' responses to *Riceboy Sleeps,* I uncover the ongoing predicament of representing marginalized groups in media: how on-screen portrayals of race and marginalization can simultaneously resonate with audiences yet also flatten real-life racial experiences into tropes such as "stinky lunch trauma." The wide range of opinions reveals how Asian artists and audiences grapple with postcolonial identity politics while being simultaneously constrained by the neoliberal marketplace of media production and consumption. I offer this analysis from a place of tension, my delicate disposition as an Asian artist and audience member, with the desire to untangle a topic that consumes me. This unraveling is an act of becoming, an attempt to reclaim the parameters of my Asian self-definition.

Riceboy Sleeps **(2022)**

Riceboy Sleeps (2022) is an independent drama directed by Vancouver-based filmmaker Anthony Shim. The film follows Korean single mother So-Young and her son Dong-Hyun from 1989 to 1999 as they immigrate to the suburbs of British Columbia. Bittersweet themes of internalized racism, motherhood, generational differences, and struggles with assimilation and cultural identity are traced through the mother and son's changing relationship as Dong-Hyun grows into teenagehood, culminating in the film's third act when the pair returns to South Korea. As both the writer and director of the film, *Riceboy Sleeps* loosely draws upon Shim's own life and relationship with his mother. It is a stunning film that left me hollow; I thought about it for days after watching it.

Riceboy Sleeps is intriguing in that it delivers nuanced storytelling of oppressive stereotypes of Asian characters in film, while also leaning into various tropes about the Asian immigrant experience that some interpret as shallow and overdone. In particular, the film shines in its subversion of the objectified, stagnant, and subservient stereotype of the East Asian woman. So-Young is a thoughtfully developed protagonist whose identity extends beyond her role as a mother; she demonstrates agency, is outspoken and rebellious, and directly challenges the racism that victimizes her. It is in this way that *Riceboy Sleeps* tactfully avoids the narrative of the East Asian model minority.

Dong-Hyun's characterization is a mirror for second-generation immigrants' struggles to assimilate and their propensity to internalize racism when growing up in a primarily white country. A kindergarten-aged Dong-Hyun is seen in the mirror trying to change his eye shape, using his hands to slant and widen his eyes in response to ridicule at school. In his teenage years, Dong-Hyun bleaches his hair blonde and wears blue eye contacts—a metaphor for his eroded self-worth and desire for whiteness that is nothing short of unsubtle. Perhaps the most distinctive trope appears in a scene where Dong-Hyun opens his lunch at elementary school and is bullied for the food being "stinky." He returns home distraught and asks his mother to stop making Korean lunches for him in favour of "normal" Canadian food. This is an experience that many are familiar with, so much so that it has been coined within Asian communities and online circles as "stinky lunch trauma."

"Stinky Lunch Trauma" and Tropes in Asian Diasporic Media Representations

I enjoyed *Riceboy Sleeps* for its tender, skillfully executed cinematic retelling of the immigrant experience. But the very moment that young Dong-Hyun pulled out his lunchbox at school, I knew

exactly what was about to unfold on screen. The origin of this now-tropified experience is very tangible; researchers such as Seko et al. (2023) have well documented that children from countries with non-dominant culinary backgrounds are often subjected to microaggressions or overt bullying, leading them to feel "stood out, ostracized, and embarrassed" (p. 383). Asian foods and cultural practices have "historically embodied a distinct Otherness in [the] White imaginary," which lends itself to larger issues of food hierarchies and culinary racism (p. 384). Not only is "lunchbox shaming" a widely shared experience among the Asian diaspora but it is frequently depicted in Asian Canadian and American film and television, discussed in pop culture, and (over)relied on in personal essays and college applications that passionately recount how one overcame "the trauma of being the Asian kid with the stinky lunch" (Wong, 2024, para. 5). Wong (2024) finds that "if you're part of the Asian American community and very online, you're no doubt familiar" (para. 1) with this narrative—this has also been true to my experience. Eddie Huang's acclaimed ABC television series *Fresh Off The Boat*—the first American sitcom to feature an Asian family as main characters in over 20 years—dedicates an entire episode to a similar plotline that Dong-Hyun experiences in *Riceboy Sleeps* (Khan, 2015). The Toronto Star also published an article in 2018 that interviewed Asian Canadians about their experiences with food-based discrimination at school (Kwong, 2018). The fact that the Asian diaspora has created a term to describe how food-based discrimination is represented in popular culture signifies that "stinky lunch trauma" has become distilled into a trope and therefore alienated from the lived experiences at its core.

