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Special Thematic Issue

Exploring the Unknown Currents of "Asian" Critical Theory

Edited by

Alex Taek-Gwang Lee, Kyung Hee University, South Korea
Maria Luisa Torres Reyes, University of Santo Tomas, Philippines
Yang Gexin, Zhejiang University, China

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2025 年第 2 期

学术专刊

探索“亚洲”批评理论的未知趋势

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Contents

Special Thematic Issue

Exploring the Unknown Currents of "Asian" Critical Theory

目　录

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探索“亚洲”批评理论的未知趋势

Special Issue

Introduction: Can Asians Critique?

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The question "Can Asians Critique?" serves as the point of departure for this special issue, not as a provocation concerning intellectual capability, but as an invitation to re-examine the historical formation, conceptual boundaries, and enduring possibilities of critique itself. At stake is not the inclusion of Asian thinkers within a pre-existing canon of critical theory, but the conditions under which critique has been defined, institutionalised, and geographically delimited within dominant philosophical traditions. In particular, this question compels us to reflect on the extent to which Asia has been structurally excluded from, and yet continues to preserve, the potential for critical thought beyond its marginalisation.

The European tradition of critique is commonly traced to the Enlightenment, most notably to Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, where critique is formalised as the interrogation of reason's capacities and limits. This Kantian model established a foundational framework for modern philosophy and the human sciences, positioning critique as a reflective mode that subjects systems of knowledge to rational examination. Over time, this understanding of critique became synonymous with philosophical modernity itself, shaping the parameters of what counted as critical inquiry. However, in establishing itself as a universal rational discourse, European critique simultaneously obscured and displaced other traditions of reflective thought. It defined itself not only through epistemic rigour, but through selective remembering and forgetting.

The role of Asia in this history has been largely occluded. While European thinkers were not unaware of Asian traditions, these were rarely acknowledged as constitutive of philosophical modernity. The offhand remark by Friedrich

Nietzsche referring to Kant as the "Chinaman of Königsberg" is emblematic of this ambivalence: Asia is present in the European imaginary, yet marked as exterior to the unfolding of reason. Within such a framework, Asia is not excluded through ignorance, but through a structural act of erasure that renders it intellectually peripheral and conceptually subordinate

The Tradition of Critique in Asia

Rather than viewing this erasure as total, this issue proposes that Asian traditions have continued to preserve the possibility of critique, not by replicating European models, but by sustaining alternative modes of reflection, judgment, and intervention. These modes, while often unrecognised within dominant theoretical vocabularies, nonetheless engage in forms of critical practice oriented toward ethical discernment, social accountability, and epistemological inquiry.

The historical record provides ample evidence of this continuity. In classical Indian philosophy, traditions such as Nyāya, Mīmāṃsā, and Buddhist logic developed systematic procedures for debate, inference, and the evaluation of truth claims. In early Chinese thought, the Mohist critique of ritual hierarchy and the Daoist skepticism of normative constructs exemplify distinct forms of philosophical questioning. In Southeast Asia, oral traditions—riddles, aphorisms, metaphorical narratives—have served as vehicles for social commentary and moral critique, often operating within culturally embedded registers rather than through formalised theoretical abstraction.

These practices are also reflected at the level of language. In Tagalog, *kritika* coexists with terms such as *puna* (criticism or correction), *pansin* (notice or observation), and *puri* (praise), suggesting a continuum of critical engagement ranging from subtle attentiveness to overt dissent. In Bahasa Indonesia, *kritik*—borrowed from the Dutch *kritiek*—encompasses not only judgment but also suggestion, interpretation, and evaluation. In Javanese, lesser-used but conceptually rich terms such as *pamrayog*a (constructive suggestion) and *panyaruwe* (correction) point to modes of critique oriented not toward polemic but toward maintaining social equilibrium.

In this sense, the term "critique" (kritikē), while sounding so contemporary, is actually a very old concept. From the Greeks, we have learned that it refers to "the faculty of judgment." From the French, however, we were told that it is "the art of criticism." Interestingly, it has retained the Greek sense of *kritike tekhne* or "the critical art" which, oddly, one might consider a contradiction in terms. *Kritike techne* implies that "critique" is about both criticism, and art. Today, as we know, the critical and the artistic have been separated out like contrapuntal categories.

In Southeast Asia, the idea of what is called "critique" is not new either but differently inflected. In Indonesian literary and cultural studies today, for example, the translation of "critique" is *kritik* in Bahasa Indonesia. Apparently, *kritik* is derived from the Dutch *kritiek* which refers to a whole gamut of senses including, criticism, comment, remark, and discussion. Although the Dutch *kritiek* and the Indonesian |*kritik* sound quite similar, the Indonesian *kritik* today encompasses nuances of related Indonesian ideas implied by other deeply situational Indonesian words like *kecaman*, *tinjauan*, *telaah*,and *kupasan*, which imply a spectrum of associative meanings with words like criticism, censure, review, survey, study, or research. Nonetheless, the current local word, *kritik*, is clearly derivative of the term "critique" as it has been generally deployed in the West. Moreover, in the Malay language, "critique" is translated as *kritikan*. Used in context, its meanings range broadly from to review, to examine, to interpret, and/or to evaluate. Apparently, no equivalent indigenous word for "critique" exists in Philippine, Indonesian, and Malaysian languages, but that does not mean that the concept does not exist, however narrowly linguistic one might wish to limit the question posed by the colloquium.[1]

Between Indonesia and the Philippines are hundreds of languages which are spoken by both the majority and minority cultures to whom the basic ideas of "critique" might hold a particularly counter-dominant meaning in their lives as individuals and as communities as it does among Tagalogs. This may be so because in Maritime Southeast Asia, conceptual categories are often literally and rhetorically rooted in people's everyday life, history, culture, and society, such as those that are related to the word critique, which makes it difficult to find equivalent expressions between one language and another. From the vantage point of everyday life, *kritika* is not a specialist term for intellectuals alone; even workers engaged in collective bargaining use the term at will in the factories, or the Filipino domestic contract workers abroad in organizing themselves for community project with other domestic helpers from other countries in Hong Kong. Its meanings are refracted commonly yet variously across context-specific "locations."

For example, in the Cebuano language, a major Philippine language, "critique" refers to "tuki" (examination, analysis or scrutiny) or "saway." On one hand, "saway"

1 In Philippine literary and cultural studies, "critique" is generally understood in the context of the term *kritika* as drawn from European history of ideas initially via the Filipinos' Spanish colonial education from the 16th century to the late 19th century and later, American colonialism in the early 20th century.

could mean negative criticism; on the other hand, it could also mean censorship [1] In other words, contrapuntally, on one hand, it could refer to the exercise of criticism, and on the other hand, it could mean the imposition of censorship, depending on its use in context. Clearly, this history goes back centuries. In the article, "*Magaling Datapoua: Ang Dating at Galing sa Estetika ng Ating Panitikan*," ("Good but…") foremost Philippine studies scholar, literary and cultural critic and National Artist, Bienvenido Lumbera, suggests that the emergence in the country of what is now called "kritika" as a critical category owes to some unarticulated assumptions between cultures.

Lumbera cites the case of the Spanish Dominican missionary, Francisco Blancas de San Jose of the famous *Memorial de la vida Cristiana* (1606) and *Arte y reglas de la lengua tagala* (1610) who had written a poem in Tagalog following the model of the Spanish versification that we recognize as the European "romance," so beloved of Spanish sailors, Poetically, the romance is very different from the seven-syllable one that the natives had traditionally followed, such as the poetic form called the *tanaga*. Lumbera explains that the Spanish friar had asked a Tagalog native to read his poem. To quote,"*Sa pag-aakala marahil na hahangaan at tutularan ang kanyang katha, ipinabasa niya ito sa isang katutubo*" ("Expecting his work to be admired and emulated, that Spaniard asked a native to read it"). In response, the native was said to have replied, "*Magaling, Datapoua Hindi Tola*" (Good, but it is not a poem.). [2]

One might surmise the reason why. For one, the romance that was brought into the islands told tales that were written either in dodecasyllabic or octosyllabic lines, while the Tagalog *tanaga* of the natives used the conventional seven-syllable versification which was laden with metaphors. Moreover, the European romance, which took the form of the dodecasyllabic *awit* and the octosyllabic *corrido* were traditionally about love and adventures which were set in the Middle Ages. On the other hand, the *tanaga* consists of four lines with seven syllables each with the same rhyme at the end of each line—that is to say a 7-7-7-7 syllabic verse, with an AABB rhyme scheme. Like the Japanese haiku, the *tanaga* is traditionally untitled and most are handed down by oral history, and contain proverbial forms, moral lessons, and ethics.

In addition, while the romance followed a narrative thread, the *tanaga* spoke in metaphors. Therefore, in terms of poetics, one might say that the "encounter"

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1 The Cebuano language is the lingua franca of Central Visayas, parts of Eastern Visayas, some parts of Palawan, and most parts of Mindanao.

2 Bienvenido Lumbera,*Tomas*, Center for Creative Writing and Literary Studies, University of Santo Tomas, July 2021, pp. 189-199.

between the romance and the *tanaga* was a clash of aesthetics. But what could also be inferred is that the Tagalog native's remark about the Spaniard's "poem" had implications deeper and bigger than just a matter of aesthetic taste; basically, the encounter was undergirded by a clash of cultures.

Present-day "kritika" in Tagalog derives from the Spanish "critica" bringing into it the European sense of "critique" whose meaning ranges from the descriptive and analytical (appreciation) to the normative and critical (evaluation). *Kritika* in Tagalog, refers to a spectrum of meanings today in everyday language. From one end of the hermeneutical spectrum, there is the sense of "pansin" (to observe, notice, remark, recognize;), and on the other end, the sense of "puna" (to criticize, comment, fault-find, censure), thereby moving between the senses covered by the rhetorical force of "explication," the imaginative energy of "interpretation," and the polemical power of "argumentation."

Indeed, old Javanese words exist though rarely used now which are associative of "critique." Words like *pamrayoga* which means a suggestion or an advice or *panyaruwe* which means criticism or "kritik" as they also say. *Pamrayoga* refers to an advice or solution given to solve a problem that has a constructive and objective nature. On the other hand, *panyaruwe* also refers to criticism that is meant to correct a problem. Interestingly, these Javanese terms align quite well with the fine distinction between the Tagalog *puna* and *pansin*, where Asian "ethics" and Western "critique" seem to overlap in places. More importantly, they both admit of critique's situatedness and contingency. [1]

In the age of globalization, there are at least two important considerations in the understanding and deployment of "critique" in the specific case of the literature and culture of archipelagic Philippines and Indonesia, in particular. The first consideration is their long literary history that may be both traced back to precolonial orature. That, despite the historical dominance of Java Island

1 In Tagalog, deployed in contemporary context, the word *puna* could be used interchangeably or finely delineated to mean either the idea of *puri* (praise) or *pintas* (dispraise) on one hand, or the idea of mere *pansin* (observation). However, *pansin* can be couched in the language of a *puna* and if pursued, eventually end up as a *puna*. In traditional Javanese and Tagalog societies where the sense of "hiya" ("shame") and respect are observed, expressing "critique" of the strongly argumentative type would have been taken to be too impolite and combative to be practiced so openly. Indeed, shame and respect are features of traditional Asian societies as well. Therefore, *kritik* or *kritika* may apparently come out to be just a *pansin* rather than a flat-out *puna*. Still, "critique" could be deployed similarly in specialist disciplinary discourses such as in literary and cultural criticism—called *kritisismo* or *panunuring pampanitikan* (literary criticism, in the sense of either *puri* or *pintas*, or both). As such, even literary criticism is as much a critique as any.

within Indonesia—its language, economics, and culture—or as in the case of the Philippines, especially its "Manila-centricism." Indeed, their oral traditions are practiced side by side with written contemporary ones in the Philippines where riddles, proverbs or epics may be said to have carried in themselves "critiques" of their own concerning their communities about interpersonal manners, responsibilities of rulers, leadership, and governance. Understandably, in their orature, "critiques" often come wrapped in "ethics."

The second consideration has to do with the fact that Indonesia and the Philippines are both archipelagos with a shared reality of multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-linguistic histories that have remained in the category of "developing countries" for so long but have never quite made it to league of "developed" countries for complex reasons, and our shared history of multiple colonization has not helped either. As archipelagos, Indonesia and the Philippines have shared vulnerabilities not only from natural disasters but also from those that are man-made, devastating the environment and triggering destruction to life and property, and the planet. Foreign multinational companies have been made rich by these countries' rich natural resources while the majority of their own people have been impoverished by them.

For many decades now, Indonesia and the Philippines have been experiencing internal and external migration between or away from their islands. Globalization has been a boon and a bane, depending on whether you are the beneficiary or the victim of this international order. Global diaspora is endemic in the two countries because among the most important exports of their economies are not products but people—the human labor of the world's working class. In neoliberal globalization, of course, people and products are interchangeably one and the same.

The situated nature of these practices challenges the assumption that critique is inherently adversarial, rationalist, or oppositional. In many Asian contexts, direct confrontation may be culturally proscribed, yet this does not foreclose the possibility of critique. Rather, it appears in alternative forms: coded speech, poetic refusal, or indirect address. The encounter between Western philosophical ideas and Asian traditions in the 19th and 20th centuries generated new forms of critical engagement. Asian thinkers neither wholly adopted Western concepts nor simply reverted to tradition. Instead, they developed hybrid intellectual strategies that questioned the presumed universality of European categories while reactivating local resources for critique. What emerged from this process was not a rejection of critique but its reconfiguration—what might be termed a postcolonial critique that addresses the dual task of provincialising Europe and pluralising the very concept of critical thought.

Today, this work continues in response to shifting global conditions. Environmental degradation, technological transformation, labour precarity, and migration demand renewed forms of reflection that are attentive to lived realities and planetary entanglements. Asian critical traditions—whether articulated through philosophical systems, oral literature, or diasporic practices—offer conceptual resources for addressing these challenges. Their significance lies not in their proximity to Western models, but in their capacity to widen the scope of critique itself.

This special issue therefore proceeds from the premise that critique is not the exclusive property of any single tradition. Rather, it is a translatable and historically variable practice of thinking that emerges wherever systems of meaning, power, or value are interrogated. To ask "Can Asians Critique?" is to examine the conditions under which critique is recognised, the forms in which it appears, and the horizons it opens. Asia may have been forgotten in the dominant history of critique, but it has continued to preserve—and now rearticulate—its possibility.

What follows are contributions that engage with this possibility across philosophical, literary, cultural, and political contexts. They explore how critique operates in multilingual archipelagos, indigenous lifeworlds, colonial inheritances, and contemporary diasporas. Collectively, they aim not to supplement an existing canon, but to reframe critique as a field of thought responsive to plurality, contingency, and the unfinished work of conceptual transformation.

Critique, Rooted and Reframed

"A Return to Materiality: Reframing 'Digital Feminism' in South Korea" by Jay Hee-jeong Sohn analyzes cyberspace in 21st-century South Korea through the conceptual lens of digital gore capitalism, which offers a critical framework that foregrounds the lived realities of the Global South. Such realities are marked by uneven attempts to replicate a capitalist system orchestrated by the Global North, which often results in systemic failure, fragmentation, and violence. The analysis reveals the digital sphere as a space shaped not only by connectivity and innovation, but also by new forms of exploitation, discrimination, and exclusion.

The paper situates South Korea not as a peripheral imitator of Western modernity, but as a crucial site from which to theorize global techno-capitalist structures. In doing so, the paper seeks to displace Western-centric critiques of technology; instead it theorizes the materiality of the digital and the embodied experiences of those who engage with it. Drawing from the feminist resurgence in South Korea since the 2015 reboot and the digital lives of Korean women, the paper highlights how feminist critique can intervene in dominant narratives of technological progress. Emphasizing materiality—a central concern in contemporary feminist theory—it challenges Big Tech's transhumanist fantasy of immaterial, frictionless digitality, and proposes an alternative understanding of the digital rooted in situated, material, and embodied practices.

"Can Asians Feel? Affect Theory and the Decolonial Politics of Untranslatability" by Jeremy de Chavez presents a distinctive form of "Asian critique" by examining what Claudia Garcia-Rojas terms "white affect studies," a field of research rooted in the work of white male psychologists and philosophers. Rather than starting with the question "Can Asians Critique?" the essay instead poses, "Can Asians feel?" This shift uses feeling as a foundation to propose an alternative affective reading practice that emphasizes the untranslatability of certain affects and emotions in Anglophone postcolonial texts. The essay argues that these moments of failed translation arise "from a discrepancy between the affects sedimented in literary form and the universalist language of emotion used to specify them." It contributes to postcolonial criticism and Affect Theory by suggesting a new interpretative approach to the former and initial steps to decolonize the latter.

"Theory of Causation and Principle of Irreduction: Nagarjuna, Spinoza and Latour" by Ki-Myoung Kim challenges the essentialist binaries that have long shaped comparative philosophy—particularly the opposition between "Eastern" and "Western" traditions. Rather than offering a counter-essentialism that reifies "Asian philosophy" as a fixed and coherent category, Kim argues that such reversals risk reproducing Eurocentrism in the form of inverted Orientalism. Instead, the paper proposes a model of philosophical critique that moves beyond these dichotomies by tracing structurally resonant critiques of substantialist metaphysics in the works of Nāgārjuna, Spinoza, and Latour. This approach allows for a trans-traditional philosophical engagement grounded not in cultural identity but in conceptual convergence.

As an Asian philosopher trained in both East Asian and European intellectual traditions, Kim situates his work not outside but within the project of "world philosophy." Indeed, the very signifier "Asia"—which historically marked what lay outside the conceptual geography of Europe—can now be reimagined as a space generative of philosophical thought that speaks across civilisational boundaries. The capacity to think across traditions—to identify resonances without collapsing differences—enables a distinctive mode of critique grounded in both historical specificity and conceptual agility. In this sense, Kim's paper is an example of "Asian critique" not because of its geographic origin, but because it demonstrates how philosophical thinking situated outside Euro-American institutional centres can intervene in global debates on ontology, identity, and power. It aims to contribute to a deprovincialized and truly planetary practice of philosophy.

"Theorizing the Selves: Hip-Hop and Subjectivity among Ambonese Youth" by Wening Udasmoro and Elizaveth F. Drexler theoretically positions critical island studies in the context of social sciences and humanities studies. Moreover, it tries to advance the scholarship in this field by unequivocally positioning itself in their interdisciplinary cross-section, contributing to its growing and deepening body of knowledge. In this perspective, the discussion in this article cannot be separated from other scientific perspectives, especially in the context of subject-object relations where power contestations are always present. Moreover, empirical experiences from the island could enrich the scientific debates in that field, giving rise to and even strengthening the critical island studies' perspective and critical epistemology.

Against the dominant views, the subjectivity elaborated on in this article regards the islands not only as objects, as they are often portrayed, peripherally, against the broader question of Indonesian identity. The views expressed towards the positionality and subjectivity of Ambon Island suggests that the Ambonese are powerful subjects. They have collective authority, although their power is contested internally in various arenas of struggle. for their own identity.

"Predicaments of Prestige" by Joel David focuses on film criticism in the Philippines, its form of practice that, like the medium under review (film) and the medium used for criticism (print), which were both directly provided by the country's Western colonizers, along with film commentary shaping itself after first American and later French models. Joel David argues that, in attempting to distance themselves from their foreign influences, Philippine film critics banded together and attempted to propagate what they envisioned as a new canon that embodied their own prescription for excellence. His inspection of this prestige-granting dynamic, taking off from James F. English's critical reconsideration of Pierre Bourdieu's studies of cultural capital, proceeds from his former insider status in the award-giving body as well as the academic institute dominated by these critics, and raises questions about processes, motivations, and the difficult possibilities of upholding progressive ideals in such an undertaking.

The study's usefulness for Asian criticism lies in its acknowledgment of English's argument that awards in the modern age will be as much problematic as inevitable; from this arises the need to look into how the prestige-granting body's internal dynamics create a narrative of conflict, compromise, and influence-peddling despite its members' claims to objectivity, consistency, and concern for upgrading the preferences of film audiences. Like English (and reworking Bourdieu), David does not advocate for the dismissal of prestige-making activities altogether; instead, what is initiated is a call for a carefully considered and historically responsive project of counter-canon formation.

"Diasporic Errantry" by Maria Luisa Torres Reyes examines errantry in moments of the country's history of diasporic poetics that does not just involve a scattering of people. It is not just about the dispersion but about their return to their homeland, or a reliving of homeland in a strange land among familiar objects, rituals, practices, and memories. It is about the coming and going of the Filipino overseas contract worker who returns home again and again after and in between work overseas as a domestic helper, a seaman, or a construction worker -- the repatriate (*balikbayan*). Alongside the OCW, is the *balikbayan* box, which contains both objects (*pasalubong*) and subjects (dead *balikbayan* 's body), the embodiment of that internationalist imaginary "elsewhere" of which Glissant speaks. Inside the moving box, crossing the oceans between home and not-home, is the errantry of the diasporic Filipino repatriate, caught between mobility and stasis under neoliberal globalization.

Finally, "Beyond Market Representation: Lacan, Fanon, and the Impossibility of Neoliberal Equality" by Alex Taek-Gwang Lee critiques how neoliberalism commodifies identity through a fantasy of equal exchange that ignores the structural realities of racial and sexual difference. Drawing on Fanon and Lacan, it argues that the neoliberal promise of market-based recognition is flawed because it assumes universal exchangeability, which colonial and patriarchal systems fundamentally obstruct. The essay shows how political demands for recognition are co-opted into market demands for representation, deepening the marginalization of oppressed subjects. Identity becomes an entrepreneurial pursuit that generates jouissance—a mix of enjoyment and suffering—rooted in the impossibility of recognition within market terms. Ultimately, the essay contends that resistance must confront the contradictions hidden by neoliberal exchange, rather than seek validation through it.

In closing, we thank the Critical Island Studies consortium, an international network of universities for participating in this publication project. CIS works to move away from the prevalent Eurocentric cosmology of nature, focusing on the study of oceans and islands instead of lands and continents from an archipelagic perspective.

Return to Materiality: Reframing “Digital Feminism” in South Korea[1]

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Abstract This essay offers a critical examination of the development of South Korean feminism in cyberspace since 2015, reconceptualizing it as a political project that I refer to as “digital feminism.” The popularization of feminism in South Korea over the past decade has witnessed the formation of online women’s groups, such as Megalia and Womad, the founding of the South Korean Women’s Party, and countless conflicts triggered by hashtag activism. Indeed, feminist organizing in South Korea in the past ten years has been a complex process involving the formation of new subjectivities and communities within the digital environment, resulting in conflicts, exclusionary political strategies, and contested gender categories. This paper theorizes the digital field not simply as a technological environment but as a political space with various material bases that includes bodies, labor, planetary minerals, and waste. It also analyzes various dimensions of materiality, such as the formation of connections between bodies in digital space, the shaping of subjects by algorithms, the gendering of platform labor, and ecological costs. In this way, the essay seeks to present “digital feminism” as a critical epistemology that is distinct from both cyberfeminism, which approached cyberspace in the 1990s in a dematerialized way and held a utopian perspective, and from online feminism, which focused on describing events that unfolded online after the 2010s in Korea. In conclusion, this paper argues that digital feminism should consider the new ethics and conditions for organizing feminist politics within the context of the posthuman age while focusing on differences and relations as rooted in material conditions.