Audience Responses to *Riceboy Sleeps* (2022)

In examining the hypersexual stereotypes of Vietnamese women in the renowned stage musical *Miss Saigon,* Shimizu (2007) emphasizes that audience engagement with and responses to media are vital to constructing its meaning. Shimizu notes how some Asian American spectators felt offended and alienated by *Miss Saigon,* while others felt seen—in varying degrees—by its depiction of cultural identity. A similar balance between criticism and appreciation can be found in audiences' unfiltered reviews of *Riceboy Sleeps* on the movie review-based social media platform Letterboxd. The user @icebear expresses their frustrations with diasporic media representation:

> I really don't enjoy harping on Korean diaspora films, but when they regurgitate the same common representations of microaggressions seen throughout Asian American/Canadian films, *they lose all meaning they once had*. Riceboy Sleeps literally starts off with a lunchbox scene where David, our protagonist, gets bullied by the other kids for bringing gimbap. *I honestly don't know what the purpose of these scenes are anymore other than to gain sympathy from well-meaning white liberals*. [...] *Representation is a trap*. Being part of a diaspora is a result of histories and political situations, but too often, we just get self-pitying depictions of Asian diasporic characters who are embarrassed to be Asian. (Icebear, 2023; emphasis added)

@icebear argues that tropes like "stinky lunch trauma" are overused in Asian diasporic media to the point where they are unsuccessful at contributing anything of nuance and value. It also appears that they are understandably conflicted by the effectiveness of media representation, questioning *who* these tropes are meant for and who they typically resonate with. By bluntly declaring that "representation is

a trap," this viewer recognizes that the representation of the marginalized individual is too often conflated with that of the entire marginalized group, aligning with Rosskam's (2011) observations on trans media representation (p. 341). Dong-Hyun becomes an accidental ambassador for children of the Asian diaspora, and in employing excessively on-the-nose depictions of his racialized struggles, all of his complexities are effectively erased. Another user, @nimuy, shared similar qualms, finding that there are "more sophisticated and better-crafted ways of communicating this refusal to embrace your roots" than the literal act of Dong-Hyun transforming into blonde and blue-eyed (Nicole, 2022). *Riceboy Sleeps* tends to frame Dong-Hyun's appearance change as merely teenage rebellion, and by doing so, it fails to highlight that the desire for European features stems from a history of colonial beauty standards that are continually and systemically reinforced. There was great potential for *Riceboy Sleeps* to underscore how internalized racism can be an unconsciously adopted strategy to survive and avoid discrimination. Instead, it relegates itself to what @nimuy dubs as a "ChatGPT result for a Korean diasporic tearjerker" (Nicole, 2022). Asian audiences are directly calling on Asian artists to move away from "the safety net of cliches that are constructed by Western frameworks" (Nicole, 2022). While these narratives may be valuable in building empathy and understanding within general (white) audiences, they risk reducing the diasporic experience to a personal story of exclusion, overlooking the broader complexities of systemic issues related to class, gender, and religion (Saxena, 2021). These two reviews underscore how Asian diasporic audiences might be feeling trapped by the "bind of representation," a term Shimizu (2007) uses to describe how racialized people are confined to media

representations that they find limiting or even damaging. In the case of *Riceboy Sleeps* and adjacent Asian diaspora films, there are so few representations available in mainstream media that audiences have no choice but to interact with tropes and stereotypes. Perhaps these Asian viewers' dissatisfaction with "stinky lunch trauma" echoes how Black audience members like Brown (2016) are "so damn tired of movies about slavery."

These unfavourable responses to *Riceboy Sleeps* can be contextualized within the broader cultural landscape of liberal identity politics that marginalized folks have long been asked to navigate, having become heightened and increasingly polarized in the digital age (Wu et al., 2025). For those in the Asian diaspora, the personal is always and undoubtedly political, and audiences and artists will grapple with this reality in their own way. I interpret @icebear and @nimuy's responses to *Riceboy Sleeps* not only as a critique of the film's cinematic merit, but a clearly expressed desire to resist the categorization and expectation of relatability that they feel *Riceboy Sleeps* has placed onto them. What may lie beneath these reviews is a personal exhaustion with postcolonial Asian identity politics. This refusal to accept fixed representations of identity may be unique to younger generations, as scholar Earl Smith (2024) points out that Generation Z has "inherited a world deeply shaped by the legacies of identity politics" and has thus embraced a fluid and adaptable redefinition of identity.