Keywords digital feminism; Fourth Wave feminism; Feminism Reboot; South Korea; digital gore capitalism; gore masculinity; hashtag movement; materiality

1 This work was supported by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the National Research Foundation of Korea(NRF-2024S1A5B5A16021772)

Author **Jay Hee-jeong Sohn** holds a PhD in cine-feminism, and her doctoral thesis was titled "The 21st Century Korean Cinema and Nation." She is an actively engaged film critic and feminist based in South Korea and the author of multiple books, including *Feminism Reboot*, *I Saw the Universe You Created*, *Gender Equality*, and *If Only We Could Envision a Better End on This Damaged Planet*. She has also translated influential feminist works in Korean, including *Monstrous-Feminine* by Barbara Creed and *Stiffed* and *In the Darkroom* by Susan Faludi. She is affiliated with the Center for Cross-Cultural Studies at Kyung Hee University and is a member of the cine-feminist group Project38.

Introduction: The Feminist Reboot Ten Years On

It was August 2015, and I had just written that "feminism has been rebooted" in an article for the quarterly cultural studies journal *Munhwa/Gwahak* [Culture/Science] (Sohn, "Peminijeum ributeu"). The article examined the "#Na neun peminiseuteu imnida" [#I'm a feminist] hashtag movement, starting in February 2015, as a decisive moment in Korean feminist history. It also explored the recent popularization of feminist ideas, a process that began with Korean women's groups before spreading to the general Korean public.

This moment was not particular to Korea but rather was part of the unfolding of the Fourth Wave of feminism on a global scale (Munro). The Fourth Wave was a new stream of feminism that began in the early to mid-2010s by those who drew from popular culture and a diversified media environment, leveraging the combination of online platforms and digital devices to cross borders and form connections of solidarity and mutual influence across the globe. In this way, they expanded the popular feminist movement in both online and offline spaces. This movement pursued female empowerment via demands for the right to equal pay for equal work, freedom from sexual violence, gender parity in society, and the decriminalization of abortion. Fourth Wave feminism, under the influence of postmodern feminism, also emphasized the intersectional nature of gender. Identifying the factors that set off the Fourth Wave is a difficult task. That said, I look to the 2011 "SlutWalk" protest held in Canada as an important watershed moment.[1] South Koreans also participated in the SlutWalk movement, holding

1 Slut walks were a protest movement that began in response to a Canadian policeman telling university students attending a safety training in January 2011 that women should "avoid dressing like sluts" if they wish to avoid being sexually assaulted. Women marched to express that they had the freedom to dress like a "slut" if they wished and that it is not acceptable to victimize women simply because of the clothes they wear. The first protest was held in Toronto on April 3, 2011, and by early June of that year, slut walks had spread to over 30 different cities in Europe, Australia, and elsewhere.

their own *jamnyeon haengjin* [slut march]. In this way, these slut walks—as well as the "black protests" in Poland, South Korea, and elsewhere, which called for the decriminalization of abortion, and the #MeToo movement, which fought against sexual violence in workplaces, educational institutions, and elsewhere—constituted a glocal movement that criticized patriarchy in both its local and universal forms.

In the case of Korea, there has been a clear conflict between those who emphasize women's empowerment and those who prioritize intersectionality. In particular, regarding the political question of "Who counts as a real woman?" (e.g., should trans women be included or excluded), these two groups continue to argue, debate, negotiate, and (sometimes) join together in solidarity in a complex and dynamic relationship. That said, they are not diametrically opposed. Where their perspectives overlap, they engage in intense debates over the nature of gender-based discrimination, as well as its causes and solutions. Moreover, these debates are deeply impacted by the characteristics of digital media, such as its immediacy and anonymity, with debate occasionally devolving into extreme cyberbullying and high-stakes struggles over recognition. These debates also sometimes transition into conflict and political battles in offline spaces. These confrontations, which, for the past decade, have oscillated between online and offline spaces, have revealed that "women" are not a monolith, that feminists do not all speak with one voice, and that for those seeking radical social change, politics is as much a process of identifying one's enemies as it is one of finding comrades.

Examining the formation of feminist community and identity via early Twitter, Megalia, Womad, and private Facebook groups feels like witnessing the formation of a new "nation" These women first gathered to form an oppositional force intent on defying the dominant ideology in the name of safety, dignity, and equal rights for women. They pursued equality amongst themselves while fighting back against the existing social order and systems of authority. They developed a new language and culture that only members of the movement could understand and strengthened the bonds binding them together. Their internal unity was strengthened in response to the rise of anti-feminism, including attacks on feminism from politicians and the media, and biased police investigations that downplayed the crimes of men.[1] This was also accompanied by an increasing tendency to eliminate heterogeneity within the women's movement. Indeed, the list of those who were excluded continued to grow: political activists, married women, women who rejected the *tal koreuset*

1 For more on the anti-feminist attacks and corresponding critiques since the feminism reboot that have gained purchase with the public as part of the larger "gender conflict," see Kim Bo-myeong.

[escape the corset] movement, and women in romantic relationships. The thrashing of other women in the movement—particularly those who seemed to be using the feminist struggle for their own personal gain—may appear as a form of internal democracy; however, it also cannot be separated from the sentiment of "somebody is trying to steal credit for my work." Indeed, it is not easy to differentiate between cyberbullying and thrashing as ways of doing politics. Korean women who have styled themselves as "radical feminists" (radfem) have emphasized the associations between feminism and ethnic identity, relying on "biology" as a means of defining difference. Consequently, equality among members of the movement has evaporated, and a new hierarchy has emerged within the feminist movement, judging others based on how aggressively one "does feminism," such as whether one has "escaped the corset."

It is undeniable that over the past decade, feminism, compared to other discourses and social movements, has had a considerable influence on Korean society and politics. Likewise, tensions within the feminist movement have also gradually increased. Ultimately, 2020 was a watershed year with these tensions coming into acute focus. One such critical moment was when a trans woman admitted to Sookmyung Women's University gave up on attending due to attacks by trans-exclusionary radical feminists, or TERFs. Feminists increasingly spoke out against the treatment of this trans student, and support for trans people grew within the media and among the public. In the same year, there was explosive reporting on the existence of so-called "Nth rooms" on Telegram where men shared pornographic videos of mostly underaged girls obtained through blackmail and deception, resulting in an abrupt rise in public concern regarding digital sex crimes. Sometime later, the Women's Party was formed, and more organized political resistance emerged. Demand for harsher penalties for digital sex crimes grew. Prosecutors demanded that the creator of the "Nth room," Moon Hyung-wook (whose screenname was God God), as well as Cho Ju-bin, the creator of the so-called *baksa bang* [professor room], another Telegram chatroom for sharing illegal pornographic content, receive life sentences. Despite this climate of increased scrutiny of the justice system, Son Jeong-woo, who had been imprisoned for operating the dark web child pornography website Welcome to Video, was released from prison after serving just one year and six months. Additionally, the arrest warrants needed to investigate where Son had hidden the profits he made from his illegal activities were continually denied, illustrating the persistent limitations of the judiciary. In the ensuing years, debates around gender equality have only become more complex. In 2021, the government announced that it was "too soon" to allow trans people to serve in the military, further inflaming debates on trans rights. Furthermore, an amendment was introduced to maintain penalties for abortion in the criminal code following a court ruling stating that the criminalization of abortion was unconstitutional. In this way, the last several years have seen intense battles over women’s rights in Korea. In the 2022 Korean presidential election, feminism emerged as a focal point of political contestation, with anti-feminist sentiment ultimately being adopted as a key election strategy, further exacerbating tensions over gender politics in South Korea. In 2024, further controversy emerged in response to the mass production and distribution of deep-fake pornography.[1]

The arrival of Web 2.0 at the dawn of the new millennium was welcomed as offering new utopian possibilities. Subsequently, the Arab Spring of 2010 and the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States presented a new time–space for experimenting with the potential of this new horizon for popular movements. In the current moment, however, we have witnessed a rightward shift across the globe alongside the recapture of the White House by an attention-seeking populist president and social upheaval created by Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol, who is suffering from a case of “brain rot” caused by binging on election denial videos circulating on YouTube. Judith Butler has described, quite beautifully, the bodies assembled at the Occupy Wall Street protest as “exercising a plural and performative right to appear” (11). Meanwhile, Amy Chua and others have characterized the Occupy Movement as a means for the diverse “tribe” of the white middle-class elite of the United States to set themselves apart from others (140).[2] If we continue to apply Chua’s reasoning, it could be argued that Trump’s arrival was an effect of the Occupy Movement. Whereas Butler’s reading is romantic, Chua’s is depoliticized. Therefore, in the current context of 2025, amidst the rightward shift led by machoism, where should feminism stand?

The lessons of the past decade have also taught us that any criticism that seeks to capture and explain the totality of our present moment will ultimately fail. This essay begins by recognizing the inevitability of this failure. However, this does not lead to frustration, as this essay turns its gaze toward relationality instead of totality.

1 In 2024, reporting revealed that a Korean-run Telegram room for the purpose of producing and distributing deepfake porn had approximately 220,000 members. In Korea, deepfake porn is commonly distributed under the label *jiin neungyok* (meaning “acquaintance humiliation” or “violating an acquaintance”), and those who make it often use the identities of people they know. According to a 2023 report by the security company Security Hero that analyzed 95,820 deepfake pornography videos, 99% of the subjects were women, and 53% were Korean.

2 Chua emphasizes that “Occupiers were disproportionately young, white, and highly educated, which helps explain the movement's oft-noted technological savvy.”

Based on the understanding that believing in the generative expansion of feminism is just as naïve as having faith in the potentiality of the digital, this essay proposes the project of "digital feminism." Digital feminism is a political project that should be differentiated from terms such as "cyberfeminism," which was optimistic regarding the building of a feminist movement in online spaces, and "online feminism," which was used as a catch-all term to describe these changes. Rather, digital feminism represents a feminist epistemology that critically interrogates the digital while also recognizing that it is a mode of production and a set of conditions that regulates the formation and continuation of a new subjecthood. This essay begins by first describing the digital environment that present-day feminism inhabits in Korea and then advances an argument for why we must take seriously the question of materiality. Subsequently, after a cursory mention of the "type of materiality" under discussion, the essay suggests a direction for the future of feminist criticism.

The Digital World We Inhabit in 2025

Several neologisms sprang up in Korea during the COVID-19 pandemic. Terms such as *korona beullu* [corona blue] and *korona aenggeuri* [corona angry] were clear reflections of the emotional impact of the pandemic. The phrase *dolbap dolbap* [having to cook rice every time one turns around] described the increased demand placed on those performing care work during the pandemic, while *korona dibaideu* [corona divide] drew attention to class issues and worsening inequality due to COVID-19. Most conspicuous among these neologisms was *eontaekteu* [literally "un-tact," meaning "contactless"]—a term that perhaps most succinctly defines the post-corona age. This term, which refers to the arrival of an age dominated by remote, contactless interactions, has provoked two responses in Korea: anxiety over a future where the Fourth Industrial Revolution makes humans useless and excitement over the potential for establishing a new reality based on new digital communities through the passage of a Korean-style "New Deal." Vacillating between these two somewhat uncertain passions is another effort to develop new ideas for creating a commons. The key term here is *coexist*. How do we build a commons, and how can we ensure it continues to exist? Of course, the foundational orientation that supports this key term is posthumanism, or post-anthropomorphism. Therefore, can the digital—which is now the default value of life—become a condition for coexistence? The prospect of drafting a blueprint for the future remains rather dark at the moment. The digital world of 2025 constitutes an addiction economy built on a network of illicit Telegram chat rooms, websites for maliciously distributing personal information, illegal gambling sites, and exploitative moneylending businesses. This essay now turns to take a closer look at this network.

Following the Great Recession that began with the US financial crisis in 2008, the internet became a battleground for recognition and attention among online snobs. These snob-netizens do not battle nature or dream of historical progress; rather, they simply accumulate "likes" while seeking recognition for recognition's sake. In this way, they are far different from the America that Alexandre Kojève observed in the 1950s. A snob is not a snob because they have become an animal that seeks only to fulfill its own desires amongst the abundance promised by capitalism. Rather, the snob is born from the total frustration that results from being unable to fulfill even the most basic of needs, to say nothing of one's desires (Azuma 67–68). Those who adopt an anti-authoritarian attitude that questions the global order and resists hierarchies cannot look to the social for resources, and therefore, they turn to the ontology of the snob, which craves the only resource available to it—attention—resulting in anti-intellectualism. Online (so-called manosphere) communities, such as DC Inside, a popular Korean online forum from the 2000s, have been described as anti-authoritarian spaces because they operate on the principle of equality among all members. However, the difference between anti-authoritarianism and anti-intellectualism is deceptively minuscule (Sohn, "Eoyong simin"). Within this climate, where the line dividing anti-authoritarianism and anti-intellectualism was dangerously thin, women began familiarizing themselves with the language used on various online communities and social networking sites, altering, reworking, and appropriating this language to wage their own fight against the manosphere, resulting in the appearance of Megalia in June of 2015. Megalia was an effort to overturn patriarchy, and therefore, it was closer to a political organization than simply a snobbish battle for recognition.

Near the end of 2015, misogyny among gay men emerged as a controversial topic on the site. Intense debates raged over such questions as, "How should feminists attempt a criticism of the misogyny expressed by gay men?" And "Can this be used to discriminate against and exclude gay men?" As a consequence of these debates, the group Womad was formed when members who declared themselves to be "women supremacists rather than feminists" split from Megalia. Although Korean society pointed its finger at Womad as a "group of deplorables" who had seemingly come from nowhere, the Womad community was amply fed by Korean cyberspace and even grew. The so-called "defiled sacramental bread incident" of July 2018 is one representative example of the "deplorable" actions of Womad. At this time, the Hyehwa Station Protests against biased investigations into digital sex crimes [also referred to as the *bulpyeonhan yonggi* protests, or "uncomfortable courage" protests, in Korean] were ongoing, and, correspondingly, there was increased public attention on Womad. A Womad user posted a criticism of misogyny within the Korean Catholic Church alongside a photo of a piece of burnt sacramental bread. The post drew attention, and another post threatening to start a fire at a Catholic church appeared. Some Catholics reported the threat, and an investigation was launched. In 2019, a suspect was arrested. The assigned sex at birth of the accused was male. The media referred to him as a "male feminist," while some feminists criticized him as an "anti-feminist" who had "cooked up" the controversy to harm the feminist movement. "Look, see. It's men who do these kinds of things, not women," they urged. However, the user's assigned sex is not important. Rather, what is important is to question what kind of content can become "humor" or "bait" for the Womad "tribe" (to borrow the language of Amy Chua) and what actions by Womad does the Korean public choose to focus on?

Online macho culture and misogyny—which, in an ambiguous sense, is what nurtured the growth of Womad—began to construct a vast network and market for commodities in the mid-2010s, a time when platforms such as Africa TV and YouTube were becoming more popular and were emerging as money-making vehicles once they began interacting with online wars for recognition and attention. Attention-seeking is not simply about enjoying the attention of others; it can also be a means of making money. That is, we now live in a world where, despite having no resources, one can, simply by appearing in a male body and reenacting conventional and familiar forms of hate, earn money. In 2025, this has given us "digital gore capitalism."[1] In Korea, violence in online spaces is expanding into a "violence industry" that presents harm to the body and human dignity as commodities. Clickbait YouTubers stigmatize female YouTubers as "feminists" and call male volleyball athletes "queer," bullying their targets until they end their own lives. However, this describes only that which occurs "in the daylight." The exploitative live sex cam industry, which began alongside the first live internet broadcasts at the dawn of the

1 Sayak Valencia introduced the term "gore capitalism" to describe the narco economy of Mexico, where "death
has become the most profitable business in existence" and "the destruction of the body becomes in itself the product or commodity." For more on how I have adapted Valencia's concept of "gore capitalism" as "digital gore
capitalism" to describe Korean cyberspace, see Son Hui-jeong, "Dijiteol sidae."

twenty-first century, continues to this day. Following the arrest of Yang Jin-ho, the owner of several online file storage companies that distributed illegal pornography, so-called *beotbang* [naked live cams] became popular. These *beotbang* emerged as a popular illicit underground cam genre where men performed sadistic acts on women in response to viewers’ requests. That is, the empty space left by illegal pornography was filled by the “sadistic shows” offered by *beotbang*. These *beotbang* are not made by independent streamers but rather are systematically produced and distributed by “entertainment companies,” and female webcam models in the industry are subjected to extreme exploitation. Similar to the sex work industry, even if one enters the sex cam modeling industry willingly, due to its structure, it is difficult to leave (*Geugeosi algo sipda*, episode 1207). In addition to the expansion of live sex cams, there has also been a boom in “dark web” content, such as the Welcome to Video website and the “Nth room” Telegram channel, both of which distributed child pornography, as well as chat rooms for sharing deepfake pornography.

This period also saw the emergence of the *dijiteol gyodoso* website [literally, “digital prison”], an Instagram account and then a website that purported to share the personal information of individuals accused of digital sex crimes. This website grew rapidly, feeding off public anger resulting from the revelations of the “Nth room” case in March 2020 and the denial of a request to extradite Son Jeong-woo to the United States in the following July. The site began as an Instagram account that gained popularity for revealing the identity of those who had committed sex crimes on Telegram. Subsequently, an actual website was created to reveal the identities of not only those associated with the “Nth room” case but also perpetrators of sex crimes, child abuse, and more, placing the website at the center of ongoing controversy and discussion. For some time, this “illegal” activity was accepted as “extra-legal” justice. Within Korean society, there was little criticism of the site, even after innocent individuals who had been featured on the site committed suicide. Indeed, Koreans were apprehensive about casting suspicion on the claims of the creator of the “digital prison” account, as he had claimed that his own cousin was a victim of the “Nth room” abuse, stating, “I feel there are limitations regarding the lenient punishment given to vicious criminals in South Korea, and I intend to reveal their personal information so that they can be judged by the public” (Jang). However, the situation became only more confusing when it was revealed that the creator of the “digital prison” account had, in fact, been prosecuted for selling drugs online and operating his own “Nth room.” He used the account to terrorize those who were uncooperative or crossed him by spreading their personal information. By exploiting the personal information of others, he forced numerous men into “slavery,” a strategy identical to that of the "Nth room" operators. His actions were somewhat perplexing. On the internet, he presented himself as a god who exacted justice on his own terms, and perhaps as a way of further indulging in this god-like image, he even appeared on the TV show *Geugeosi algo sipda* [Unanswered Questions], where he reported on himself (episode 1234).

In this way, the "digital prison" account and website targeted male victims in the same way the "Nth rooms" had targeted women. This "digital prison" functioned by first luring men to the site with ads for such services as "creating humiliating deepfake images of your acquaintances" (i.e., advertising to make custom deepfake porn). Afterward, the owner would order these men to do his bidding while threatening to reveal their identities to the public. The digital prison website was also connected to illegal gambling sites. The connection between illegal gambling sites and sexual exploitation material has long been known. For example, the investigation into Soranet in 2016 also found that advertising revenue for illegal gambling websites sustains this underground world (Sohn, "Goemul eun"). That is, exploitative videos of women were the bait used to attract men to illegal gambling sites. In this dark world where one cannot even see their hand in front of their face, teenagers and those in their twenties who feel that "my life is a failure" flock to illegal gambling sites in hopes of striking it rich (Kim Wan and Kim Min-je; Kim Wan, Bak Jun-yong, and Kim Min-je). Likewise, it is unsurprising that some men produce, sell, and distribute illegal pornography to earn money for gambling and that male teenagers in South Korea have formed their own moneylending industry (Jeon). The market for illicit drugs is also relevant here. Among teenage boys, hierarchies are no longer determined by physical and sexual prowess. In the present world, where the ability to quickly strike it rich has become the foundation of power and authority, illegal gambling and moneylending have taken deep root. This is why the "digital community" as a clean zone that is being called for by supporters of a Korean-style New Deal rings hollow. Indeed, the "digital community" in which we currently live is a twisted network of male solidarity that rules by exploiting others.

The Trouble Facing Feminism

The above section describes the challenges that feminists currently face in the digital realm. How can we recover the conditions for coexistence in times of crisis, such as a global pandemic? Is it possible to form political subjectivities and foster solidarity within cyberspace? And how might we respond to the ongoing violence and femicide against women in an addiction-driven economy where hate and violence have been commodified? Korean women primarily fought for feminist causes in online spaces, and this fight, therefore, was also a fight for survival. This does not mean, however, that it is acceptable to incinerate others as a fuel source for continuing the fight. This section addresses the trouble in which feminism, when faced with such challenges, falls into the trap of essentializing the body and, as a result, ends up attacking minorities-particularly in the form of transphobia. As a new ethics and politics, digital feminism must confront the task of moving beyond such essentialism of the body.

The "radfem" strain of Korean feminism, which first appeared in 2015, has pursued a strategy of exclusion and discrimination, strengthening bonds between "women" by actively excluding particular individuals, such as trans people. To examine these issues further, the essay now turns to address the formation of the South Korean Women's Party, which was both a product of "online feminism" and the political manifestation of radfem organizing.

For this purpose, it is necessary to first return to the morning of January 30, 2020, when it was reported that a trans woman had been admitted to Sookmyung Women's University, provoking feverish responses on social media. The university had already clarified its position that if an applicant had undergone sex reassignment surgery and had legally changed their legal gender marker to female, then there were no obstacles to them applying for admission. Nevertheless, so-called TERFs reacted with vehement opposition. This led to the release of a petition by "radfems" opposing the student's admittance. The president of Yeolda Books, which had published a book inciting trans hate under the label of "radical feminism,"[1] made a sarcastic comment on their personal social media account, stating, "Transgenderism violates the constitution." Later, it was revealed that they planned to file a constitutional appeal if the student were to be admitted. Korean society expressed surprise that a feminist organization would claim that anyone's existence is "unconstitutional." And as if some had been waiting for the opportunity, criticisms of feminism began to intensify. One particular YouTube ideologue who had been dormant for some time came back to the platform, creating a live stream video titled "I came back because of the Sookmyung issue. It's been a while." (Lee Seon-ok TV). Each time she blamed trans hate on feminists, her subscribers sent Super Chat donations. As donations worth 10,000, 30,000, and 100,000 won flashed on the screen, she smiled while saying "thank you" to her subscribers—a clear illustration of how attacks against feminism can be monetized within the market for anti-

1 In 2019, a Korean-language translation of Sheila Jeffreys' book *Gender Hurts* was published. Jeffreys was also invited to Korea to give lectures and participate in roundtable discussions.

feminist content.

Many who are active in this digital space, including anti-feminists, place the blame for transphobia on feminists while demanding that they deal with the issue internally. Although this is an issue that feminists need to confront and resolve, transphobia is not solely a problem of feminism. That is, although the logic of trans hatred expressed by TERFs in Korea has been borrowed from TERF commentators in the West, it is also rooted in a more widespread hatred of minorities within Korean society. Indeed, the same logic was on display in the incendiary protests against Yemeni refugees on Jeju Island in 2018. Conservative Christians wrote fake news articles (Kim Wan, Bak Jun-yong, and Byeon Ji-min), and radfems actively spread them. Consequently, a national petition posted to the Blue House website titled "Petition Against Accepting Yemeni Refugees" was signed by 710,000 people. Although it is unclear how much overlap there was between conservative Christians and radfems, it is clear that, regardless of either group's intentions, it resulted in a productive collaboration.[1]

Those in Korean society who sought to exclude minorities in the name of feminism ultimately succeeded in denying this trans student their right to an education while violating her autonomy. Unable to overlook this injustice, some commentators reflected on some existing feminist views and expressed regret over the outcome, while some feminists who supported the student published their own statements of support.[2] The confrontation was fierce, and ostentatious efforts to exclude and discriminate against trans people continued. Following the Sookmyung Women's University incident, another national petition was filed under the title "Don't Allow Gender Marker Changes Without Genital Reconstructive Surgery," which received over 220,000 signatures. It had become difficult to voice one's opinion in opposition to the exclusion of trans people. Within the logic used by TERFs to exclude trans people, the rhetoric of "protecting women" wields a particular power, likely because achieving a society where women are safe remains a far-off reality. Of particular significance here was the "Nth room" case. The sexual exploitation and violence of the "Nth room" case were so abhorrent that even anti-

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1 Writings posted on the Facebook page Feminism Without Borders speaking out against hatred directed toward refugees on Jeju Island were collected and published in 2019 by publisher Waon under the title *Gyeonggye eomneun peminijeum: Jeju yemaen nanmin gwa peminijeum ui eungdap* [Feminism without borders: Yemeni refugees in Jeju and feminist responses].

2 These statements were published in book form in 2020 by publisher Waon under the title *Uri neun jagyeok eomneun yeoseong deulgwa sesang eul bakkunda* [We are changing the world alongside women who have been denied recognition].

feminists had to express their disapproval. The number of accounts that could be successfully traced back to these "Nth" Telegram rooms reached 260,000, and as the disgusting nature and scope of the violence, as well as the ages of the victims and perpetrators, was revealed, many women experienced both fear and anger. It is at this moment that women began to declare, "Up until now, I was a feminist who spoke of solidarity, but from now on, I'm a radfem." In this context, the term "radfem" was used to denote "an exclusive focus on women's issues." Likewise, the category "woman" was clearly defined to exclude trans women.

This unfortunate quagmire is strikingly similar to the patriarchal governmentality that seeks to block any progress within feminist discussion. Korean women had become increasingly despondent as they witnessed repeated incidents of violence and discrimination against women, such as the Soranet scandal, the Gangnam Station murder (and many other murders and assaults of women), Yang Jin-ho's cloud storage cartel, ideological "screenings" intended to identify feminists among job applicants at game companies, cases of discrimination in hiring, and the "Nth room" case. Unsurprisingly, women erected tall fences around the identity of "woman," further strengthening their internal sense of "tribalism." However, a movement that relies on biological essentialism and an exclusionary definition of woman is unable to realize a fair and just society that can liberate women from discrimination and violence. Discussions that deny the existence of trans people and again reduce "women" to their external sex organs ultimately imitate the patriarchal culture that reduces women to their genitals. Discrimination and violence that objectifies and dehumanizes women is a product of gender stereotypes based on a gender binary that divides humans into the male and female sexes. This constructed myth of the masculine and feminine is the central core of misogynistic culture. In its attempt to oppose misogynistic culture, feminism made the error of reinforcing the very gender binary that sustains this misogyny. Donna Haraway previously commented on this vicious cycle in the 1980s, stating, "Sex is 'resourced' for its representation as gender which 'we' can control" (Haraway 592). It is a vicious loop: Misogynistic culture feeds transphobic culture, and transphobic culture, in turn, props up misogynistic culture.

Of course, it is possible to steelman trans people and, for a short while, generate sufficient "firepower" to sustain a movement by conjuring up images of "monstrous trans people" and claiming that "the very existence of trans people is the rape of women." No strategy is more effective for strengthening the internal unity of a community than identifying a common enemy and expelling them from the in-group. Consider the fact that the South Korean Women's Party, which declared the “Nth room” case to be its top priority, began recruiting members and preparing for its official entrance into electoral politics in the aftermath of the controversy at Sookmyung Women’s University—a time when TERFs in South Korean were consolidating their power. Although it may have been difficult for the Women’s Party to make transphobia part of its official party platform, it is clear that the politics of exclusion contributed to the party being able to attract many members in such a short period of time.

Here, we are presented with another challenge. Even progressive activists, intellectuals, and others who express interest in human rights and solidarity politics are willing to exploit the dynamic power generated by the politics of exclusion to realize the feminist objectives that they see as taking precedence over all else. Not only feminism but all political movements can fall victim to the trap of exclusionary politics. No one is free from this temptation. Exclusionary politics are characterized by a stoic determination, and this sublimity is alluring. The language of hatred that drives exclusionary politics can be pleasurable, like the crisp freshness of a carbonated drink. In this way, when politics becomes an amusement, it can have powerful effects. When this is combined with impatience over the feeling that “Nothing can be accomplished if we keep doing things this way,” emotional chaos intensifies, and it is this chaos that generates an increasing sense of “something getting done.” However, compared to the feminists who construct imaginary enemies to alleviate the discomfort and fear they experience in their everyday lives, feminists who, out of impatience, ignore such ongoing incitement of hatred set the movement back even further.

It is notable that feminists (of a certain sort) have sought to justify their conversions by expressing the need to “take care of women first.” That is, they separate the “women’s movement” from other “minority movements” to assert their legitimacy. Of course, this is done with clear knowledge that the two cannot be separated. Moreover, this reckless dividing act will not just ghettoize feminism but ultimately destroy the accumulated significance of the women’s movement in South Korea. This is demonstrated by such claims as “Women’s groups have not properly represented the anguish of young women” and “Elite feminists have been silent regarding the death of Jang Ja-yeon.”[1] (Both false claims that were made by those

1 Jang Ja-yeon committed suicide in March 2009. There was considerable public controversy when a letter she had written before her death was made public, revealing that she had been physically and verbally abused by the president of her agency and had been forced to serve alcohol and provide sexual services at a hostess bar. This incident exposed the sexual exploitation of female celebrities within the Korean entertainment industry.

associated with the formation of the Women’s Party.) Such claims are both a denial of the history of the feminist movement in Korea and a rejection of the feminist colleagues with whom they must forge a path forward.

In the 2020 South Korean general elections, the Women’s Party received approximately 210,000 votes, constituting 0.74% of the total vote. When considering that the party was formed in March and elections were held in April, this is a rather astonishing accomplishment.[1] However, the popularization of feminism via digital media following the so-called “feminist reboot” did not simply conclude with the establishment of the Women’s Party, nor is its meaning exhausted by the Women’s Party alone. Feminism continues to spread and expand among the public via various intersecting positions and perspectives, including socialist feminism, ecofeminism, queer feminism, and trans feminism—a process of differentiation that actively continues in the current moment.

Digital Feminism Centers the Material

Above, I examined the digital environment in which feminism is situated and the difficulties feminism faces within Now, I turn to digital feminism as a form of radical feminism necessary for our time and will discuss the question of materiality that digital feminism must deal with.

Within the pop culture imaginary, the image most immediately evoked by the term “digital” is the world of falling vertical green text from the film *The Matrix* (1999). It is an immaterial world that appears in the binary of mind and body. However, even though the digital is imagined as that which facilitates the shift from the material to the immaterial, the digital is still material. Of course, there are those who indulge in the digital in a non-material way. This minority abstracts the workings of the digital into something immaterial, polluting the world and exploiting the majority. The process of enjoying the immateriality of the digital is analogous to the process by which life becomes “meat” served on a table. The slaughtering of animals, the removal of bones, and the packaging and distribution of flesh all disappear from view, leaving only a piece of appetizing meat before our eyes. A life of enjoying the digital as one enjoys meat is an extension of the modern

1 Perhaps more revealing would have been an analysis of how this party, which emphasized that it “stood not for the left or right but for women,” would have sought to expand its political power. However, after its founding, it power continually waned, and currently, it is struggling to survive.

humanism that places "historical masculinity" as the center of life.[1] Therefore, there is a need to think more intentionally about the materiality of the digital. In this context, the "material" is an analytical concept that—according to different bodies and the different conditions of life—can capture the flux and variation of subjects who possess different desires and urges and different hopes and anxieties while seeking to mediate between these differences. However, most of all, the material serves as a clear marker of the specific coordinates from which the effort to face reality head-on must begin.

Therefore, in this context, what kind of "material" are we talking about? Firstly, it seems necessary to begin by stating that the digital is that which connects bodies together. As demonstrated by the networked relationships between illicit Telegram rooms, the "digital prison" account, and illegal gambling sites, digital space can serve as a site for the exploitation of bodies. However, such connections between bodies do not take exclusively violent forms. The "connective action" of hashtags on social media is another example of making connections between bodies. Such hashtags as #Naneun peminiseuteu imnida" [#I'm A Feminist], #00 Gyenae seongpongnyeok [#Sexual violence in the art world], #MeToo, and #Nanneun naktae haetda [#I had an abortion] function to connect bodies via their experiences, forming loose networks and creating webs of meaning. On platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, hashtag activism has had an inflammatory effect on the formation and development of discourses on issues surrounding minorities.

Meanwhile, "Hashtag activism [also] intensifies as differences of opinion widen, resulting in the formation of frames for competing with others" (Kim Su-a 316). Such "framing battles" have been rather intense. For example, when the Korean web media company Dot Face (dotface.kr) held a virtual queer parade in 2020, TERFs invaded the parade and left hateful and inciteful comments. Both queer people and TERFs began posting under the hashtag #Urineun eopdeon gildo mandeulji [#Making roads where there were none]. TERFs also used hashtags such as #Jendeo baksal [#Gender annihilation] and #Jamaedeuriyeo yeohyeom kwieo

1 The fact that attributes such as "short hair, muscles, athleticism, and pants" are both stereotypes of maleness and models for masculinity is an issue of culture. And because such attributes have been understood this way within a particular history of humans, I refer to these gender stereotypes as "historical masculinity." Likewise, I refer to "dressing up, long hair, detail-oriented, and dresses" as associated with "historical femininity." Historical masculinity and historical femininity are the product of a gender system that divides humans into two genders, male and female. That is, historical femininity and masculinity do not represent intrinsic categories; rather, they should be understood as things that can be embodied according to non-verbal compulsions regardless of the medical designation of sex that is applied to the gender spectrum.

eseo talchul hara [#Sisters, escape from the women-hating queers] (Bak). TERFs continue to use these hashtags to attack the rights of trans people. This battle continues to play out in the context of a variety of issues. The injuries suffered by bodies that become linked through hashtags and engage in battle are not easily healed. Additionally, these bodies sometimes suffer attacks strong enough to demand medical intervention, including psychiatric treatment. The uplifting energy of movements and the sudden collapse of hope are necessary elements that constitute the acts of connection made possible within digital spaces. The question of how to regulate the destructive imaginary and its imperative to "fight until only one is left standing" is a critical task for digital feminism. There is a need to more effectively convey the reality that there is another breathing, living body on the other side of the screen.

Second, although the experience of being online is often imagined as a free and unencumbered "voyage" sailing from one hyperlink to the next, there is an unseen reality of IT companies using data mining to collect our information and employ algorithms that motivate us to spend increasing amounts of time online. The freedom to browse and search that users feel in cyberspace comes at the price of submitting to a variety of control mechanisms operating clandestinely behind the computer screen (Chun). Just as the accumulation of memories is what makes the individual, IT companies create algorithms to draw us in, creating constantly updating, personalized social media feeds that lead to the formation of an identity for the online "me." This point is connected to the feminist identity generated within battles over attention. Posting violent tweets, contributing to the exclusion of certain minorities, and seeking attention from others are all strategies for winning battles for attention. More precisely, however, this is also the space wherein social media formalizes neoliberal ideology as media. As the problems of confirmation bias and digital echo chambers increase, users become increasingly tied to their feeds and are driven to continually produce data. Simultaneously, social media mechanisms intended to induce unintended consumption operate outside of the political spectrum. They do not discriminate between left and right or between liberals and fundamentalists; they also blur the distinction between feminists and anti-feminists. Consequently, the strategies employed by online selves and collectives of selves are shared and adopted regardless of one's values and objectives.

Third, it is necessary to think more concretely about the labor that makes the digital world possible, as well as the labor that is created and transacted within this digital world. In the current age of "un-tact" services, it is often said that humanity is facing the "end of work." However, as a virtual space produced by human technology, cyberspace inevitably relies on material machines, such as computers, and electricity. Moreover, the labor involved with producing, distributing, maintaining, and using such machines remains the work of humans. Brash statements about the "end of work" are problematic as they make certain forms of work invisible, forcing workers to labor under more vulnerable and precarious conditions.

Another issue that must be addressed here is the "platform work" facilitated by the digital. As Danggeun Maket (branded as "Karrot" outside Korea) and Airbnb demonstrate,[1] platform capitalism "exhibits a centripetal force that indiscriminately pulls [everything] into the platform market" including "the gift economy that has existed outside the capitalist market and the tradition of free gift giving" in an effort to realize the marketization of everything. Simultaneously, it also seeks to create a distribution network for labor to further the flexibilization of labor markets and strengthen capital's domination of workers (Lee, "Peullaetpom" 19–27).[2] However, current discussions about platform work have concentrated on male workers, such as delivery bike drivers, resulting in a lack of attention to women's work. The gender discrimination and sexual violence affecting women in the current labor market also force women out of platform work, and this misogynistic culture has also been transplanted into the world of platform labor. Considering the poor labor protections within platform work environments, its expansion will have "a high probability of exacerbating outsourcing and precarious work arrangements within fields with high rates of female works that have historically been undervalued in the labor market," and it is already contributing to the worsening "marginalization of vulnerable female workers" (Kim Won-jeong). Relatedly, when the "workplace" becomes dematerialized and the "home" becomes a place of work, it becomes crucial to consider the issue of housework and care work.

Fourth, the digital gadgets that make cyberspace possible are based in the material world. Media scholar Jussi Parikka has referred to the current age as the "capitalocene" as a means of criticizing how capital ceaselessly produces surplus value by maximizing human desire. Parikka emphasizes that media rests on a foundation that requires various minerals, metals, and chemicals that have formed

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1 Danggeun Maket is the most used application for the buying and selling of used goods in Korea. In addition to used goods, the application also allows users to sell or trade services and give away goods for free.

2 For suggestions on how to improve labor conditions within the world of platform work, see Lee Gwang-seok's chapter titled "Peullaetpom nodong eul eotteoke bol geot inga" [How should we view platform labor?] in the book mentioned in the above in-text citation.

over vast expanses of time, such as lithium, platinum, and coltan. In this way, the material base of the newest digital gadgets is connected to a lengthy history that extends back to ancient times. In order to make its digital gadgets, humanity must dig up resources from, as Siegfried Zielinski states, "deep time," creating e-waste that does not decompose chemically or materially, thereby threatening "deep time" long into the future. Media exploits the ecosystem, and once it has exhausted its uses, the media itself becomes a component of the ecosystem. Media has already become synonymous with nature. Consequently, it is necessary to consider the energy and physical space that goes into maintaining cyberspace. Ultimately, we must reach a place of "uncomfortable coexistence" in relation to the waste and innumerable other forms of filth created by the digital. Humans must find the good in the appropriate technology movement, which is a necessity for humanity, and happily tolerate this discomfort amidst the good.

However, it is important to remain vigilant to ensure that this emphasis on materiality and the body does not devolve into essentialism. As the sentiment of "My body is mine," as expressed at such demonstrations as the SlutWalk and Black Protests, continues to grow, the body has begun to be understood in increasingly essentialized terms. As the body become sacralized as a site where experiences unfold and meaning is embodied, and is increasingly perceived as a possession, the body assumes a new status. Consequently, the concept of the body as "something that should not be harmed" is further emphasized. A problem arises, however, when this emphasis on the body is combined with biological essentialism and racism. Indeed, it is within this context that the TERF logic that answers the question "What is a woman?" according to the appearances of sexual organs, chromosomes, and hormones gains legitimacy. It is occasionally argued that accepting the "existence" of the female sex is a matter of thinking rationally about the material world. However, thinking seriously about the materiality of the body can also begin from an acceptance of the fact that it is impossible to capture and understand the countless sexes that exist in nature with the epistemology of "the two sexes," as asserted by patriarchal epistemology. Thinking about materiality is not simply about grouping generally similar things together and describing them as a category of objects. Rather, it is about confronting differences that cannot be bound to one another.

Rather surprisingly, within the radfem logic that asserts that the medical differentiation of the two sexes is a fundamental fact, men and women are defined by physical differences that transcend language and culture, while at the same time, all diverse sexual practices are understood as being determined solely by the gender system. In this framework, lust as something that cannot be captured by culture disappears, and everything sexual becomes understood according to power relations. Moreover, "historical masculinity" is imaged as the only thing able to escape from the domination of the gender system, and "historical masculinity" is enthroned as the default value for the human body. Consequently, "historical femininity" naturally becomes regarded as that which must be repressed and expelled. For example, the "escape the corset" movement, which began as a criticism of the beauty expectations placed on women, went beyond a call for women's autonomy, with style choices such as "short hair" and "pantsuits" being presented as the new standard for true liberation, reducing femininity to the various ways women dress and the negative connotations attached to such choices. This, in turn, further exacerbated the hatred directed toward "historical femininity." Ultimately, the very women who stated they "hated misogyny" ended up expressing more hatred of women than any other group.

Digital Feminism and Network Leadership

The Hyehwa Station Protests and other actions that demonstrated both the political potential and limitations of online feminism "involved neither leadership nor membership, lacked a clear organizational power, and operated based on the involvement of diverse participants" (Kim Eun-ju 15). This type of movement is reminiscent of discussions of the multitude and has continually elicited questions over its potentiality or impossibility. Butler states, "We have to read such scenes not only in terms of the version of the people they explicitly set forth, but the relations of power by which they are enacted. Such enactments are invariably transitory when they remain extraparliamentary." She continues, "As the popular will persists in the forms it institutes, it must also fail to lose itself in those forms if it is to retain the right to withdraw its support from any political form that fails to maintain legitimacy" (7). The fact that the bodies that are incited to action are temporary in nature is, in fact, a "strength." What is most important is ensuring to leave behind the necessary building blocks for organizing this strength-leadership.

One possible future for digital feminism may lie in building the leadership for a future feminist network (Negri and Hardt). It is the abortion decriminalization movement in Korea that enables me to speak of the romantic project of "network leadership" at the end of this rather depressing discussion. It was by discovering one another online, forming connections, and ultimately coming together as bodies in offline spaces that women were able to make their voices heard while avoiding capture by the language of patriarchy. This passion has found concrete form in various women's groups and has resulted in new social agendas. Moreover, in the realm of politics, female politicians have planned and put forth specific systems and legal mechanisms. Although political disagreements persist regarding whether the decriminalization of abortion is "for everyone" or "for women only," there is clear movement toward a system of collaboration. Although the Korean government continues to take steps backward by seeking ways to maintain the illegality of abortion within the criminal code, feminists are once again creating spectacles that inspire hope for future change. The concept of network leadership can serve as a practical strategy for digital feminism.

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Can Asians Feel? Affect Theory and the Decolonial Politics of Untranslatability

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Abstract This essay interrogates the Eurocentrism inherent in affect theory by proposing a model of affective reading specific to postcolonial Anglophone literary texts. Drawing on Emily Apter's notion of the "untranslatable," this approach pays attention to culturally specific emotions and affects that are sedimented in literary form but are inadequately expressed through the vocabulary of basic emotions. While Apter employs the "untranslatable" to critique the "translatability assumption" prevalent in World Literature, this paper applies it to challenge the same assumption in affect theory. It argues for the necessity of recognizing the untranslatability of culturally specific emotions, as basic emotions are frequently accepted as pre-linguistic and universal, a stance relying on the same "translatability assumption." This paper introduces the concept of "archipelagic feelings" to describe the nuanced layers of affect in postcolonial texts, which resonate with specific reading communities yet resist the universalizing framework of basic emotions. Like archipelagic thinking, archipelagic feeling opposes totalizing and hierarchical epistemologies of emotion.
Keywords affect theory; basic emotions theory; decoloniality; Global Anglophone literature
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Introduction

The theme of this conference—"Can Asians Critique?"—renders time out of joint for a gnawing belatedness seems to accompany the question. Why ask now at a time when some have already made the case that we are supposedly in the age of postcritique, a period where the very value and legitimacy of critique is itself under scrutiny? Why ask at a time when we find ourselves in a moment when critique has become the object of critique itself? A time when critique has been labeled a form of rhetorical posturing instead of a means of transformative engagement (particularly when practiced in its routinized and often institutionalized form). Thus, to answer the question in the affirmative—that, yes, Asians *can* critique!—risks suggesting that perhaps Asians too are adept in the art of inflating the transformative utility of an otherwise ineffectual practice. For, indeed, critique has been called out as ineffectual at best or a tool that can potentially reproduce the very structures it sets out to resist at worst.

The question also suggests that, for the most part, criticism in the non-Western world has heavily depended on exported theories and intellectual traditions. Asians are sadly condemned to employ borrowed templates to make sense of their cultural and socio-political worlds, merely affirming Western styles of thought and frames of reference. To ask the question "Can Asians Critique?" in the first place is already indicative of an underlying anxiety that the Asian mode of critique, if any, remains illegitimate or even unintelligible to the global order of knowledge production unless it can somehow align itself with or conform to Western paradigms and frameworks. This reveals a deeply rooted assumption that the Western intellectual tradition is the normative standard against which all other forms of critique must be measured and validated. The question implies that Asian forms of critical thought are inherently suspect or lacking in legitimacy unless they can be reconciled with or assimilated into dominant Western models of analysis and interpretation, which underscores the persistent Eurocentrism and colonial legacies that continue to shape global knowledge production.

However, it must be said that the rise of postcritique has cultivated an environment hospitable to other forms of cultural engagement that are less oriented towards negativity and the hermeneutics of suspicion and more towards positive investments in the objects of study. One such approach would be those informed by affect theory, which positions itself as an alternative to what are seen as the limits of critique by making affect, emotion, and feeling key sites of cultural analysis, taking precedence over more traditional modes of cultural interpretation that have tended to prioritize language or ideology. Rather than privileging textual analysis or ideological critique, the so-called affective turn in the humanities and social sciences has placed greater emphasis on embodied, sensorial, and relational aspects of culture and social life. The rise of affect theory could regarded as a corrective to modes of analysis that have privileged language and ideology as the primary sites of cultural analysis. Affects are supposedly universal and not subject to the instability of language games or the overdetermination of discursive structures. So, instead of “Can Asians Critique?” I would instead prefer to ask, “Can Asians Feel?”

In response to that question, I turn to a 1970 study by Paul Ekman, an American psychologist, loyal follower of Silvan Tomkins (the father of affect theory), and proponent of basic emotions theory. Drawing from Tomkins's affect program, basic emotions theory posits that there is a limited set of universal primary emotions—such as joy, anger, fear, sadness, disgust, and surprise—each with its own unique physiological signature, which are believed to be shared by all human beings regardless of culture or social context. This theory suggests that these basic emotions have a biological and evolutionary basis, and are not solely the products of cultural conditioning. In his 1970 study, Ekman had participants from two culturally distinct groups—American college students and Japanese college students—watch "stress-inducing films." As the participants watched, however, they too, unbeknownst to them, were being watched. What Ekman and his team were observing were their facial expressions. Ekman was trying to obtain evidence to support his theory of “universal facial expression of emotions.” Ekman writes:

> Our analysis...shows the same facial responses to stress by members of the two presumably quite different cultures…The cultural differences in facial behavior were seen later in the experiment [when researchers entered the room]… The Japanese masked negative affect with polite smiles while the Americans replayed and showed the negative affect they had experienced. (Ekman156)

While the study aimed to demonstrate that certain affects or emotions are universal—that is to say, biologically hardwired—and are, therefore, a more authentic form of expression compared to the culturally embedded sign, it also consequently suggested that some cultures are more authentic in their affective expressions than others. The study seems to conflate universality and authenticity with whiteness, as the American participants seemingly had more immediate access to their so-called authentic emotions than their Japanese counterparts, whose cultural “display rules” required them to mask their emotions. The study, therefore, folds itself into the problem it wanted to resolve in the first place, involving subjective processes of interpretation as it offers a normative mode of affective expression as a master signifier by which to read other cultural variations. In addition, the study also conforms to Orientalist structures of thought: does not Ekman’s findings rehearse the trope of the inscrutable oriental—mysterious, unfathomable, untrustworthy—as it affirms the idea that Westerners are more authentic and genuine?