However, there are a comparable number of positive reviews of *Riceboy Sleeps* on Letterboxd, signalling that a fair amount of Asian audience members resonated with the film's portrayal of the immigrant experience. The user @cccharlesl writes that "the beauty and delicacy [of] this movie made me feel like I truly was represented," citing the film's realistic hybrid of Korean-English dialogue and

mother-son relationship as healing to witness (Charles, 2022). Like others, @metafrick recognized the use of "stinky lunch trauma"; however, they find that Riceboy Sleeps "catapulted itself completely beyond" clichés and used them skillfully to recontextualize the Asian immigrant experience (Hannah, 2022). The myriad of audience responses to *Riceboy Sleeps* raises "thorny, problematic issues of accuracy and [...] authenticity," resembling what Lau and Mendes (2011) describe as the "radical instability of representation" (p. 5). Our lived experiences shape our implicit understanding of racial identity, and by extension, our embodied and affective responses to stories told through film.

The Limits of Representation

Hall's (1997) theory of representation tells us that "true" representation is impossible within a media text—there is never one true meaning because meaning can always be (re)constructed and disputed. Rosskam (2011), a trans documentary filmmaker whose work engages with the community they belong to, contemplates that creating "the most politically progressive, egalitarian [...] a story about (fill in the blank)" is frankly unachievable (p. 337). One artist cannot represent the entire spectrum of identities and complexities of lived experiences; therefore, someone might always feel unseen or even "wronged by the insufficiency of that representation" (Rosskam, 2011, p. 337). I have long pondered this dilemma in my own artistic practice: can I convey shared cultural experiences without inherently tropifying them? Is it possible to create art that is critical yet accessible, original yet relatable at the same time? What if someone thinks the way I have conveyed my lived experience is

cliché? Rosskam's acceptance that "no matter how I make the film, and for whom I make it, I will always fail on some level" offers some consolation (p. 337).

Marginalized people need to move beyond the assumption that achieving positive media representation is the end-all be-all of our collective liberation. This is not to diminish the importance of diversity and equity in media representation. However, one should remember that mainstream films and television are bound to the market logics of neoliberal capitalism and therefore do not earnestly or entirely signify social progress. When the ultimate goal of film studios and production companies is profit maximization, it is difficult to reasonably expect that our lived experiences will *not* be commodified and tropified. It should be of no surprise that we see the same "(mis)representations time and time again," given that representation of marginalized groups must exist under the "confines of a [media] system that disallows for individual expression and a truly dissenting voice" (Rosskam, 2011, p. 341).

This is further complicated by the reality that marginalized artists are constrained by the political-media industrial complex in which they work. To make their films, Asian artists must navigate media industries dominated by the (white) elite class and their tastes and values. At its most extreme, this is represented by the American Hollywood blockbuster model, but also applies to independent films, where films are commodities sold in the market. A feature-length film such as *Riceboy Sleeps'* very existence depends on receiving gate-kept support from private and public funders, production companies, broadcasters, and distributors. Receiving financing is contingent on many factors, such as artistic merit and belief in the director's capability, but ultimately depends on the story's potential to

appeal to mass audiences, which determines the film's potential for "success" (i.e., visibility and profitability). Artists are tasked with balancing their creative vision with the sometimes incompatible demands of the industry. Korean-American writer Cathy Park Hong reflects on similar qualms when discussing the American literary industry's long-overdue shift towards diversity in her memoir *Minor Feelings* (2020). While of course supportive of the initiative towards equitable representation, she notices that there has become a "template of ethnic fiction that supports the fantasy of Asian American immigrants" that the publishing industry favours and *expects of* marginalized authors—one that toes the line of cultural difference and racial trauma but does not challenge the white imagination (Hong, 2020, p. 48). Hong acknowledges that nonwhite artists are repeatedly asked to prove their humanity through retelling the oppression they've experienced; as a result, Asian artists may self-fashion themselves to maintain a career in their desired field. Hong observes that her work is "graded on a pain scale," contemplating "if [my racial trauma] is [at] 10, maybe my book will be a bestseller" (2020, p. 49).