The hierarchy of affects pressumed in Ekman's work and the idea of culturally specific "display rules" for non-Western emotional expression was taken up by Paul Griffiths, a philosopher interested in the philosophy of biology and emotions. In *What Emotions Really Are: The Problem of Psychological Categories,* a work that is "arguably the most influential book on the affects in recent times" (Leys 3), there is a very telling passage regarding the social construction of emotion:

> [The social role explanation] might be given of the syndrome found in a number of Southeast Asian societies and referred to as *amok.* This syndrome consists of indiscriminate attacks on others and usually culminates in the killing of the person who runs *amok*...He is acting out a social role, part of which is that he is not in control of his actions. It might be argued that a similar syndrome now exists in Western cultures. (Griffiths 141)

There are a few things I wish to highlight in Griffiths's telling example of socially constructed emotions. Whereas basic emotions or primary affects are universal, others are culturally specific and often located outside the West and Western epistemologies of emotion. And, whereas basic emotions are closer to being "authentic" as "signature facial expressions" properly synchronize with "autonomic nervous system processes (that is to say, nonvolitional facial and bodily responses), culturally specific emotions, following the "social role explanation," is acted out through a social discursive system of "display rules." Crucially, even the designation emotion or feeling seems to be reserved for only basic emotions and sometimes extends to what Paul Griffiths calls "higher cognitive emotions." Claire Hemmings has suggested that affect theory positions itself as a "privileged way out of the impasse in cultural theory" as it offers a ground for interpretation that is pre-linguistic and pre-cognitive. It appears, however, that only certain types of emotions deserve this recognition. Non-Western affects, legible primarily through culturally specific "display rules," are still subject to the unstable laws of signification.

This paper is in line with those affect scholars who have recently begun to examine the intrinsic whiteness and Eurocentrism that form the foundation of many of the field's central assumptions. Scholars such as Sneja Gunew have interrogated the emphasis on Western philosophical and psychological genealogies in affect theory. Claudia Garcia-Rojas has warned against what she terms "white affect studies" that has been constructed around the work of white male philosophers.

In a similar vein, Colin Patrick Ashley and Michelle Billies have contended that racial issues have been significantly underexplored in affect studies. These critical perspectives on affect theory highlights a growing awareness of the field's inherent biases and limitations. By challenging the assumed universality of Western emotional experiences, these scholars are pushing for a more capacious understanding of affect. The critique of "white affect studies" exposes how the field has often privileged Western philosophical and psychological traditions, potentially overlooking or misinterpreting affective experiences rooted in non-Western cultures and contexts. The call to address racial matters within affect studies represents a crucial step towards decolonizing the field.

It is not the aim of this paper to review and evaluate the long history of disagreement between universalists and culturalists over emotional expression. As a scholar of literary studies, I am concerned about how to address this hierarchy of emotion within the practice of literary interpretation. I would like to suggest that non-Western affects that often appear as "untranslatables," to use a concept by Emily Apter, function as a mode of interrogation of Western epistemologies of emotion (including its monolingual assumption). I suggest that these "untranslatables," which often appear in the ill-fitting suit of the vocabulary of basic emotions, but could be, quite aptly, *felt* as literary affects by particular interpretative communities. The feeling I speak of is one that I hope would be intuitively recognizable when reading post-colonial anglophone texts, a sense that certain emotions are not quite in harmony with the language used to designate them. This feeling arises from a discrepancy between the affects sedimented in literary form and the universalist language of emotion used to specify them, a misalignment between non-Western affects and the emotional signifiers provided by the colonizer's language. This dissonance, this untranslatability of certain affects, serves as a reminder of the persistent legacy of colonialism and the ongoing struggle to decolonize not only institutions but also the very ways in which we understand and express our inner lives.

Part of the reading strategy I propose is to seek out and highlight the inevitable failures of translation as a means to insist on the limits of Western epistemologies of emotion. It is an invitation, therefore, to commit what Wimsatt and Beardsley referred to as the "affective fallacy." Wimsatt and Beardsley were very aware that emotions are rather unruly and an obstacle to "objective criticism," an approach that solely respects the integrity of the ontological status of "the text itself"—that is to say, a "dispassionate, objective, cognition-based interpretation." Against the idea that to read affectively is to commit the error of "impressionism and relativism," I suggest that in some cases, it opposes the monolingual assumption of Wimsatt and Beardsley and gestures towards a decolonial linguistic pluralism that can only be, first and foremost, felt affectively. This felt sense is not the one that critics W.K Wimsatt and M.C. Beardsley refer to as "emotive import" (these critics argue that they do not even want to use the phrase "emotive meaning" since the word "meaning" should only be assigned to the cognitive or descriptive function of language) because this term "depends directly on descriptive meaning or descriptive suggestion." The thinking of Wimsatt and Beardsely about affect in literature is predicated on a monolingual assumption. The feeling I refer to, which in this paper I designate as archipelagic feeling, gestures towards a decolonial linguistic pluralism that is, first and foremost, felt affectively. This proposed approach endorses decolonial linguistic pluralism by recognizing and validating the diverse emotional experiences and expressions that exist beyond dominant Western frameworks.

In the following section, I try to sketch this mode of affective reading by analyzing a well-known Philippine short story in English.

A War of (Un) Translatability

"The classroom thus became the site for a kind of linguistic war or, better yet, a war of translation" (Rafael, Motherless 43).

In his highly anthologized "The Bread of Salt"— a story about a boy who frames his life through his romantic infatuation—Filipino writer and National Artist N.V.M. Gonzalez includes a revealing scene in a classroom. In the scene, the story's nameless fourteen-year-old narrator describes his reaction to a tale of unconventional romance by a canonical British writer, which is set in a time and a place very far removed from his own:

> In class I would not allow a lesson to pass unmastered. Our English teacher could put no question before us that did not already have a ready answer in my head. One day he read Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Sire de Maletroit's Door*, and we were so enthralled that our breath trembled. (Gonzalez 176)

Better than any answer he can give to a question his English teacher could pose, the best evidence the narrator could offer as proof of his mastery of the lesson is the supposed straightforward honesty of affect. To be affected by the story to the extent that his "breath trembled" confirms his thorough comprehension of an English text, for the intensity of affect that is sedimented in literary form registers itself on his body, suggesting a more thorough and genuine form of understanding. The idea here is one that has become a cornerstone argument for some proponents of the affective turn: that affect, as a pre-conscious, pre-linguistic intensity, evinces a truth that transcends the uncertainty of language games. The scene could be read as one that dramatizes the visceral logic of colonization (to pervert a phrase from Neetu Khanna). Not only has the narrator's mind been captured by colonial structures of thought, but his body, too, responds in tandem. Any suspicion of subversive slippages (or any Homi Bhabha-esque variant of linguistic subterfuge) is extinguished, for affect, written, as it were, on the body, is a supposedly more stable ground for interpretation.

There is, however, more than meets the eye in this scene--or, to use a more appropriately affect-oriented metaphor, more than it seems at first blush. When the narrator codifies affect, he goes only so far as to describe his physiological reaction and stops short of naming its corresponding emotion. He uses a seismic metaphor, "tremble," but leaves it to his readers to decipher that bodily response. This is what Wimsatt and Beardsley refer to as "emotive import"—a term which they prefer over "emotive meaning". What the use of the term "emotive import" also does is to construct a hierarchy of value that places the affective as secondary to the referential, for "emotive import depends directly on descriptive meaning" and sometimes even in "descriptive suggestion" (Wimsatt and Beardsley 35).

It is reasonable to say that if he was "enthralled" to the point that his "breath trembled" that it is suggestive of the affect of interest-excitement (following Silvan Tomkins's affect program). However, rather than a simple case of showing and not telling, I suggest that his omission exposes a tension between what we might refer to as universal primary affects/ basic emotions and culturally specific emotions, that is to say, what is also going on here is "a war of translation" (Rafael, *Motherless* 43), or perhaps more specifically, one of untranslatability. In the context of colonial education, where the narrator is asked to perform his mastery of English by describing his affective state, his performative inability to name the appropriate emotion is revelatory.

In suggesting that this ordinary scene in a Philippine classroom is a site of a translation war, I take my cue from Vicente Rafael, who pointed out that, in the backdrop of the "legacy of American colonial education," learning English necessarily meant the suppression of vernacular languages (Rafael, *Motherless* 43), which reflected how education served as an "adjunct to military operations" to speed up the pacification of Philippine colonial subjects (Rafael, Motherless 44). Thus, in flaunting his mastery of the English language, the nameless narrator also calls attention to the "aporia of translation" (to use another phrase from Rafael), an *aporia* that is, first and foremost, "felt"—that is to say, it registers itself affectively—that reveals that this monolingual narrative brimming with multilingualism.

Since I first read "The Bread of Salt" as a young boy, I have always associated that scene with a culturally specific emotion called *kilig*. Kilig is a culturally specific emotion that is difficult to translate into English. It describes the giddy, butterflies-in-your-stomach feeling one experiences when something romantic or whimsical occurs. I suggest that kilig, though not identified in the story, is present in the text as affect, despite its linguistic omission. It is, to use the words of the narrator himself, "a silence full of voices" that is not named but is present as affect sedimented in literary form.

Allow me to supply a bit more context. The young narrator wishes to excel in his studies and indeed cultivates the whole of his being (intellectually, physically, and even morally) to honor his beloved, a girl from an affluent family who, throughout, remains utterly oblivious to him and his desire. The above scene, therefore, must be considered in the context of his infatuation. Indeed, the narrator imagines substituting himself and his beloved for the characters of Stevensons's story: "…a benign old man…would also detain me in a secret room, and there daybreak would find me *thrilled* by the sudden certainty that I had won Aida's hand" (Gonzalez 176). In his reimagined version of the story, trembling breath has been translated to "thrilled" (an insufficient translation of *kilig*).

I am not simply reiterating the banal point that some words do not have direct English translations; rather, I underscore how culturally specific emotions register a "felt" presence as affect sedimented in literary form. I invoke Emily Apter's concept of "untranslatable" to designate those "culturally specific emotions" that are "felt" in postcolonial Anglophone texts but sadly appear in the ill-fitting dress that is the vocabulary of basic emotions and primary affects. While Apter deploys the "untranslatable" as a "deflationary gesture" against the "translatability assumption" of World Literature endeavors, in a similar fashion, I use it here to interrogate the same assumption in affect theory. I argue that it is important to emphasize the untranslatability of culturally specific emotions, considering that basic emotions and primary affects are often uncritically designated as pre-linguistic and universal, a universality that also depends on a "translatability assumption."

I designate this felt sense of layered affects in postcolonial texts as "archipelagic feelings," which are available to certain reading communities but resistant to the universalizing idiom of basic emotions and primary affects. The concept of the archipelago has been deployed in recent critical discourse to name a style of thought that privileges fluidity, multiplicity, and relationality, archipelagic thinking also represents a strong demand for what Édouard Glissant calls the "right to opacity," an ethical appeal to respect the integrity of the ineffable, irreducible, and untranslatable (189). In this paper, I resituate the concept of the archipelago from the exclusive domain of thought to the domain of feelings—that is to say, from archipelagic thinking to archipelagic feeling. Like archipelagic thinking, archipelagic feeling, I suggest, opposes epistemologies of emotion that are totalizing and hierarchical. The apparent hierarchy in affect research involves basic and culturally specific emotions.

Conclusion

As I conclude, it might be *apropos* to end with a discussion of the ending of "The Bread of Salt." Interestingly, the story ends with an event that involves a failure of translation, a failure that is "felt" by readers of the story, too. The narrator, a promising amateur violinist, and his musician friends were invited to play at a party held for Aida's visiting cousins. In a rare moment when the narrator is not acting out of his infatuation for Aida, he comments on the food at the party.

> The sight of so much silver and china confused me. There was more food before us than I had ever imagined. I searched in my mind for the names of the dishes but my ignorance appalled me. (Gonzalez 180)

This is when the narrator encounters what he refers to simply as "egg yolk things" (Gonzalez 181). In a moment of weakness, he stuffs his face with "this and that confection" and also "wrapped up a quantity of those egg-yolk things in several sheets of napkin paper" which he slips into his pocket. He did all this, unaware that Aida was observing him.

> "Have you eaten?"
>
> I turned around. It was Aida. My bow tie seemed to tighten around my collar. I mumbled something. I did not know what.
>
> "If you wait a little while till they've gone, I'll wrap up a big package for you, she added. (Gonzalez 180)

The narrator, who was particularly proud of his language and translation skills, is at a loss for words. He runs outside and dramatically flings into the darkness the "egg yolk things" contained in the "napkin balled up in [his] hand" (Gonzalez

181). Various commentators have noted that this story is really about a young man's realization of the immutable hierarchies of social class in the Philippines. But the story, I suggest, could also be read as a commentary on the hierarchies of emotional taxonomies. As he retreats, the narrator names the specific emotion he is experiencing: "I walked away to the nearest door, praying that the damask curtains might hide me in my shame" (Gonzalez 181). Shame, however, will not fully account for his incommensurate reaction to his perceived gluttonous crime. Again, readers attuned to archipelagic feelings would have sensed that another culturally specific emotion is at work here: *hiya*, which might overlap with but is not consubstantial to shame.

Commentators have pointed out that "The Bread of Salt" shares many similarities with James Joyce's "Araby." One of those similarities would be an ending that expresses emotions that are an incommensurate reaction to the event that triggered those feelings. Recall, the line from "Araby": Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger." For a certain reading community, that scene of "shame" also registers *hiya*, which has more explanatory force for the narrator's strong emotional response. In *Contracting Colonalism,* Vicente Rafael writes, "The worst thing one can say about a [Filipino] is that he or she is *walang hiya*…" (127). *Walang hiya:* to have no *hiya.* According to Lasquety-Reyes, to be *walang hiya* is when one violates socially approved norms of conduct yet is known or presumed to have an awareness of those norms, which could be extended to the exploitation of the generosity or kindness of others.

So, can Asians feel? Yes, and indeed much more than what Eurocentric epistemologies of emotion can recognize. This essay has thus proposed a model of affective reading guided by "archipelagic feelings" as a way to interrogate the universal and monolingual assumptions of affect theory. It is also a way to recognize those layered affects and emotions as "untranslatables," which is also a demand for the "right to opacity" that resists Eurocentric epistemologies of emotion. This model of affective reading aims to shift the tides of cultural understanding to resist the urge to map every emotional island onto a single, dominating continent of feeling.

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Theory of Causation and Principle of Irreduction: Nāgārjuna, Spinoza and Latour

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Abstract This article challenges the persistent East–West dichotomy in comparative philosophy by examining how Nāgārjuna (ancient India), Spinoza (early modern Europe), and Latour (contemporary France) each develop relational critiques of substantialist ontology. Despite distinct vocabularies and historical settings, all three reject the idea of self-subsistent substances and affirm causality as constitutive rather than external. Nāgārjuna negates the intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) of entities through the logic of *emptiness* (*śūnyatā*) and dependent origination. Spinoza reconceptualises substance and mode in a monist ontology, asserting that all finite things exist *in and through* others. Latour's principle of *irreduction* similarly denies ontological autonomy, showing that entities emerge through networks of translation. Using Latour's irreduction as a heuristic lens, the article identifies structural isomorphisms in these relational ontologies that transcend essentialist cultural divisions. This convergence not only enriches global philosophy but also offers resources for rethinking ecological and political crises. By undermining the substantialist and essentialist metaphysics of possession and identity, relational ontology opens possibilities for post-identitarian ethics grounded in mutual constitution and interdependence.

Keywords Nāgārjuna, Spinoza; Bruno Latour; anti-substantialist ontology; relational causality; comparative philosophy; global philosophy

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Introduction

Comparative philosophy has long been plagued by essentialist dichotomies that artificially separate "Western" and "Eastern" (or "Asian") philosophical traditions. This problematic binary categorization often reduces rich, complex philosophical traditions to monolithic entities, characterized by stereotypical traits: Western philosophy as rationalist, individualistic, and substance-oriented; Asian philosophy as holistic, relational, and process-oriented.[1] Such essentialist framings persist in academic databases, where categorizations like "Eastern thought" and "Western metaphysics" remain common organizing principles despite decades of scholarly critique.[2]

This paper contests such reductive categorizations by examining three philosophers from vastly different spatiotemporal contexts who articulate strikingly parallel critiques of substantialist thinking: Nāgārjuna from ancient India (c. 150 CE), Baruch Spinoza from early modern Europe (1632-1677), and Bruno Latour from contemporary France (1947-2022). I adopt a comparative methodology that neither assumes essential similarities between the thinkers nor treats their concepts as entirely incommensurable. Instead, it focuses on a shared philosophical problem—namely, the critique of substance-based metaphysics and the articulation of causality in non-substantialist terms—as the basis for comparison. I treat Latour's principle of irreduction as a heuristic lens to illuminate resonances among their critiques of ontological autonomy and intrinsic essence of discrete substances. The aim is not to claim doctrinal equivalence, but to identify structural isomorphisms in their relational ontologies. By attending to these isomorphisms through the concept of causality, this paper attempts to construct a philosophical dialogue across temporal and cultural boundaries without collapsing historical and conceptual differences.

The persistence of anti-substantialist thinking across these diverse contexts demonstrates that wherever substantialist, essentialist, and individualistic frameworks have dominated philosophical discourse, equally vigorous critiques have emerged in response. This pattern suggests not a simple "East-West" divide, but

1 See Van Norden, Bryan W. *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto*. New York: Columbia UP, 2017; and Angle, Stephen C. *Growing Moral: A Confucian Guide to Life*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2021.

2 See Chakrabarti, Arindam, and Ralph Weber. *Comparative Philosophy without Borders*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016; and Garfield, Jay L., and William Edelglass, editors. *The Oxford Handbook of World Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011.

rather a dynamic tension within global philosophical thought between substantialist ontologies and their relational alternatives. As Moeller and D'Ambrosio argue, the very notion of culturally distinct philosophical "worlds" (Eastern vs. Western) is itself a product of substantialist thinking that reifies dynamic traditions into fixed, self-contained entities.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, I elaborate Latour's principle of irreduction as a theoretical framework that will guide our comparative analysis. Then, I examine Spinoza's concept of relational causality, showing how his critique of Cartesian substance theory leads to a thoroughly relational metaphysics. Next, I explore Nāgārjuna's theory of causation through his fourfold negation and concept of emptiness (śūnyatā). Throughout, I emphasize that their convergent critiques of substantialism suggest that this philosophical move transcends cultural boundaries—not by ignoring historical or cultural differences, but by revealing how distinct traditions independently challenge metaphysical frameworks that isolate entities from their relations. In this sense, "cultural boundaries" refer to the conventional divisions between so-called "Western" and "Eastern" philosophical worlds, which these thinkers resist by advancing relational ontologies. Ultimately, this convergence not only offers a more interconnected and non-essentialist vision of global philosophy, but also provides conceptual resources for addressing contemporary crises—especially those rooted in metaphysical assumptions of autonomy, mastery, and ecological separation.

Theoretical Framework: Latour's Principle of Irreduction

Let me begin with Bruno Latour's principle of irreduction, which will serve as our theoretical framework. What is "irreduction"? Latour introduced this concept in his book *The Pasteurization of France*, in its intriguing second part, titled "Irreductions," which appears to be quite independent from the first part's historical analysis of pasteurization.

The principle begins with this fundamental statement: "1.1.1 Nothing is, by itself, either reducible or irreducible to anything else" (Latour, *Pasteurization* 158). This double negation appears repeatedly throughout the text: "Nothing is, by itself, the same as or different from anything else" (162), "There are neither wholes nor parts" (163). Through these double negations, Latour articulates a crucial insight about existence and determination, which he explicitly states: "Nothing is by itself ordered or disordered, unique or multiple, homogeneous or heterogeneous, fluid or inert, human or inhuman, useful or useless. Never by itself, but always by others" (160, emphasis mine).

From this perspective, Latour places ideas, humans, and inanimate objects on the same ontological plane. Nothing is more real than anything else based on essence or substance. There is no privileged position in reality, no hierarchical layers of being that would indicate greater or lesser degrees of reality. This means there is no unchanging core or essence at the bottom of being that would grant identity to each thing—which has been variously called "substance," "substrate," or "form."

Latour provides a scathing critique of various forms of reduction:

> A Christian loves a God who is capable of reducing the world to himself because he created it. [...] A philosopher hopes to find the radical foundation which makes all the rest epiphenomenal. A Hegelian wishes to squeeze from events something already inherent in them. A Kantian reduces things to grains of dust and then reassembles them with synthetic a priori judgments that are as fecund as a mule. [...] A Westerner never tires of shrinking the evolution of species and empires to Cleopatra's nose, Achilles' heel, and Nelson's blind eye. A writer tries to recreate daily life and imitate nature. A painter is obsessed by the desire to render feelings into colors. [...] A man likes to use the term 'he' in place of humanity. (Latour, *Pasteurization* 162-163)

The most common form of reduction we do daily is "naming"—the reduction of complex causal networks into noun-substances. When we say "this 'water bottle' is on the 'desk'," are we really capturing the reality of what's happening? Like when "I" drove my "car" here today and sat on this "chair." Can these situations really be expressed as connections between such noun-substances?

This skepticism toward substantialization connects to the concept of "black box". Developed most famously in *Pandora's Hope*, Latour's concept of the blackboxing describes how scientific facts or technological devices, once stabilized through complex networks of practices, are treated as self-evident and no longer interrogated. A black box, in this sense, is not merely a physical container but a conceptual one: it renders invisible the heterogeneous processes—social, technical, historical—that made it possible. As Latour explains, "when a machine runs efficiently, when a matter of fact is settled, one need focus only on its inputs and outputs and not on its internal complexity" (Latour, *Pandora* 304). The more successful a scientific fact or artifact becomes, the more opaque its inner workings appear. Latour extends this insight to include not just machines and scientific models, but also everyday objects, persons, and even philosophical concepts, suggesting that much of reality is composed of such black-boxed entities.

From an ontological perspective, black boxing functions as a form of abstraction that hides the dense relational networks through which an entity acquires identity and stability. In this light, even the most mundane expressions—"this water bottle is on the desk"—already involve black-boxed assumptions about what "bottle," "desk," and "on" mean. Such expressions gloss over the relational processes, material conditions, and historical networks that sustain the intelligibility of these objects. Latour's principle of irreduction invites us to reopen these black boxes, to trace the chains of associations that were hidden for the sake of stability. Doing so reveals that no object—no "thing"—exists in isolation or possesses an essential identity apart from its networks of relations and translations.