Perhaps this is how one should interpret writer-director Anthony Shim's choice to engage with common racial tropes in *Riceboy Sleeps.* "Stinky lunch trauma" accomplishes the impossible: it satisfies the industry's thirst for identity politics-laden, poignant yet palatable storytelling, while still invoking some measure of truthfulness to Shim's lived experience of racism and assimilation. Engaging with tropes may be a "covert vantage point" for marginalized artists to negotiate power within the media industrial complex, similarly to Lau and Mendes' (2011) observation that Asian artists' self-Othering

practices may be a potential strategy to survive in the marketplace (p. 11). This may be true for Shim: *Riceboy Sleeps* is considered a victory for Canadian independent film. Its critical acclaim and successful film festival run have cemented Shim's status as a talented and capable director, which in turn gives him freedom for his future projects.

Moreover, media representations rarely address the systemic issues that underlie the individual lived experiences they aim to portray. I draw connections here to Mahtani's (2014) critique of critical mixed-race studies, where she argues that overindulged personal narratives around racial "impurity" and hybridity "in and of themselves are no guaranteed challenge to the racial orders" of white supremacy and systemic racism, which are the real issues at hand (p. 42). It should also not be assumed that diverse representation automatically results in positive material change for the groups represented. Celebrations of these representations as proof of liberation may even placate the pervasive inequities that continue to persist within and around the Asian diaspora, such as rampant income disparity and oppressive patriarchal norms.

It is also worth reflecting on positionality when assessing the validity and effectiveness of media representation. I am certainly influenced by my disposition to be hyper-conscious of these tropes, which is due to my generation, frequenting the internet, and the knowledge afforded to me through class privilege and higher education. Wong (2024) argues that there is still value in telling the "stinky lunch" story, "even if people on Twitter are sick [of it]," to which I agree (para. 31). Amidst these intra-community debates, it is important to keep in mind that others may not be as knowledgeable or attuned to the politics of media representation. We should avoid discussing this topic in an

unnecessarily academic tone or invalidating those who identify with what could be deemed as "tropified" to not come off as "inaccessible and condescending" (para. 32). I think of people like my grandmother, who recently asked me if people have ever commented on the appearance or smell of her home-style Cantonese cuisine when I bring it for lunch. For those in her generation, the "stinky lunch" trope is a genuine lived experience unattached to media representations, college essays, and internet jokes. For other folks in the Asian diaspora, tropes may just be the "place to start," the necessary catalyst that begins the lifelong process of wrestling with one's relationship to their race (para. 33). Media and art offer us these entryways to see and define ourselves. Indeed, being in community with others means that each individual should be allowed to explore and define their experiences on their own terms, in their own time.

Everyone in the Asian diaspora should have the agency to represent themselves as they please, just as they should have the agency to *feel* however they want about how they are represented. This is precisely the bind of representing marginalized groups in popular media—because there are still so few thoughtful, non-stereotypical portrayals available, the options are scarce and imperfect. The goal is that marginalized groups will one day be so vastly present as both subjects and creators that the unattainable ideal of media representation is no longer framed as a milestone yet to be achieved. Nuanced representations should simply exist so that there is something everyone can draw upon. Despite my and other audience members' qualms with the use of Asian diasporic tropes in *Riceboy Sleeps,* if director Anthony Shim felt that the story told in the film was true to his lived experience, that

is reason enough to include a scene about "stinky lunch trauma." South Asian author Soniah Kamal's (2016) refusal to self-censor her storytelling "just because parts of the world have turned my reality into a cliché" is an affirming reminder worth taking away (para. 9). We can and should critically examine the potential limitations of a media representation *without* dismissing its cultural significance or personal resonance to audiences. Meaningfully discussing these contradictions will support the evolution of sincere and layered media representation. We can appreciate the work that exists and also want more from the stories that are supposed to be about us—this is the only way progress happens.

I am once again reminded of the remarkable complexities of the diasporic experience. No racialized person forges their identity in the same way, and so I find solace in knowing that I will never be able to predict how others interpret it. One story will never fully portray the "vastly different, extremely complex and beautiful variety of our lives" (Rosskam, 2011, p. 342). My only wish for members of the Asian diaspora is that we stand valiantly in the truth of our lived realities—and "stop spelling ourselves out in the alphabet given to us" (Hong, 2020, pp. 47-48).

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