Yet there are heretics of irreductionism. Graham Harman and other proponents of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) adopt only the first half of Latour's principle: that "nothing is reducible to anything else." They ignore the second and equally vital clause: "nothing is, by itself, irreducible to anything else". In doing so, OOO ends up reinstating the very metaphysical isolation that Latour's relational ontology aimed to overcome. Harman's metaphysics grants each object a withdrawn, inaccessible core—an irreducible essence that exists independently of all relations. This position leads to a "flat ontology" in which all entities, from electrons to novels, are said to be equally real and equally withdrawn (Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology* 55–58). I would rather call this move an 'ontological identity politics'—a metaphysical stance that treats each object as a self-subsistent entity deserving respect on account of its uniqueness and opacity. What emerges is a peculiar inversion of possessive individualism of the Western liberalism: not liberal subjects claiming autonomy, but objects claiming ontological sovereignty.

In its rejection of relationality, OOO undermines the very conditions for interaction and transformation. Harman's notion of "vicarious causation" attempts to salvage causality by suggesting that objects relate only indirectly through translation, yet offers no account of how change can occur without positing some transcendent or spontaneous principle. As such, the framework risks slipping back into a kind of neo-occasionalism or covert creationism—an issue Harman himself anxiously acknowledges but does not resolve. In contrast, Latour's irreduction affirms that all entities emerge in and through relations, that translation is not deferral but composition. "Nothing is, by itself, the same as or different from anything else. That is, there are no equivalents, only translations (In other words, everything happens only once, and at one place)" (Latour, *Pasteurization* 162). There is nothing beyond translation. Everything is relational. OOO's selective reading of the principle irreduction thus exemplifies how anti-humanist metaphysics can relapse into essentialist ontologies under a different guise.

Through this relationalism, Latour rejects two opposing views of causality: 1) the view that sees everything as "necessary" and 2) the views that attempt to introduce contingent elements in various ways to counter such deterministic thinking. For these are merely two extremes debating within the principle of reduction to substances or relationships between substances, not the principle of irreduction. In other words, Latour rejects both the perspective that posits mechanistic causal relationships between self-subsistent atoms or objects (as in Newtonian physics) and the view that contingent moments intervene in these causal relationships:

> 'Everything is necessary' and 'everything is contingent' mean the same thing—that is nothing. The words 'necessary' or 'contingent' gain meaning only when they are used in the heat of the moment to describe gradients of resistance—that is, reality. The length of Cleopatra's nose is neither significant nor insignificant. Circumstances determine, for a time, the relative importance of whatever it is that makes them up. Chance and necessity can not be allocated their roles in advance. (Latour 161)

In other words, in a world where everything happens only once and is neither difference nor identity, causality must be simultaneous and interdependent (or, to adapt Karen Barad's terminology, intra-dependent).

In his final masterpiece *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence*, Latour contrasts being-as-being with being-as-other: "from being-as-being we can deduce only one type of being about which we might speak in several ways, whereas we are going to try to define [from being-as-other] how many other forms of alterities a being is capable of traversing in order to continue to exist" (Latour, *Inquiry* 163). Therefore, this "water bottle" and "desk" are not water-bottle-as-water-bottle or desk-as-desk. These are things that are constantly passing through causal relations, that is, translating and being translated, and have never once been simply a "water bottle" or a "desk."

Spinoza's Relational Causality

Turning our attention to the 17th century, we can explore how Spinoza's conception of causality harmonizes with Latour's principle of irreduction. Spinoza developed his relational metaphysics through a critical engagement with Cartesian substantialism, which itself had incorporated and transformed elements of Aristotelian substance theory. His philosophical framework constitutes a fundamental challenge to Descartes' positions, specifically rejecting both the methodological skepticism culminating in the thinking self ("cogito ergo sum") and the pluralistic view that reality comprises numerous mental and material substances that we perceive as distinctly separate entities.

In the Aristotelian tradition, 'substance' functioned primarily as the grammatical subject in propositional statements. Throughout his *Categories*, Aristotle characterizes substance as "that which, […] most strictly, primarily, and most of all, […] is neither said of a subject nor in a subject," illustrating this with examples like "the individual man or the individual horse" (2a11). Within this framework, all non-substantial entities exist only in relation to substance—either as qualities inherent 'in a substance' or as predicates 'said of a substance.' This leads Aristotle to conclude that "if primary substances did not exist it would be impossible for any of the other things to exist" (2a34). The resulting ontological system presupposes subjects as fundamental entities to which attributes or modes are ascribed as predicates.

Descartes articulates a definition of substance in Part I of the *Principles of Philosophy* describing it as "a thing which exists in such a way that it needs no other thing in order to exist"—though he restricts this full meaning exclusively to God (Descartes 22). Beyond this absolute substance, he acknowledges created substances that require only divine "participation" to maintain their existence (23). Each substance manifests itself through characteristic attributes—thought for mental substances, extension for physical ones. Crucially, Descartes insists that distinct substances yield numerical distinction, but this creates a fundamental inconsistency in his system. Deleuze penetrates to the heart of this contradiction:

> A second difficulty concerns real distinction considered alone. It is, no less than the other forms, a datum of representation. Two things are really distinct if one can conceive one of them clearly and distinctly while excluding everything belonging to the concept of the other. So that Descartes explains the criterion of real distinction to Arnauld as the completeness of the idea alone. [...] Real distinction does not contain within it the ground of things differing, but this ground is furnished by the external and transcendent divine causality that creates substances conformably to our manner of conceiving them as possible. Here [...] God as creator effects our passage from substances conceived as really distinct to really distinct substances. Real distinction, whether between substances with different attributes or those with the same attribute, brings with

> it a division of things, that is, a corresponding numerical distinction. (Deleuze 30-31)

Deleuze's critique highlights a profound epistemological problem: What justifies our perception of everyday objects—such as a cup and desk—as ontologically distinct entities? When we examine the Cartesian position carefully, we find it rests upon two questionable foundations: the subjective certainty that we perceive them clearly as separate, and the theological assertion that divine truthfulness guarantees the accuracy of such perceptions. Beyond these contentious premises, the Cartesian framework provides no substantive basis for affirming the distinct substantiality of ordinary objects.

Spinoza's response to these difficulties involves a radical reconceptualization of substance. He rejects the Cartesian view that positions individual entities as substantially distinct from one another and frames the human mind as the privileged subject of knowledge. Instead, Spinoza advances a monistic ontology wherein only one self-causing substance exists—which he identifies as "God or Nature"—with all particular entities constituting mere modifications or modes of this singular substance. This relationship between unitary "substance" and its diverse "modes" is articulated through his concise formulations of "in itself" and "in another":

> By substance I understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, that is, that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing, from which it must be formed (E1Def3).[1]
>
> By mode I understand the modifications of substance, or that which is in another and is conceived through another. (E1Def5)

Spinoza's deceptively simple definitions thus launch a profound philosophical transformation, generating an anti-substantialist ontology that fundamentally

1 For citations of Spinoza's works, I depart from the journal's standard citation format and instead adopt the conventional citation method used in Spinoza scholarship. Translations of Spinoza's text are from Curley's *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vols. 1 & 2. When necessary, I have directly amended Curley's text without specific mention, referring to the Latin text (Gebhardt, 1925). I have used the following method in referring to the *Ethics*: the first Arabic number following E (*Ethics*) identifies the part of the Book, the letters after that specify whether a proposition (P), definition (Def.), or axiom (Ax.) is intended. The number after these letters tells which proposition, definition, or axiom is referred to. If these numbers are followed by letters, then S means scholium and C corollary. For example, E2P8C refers to the corollary of the eighth proposition of the second part of the *Ethics*.

departs from preceding traditions. According to this perspective, substance exists not as an underlying substratum containing attributes and modes, but rather as the dynamic process of existing itself—expressing through infinite attributes like extension (manifested as motion and rest) and thought, and producing an infinity of modes (Gueroult 49). This ontological revolution dissolves the traditional hierarchy between substances and their modifications, eliminating the categorical distinction between what had previously been classified as qualities or movements (modes) and the supposedly independent entities (substances) to which they belonged. In Spinoza's system, numerical distinctions between finite things no longer represent substantial or real distinctions. The differentiation between entities cannot be grounded in any intrinsic essence or form supposedly residing within each thing.

What form does causality take in this ontology where nature consists of modes instead of substances? Spinoza presents his understanding of causation at the very beginning of the *Ethics* as an axiom: "The knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of its cause" (E1Ax4). He employs this Axiom 4 to prove that "one substance cannot be produced by another substance" (E1P6C). Again, for Spinoza, similar to other substantialist traditions, "substance" is that which "exists in itself and is conceived through itself." Therefore, if a substance could be produced by something else, it might have to, according to the axiom, depend on the concept of anything else—creating a contradiction. Here, Spinoza seems to align with Object-Oriented Ontology in arguing that causal relations cannot operate between substances. However, his solution takes an entirely opposite direction.

Intriguingly, Spinoza applies this axiom to prove his famous "parallelism" in Part II of the *Ethics*, namely that "the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things" (E2P7). The proof of this proposition contains nothing but this axiom 4 ("The knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of its cause"). Following this parallelism, we might reverse-read the axiom of causality as "the effect depends on and involves its cause" (let's call this Axiom 4-parallel). At this point, some might still feel relatively close to the everyday notion of causality, that is, causal relations between substances. However, when we then consider the contrapositive of Axiom 4, which must be equally true as it, we encounter the uniqueness of Spinoza's theory of causation: "If the knowledge of an effect neither involves nor depends on the knowledge of its cause, then it is not knowledge of the effect." Why is this striking? Because it makes it impossible to explain causal relations using names.

Let's take an everyday example: "The cake became sweet because sugar was added." Applying Axiom 4-parallel, "the sweetness of the cake" (or "the sweet cake") must depend on and involve "the adding of sugar" (or "the added sugar"). But look at this sentence again: the concept of "sweet cake" neither involves nor depends on the concept of "added sugar." The sweet cake is simply conceptualized as a sweet cake, and the adding of sugar is simply conceptualized as adding sugar. When "sweet cake" and "adding sugar" are considered as such independent concepts—that is, when the concept of sweet cake neither depends on nor includes the concept of added sugar—these concepts can no longer represent a cause-effect relationship for Spinoza. And according to the parallelism (E2P7), "adding sugar" ceases to be the cause of "sweet cake." The sweet cake is a substance called "the sweet cake," and the sugar is a substance called "the sugar." As mentioned earlier, "one substance cannot be produced by another" (E1P6C).

This is precisely why Spinoza rejects the world of Aristotle and Descartes, composed of innumerable finite substances. Insofar as substances are substances, they cannot be causes and effects of each other. Spinoza's perspective demonstrates that the interdependency (or as mentioned earlier, "intra-dependency") between cause and effect is essential not only for explaining the becomings in nature we live but also for understanding things' individuality, identity, and difference. An effect cannot exist without its cause, and likewise, a cause loses its existence without its effect. This presents a view distinctly different from the common understanding of causality that sees it as causal relations between substances. Substances cannot have causal relations with each other. Therefore, there are no substances in the world. This is precisely the world composed only of what Spinoza calls modifications or "modes"—things that "exist in another and are conceived through another." Even if we conveniently refer to things using nouns such as names, these things do not exist as substances outside those words. Ontologically, they can only appear as something under the causal relation of affecting/being affected. It is not difficult to recognize its resonance with Latour's opening statement in "Irreductions": "Nothing is, by itself, either reducible or irreducible to anything else" (Latour, *Pasteurization* 158).

All subsequent propositions in the *Ethics* and the discussions of individuality, body, mind, emotion, social contract, intuitive knowledge, and beatitude can only be adequately understood on the basis of this anti-substantialism. In particular, nothing could be more anti-Spinozistic than understanding Spinoza's ethics as a substantialized "I" possessing "my conatus" and "my power," aiming to "expand my power." Moreover, readings that simply replace this "I" with "thing" and understand things' power and conatus in a vitalist way (for example, Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*) also misinterpret Spinoza.

Nāgārjuna's Theory of Causation (or Emptiness of Causation)

Let us now journey back to ancient India. Buddhism is generally known for its dedication to the principle of causation, most clearly expressed in the formula of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*). The most concise statement regarding dependent origination is formulated in early texts such as the *Nikāyas* as: "When this arises, that arises. When this is absent, that is absent." In the general Buddhist worldview, every action (*karma*) necessarily brings about its consequences (*vipāka*), establishing the fundamental basis for understanding how suffering perpetuates itself through successive lives. However, Buddhist theories of causation never understand "this" and "that," or "action" and "consequence," in substantialist terms. Another doctrine universally accepted by all Buddhist schools is "anatman" (non-self)—the teaching that there is no unchanging substance or "self" (*ātman*). Nāgārjuna offers the most radical interpretation of these Buddhist positions by unifying the theory of causation and the doctrine of non-self into a single, integrated teaching through his concept of emptiness (śūnyatā). His *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* demonstrates an even more radical anti-substantialist position than Spinoza's theory of causation. That is, one must negate the substantiality of the relational categories themselves—what we call "cause" and "effect"—in order to understand the Buddha's teaching of dependent origination.

The exact historical context in which Nāgārjuna (estimated to have lived around the 2nd century CE) developed his philosophy remains somewhat unclear. While we cannot definitively identify all the specific schools or philosophers he directly engaged with, we can discern the broad intellectual landscape against which his radical critique of substantialism emerged.

Nāgārjuna's primary concern was challenging what he saw as substantialist tendencies within Buddhist traditions themselves. The Sarvāstivāda school—likely the most influential Buddhist philosophical system of his time—asserted the real existence of all dharmas (elements of existence) across past, present, and future, maintaining that while phenomena are momentary, their intrinsic nature (svabhāva) endures. They reconciled this with the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence by distinguishing between a dharma's existence and its causal efficacy, claiming only present dharmas have causal power. The Sautrāntika school, though emerging around Nāgārjuna's time, opposed this strong substantialism, asserting only present dharmas exist, but still maintained certain substantialist elements through affirming the substantiality of momentarily existing dharmas.

Beyond Buddhist traditions, Nāgārjuna's critique also implicitly addressed non-

Buddhist Indian philosophical systems. The Vaiśeṣika-Nyāya schools exemplified substantialist atomism, categorizing reality into substances, qualities, actions, universals, particulars, and inherence—all having objective existence independent of perception. Their theory of causation (*asatkāryavāda*) held that effects are newly produced by causes rather than pre-existing within them. The Sāṃkhya school presented a dualistic metaphysics dividing reality into consciousness (puruṣa) and primordial materiality (prakṛti), maintaining a causal theory (satkāryavāda) where effects pre-exist in their causes.

Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (MMK, "Song of The Middle Way") attacks the foundational concepts of these various substantialist positions—both Buddhist and non-Buddhist—by demonstrating the logical impossibilities that arise when entities are conceived as having self-existence (*svabhāva*). His radical interpretation of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) as emptiness (*śūnyatā*) was aimed at purifying the Buddha's teaching from substantialist distortions. This clarifies why his causal analysis begins with the systematic negation of all possible substantialist accounts of causation, establishing the foundation for his revolutionary philosophy of the Middle Way.

Nāgārjuna's MMK defines the doctrine of dependent origination taught by the Buddha through a series of double negations reminiscent of Latour's principle of irreduction: "[...] the doctrine of dependent origination, according to which there is neither cessation nor origination, neither annihilation nor the eternal, neither singularity nor plurality, neither the coming nor the going [...]" (MMK Dedicatory Verse).[1] Moving to his treatment of causation specifically, in the first chapter of MMK, Nāgārjuna begins with a striking quadruple negation, which will be our focus:

> Not from itself, not from another, not from both, nor without cause: Never in any way is there any existing thing that has arisen. (MMK 1.1)

This systematic negation of four possible types of causation sets the foundation for his critique of substantialist thinking about causation.

The first negation—"not from itself"—primarily targets the Sāṃkhya school's theory of self-causation, which claims that effects pre-exist in their causes. If

1 For citations of Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (MMK), I have provided my own translations and follow the conventional citation method in Buddhist philosophical scholarship, indicating chapter and verse numbers after "MMK." For example, "MMK 1.1" refers to Chapter 1, Verse 1 of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*.

something could arise from itself, Nāgārjuna argues, this would lead to an infinite regress of the same thing perpetually reproducing itself. Moreover, if the effect already exists in the cause, what need is there for it to arise again? This critique reveals the logical impossibility of genuine self-causation. This critique could also be applied to the concept of form (*eidos*) or formal cause, which is central to Western substantialist philosophy after Aristotle.

The second negation—"not from another"—challenges the common-sense view that things arise from other, separate things. This seems to contradict our everyday experience, where we constantly observe things appearing to cause other things. However, Nāgārjuna's point is subtle: if things had their own independent, intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*), they could not interact causally with other things that also have their own independent nature. True otherness would preclude any causal relationship, much as Spinoza would later argue that "one substance cannot be produced by another substance" (E1P6C).

The third negation—"not from both"—dismisses the possibility that things could arise from a combination of self-causation and other-causation. This combination would simply combine the logical problems of both previous positions. More fundamentally, it would create an internal contradiction: how could something be simultaneously self-caused and caused by another?

Finally, "nor without cause" rejects the possibility of completely random or uncaused arising, which could be also called "contingency." Like all Buddhist philosophers and most ancient Indian schools, Nāgārjuna here seems to agree with Spinoza's statement that "From a given determinate cause an effect follows necessarily, and conversely, if there is no determinate cause, it is impossible for an effect to follow" (Spinoza, E1A3).

This completes Nāgārjuna's systematic dismantling of all possible substantialist accounts of causation. The conclusion is not that causation doesn't exist, as the fourth negation clearly shows, but rather that it cannot be understood in terms of substances with independent existence (or intrinsic nature, *svabhāva*). What Nāgārjuna is pointing to here is the nihilistic dead end we encounter when we cling to substantialist notions of causation: "For the intrinsic nature of existents does not exist in the conditions, [causes,] etc. The intrinsic nature not occurring, neither is extrinsic nature found" (MMK 1.2).

Instead, causation can only be understood in terms of radical interdependence (*pratītyasamutpāda*), where no entity possesses independent existence but arises in dependence upon conditions. The world consists of causes and effects. However, simultaneously, nothing can be substantialized as either "cause" and "effect," or as "something that is a cause" and "something that is an effect"—whether by itself or by another. This is because nothing exists outside of the mutual dependence, or more radically, intra-dependence of cause and effect. Nāgārjuna termed this non-substantialist theory of causation *śūnyatā* (emptiness). And as the *Heart Sutra* famously declares: "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form" (rūpaṃ śūnyatā śūnyataiva rūpam; 色即是空 空即是色). Paradoxically, it is precisely because there are no substances in the world that thorough causal relations can operate.

Conclusion

This comparative analysis of Nāgārjuna, Spinoza, and Latour reveals a striking isomorphism in their critiques of substantialist ontology despite vast differences in historical context, cultural background, and philosophical vocabulary. Each thinker, in his own distinctive idiom, arrives at the fundamental insight that entities cannot be understood as self-subsistent substances but must be conceptualized through their causal interconnections. Nāgārjuna's principle of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) articulates this through his doctrine of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), demonstrating that nothing possesses intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) precisely because everything arises in dependence upon conditions. Spinoza's relational metaphysics reframes this through his reconceptualization of substance and mode, establishing that finite entities exist not *in themselves* but *in and through another* (*in alio*). Latour's principle of irreduction affirms the same through his dialectical axiom that "nothing is, by itself, either reducible or irreducible to anything else," emphasising that entities emerge only through translation and negotiation within ever-shifting networks of relations.

What emerges from this dialogue is not merely a negative critique of substantialism, but a positive ontological orientation: reality as fundamentally relational, constituted not by isolated essences but by co-emergent patterns of causation. This relational ontology calls into question any philosophical framework grounded on possession, autonomy, or fixed identity—be it of subjects, cultures, or things. In this sense, the convergence of these three trajectories—spanning ancient India, early modern Europe, and contemporary thought—reveals a recurring thread in the history of philosophy: a sustained critique of the idea that beings exist independently and possess intrinsic essences. This critique arises in diverse traditions not because of shared cultural origins, but because they each confront the problems generated by metaphysical systems that isolate entities from their relations. Rather than relying on essentialist sameness, this comparison illuminates how distinct philosophical traditions have, in their own contexts, developed relational ontologies that challenge the logic of separation and self-sufficiency. As such, this comparative study contributes not only to the philosophical understanding of relational ontology but also to the practice of global philosophy by unsettling the East–West dichotomy and offering a model for productive cross-cultural philosophising. Rather than reducing traditions to their presumed cultural essences, it foregrounds shared conceptual challenges and resonant solutions, thereby opening space for more generative and interconnected histories of thought.

The enduring resonance of these relational ontologies suggests that their insights are not confined to the past; rather, they offer vital resources for rethinking the crises of the present. By undermining the metaphysical foundations of possessive individualism and categorical difference, anti-substantialist ontology offers the ground for post-identitarian political imaginaries, where ethical and collective relations are not structured around fixed essences but around processes of mutual constitution. Such a relational understanding of causality and being opens new possibilities for addressing the ecological crisis—not merely as a scientific or policy problem, but as a symptom of deeper ontological assumptions about separation, mastery, and autonomy. The world imagined by Nāgārjuna, Spinoza, and Latour is one in which beings are never by themselves, but always in and through others. In that sense, their shared vision invites us to reconceive ecological entanglement not as a burden to be managed, but as the very condition of reality to be affirmed and lived through.

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Theorizing the Selves: Hip-Hop and Subjectivity among Ambonese Youth

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Abstract Theorizing the island as a landscape within the humanities requires empirical engagement to foster a dialogue between established theoretical frameworks and the lived realities of the communities being studied. The concept of "the Selves and the Others," long developed by Western theorists, provides a useful foundation for examining identity dynamics. However, empirical realities contribute significantly to academic debates by revealing internal contestations within "the Selves" rather than solely positioning them in opposition to "the Others." This study explores how such contestations manifest within Ambonese identity, particularly through the lens of Hip-Hop. As a popular art form among Ambonese youth, Hip-Hop serves as a point of departure for understanding these internal negotiations. This study employs the vignette method, drawing from interviews with Ambonese Hip-Hop artists. While some artists embrace uplifting and energetic tones to counter adversity, others adopt melancholic expressions. Traditional Ambonese pop music is predominantly melancholic, centering on themes of longing and love. However, contemporary Ambonese youth have gravitated towards Hip-Hop as a genre that articulates their identity in a distinct manner. This shift signifies a conscious departure from the melancholic themes of previous generations, positioning Hip-Hop as a vehicle for self-expression, resistance, and liberation from entrenched narratives of trauma and sorrow.

Keywords Hip-Hop; island studies; Ambon; selves; youth

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Introduction

Islands serve as entities that simultaneously represent disparities, exploitation, and injustices between the center and the periphery, as well as struggles and agency. In Indonesia, the term "island" in everyday usage typically refers to small islands separate from larger landmasses. While Indonesia is an archipelago comprising both large and small islands, in the Indonesian context, individuals from major islands rarely use the term "island" when describing their place of origin. Formally, people may refer to "the island of Java," "the island of Sumatra," or "the island of Kalimantan." However, they seldom recognize that they inhabit or originate from an island. Even Papua, the easternmost large island of Indonesia, is almost never referred to as "the island of Papua." Papuans themselves rarely use this designation, instead referring to it as "the land of Papua." Indonesians are more accustomed to conceptualizing their geography through terms such as *tanah air* (land and water), *gunung dan laut* (mountains and sea), *desa dan pantai* (villages and coasts), or *kota dan pinggiran* (cities and suburbs). Among the most commonly used terms reflecting Indonesia's maritime nature is *pantai* (coast). This term often functions as an independent entity without direct reference to an island. For example, *Pantura*

(*Pantai Utara* or "North Coast") refers to the northern coastal region of Java, yet it is never associated with the term "island." People from Pantura identify as coastal inhabitants rather than islanders. Their attachment to Java as *tanah* (land)—reinforced by the phrase *Tanah Jawa* (the land of Java)—is far more pronounced than any identification as part of an island. These naming conventions reflect perspectives shaped by dominant cultural centers, particularly those who do not reside on smaller islands. The discourse surrounding islands, therefore, underscores their marginalization within Indonesia's geographical, geopolitical, geocultural, and geosocial frameworks.

This paradox is particularly striking given Indonesia's reputation as an archipelagic nation. The following descriptions are commonly used in geography textbooks, government promotions, and tourism campaigns to define Indonesia's identity: Indonesia is portrayed as the world's largest archipelagic state, comprising 17,580 islands and spanning 1,004,569 km^2. It is also recognized as the country with the sixth-highest number of islands globally. Another name for Indonesia is *Nusantara*, meaning "*nusa antara*" or "islands in between." Geographically, Indonesia is situated between two continents—Asia and Oceania—and two oceans—the Pacific and the Indian (Conrad; Mackinnon). Meanwhile, Indonesia's land area is recorded at 1,919,440 km^2, while its maritime territory covers 3,273,810 km^2, indicating that the majority of Indonesia's territory consists of ocean.

Maritime Identity

From a geopolitical, geostrategic, and common discourse perspective, pride in Indonesia's maritime identity and its thousands of islands is deeply embedded in national narratives. This pride is reinforced through educational materials from elementary school to university curricula and is reflected in broader national discourse. Songs such as *Nenek Moyangku Seorang Pelaut* ("My Ancestors Were Sailors") are widely sung by kindergarten and elementary school children. However, this maritime pride often remains superficial—an abstract national rhetoric rather than an ingrained mindset in everyday life. In practice, islands do not feature prominently in the consciousness of most Indonesians.

This is evident in how islanders are perceived and how they perceive themselves. People from small islands consistently identify as islanders. The Ambonese, for example, explicitly recognize their islander identity, stating, *kami orang pulau* ("we are islanders"). At the same time, they are acutely aware of their marginalization across various dimensions—economic, political, social, and cultural—largely due to the dominance of majority cultures, such as the Javanese and Sumatranese. This dominance has resulted in multiple, and often conflicting, definitions of what it means to be an islander.

This situation of conflicting definitions is closely tied to the New Order era (1968–1998) under President Suharto, a Javanese leader who positioned Java as the center while relegating regions outside the island to the periphery. A rigid hierarchical structure was established, in which the Self was centralized in Java, while the Others referred to those beyond it. The term *wong sabrang* (literally, "people from across the sea") illustrates this dichotomy, reinforcing Java as the center ("the Self") and those outside the island, including island communities, as "the Others."

Within the islands themselves, however, internal complexities emerge arising from the intersection of ethnicity, generation (age), religion, social class, and other overlapping social categories. Ambon, the research site for this study, reflects these layers of complexity, having experienced conflict driven by contestations over religion, ethnicity, and social class. However, these contestations are not static; they continue to evolve, giving rise to new forms of internal negotiation. Among these is an intergenerational dynamic that, while not necessarily manifesting as overt conflict, challenges established discourses shaped by previous generations.

The study of islands intersects with geography, geopolitics, economic inequality, and regional development disparities, among other issues. Theorizing island studies requires a broad range of empirical experiences. Empirical inquiry, combined with internal critique, plays a crucial role in advancing critical island studies. While many scholars focus on how islanders are constructed as "others" from a Western perspective, theorizing the internal selves offers a strategic approach to developing island studies. However, these selves are highly heterogeneous, necessitating internal critique and self-reflection.

In that regard, this study generally employs the vignette methodology, which uses language as an entry point to understand specific social phenomena. Language serves as a tool to examine human cognition, as reflected in the way people express themselves. The research involved interviews with 22 artists in Ambon, particularly those engaged in Hip-Hop, conducted between 2023 and 2024. According to Finch (105), a vignette is "a short story about hypothetical characters in specified circumstances, to whose situation the interviewee is invited to respond." This short scenario format presents an individual's story, which serves as a reference point for analyzing perceptions, beliefs, or attitudes (Hughes 381). A key aspect of this method is examining how these narratives are presented, how the collected data is structured, and how informants' responses are incorporated into the study's findings.

The research process using this method consists of three main steps. First, the collected data is interpreted to explore the informants' situational contexts. Second, clarifications are made, particularly regarding the dilemmas they face. Third, discussions are conducted on sensitive experiences, especially in relation to information shared by other informants.

Selves and Others

The discourse on the self (the selves) and the other(s) has been a central theme in international academic scholarship. Thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus have extensively examined the concept of *l'autrui* (the other) within their existentialist frameworks. Sartre, in particular, positions *l'autrui* as a fundamental element of existentialist philosophy, asserting that human relationships are inherently inescapable (Murdoch). However, within these relationships, individuals are inevitably positioned as either subjects or objects. This subject-object dynamic is marked by an ongoing conflict, as one's existence is constantly defined in opposition to the other (Kaufmann). The notion of *being* is central to existentialist thought, with concepts such as *être en soi* (being-in-itself), *être pour soi* (being-for-itself), and *être pour l'autrui* (being-for-the-other) forming the foundation of how existentialists, including Sartre and Camus, conceptualize the self in relation to the other.

One of the most significant existentialist contributions to the discussion of *l'autrui* comes from feminist existentialist Simone de Beauvoir. In her seminal work *Le Deuxième Sexe* (*The Second Sex*) published in 1959, which profoundly influenced the Second Wave Feminist Movement in the post-World War II era, Beauvoir critically examines the hierarchical construction of the self and the other. According to Beauvoir, women exist as *l'autrui*—the second sex—often occupying a marginalized position in social structures. They are relegated to second-class status beneath men, who are granted the privileged position of the self (Udasmoro).

A second group of theorists examining the subject-object relationship, with a stronger focus on the concept of the Other, emerges from psychoanalytic thought—most notably Jacques Lacan and his followers, including Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous. Lacan ("The Signification of the Phallus"; "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious") elaborates on the theory of the Other by distinguishing *the Other* (with a capital O), which he associates with two crucial dimensions: the Symbolic and the Real. Additionally, Lacan identifies a dimension of *the Real* within Otherness, which is intricately connected to love and psychosis— what he describes as an unknowable "x." The Real is the *intelligible form of the horizon of truth* within the *field of objects* that has been disclosed (Johnston).

Among Lacan's followers, Julia Kristeva, a French feminist of Bulgarian descent, introduces the concept of *abjection*, which describes subjects structurally degraded due to their very existence. In *Le Pouvoir de l'Horreur* (*Powers of Horror*), Kristeva (Kristeva) associates abjection with human reactions of horror and revulsion— such as vomiting—manifested when individuals are excluded because of their identity. Meanwhile, Hélène Cixous, a French philosopher of Greek-Jewish descent, places greater emphasis on the subject, or the Self. For Cixous, the most fundamental means of achieving this is through writing, especially autobiographical writing. She argues that writing about one's sexuality is crucial, as women's experiences have historically been narrated predominantly by men.

Beyond psychoanalysis, the notion of *otherness* has also been a central concern in postcolonial studies, particularly in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994). Said examines how people in colonized nations undergo processes of marginalization, positioning them as *the Other*. These individuals often strive to become *the Self* yet continually face challenges in doing so. Mimicry becomes a key strategy in this process; however, the Self they attempt to embody remains a mere replication of the colonizers' cultural, political, and social constructs. Similarly, scholarship on *otherness* has explored the exclusion of those perceived as undeserving of centrality. Gayatri Spivak's seminal essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) addresses this issue, introducing the concept of *subalternity*— a framework that contextualizes *otherness* within postcolonial conditions.

In political and cultural studies, theories of the other and the self have pointed to layers of power structures and macro identities that are formed in historical, national and political contexts. Much analysis examines the dynamics of articulating the postcolonial and national self in moments of transition and distinction from the colonizing other. There are layers of distinctions and identities that develop within the postcolonial or settler contexts. In the literature on settler colonialism, scholars have paid particular attention to the ways in which indigenous knowledge challenges or subverts the epistemic frames of colonizers, but also the ways in which indigenous and colonized populations do not have uniform experiences or thoughts and also may at times be unable to avoid becoming co-responsible or complicit with colonizers (Morgensen 3). In such complex situations, it is important to analyze forms of resistance and identification between the self and others in an array of contexts including categories of gender, sexuality, race, and nation that are negotiated in power-laden contexts and not stable categories (Morgensen; Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule*; Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things*). It is especially important to look beyond issues of cultural recognition and consider the forms of refusal or distinction that exist within state boundaries (Simpson). These processes are ongoing and evolving over time and not finished at the moment in which nation states are consolidated. It is equally important to understand the conditions in which the national and individual selves come to be seen as "pure" or "authentic" and the relational consequences of this, particularly for minoritized or indigenous populations (Heryanto).

As theories of *the Other* have evolved, so too have conceptualizations of *the Self*, particularly in relation to subjectivity. Theorization of subjectivity gained significant traction following Michel Foucault's (1977) work on power and the subject (Foucault). In Foucault's framework, *the subject* exists within power relations— every individual possesses power, and thus, every subject is an agent of power. Poststructuralist and Cultural Studies scholars have subsequently expanded on the notion of *the Self*, as seen in Anthony Giddens' theorization of self-identity. Giddens (1991) argues that self-identity is not a static quality but a dynamic and ongoing process of self-reflection and self-interpretations. The individuals continuously revise their understanding about themselves through their experiences and interactions with others. The central issue remains that *the Selves* are constantly positioned in opposition to *the Other*. This opposition is intrinsic, as *the Self* seeks to assert dominance culturally, politically, socially, and economically. Within society, various *Selves* exist as distinct yet competing entities. However, akin to a pluralized "I," these *Selves* are also engaged in internal contestation, navigating conflicting identities and roles within themselves.

Island Selves in the Subject-Object dynamic

Western scholars have laid the groundwork for theoretical frameworks that enrich the social sciences and humanities. However, these theories must be further developed by examining diverse contexts, particularly in regions with distinct sociopolitical and cultural dynamics. The application of these theories in developing countries—where social hierarchies are highly complex—reveals significant variations that challenge conventional dichotomies of subject and object. This complexity disrupts simplistic frameworks that view gendered power structures as universally applicable. In the context of Ambon, conflict itself is deeply multifaceted. Various forms of difference and power relations intersect, particularly in the entanglement of ethnicity, religion, and social class. These intersections highlight how cultural identity has been strategically employed in Indonesia over time, particularly in the context of conflict.

Similarly, when discussing subjectivity in the context of *the Self*, island communities do not merely contend with *the Other* as an external force that asserts dominance as *the ruler,* an entity that organizes, controls, and dictates their existence. Rather, hierarchical structures also emerge within island societies, where *the Selves* are engaged in ongoing internal contestations. These *contested internal Selves* reveal the absence of a singular, centralized authority, emphasizing the multiplicity and fluidity of selfhood. In addition, shifts over time in the forces of authority and the multiplicity of island selves as generationally distinct, relationships to past authoritarianism, and communal conflict further complicate island selfhood. In Ambon, this complexity is particularly evident as individuals navigate shifting forms of consciousness, expanding access to education, and evolving power dynamics. These factors contribute to a dynamic interplay of identities, challenging fixed notions of subjectivity and authority.

Hip-Hop and the Contestation of Internal Selves

Ambon, an island in eastern Indonesia, experienced violent conflict between 1999 and 2002. The conflict intensified conditions in which antagonists were identified as former members of the community now divided by religion rather than unified by cultural and ethnic identity. In the aftermath, Ambon emerged as an entity in which its identity became the Selves, as the end of the conflict reinforced a collective spirit among Ambonese people, emphasizing the importance of rebuilding their region. In this context, the Other was no longer defined by religious differences but rather by external groups often blamed for inciting the conflict, exacerbating tensions, and making the situation difficult to control (Rigual et al.). Among the most scrutinized were journalists from Javanese newspapers, who were perceived as provocateurs due to their framing of events in ways that appeared to favor one side. There were also provocations by the State security forces considered as trigerring the conflict. These journalists, the Javanese media outlets and the security forces were regarded as outsiders whose reporting contributed to the escalation of violence (Udasmoro et al.). However, divisions within Ambonese society persisted, not along religious lines but across generational differences. Older and younger generations held divergent views on music and its role in social life.

Following the conflict, peacebuilding efforts led by Ambonese youth, coupled with the rise of digital media accessible to younger generations, fostered a cultural shift. Hip-Hop emerged as a preferred artistic medium, offering a distinct space for self-expression that set them apart from the older generation. Globally and historically, Hip-Hop, is often seen as a music of resistance or rebellion. For example, in South Korea, it is a genre and space that allows socially marginalized individuals and groups to convey their concerns (Kim and Sung). As Yanko and others have recently argued, hip hop has moved from being a global and unifying context for shared resistance, to become a site for emphasizing local and indigenous languages and providing a context for indigenous and marginalized groups to preserve language and convey grievances to centralized states (Yanko). Yanko's compelling analysis demonstrates how musicians from Eastern Indonesian "pulau," or island, contexts have migrated to more urbanized, prosperous islands in search of economic advancement and along the way encountered dehumanizing discrimination and denial of rights to which they are entitled as citizens of multicultural Indonesia. Through the use of local languages, one "group [Mukarakat] links the decentralization of governance and cultural preservation to national prejudice and implicit racism" (Yanko 385–86). At the same time that they advocate to end discrimination of their region, as they move through national contexts and experience forms of discrimination, they also demonstrate their place in the diverse nation, but with a more dynamic notion of culture than prescribed by the centralized state (Yanko).

Ambon provides a slightly different *pulau* (island) context in large part because of Ambon's national and international distinction as a city of music. It could be argued that it provides elements of both center and periphery in the context of the national music scene. In this article, we focus on the role of youth as they use hip hop to negotiate their post conflict identities relationally in the context of national identities, conflict pasts, religious and cultural identites of their region, and generationally. Through Hip-Hop, young people in Ambon conveyed a wide range of narratives, using lyrics to articulate their lived experiences and social realities. For them, Hip-Hop is not merely a vehicle for melancholic storytelling—an approach the young Ambonese associated with the older generation, which tends to romanticize the past rather than engage with the present. In making this distinction, Ambonese youth seek to redefine Ambonese music itself, asserting that it is no longer confined to its traditional melancholic form.

Music in the Everyday Life of the Ambonese

Ambon is one of Indonesia's major producers of pop music, with its singers and songwriters achieving recognition at both national and international levels. Beyond commercial pop, Ambon also has its own distinct musical tradition, which is performed at various social events, including café performances, weddings, and other routine gatherings. Music is deeply embedded in the everyday life of Ambon; even public transportation vehicles play music at high volumes, allowing pedestrians to hear Ambonese songs as vehicles pass by. Given the centrality of music in daily life, UNESCO designated Ambon as a *City of Music* (Wahyudi). This designation also stems from the role of music in fostering peace during and after periods of communal conflict. During the conflict, music served as a unifying force between Christian and Muslim communities. In the post-conflict period, it has continued to play a crucial role in reconciliation efforts among Ambonese youth, helping to rebuild fractured social bonds.

Traditional Ambonese pop music, largely composed by the older generation, typically follows a repetitive four-verse structure, with lyrics that are looped throughout the song. Young musicians in Ambon often criticize this format as monotonous, lacking creativity, and insufficient for conveying complex ideas. In contrast, Hip-Hop employs a more dynamic lyrical structure. In Hip-Hop compositions, each verse explores a different theme, allowing for multiple narratives to unfold within a single track. This structural variation enables Hip-Hop to communicate a wide range of messages more effectively.

> Many topics can be explored in a single song. For instance, the guys can write a song about peace, dedicating the entire song to peace — like highlighting the theme of loving Maluku. Specifically, they bring this theme into Hip Hop songs. (Interview with Firman Wally, May 31, 2024)

Ambonese youth seek to distinguish themselves from the previous generation. By producing their own music, they assert their identity and resist the transmission of narratives they perceive as belonging to the older generation. In doing so, they construct a musical expression that becomes an integral part of their own *Selves* as Ambonese youth.

> In Hip-Hop, we can pour all our ideas into the music—whether they stem from anxiety, happiness, or any other emotion. A senior Hip-Hop musician from Maluku once said: 'Hip-Hop is different from pop music or other genres because, in Hip-Hop, a single song can address multiple themes. That's why we choose Hip-Hop—because all the thoughts and concerns in our minds can be expressed through it.' (Interview with Firman Wally, May 31, 2024)

The statements above illustrate how young musicians in Ambon aim to contribute to society by articulating their concerns through song lyrics. In their view, Hip-Hop is not merely a performative art form but a political channel through which they engage with the public and policymakers. This perspective sets their music apart from that of the previous generation, which primarily regarded music as a form of artistic expression and a source of pleasure—one that conveyed personal emotions, romanticism, and love.

From Melancholia to Happiness Across Generations

The pursuit of happiness through art appears to be generational. In Ambon, older and younger generations have distinct ways of achieving happiness. The flexible and evolving storytelling structure of Hip-Hop, which often incorporates themes of love and solidarity, is one reason why young Ambonese artists have sought to move away from the melancholic music produced by the older generation. They reject sorrowful tones in their songs, as they have grown up in an environment where their parents have physically endured hardship, particularly as a result of past conflicts. For them, Hip-Hop represents a means of realizing their aspirations for happiness through which the young Ambonese use Hip-Hop to could escape sorrow. This choice stems, in part, from their desire to break free from the past and from the historical narratives shaped by the older generation—a generation that long controlled the music scene. Instead, they seek to establish a "happy generation," unafraid of the future, and to construct an identity rooted in joy and love. Through Hip-Hop, they also reconstruct a sense of camaraderie among the Ambonese. Hip-Hop lyrics can genuinely uplift people. They inspire enthusiasm, offer solutions, and provide a sense of direction.

> There are hundreds of Hip-Hop communities in Maluku because Hip-Hop itself serves as an echo—an echo of literature, an echo of reconciliation. If you pay attention to Hip-Hop songs from 2010 and 2011, [you'll notice they] don't

> contain 'I love you' lyrics, [not conventional songs about] love. [Instead, they address] segregation: 'How did you and I meet? We are brothers. We've come together. We love each other. (Interview with Eka Poceratu, 27 May 2023)

Hip-Hop is often perceived as street music. However, for young Ambonese, it serves as an inspiration and a means of liberation from injustice, exploitation, and sorrow. Their music has gained recognition in Jakarta, with several Hip-Hop groups from Ambon establishing a presence in the capital.

In their Hip-Hop compositions, these young musicians challenge dominant cultural forces, particularly genres that have long dominated the Indonesian music scene, such as reggae, pop, and rock. Hip-Hop endures because, in young people Ambonese view, it embodies the spirit of freedom.

> Hip-Hop just feels closer to young people. The streets feel closer. Culturally, Hip-Hop comes from slavery, from the streets, and [it gives us a space to] express our anxieties through rap—no limits to what we can talk about. It's all about freedom of expression. And as for other genres, like rock, reggae, maybe [they are] influential too, [mostly] because of the references the young people here [draw from]. And yeah, culturally, there's not that much difference between rock, reggae, and Hip-Hop. The issues raised are often similar. Reggae speaks of freedom. Hip-Hop speaks of freedom. Rock does too. (Interview with Eka Poceratu, 27 May 2023)

Hip-Hop serves as a means for the Ambonese youth to construct a distinct political identity, setting themselves apart from the older generation. Through Hip-Hop, they engage in a process of liberation, shifting from a melancholic musical tradition to one that embodies a more joyful and forward-looking compositions. They adapt elements of street culture to the island context in their own way, crafting a distinctly Ambonese Hip-Hop style. This "island way" is reflected in how they preserve their identity as islanders by embedding narratives about Ambon within their music.

Beyond its role as a medium for self-expression and happiness, Hip-Hop also offers economic opportunities. Amid growing economic hardship and increasing job scarcity, Ambonese youth use Hip-Hop as a source of income. Leveraging media and Indonesia's expanding music industry, they actively participate in the broader musical landscape, widening their economic prospects. Their efforts have gained international recognition, leading to invitations to perform abroad.

> I have my own Hip-Hop group, as well as a band and a Maluku ethnic music group. So yeah, I'm usually invited to perform at events around Ambon, like in open fields or other local venues around here. The farthest I've traveled was in May 2023, when my friends and I were invited to Kentucky, United States, to a city called Paducah. The city is one of UNESCO's Creative Cities and has strong ties with Ambon [as] the City of Music. And in 2022, some of my friends were also invited to perform in Jeonju, South Korea, though I wasn't able to join. (Interview with Edwin Titahalawa, 31 May 2024)

The economic dimension of Hip-Hop is seen as a crucial factor in achieving happiness. As demonstrated above, the concept of happiness differs between the older and younger generations in Ambon. For the older generation, happiness in music is derived from personal expression and the cathartic experience of melancholic songs, which they consider an essential part of their island identity. In contrast, for younger Ambonese musicians, happiness is tied to the freedom to articulate the realities they face even as economic sustainability has become an integral component of this pursuit of happiness.

Conclusion

Theorizing islands is essential to understanding how islanders empirically define their identity and navigate lived experiences that differ from those in central or mainland contexts. Some islands achieve economic success due to readily available income-generating opportunities, such as tourism. However, many others face significant challenges, with their inhabitants struggling even to survive.

Within these constraints, the dynamic between *the Selves* and *the Others* is not static; rather, it is shaped by historical and social relations. In Ambon's context, particularly in the aftermath of conflict, *the Others* were often perceived as outsiders—those from beyond Ambon who were seen as having brought the region into turmoil. These outsiders were labeled as provocateurs. However, with the arrival of peace, a sense of unity emerged, fostering the idea of a singular Ambonese entity working collectively toward rebuilding. Yet, even this notion of *the Selves* is not monolithic and remains fluid over time and across generations.

Before the conflict, *the Selves* in Ambon were segregated primarily along religious (Muslim and Christian) and ethnic lines (native Ambonese versus migrant communities such as the Bugis, Butonese, and Makassarese). However, during and after the conflict, generational differences became a defining factor in shaping *the Selves*. Ambonese youth constructed an identity distinct from that of their elders, whom they perceived as having a different vision of what it means to be Ambonese. While the older generation's identity was shaped by narratives of suffering, memories of conflict, and melancholic artistic expressions, Ambonese youth challenged these perspectives by adopting a more pragmatic outlook through Hip-Hop. They sought to liberate themselves from the weight of the past, embracing Hip-Hop as a medium of artistic and economic emancipation—one that, in their view, represents freedom on both creative and financial fronts.

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Predicaments of Prestige: Negotiations and Symbolic Violence in Philippine Critical Film Practice

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Abstract As with its neocolonial center the US, the Philippine practice of film criticism was closely allied with academic and journalistic professions. The definitive triumph of Ishmael Bernal as film director occasioned several of his contemporaries to emulate his example of writing film reviews in newspapers while developing a film-industry network where they could possibly wangle directorial or scriptwriting breaks. Needless to say, the majority of these aspirants did not amount to any significance, as either critics or practitioners. What also remained unremarked was that this strategy was actually European in origin, modeled by the French *nouvelle vague* but with a vastly differing historical and cultural context that called for critical reconfiguring. This article will attempt an evaluation of the tradition of Philippine film criticism via its self-declared proponents, the organization of media reviewers who banded into an award-giving organization. It will make use of James F. English's reworking of Pierre Bourdieu's formulation and development of the concept of culture capital, in English's *The Economy of Prestige* (2005), which appropriately problematized the practice of award-giving. Where we can immediately see in how, for better or worse, the critics fostered an academicization of award-giving, positioning them among premodern institutions such as the Académie Française, they were also oblivious to the larger issues raised by the intervention of US interests in Asia during the Cold War era. This accounts for a problematic legacy of short-sightedness amid Euro-style obsession with validation on the part of the Philippine critical and artistic community.
Keywords academization; award-giving; film critics; cultural politics; Experimental Cinema of the Philippines; Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino
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Introduction

For better or worse, the Philippines can claim to be the Southeast Asian country where Western and West-aspiring powers staked their territorial claims in the region: Spain from the early sixteenth century, the United States during the turn of the previous century, and Japan during the middle of the past century. The impact of these interventions helps explain why the primary cultural forms in the country can mostly be traced to locales far removed from Asia, with the US responsible for reintroducing photography and cinema after the expulsion of the Spaniards and following through with the rest of electronic mass media that the West later made sure to propagate through the rest of the world.

Hence it would not be surprising to discover that during the colonial years (roughly first half of the twentieth century), media trends in the country followed closely those of the US. Media specialization was primarily a matter of skills training, since both sides of opposed political persuasions regarded successful popular culture as irredeemably compromised by corporate sponsorship, unworthy of elevation to high art among conservatives and a fifth column for capitalist values among progressives. The country's nominal independence from American colonization marked its transition to a Latin American-style banana republic, but it is also a way of understanding cultural developments that have eluded native scholars of pop culture.

In an essential sense, the Philippines's post-World War II filmic cultural orientation reverted to European influence once more, but this time it was from France rather than Spain, and it had to await the spread of French influence through Europe before reaching the US, from where the Philippines picked up the perspective that local scholars termed "film as art" (title of the early film-production workshops of the University of the Philippines Film Center). Such awareness was nearly too late, since the vast majority of celluloid output was lost to a combination of tropical climate, careless storage practices, industrial self-sabotage as a means of union-busting, and a drive to cannibalize celluloid products, squeezing any form of profit that these could yield, often by converting strips into hats and horns for New Year merry-making. As an example, when Lino Brocka wanted to mount a retrospective of films by Gerardo de Leon, he had to send volunteers to provincial cinemas all over the country to find if any prints might still be kept in storage (Figure 1). Several major films were outright already missing while one was damaged as it was being projected; three other prints were subsequently recovered from various Southeast Asian archives.

Figure 1. The retrospective of Gerardo de Leon films organized by Lino Brocka, titled "Manong" [Big Brother] and held at the Manila Film Center. All existing de Leon films are sourced from this recovery project except for *Sanda Wong* (1955), recovered in Hong Kong; and *Dyesebel* (1953) and *Anak ni Dyesebel* [*Child of Dyesebel*] (1964), recovered in Thailand. The celluloid nitrate copy of *Hanggang sa Dulo ng Daigdig* [*Up to the Ends of the Earth*] (1958) was permanently damaged during its retrospective screening, when its sprocket holes caught during projection and burned the print. (From the *Pelikula, Atbp*. blogspot, posted 23 August 2008)

Film criticism arrived around this time, initially as review commentaries printed as adjuncts to movie journalism in English-language newspapers. In fact, the first movie awards to be announced and handed out were sponsored by the *Manila Times* newspaper and called the Maria Clara Awards, named after the tragic heroine in national hero Jose Rizal's novels; prior to this, in fact, the *Manila Times* was already known for announcing its year's best choices, which was how the now-lost *Noli Me Tangere* (dir. Jose Nepomuceno, 1930) acquired canonical status (Torre 50). Two years afterward, the instability of one publication determining nationwide film excellence gave way to the Maria Claras transforming into what became announced as the Filipino Academy of Movie Arts and Sciences or FAMAS Awards, apparently inspired by the US Oscars, which were presented by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Unlike the American model, however, the FAMAS remained an organization of entertainment reporters, so the anomaly of its self-declaration as an academy remained a gap waiting to be filled.

The earliest regular film critic on record, T.D. Agcaoili, patterned his career after the French New Wave critics-turned-filmmakers. So when a younger group of critics converged at the *Manila Chronicle*, owned by a politician who turned from serving as Vice President of Ferdinand Marcos Sr. to being an opposition leader, they all observed the same strategy of writing reviews and later wangling film assignments. The members of the group had varying degrees of filmmaking success, but their most celebrated member was Ishmael Bernal, who became the primary friendly rival of the internationally renowned Lino Brocka.

Originary Texts

In tracking the fortunes of Philippine film criticism as centered in the organization that claimed to be its leading progenitor, I will be proceeding from one of the more inspired applications of Pierre Bourdieu's discourse on *Distinction*, from his eponymously titled book. In *The Economy of Prestige*, James F. English's study of, as per the book's title, "prizes, awards, and the circulation of cultural value," the author proposes a suspension of Bourdieu's progressively inflected analysis (more forcefully articulated in Bourdieu's short polemic, "Racisme de l'intelligence") in order to inspect more closely the dynamics behind what he described as the twentieth century's obsession with markers of symbolic value. The consequences of shirking from this call, per English, are twofold: "a strictly cynical or mocking attitude, which economistic exposés of the awards scene tend to induce ... [and] the mystified, essentially religious attitude toward culture that would shield artistic practices and artistic value from the kind of scrutiny that deploys economic coneptualizations in a broader sense" (7).

Interestingly, English points up two historical occasions that will be significant in our attempt to evaluate the manner in which the symbolic economy's extreme features emerged and developed in the Philippine cultural context. The first was the introduction of what he considered the first modern award, the Nobel Prize, whose impact on literature was wide-ranging and, more important, controversial from the start. English states that, while controversy can have the potential of sabotaging the credibility of any recent award, prizes handed out by prestigious institutions can ironically have a stronger shot at popularity and, consequently, an extended existence when they are accompanied by accusations of scandalous circumstances, for which he references Bourdieu in arguing that "there is perhaps no device more perfectly suited than scandal to making things happen on the field of culture" (190).

The other development English mentions is the 1960s superstructural shift that can arguably be regarded as resulting from European cinema's successful challenge against Classical Hollywood: the transition to a so-called weightless economy, affirmed by the eventual abandonment of the dollar/gold standard in 1971, in which "a preponderance of activity concerns trade in such intangible forms of property as knowledge or information, news or entertainment, numbers or options or predictions" (76–77). With this redefinition of economic value, we arrive at the paradoxical situation where although the literal weight of bought and sold goods has remained more or less constant, the increased trade in dematerialized products enabled the global economy to grow five times (circa the first decade of the millennium) since 1972. English's extrapolation of this still-continuing drift allows him to arrive at another surprising conclusion: that no matter how crowded the field of awards and prizes may seem, their proliferation will persist into the future (53–68).[1]

The Philippines's alertness to these trends resulted in an ever-increasing flurry of prestige-marking activity. The Nobel Prize for Literature found its Philippine counterpart around the same time that the Maria Clara Awards were announced—and even more impressively, by a captain of industry also anxious to legitimize the product he manufactured. To be sure, Carlos Palanca Sr.'s La Tondeña Incorporada (now Ginebra San Miguel), as an alcoholic-beverage distillery, was far less destructive than Alfred Nobel's dynamite production, although the company's notoriety emerged much later, when the Palanca Award for Literature was secure in its prestige stature: in 1975, the company was the first to experience the first union-organized labor strike under the martial law regime of the Ferdinand Marcos Sr. dictatorship (Fernan).

More than the Nobel or even the most successful (and controversial) literary award, the Man Booker Prize, the Palanca, already recognizing achievements in English plus any number of Philippine languages starting with Filipino, sought

1 The closest the country ever came to the abolition (as opposed to the folding up) of an award-giving group was when the Film Academy of the Philippines was formed in 1981 and announced its intent to hand out awards. As Director-General of the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines tasked with implementing the President's Executive Order, Imee Marcos announced that the FAP, comprising guilds of film professionals, will serve as the country's sole authentic academy and replace the FAMAS. Joseph Estrada, then the mayor of the municipality (now city) of San Juan City in Metro Manila, was expecting to be elevated to the FAMAS Hall of Fame in two categories, acting and producing, by winning one more award in each category; he successfully opposed Imee's plan—a rare instance of another Philippine official opposing a member of the dictator's family and surviving. Estrada was subsequently elected President but was ousted via popular protests reminiscent of the people-power revolt that deposed the Marcoses.

to cement its links with the most high-profile cultural activity, that of audiovisual production, by introducing prizes for television and film scriptwriting in 1990 and 1994 respectively, and even adding literally forward-looking categories for futuristic fiction in 2000. Meanwhile, the FAMAS became vulnerable to the interests of the fixed number of major studios during the First Golden Age of Philippine cinema (roughly coexistent with the 1950s), with one of the production outfits withdrawing its participation ironically during the end of the First Golden Age, in 1960.[1]

This same studio that refused participation, Sampaguita Pictures, cast its lot with a then-emerging popular politician after the company screen-tested a vivacious and musically inclined beauty queen who was snagged by said politician after a whirlwind courtship. The young and glamorous couple, Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos, racked up political points—enough to secure them the presidency, according to new journalist Nick Joaquin—after the censors permit for their hagiographical movie, *Iginuhit ng Tadhana* [*Determined by Fate*]*: The Ferdinand E. Marcos Story* (directed by Conrado Conde, Jose de Villa, and Mar S. Torres, 1965), was delayed during its premiere night and Imelda consequently shed tears in the theater lobby accusing the incumbent President's government of censorship (Figure 2). Hence the Marcos couple's infatuation with cinema, possibly inspired by John F. Kennedy's successful exploitation of television in his presidential campaign against Richard Nixon, intensified to the point of not just a second biofilm, *Pinagbuklod ng Langit* [*Conjoined by Heaven*] (directed by Eddie Garcia, 1969) for Marcos's reelection, but also a scandal-ridden third project, *Maharlika* [*Guerrilla Strike Force*] (directed by Jerry Hopper, 1970/1987) that arguably became the reason for

1 There have only been two verifiable and largely uncontested Golden Ages in Philippine cinema, despite belated claims that prior and subsequent periods also constituted similar phenomena. The first was more or less concurrent with the revitalization of the local industry after American colonization and during the ascendancy of the oligopolistic studio system during the 1950s, as detailed by journalist and professor Jessie B. Garcia in "The Golden Decade of Filipino Movies" (in *Readings in Philippine Cinema*, edited by Rafael Ma. Guerrero, Manila: Experimental Cinema of the Philippines, 1983, pp. 39–54). The second occurred during the period of stabilization occasioned by the declaration of martial law during the regime of the elder Ferdinand Marcos until his expulsion by the people-power revolt (1972–86), described by Joel David in "A Second Golden Age: An Informal History" (in *The National Pastime: Contemporary Philippine Cinema*, Pasig City: Anvil, 1990, pp. 1–19). A critique of the Golden Ages concept was also advanced by David in "The Golden Ages of Philippine Cinema: A Critical Reassessment" (in *Millennial Traversals: Outliers, Juvenilia, & Quondam Popcult Blabbery, Part 1—Traversals within Cinema*, Quezon City: Amauteurish Publishing, 2019, pp. 1–15).

Imelda Marcos's rise in cultural dominance in her husband's regime.[1]

Figure 2. The Marcos family during their inauguration (left) and as depicted in the campaign flick *Iginuhit ng Tadhana* (right). Although Imee became an active theater presence at the national university and was considered by Lino Brocka to star in his first Cannes filmfest entry *Insiang* (1976), the figure common to both pictures is the actor who portrayed the Marcoses' son: Ferdinand Jr., also known as Bongbong, informally addressed as BBM and elected President in 2022. (Film still from Sampaguita Pictures)

With the political stability enforced by the declaration of martial law in 1972, Filipino film critics were able to embark on more rationalized prestige-making activities. These were two-pronged, comprising first, a reassembling of reviewers (with new recruits) in need of a newspaper outlet after the closure of the opposition-owned *Manila Chronicle*, provided by the *Philippines Daily Express*, owned by a crony of Ferdinand and edited by a relative of Imelda; and second, a deployment to the FAMAS under the supervision of the dean of the national university's then-newly formed Institute, later College, of Mass Communication (now the College of Media and Communication). The latter condition, in effect for two years, coincided

1 Shown overseas in 1970 but released in the Philippines in 1987 after the Marcoses' downfall, *Maharlika* starred an American starlet, Dovie Beams, in what has been her only leading role, as Isabella the martyred girlfriend of Bob Reynolds (played by Paul Burke), who conducted successful guerrilla forays against the Imperial Japanese Army and was intended to bolster Ferdinand Sr.'s claim that he earned a record number of medals from the US Army (subsequently repudiated by the institution). Beams yielded to the man she called "Fred" but after their affair became a media scandal, he denied having known her. Upon learning that her life might be in danger, she called for a press conference where she provided proof of their relationship, in the form of explicit audio recordings of their bedroom sessions. Caroline S. Hau, in "Dovie Beams and Philippine Politics: A President's Scandalous Affair and First Lady Power on the Eve of Martial Law" (in *Philippine Studies: Historic and Ethnographic Viewpoints*, vol. 67, nos. 3–4, 2019, pp. 595–634), ascribes to the Beams affair Imelda's considerable rise in influence during the martial law period.

with the release and subsequent awarding of Brocka's independent breakout efforts, *Tinimbang Ka Ngunit Kulang* [*Weighed But Found Wanting*] (1974) and *Maynila: Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* [*Manila: In the Claws of Light*] (1975), the first Filipino movie to be added to the Criterion Collection, a film buff's wet dream, via Martin Scorsese's World Cinema (film recovery) Project (Figure 3).

Figure 3. The order page of *Maynila: Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* at the Criterion Collection website. (Screen capture from www.criterion.com/films/29221-manila-in-the-claws-of-light)

Critics Crystallize

The *Daily Express* and FAMAS critics banded together in an organization called the Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino (or Filipino Film Critics Circle, hereafter MPP) in order to hand out annual awards, starting with the year 1976. Their timing was opportune because one of the younger talents of the First Golden Age, Eddie Romero, made his "comeback" from directing Filipino films for US drive-in theaters (thereby initiating a horror subgenre called the Blood Island films, actually an appropriation of a Hammer Films title on Japanese World War II atrocities against Southeast Asian and British nationals set in Indonesia). It was also the year when the most unlikely yet most successful Philippine star, the dark-skinned and recently deceased Nora Aunor, produced her most ambitious film, a period narrative on the Japanese occupation with her character torn between a Filipino guerrilla and a

Filipino-Japanese official. The MPP called their trophy the Urian [Jeweller's Stone] (Figure 4) and gave best film prize to Romero and best actress to Aunor.

Figure 4. Prestige markers in Philippine cinema, left to right, along with the medallion for the Nobel prize for literature: the Maria Clara Award, the FAMAS Award, and the Urian Award. The first two trophies were designed by Guillermo Tolentino, the Urian by Vic Delotavo, and the Nobel by Erik Lindberg. The trophies' commercial afterlife "should be viewed as an extension and amplification of their original function—as a component of the awards game itself ... because every transaction involving that object involves strategic attempts to exchange and manipulate complex forms of value rather than to guard simple ones" (English 183–84; pics from the respective awards' online *Wikipedia* pages)

What has been overlooked by film historians, even those critical of the group, was the MPP's life-achievement prize. The very first one was handed out not to a filmmaker but to a producer, Manuel de Leon, son of the founder of LVN Pictures, responsible for overseeing projects that mostly won major prizes at the Asian Film Festival. The exclusion of Sampaguita Pictures was consistent during the first Marcos presidency, with directors, actors, and technical talents associated with either LVN or Premiere Productions winning the critics' subsequent life-achievement awards. It would take the late 1990s for the first Sampaguita performers to be acknowledged, with ironically the founder's daughter, a member of Imelda's "Blue Ladies" inner circle, given a life-achievement award during the current millennium.

The preference primarily for Premiere-produced films was articulated by the most senior founding member, Bienvenido Lumbera ("Critic in Academe" source exchange), with a harsh judgment of the interregnum between the First and Second Golden Ages, or the 1960s up to the early 1970s, articulated in his descriptor of this period as an era of "Rampant Commercialism and Artistic Decline" ("Problems in Philippine Film History" 181–84) followed by "New Forces in Contemporary Cinema" ("Problems" 184–86) starting in 1976. Lumbera's defense of the production strategies of the First Golden Age precisely, and conservatively, centered on its oligopolistic process: "during the 1950s businessmen had more confidence in the industry: 'If our movie flops, that's all right. We have a big production scheduled next that will surely draw in the crowds.' Such a procedure essentially is a rational kind of capitalist thinking" ("Critic in Academe" 62).

The romanticization of the First Golden Age masks a number of troubles that got mentioned in passing even in some of the citations that the MPP prepared for their life-achievement winners. Anita Linda, the first actor winner, described how she participated in a labor strike at Premiere and found herself blacklisted by the other studios (Reyes 420). An even more problematic predicament emerged with the recent declassification of materials by the US State Department, confirming the then-apparent US intervention in the film cultural policies of the region that eventually became known as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. This involved a recuperation of Japan's capacity to dominate the countries it had colonized in the territory, when it envisioned a Greater East Asian Cinema as an adjunct of its Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere during World War II. The US's ostensible goal was to stanch the expansion of the socialist bloc by using cinema, with Manuel de Leon as "likely the only influential Southeast Asian film producer still participating in the FPA [the US-sponsored Federation of Motion Picture Producers in Asia-Pacific] during this decade" of the 1960s (Sangjoon 12). Hence the much-vaunted track record of de Leon in the FPA-sponsored Asian Film Festival was in fact attributable to his matching of conservative film material with the FPA's antiprogressive agenda.

With LVN as a pro-US agent, Sampaguita as a supporter of a then-emerging fascist dictator, and Premiere as a union-buster, the prospect appears to have been dim for Philippine cinema. But in fact, Lumbera's dismissal of the period after the First Golden Age was precipitate, and had to be qualified even by himself. He remarked, of the period that featured films that became known as *bomba* or bomb, featuring soft-core sexual themes whose unsupervised screenings contained hard-core inserts, that such films deserve to be revaluated in light of their overt challenge to the strictures of conservatism and denial of women's prerogatives in acting on their desires and preferences (“Pelikula” 216).

Moreover, the films of the 1960s were characterized by an impressive, pioneering, taboo-breaking, politically charged vulgarity, of the sort never seen before or since in the country, and that would be essential to explaining why the Second Golden Age held far more promise and managed to meet more expectations than the First. Moreover, most filmmakers who made their mark during the First Golden Age actually produced what a number of people would consider their best products during the subsequent non-“golden” years.[1] The sheer proliferation of innovation alone would be worth a compendium all its own—transformation of actor-producers into auteur-moguls, triple-digit annual production, transitions to color, regularity of regional-language production and international coproduction, eager bandwagoning by politicians, depictions of heretofore unseen images of graphic screen violence, musical teen-idol unruliness, social turmoil, and straight and queer sexualities.

Awards Agonisms

The application of the MPP’s awards concept itself fed into a trend that similarly originated in Europe, but during a premodern period rather than with any of the modern tendencies that emerged in the twentieth century. This proceeded from the simple reality that nearly the entire long-term membership of the MPP comprised professors in the elite consortium constituted by the University of the Philippines, Ateneo de Manila University, and De La Salle University. Talents associated with these institutions were surer to win than those from, say, the university belt of Manila, with the occasional exception of the University of Santo Tomas; the founding of the national university’s Film Institute in 2003 (preceded by the College of Mass Communication’s Department of Film in 1984) became the primary source of candidates for Urian awards and even for the group’s “best of the decade” awards for films and performers.

The premodern European trend cited by English in his study was the academization of literary prizes in France, where preference was given to entrants who were associated with the Académie Française (English 37–39); the concept

1 Another MPP elder member, Agustin Sotto, echoed Lumbera’s lamentation on the rise of independent producers following the collapse of the studio system, but qualified that “this was also the period when the top directors shot their best works” (“Ninth Period” in “History of Philippine Cinema: 1897–1969” in *Pelikula at Lipunan* [*Film and Society*]*: Festival of Filipino Film Classics and Short Films*, Manila: National Commission for Culture and the Arts Committee, Film Academy of the Philippines, and Movie Workers Welfare Fund, 1994, n.pag.).

became controversial enough even overseas, so that when England announced plans for the founding of the Royal Society, a counterpart institution, Sir Walter Scott sent in 1821 one of the longest letters in his correspondence, addressed to the Honorable Sir John Villiers and described by English as "one of the great documents of prize bashing" (English 42–47; also see Grierson 397–405).

A more politically involved consequence of the imposition of academic preferences was the appraisal of film-texts created by artists whose orientation (and therefore sympathies) lay with the original Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas or Philippine Communist Party, founded in 1930 and distinguished by a history of pro-labor and anticolonial struggle, including successful participation in anti-Japanese resistance during World War II. After experiencing betrayal by the returning US colonizers, the members resumed their guerrilla activities, this time directed at the neocolonial Philippine government. After severe repression and confronted by a successful breakaway party and guerrilla army, the PKP leadership called for its members to surrender in exchange for estates in Mindanao. Films recounting its history of conflict and confrontation with power, mostly made by Celso Ad. Castillo, were initially downgraded in MPP reviews and overlooked in annual awards results, until the addition of ironically younger members enabled Castillo to win major prizes in one year, a feat that he would be unable to repeat afterward (David, "From Cloud to Resistance" part 1, note 1).

While this example of ideological bias can be overcome (as in this case) by insistent internal calls for openness and fairness, a more vexed problem inhered in the awards concept itself and conflicted with the group's avowed ideals. In attempting to provide consumerist assistance by sifting through the film industry's releases and announcing the group's preferences in the form of quarterly citations and annual awards and winners, the group inevitably favored reviewing, rather than criticism, as its primary form of critical practice. The more senior members had critical-writing samples that ranged from revaluation of pre-existing canons to historical revisionisms, with left-conservative moralizing (premised on binaristic argumentation) as the most common form of output.[1] Inasmuch as the PKP favored Soviet conventions, the newer progressives tended toward Maoist prescriptions, with Mao Zedong's *Talks at the Yan'an Forum* as foundational text (lised in Works Cited under Mao Tse-tung).

And yet, as explicated by English in describing prizes for high art and literature as "strategies of condescension" (189), the implementation of the awards concept violated the film critics group's avowed intent of supporting the community of artists. The process of winnowing achievements in fixed categories on a regular basis led to resentments and disappointments on the part of people who were shut out at any stage of the recognition mechanism, and resulted in forms of lobbying that created complications with the members' tendency to perform maverick

1 Four senior members may be counted as having written scholarly articles, most of them reprinted in various anthologies except for the first: the founding chair, Nestor U. Torre Jr., claimed that an actual Golden Age preceded the period recognized as the first one, necessarily without furnishing proof since all the films he mentioned had not been preserved; incredibly, this was included in the government's arts encyclopedia (see Works Cited). The critic with the least analytical problems was Petronilo Bn. Daroy, whose articles nevertheless suffered from severely flawed readings attributable to the rarity of early-cinema rescreenings; one of the films he critiqued, Gerardo de Leon's *Daigdig ng mga Api* [*World of the Oppressed*] (1965), is in fact considered lost ("Main Currents in the Filipino Cinema" and "Social Significance and the Filipino Cinema" in *The Urian Anthology 1970–1979*, edited by Nicanor G. Tiongson, Quezon City: Manuel L. Morato, 1983, pp. 48–61 and 126–37 respectively). Bienvenido Lumbera provided articles that were essentially revisions of the canon constructable from the results of the FAMAS awards process ("Kasaysayan at Tunguhin ng Pelikulang Pilipino" or "The History and Prospects of the Filipino Film" and "Approaches to the Filipino Film" in *The Urian Anthology*, pp. 22–47 and 94–101 respectively). Nicanor G. Tiongson's "Four Values in Filipino Drama and Film" dichotomizes standard oppositions in race, presentation, oppression, and worldview, criticizing the preferences for whiteness, spectacle, mastery, and optimism, arguing instead for brownness, realism, liberation, and hopefulness (*The Urian Anthology*, pp. 102–25); as the only still-surviving member, he has published since then articles on film history (see "The Filipino Film Industry" in the *East-West Film Journal* vol. 6, no. 2, 1992, pp. 23–61) as well as another dated universalistic piece titled "Paano Nga Ba Magbasa ng Pelikula? Apat na Dulog sa Pagsusuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino" or "How Should One Actually Read a Film? Four Approaches in Reviewing Filipino Film" (in *Santelmo: Liwanag sa Dilim*, issue 11, 2024, pp. 91–104). Behn Cervantes's "Ganyan Lang Talaga 'Yan" or "That's the Way Things Are" considers Philippine cinema in all its facets and finds it falling short of a progressive-left ideal, consistent with an unmentioned orthodox-Marxist formulation that a capitalist system will be unable to attain socialist ideals (*The Urian Anthology*, pp. 72–79).

decision-making.[1] It resulted in defensive maneuvers where the technical award for best editing, for example, would always have to be adjusted to support whichever film won for best scriptwriting, since elements such as structure, pacing, and narrative tension are shared by both activities.

Hidden Contestations

Even more scandalous in retrospect is the group's otherwise laudable attempts to buck public expectations and select underdogs as their awardees. The selection that resonated for decades was, unsurprisingly, in the 1982 performance category, when the MPP passed over Nora Aunor for *Himala* [*Miracle*] in favor of Vilma Santos for *Relasyon* [*Affair*] (Figure 5). Both films shared the same director (Ishmael Bernal) and a writer (Ricky Lee), who developed differences between them but separately declared to friends and acquaintances that the group was grossly mistaken. In the article that announced that a Second Golden Age transpired nearly during the entire martial-law period, the following became a much-quoted passage: "the one outstanding performance of the period ... belongs to Nora Aunor in *Himala*.... Not since Anita Linda in Gerardo de Leon's *Sisa*, circa the First Golden Age [actually the first Maria Clara best actress awardee in 1951], had there been such a felicitous exploitation by a performer of ideal filmmaking conditions" (David, "A Second Golden Age" 24).

Figure 5. Climactic scenes of *Himala* and *Relasyon*: left, Elsa (Nora Aunor) confesses to her followers that her pregnancy resulted from rape rather than immaculate conception, affirming that supernatural miracles are fraudulent, before a bullet from an anonymous shooter kills her; right,

1 In rejecting the only Urian award he ever won (for *Jaguar* in the 1979 ceremony), Lino Brocka lamented how he preferred the corruption practiced by FAMAS, since nominees only had to bribe the jurors in order to win an award. In contrast, he criticized the MPP for their inability to correct errors that resulted from the members' biases. This was apparently in response to *Jaguar* actor Phillip Salvador losing in the best actor category. See Joel David, "The Night the Critics Gave Out Their Awards," *Philippines Daily Express* (March 4, 1980), pp. 20–21.

Marilou (Vilma Santos), whose married boyfriend suddenly died from cerebral aneurysm, calls her mother to report what happened. (Screen caps from Experimental Cinema of the Philippines and Regal Films respectively)

As a result, the MPP had to justify their consideration of Santos as superior to Aunor, despite the latter's record of excellence in recording arts and legitimate theater, and allotment of her wealth as the country's most successful multimedia star to productions of art-film projects. Santos was given successive best-actress awards for two more years and generally consistently defeated Aunor in later years when both were nominated, accumulating the biggest number of Urian performance prizes (the director of her third successive Urian-winning performance, Mike de Leon, also complained that he was disappointed by her "wooden" delivery—see Anarcon). The evaluation of the larger community of artists departed from the MPP's: Bernal, like Brocka, was posthumously declared a National Artist, while Lee won the prize in the same year that Aunor did. A millennium-era President, Benigno S. Aquino III, son of the woman who ousted Ferdinand Marcos and succeeded him as President, endured widespread criticism for rejecting an earlier decision by the National Commission for Culture and the Arts to proclaim Aunor (Mongaya; also see "Controversy-Happy").

More than the Palanca Award for Literature, the Order of the National Artist of the Philippines was the country's closest approximation of the Nobel. It was created the same year that martial law was declared and Imelda Marcos was able to convince the country's primary practitioner of literature in English, Nick Joaquin, to accept the recognition by agreeing to free a political prisoner he had mentored. Although more overtly regarded as a strategy for cultural money-laundering, the process has remained free from political intervention, with one millennial-era President, Noynoy Aquino's predecessor Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, being overruled by the Supreme Court for adding her preferences to the list of candidates submitted by the NCCA (Dedace).

A more scandalous reading emerged when an advocacy movie produced by Aunor, titled *Ang Totoong Buhay ni Pacita M.* [*The Real Life of Pacita M.*] (again scripted by Lee), lost in the film and performance categories to a studio tearjerker that starred Santos, despite all the other award-giving bodies giving the Aunor production these prizes. Elwood Perez, who directed the Aunor film, stated that the MPP would never provide him with any form of recognition because he asked a veteran scriptwriter to fix a screenplay submitted by a senior member. In May 2024, when *Bona* (1980), the Lino Brocka-directed film that Aunor produced, was about to be relaunched at the Cannes Film Festival, a *Facebook* netizen, a former MPP member who founded and still runs the annual Filipino Arts & Cinema International Festival in San Francisco, California, noted that Aunor's loss in *Himala* was preceded by her prioritizing of a the Brocka project at the expense of a film that the same member also scripted (Tumbocon). The larger irony was that the discreditable member had written one of the moralistic "critical" articles denouncing what he declared were wrong values in Philippine cinema (see footnote on page 88), headed by producers' and audiences' racial preferences for fair-skinned performers and singling out Aunor as exemplary of the type of actor who more closely resembled the profile of the native audience.

A curious trend observed by English was in how awards jurors, owing to a misconception between a field they believe to be flawed and their own habitus which is intended to intervene and rectify these flaws (121–22), tend to aspire for prizes themselves, as a way to justify their right to pass judgment on their peers. The process favors their candidacy, since the arbiters would actually be mostly colleagues of MPP members; hence senior MPP member Lumbera was able to be declared a National Artist for Literature despite a paltry record in comparison with a later winner such as Lee. Current aspirants include the anti-Aunor campaigner—who later turned and supported Aunor when her credibility as opposition figure was recuperated—as well as Santos, Aunor's rival.

Millennial Contentions

The articulation of the group's criteria resided in a formulation that was outmoded as soon as it was announced, pursuant to Lumbera's revision of the pre-MPP film canon to favor political cinema: "In the case of two films which are equally well-made, the film with the more significant subject matter is to be preferred.... Accordingly, the content of a film is considered superior if it is a truthful portrayal of the human condition as pereived by the Filipino, and if it deals with the Filipino experience to which the greater number of moviegoers can relate" ("MPP Criteria" 3).

Such an unstable mergence of formalism with social realism would have led to a revision of the preexisting Philippine film canon (as embodied primarily in the FAMAS Award's listing of nominees and winners, supplemented by occasional international award-winners). As evident in the senior MPP members' historical surveys, led by Lumbera, this resulted in an affirmation of the FAMAS's early roster of winners, with a reordering or even rejection of its heavily compromised post-1950s choices. No upheaval on the order of the *Cahiers du Cinéma*'s critique of

Classical Hollywood's producer-driven prestige cinema occurred, mainly because the preservation of early film samples already focused on canonizable entries. With the MPP's entrenchment in academic film programs, succeeding generations of critics wound up echoing their elders' preferences, some of them even openly criticizing anti-MPP sectors.

The emergence of digital and social media during the turn of the present millennium reinforced this conservative-left sensibility. Academically trained graduates would attempt the *Cahiers du Cinéma*'s historical model of critical noise-making followed by modish, sometimes radical, filmmaking; needless to say, few succeeded and none was able to replicate the feat of Bernal. Personal blogs sprouted up, nearly all of which announced 100-best canons that observed the MPP's preferences, with occasional maverick selections to demonstrate how the authors dared to differ from standard choices. Few of these listings provided citations, often for their first ten selections only; nearly all these blogs have either disappeared or been inactive for a decade or more.

The romanticist drive occasioned by the French New Wave's alleged radicalism yielded one influential opinion leader in Alexis Tioseco, a Canada-raised returnee who assumed his father's business but who claimed he was converted to film fanaticism after watching Lav Diaz's five-hour film noir *Batang West Side* [*West Side Avenue*] (2001). Continuing the tradition of highly subjective auteurist film appreciation, Tioseco brought over his Slovenian girlfriend and immersed in film activities almost entirely, using his blog to rhapsodize over his favorites and providing a much-reprinted wish list as an addendum to a love letter addressed to his girlfriend that championed practitioners that he believed upheld the art of cinema rather than its effectiveness as a vehicle of impacting mass audiences. His popularity attained sensational levels after he hired househelp who could not present clearances from the National Bureau of Investigation; he returned one night from a film event and disrupted burglars who had connived with said househelp, and wound up dead from stab wounds along with his girlfriend.

The incident boosted his romantic status and earned him accolades and book dedications from all over, including an auteurist volume by American critic Jonathan Rosenbaum. The symbolic implication of the offence has rarely been remarked: that this was a violent separation between bourgeoisie with good taste and criminal (termed "lumpen" by Jose Ma. Sison, ideologue of the Communist Party of the Philippines) proletariat. Film as art was imbued with moral ascendancy over box-office cinema.

The MPP of course found ways to update its bias toward social relevance.

Its erstwhile chair (then-concurrent dean of the College of Mass Communication) uploaded on his personal blog his dogmatized assessments of the entries in the Cinemalaya Philippine Independent Film Festival, castigating in separate years Ellen Ongkeko-Marfil's *Boses* [*Voices*] (2008) and Marie Jamora's *Ang Nawawala* [*What Isn't There*] (2012) for attempting to infuse mainstream approaches in independent cinema, which he derisively termed "maindie." His blogposts were eventually deleted but his articulation of his prescription for films worth upholding (including, by implication, being honored by the MPP's awards) appeared in his introduction to *A Reader in Philippine Film*: "Our body of films constitute the country and its national identity. In the experience of our national cinema, these are the films that distinguish themselves because of their high aesthetic quality, capacity for interrogating the nation and national identity, and representation of the marginal and subaltern experience and collectivity" (Tolentino xx, translated by the present author).

The effect of this swing toward a high-art orientation was the severe downgrading of popular, star-driven genre cinema, specifically anything produced by millennial-era major studios as well as independent productions that attempted to replicate their output. In effect, critics tended to champion what audiences refused to watch, and vice versa. The situation became so dire (except from the established critics' perspective) that in the last series of interviews given by Second Golden Age filmmaker Marilou Diaz-Abaya before she succumbed to cancer, she cautioned how respect for the mass audience should be "non-negotiable" and explicated the merits of the then-currently most popular (and consequently most derided) local genre, the romantic comedy (Asian CineVision). Diaz-Abaya's personal ethos derived from the mentorship provided her by Ishmael Bernal; his friendly rival Lino Brocka also subsequently abandoned the art-vs.-commerce binary that he observed even through his global ascendancy and sought to develop projects that combined popular genre-sourced pleasure with strong political statements, before a vehicular accident cut his life short.

Canon Recalibrations

The longer-lasting problem for critical evaluation is the canonical implication of annual film awards. Merely raising a simple question already points up the concept's inherent historical weakness: "Is there always one 'best' film for every year that transpires, so that the MPP's choices over time can constitute a reliable canon listing?" In recognition of the absurdity raised by the query, as well as to add more winners and extend their award program's running time (and consequent advertising revenues), the MPP would announce its choices for ten best films of the decade as well as a variable number of best performers. The group would naturally resist any attempt at admitting it committed errors, so that the ten films of the decade were, more often than not, merely the same films that won Urian prizes for best picture during their respective years of release.

The variability of production opportunities as well as occasional political and economic crises would logically intervene not just in the regularity of production but also in the artistic community's capacity to focus on the generation of quality output. Even during more encouraging periods, they will have to contend with such unpredictable and generally obstructive governmental policies, starting with censorship and taxation. Finally, the private sector imposes its own requisites in terms of genres, cast, exhibition venues, and so on. The narrative of the Philippines's critics circle's half-century of participation just as egregiously exhibits more problems than it solves: from an incompetence of the typical member in exercising critical thinking through the opportunism of supposedly mature elderly critics in penalizing practitioners who thwarted their career ambitions to the failure of the awards strategy in creating a credible impression of quality achievements of Philippine film artists.

A final example of the third instance should suffice in concluding this account. A nearly complete canon project begun in 2012 covering available regular-length feature-film samples from the beginning to 2020, has resulted in a list of nearly 230 films that may be plotted out in a graph of annual titles (Figure 6).[1] One may note the paucity of early entries, partly due to the difficulty of preserving celluloid in a tropical country but also because of such historical aberrations as the Japanese occupation (1953–45), the declaration of martial law (1972), and the transition to democracy (1986). One year in particular, 1984, yielded an extremely unusual number of passable films, but not only did the Urian select only one "best" film

1 Ironically, the canon project observed the processes instilled by the MPP during their early years. These were: a willingness to cover the widest possible selection of available releases in their best conditions (to preempt biases induced by poor technological conditions), the organizing of a select group to determine entries based on extensive deliberations, the rescreening of titles that had proved controversial or borderline-acceptable, and the articulation, in the form of capsule reviews, of reasons for the selection. In addition, a senior member also provided pointers for the proper appreciation of offbeat films, drawn from genre-transformation studies, star texts, experimental cinema, third-cinema aesthetics, and so on. Where people involved in production were still around, the capsule-review author also attempted to contact them to request answers to problematic elements in the work.

from among four nominees, the members also kept writing reviews that lamented the state of film production and nitpicked with any detail they could find. The vulgar-Marxist-inflected instruction to regard the period of capitalism, exacerbated by fascism as incompatible with the production of progressive cultural products, would have justified this approach ideologically for conservative leftists (Balibar). But afterward, when production fell because of audiences turning against the cultural celebration of the pre-martial law bourgeoisie's triumph in reclaiming their lost opportunities, the MPP critics quieted down, even deciding at one point not to hold any awards ceremony.

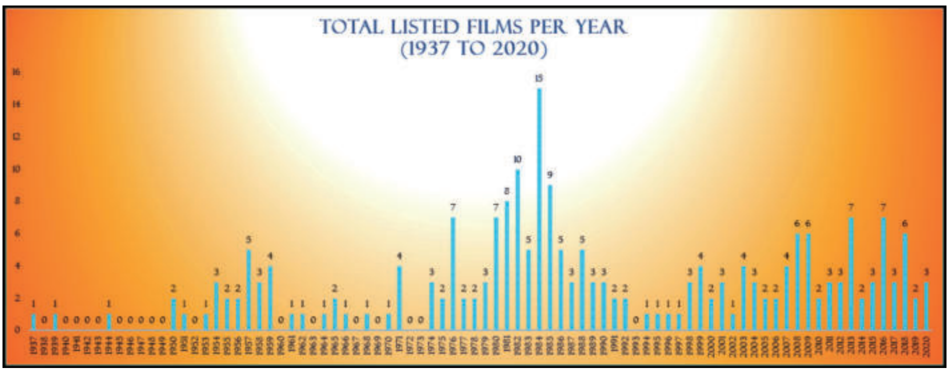

Figure 6. Canonical trends in Philippine film-quality performance. (David, *Canon Decampment*, Amauteurish Publishing, 2023, posted at amauteurish.com/2023/11/14/canon-decampment/)

The preceding study of the intervention of the original organization of film critics in Philippine cinema, in making use of principles and examples observed by Bourdieu and extended by succeeding practitioners (particularly English) has led to similar conclusions: that more questions demand to be answered, and that these efforts at the construction of distinction might have more destructive effects if the problems they raised remain unattended.

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Diasporic Errantry

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Abstract The paper engages with Edouard Glissant's idea of "errantry" in relation to his "Poetics of Relation" through the lens of the Filipino experience of diaspora—but one that is not just a matter of dispersion, but of repatriation. The idea is deployed in undertaking a diasporic critique that focuses on repatriation, both metaphorically and materially, as it is historically embedded in literary and cultural spheres, of the Philippine experience. To this end, discussed first is "rhetorical repatriation" as it is aesthetically worked into the textual mobility of figures and play of figurations in a compilation of prayers by Marcelo H. del Pilar published during the Reform Movement under the Spanish colonial regime (1565-1898). Discussed second is "material repatriation" today as embodied today in the act of naming people and objects which are associative of their function in relation to the diasporic identity of the Filipino overseas contract workers (OCWs), as in the case of the *balikbayan* and the *balikbayan* box. The analysis focuses on the dynamic processes of linguistic and stylistic engagement and transformative refunctioning across literary-critical practices. The goal is to explore the ways by which the experience of repatriation under globalization helps define Filipino diaspora, impelled as it is by errantry's tension in diasporic space, ripping apart yet carving identities, which are at once lived, challenged, and negotiated and renegotiated by OCWs as repatriates in that space of everyday between life and death.
Keywords Errantry; Edouard Glissant; diaspora; balikbayan box; Marcelo H. del Pilar; MIGRANTE International
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including *Banaag at Sika*t (2010). Her scholarly interests include the exploration of how "Western" ideas and literary and critical categories—like the theories of Bertolt Brecht, a major German theatre theoretician and practitioner—have been "refunctioned" in the Philippines and other non-Western contexts. Her international publications have appeared in peer-reviewed journals in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Sweden, Netherlands, South Korea, and Japan. In Europe, herworks have appeared in books and scholarly journals published by Edinburgh University Press, Cambridge University Press, and Oxford University Press.

Introduction

Understood broadly, diaspora is the scattering of people from an established homeland; it is either forced, like refugees, or voluntary, like self-exiles. Filipinos are neither but with millions of Filipinos living and working abroad in the last 50 years, diaspora has been as much borne out of want as out of need to survive. Driven by a range of factors, mostly, by economic opportunities, Filipino diaspora has become a global phenomenon. Understandably, this diasporic will to survive has also had a significant impact on their lives, constituting their cultural identity.[1]

Figure 1. Global flight statistics. (Navigraph user-uploaded illustration, posted online)

1 Yoonet discusses the impact of the Filipino diaspora on cultural identity and ethics, emphasizing how living abroad shapes a unique fusion of Asian and Western values in the modern Filipino workforce. See Yoonet, Balikbayan: The Filipino Diaspora and Its Impact on the Cultural Identity and Work Ethic of Employees Today, www.yoonet.io/insights/balikbayan-the-filipino-diaspora-and-its-impact-on-the-cultural-identity-and-work-ethic-of-employees-today. 20 December. 2024.

Filipino emigration of the inhabitants of what is now known as the Philippine archipelago has a long history. In precolonial times, they traveled to nearby areas, mainland Asia, and Southeast Asia, to actively exchange goods and services with their neighbors in a network of trading partnerships across the islands.[1] During the Spanish colonialism, Filipinos immigrated farther away to Guam, Mexico, Spain, and elsewhere in Europe, as workers, professionals, and students, even as they continued to immigrate to the same neighboring islands, historically.[2]

Records show that the islands of what is now called Mindanao in Southern Philippines had particularly active migratory movements into and out of Indonesia. Farther away, during the American colonial period, Filipino students and workers began migrating to the US even in the early years of occupation so that by 1940, 98,000 Filipinos were already residing in the US. The number could have been bigger had it not been due to the Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1935 which reclassified Filipinos as aliens to discourage Filipino immigration.[3]

Filipino Diasporic Dispersion

Diasporic dispersion is an unmistakable, indeed, obvious, feature of diaspora,

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1 The first recorded Philippine migration dates back to 1417, when Sultan Paduka Batara led a mission to China to enhance trade relations. For details, see "Batara, Sultan Paduka," *GeoCities*, www.geocitiessites.com/sinupan/batara.htm. 27 December 2024. See also “607th Anniversary of Ancient Sulu King’s Visit to China Commemorated.” Philippine News Agency. https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1233582. September 17, 2024. 28 December 2024.

2 Under Spanish rule in the 18th century, Manila maintained trade relations with Acapulco, which started the migration of Filipino seafarers to Mexico. Following the migration to Mexico, Filipino seafarers started settlements in Louisiana while other Filipino migrants were working as fruit pickers in California. At the end of the 19th century, Filipino students, professionals, and exiles migrated to Europe.

3 Large-scale migrations between the Philippines and the United States occurred from 1906 to the 1940s, facilitated by the status of Filipinos as U.S. nationals under American colonization. However, the passage of the Tydings-McDuffie Act in 1934 restricted Filipino migration to only 50 individuals per year. This limitation was paradoxically offset by the U.S. Navy's recruitment of Filipino Americans, who were exempt from these restrictions, to support American military efforts. For more details, see "History of Philippine Migration," *Center for Migrant Advocacy*, www.centerformigrantadvocacy.com/philippine-migration/history-of-philippine-migration/.15 December 2024.

generally.[1] As Figure 1 shows, Filipinos are nearly everywhere on earth. It has been estimated that more than 15 million people reside in 160 countries outside the Philippines. Countries where Filipinos have significant populations are the United States, Canada, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Japan, Australia, Kuwait,Malaysia, Qatar, Singapore, France, Spain, United Kingdom, Hong Kong, Italy, Jordan, and Lebanon. By significant, what is meant is the degree of their ubiquity in these countries is palpable and their presence most felt in terms of impact on the socio-economic life of the host countries. But many Filipinos are also found in Argentina, Australia, Austria, The Bahamas, Bahrain, Belgium, Brazil, Brunei, Canada, China, Cuba, Czech Republic, Denmark, Egypt, Faroe Islands, Fiji, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Guam, Hong Kong, Iceland, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Kuwait, Sabah, Luxembourg, Macau, Malaysia, Maldives, Micronesia, Monaco, Morocco, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, and many more. It is said that if you light up all the dots on a globe pointing to countries with Filipinos in them, the globe will light up brighter than a Christmas tree. Needless to say, the Filipinos who have ended up living diasporic lives repeatedly or for long periods, are no longer the same people as the ones who left the country for the first time.[2]

Indeed, the term from Edouard Glissant that comes to mind to describe such a migratory phenomenon across the globe is “errantry”—described broadly as the nomadic wandering of a people whose encounters and new experiences have shaped

1 Over a million Filipinos leave the country each year to live and work abroad. Diaspora is historically associated with the idea of dispersion, the scattering of people away from their homeland; hence, the idea of centrifugal force away from home. But diaspora is also about the centripetal force of returning home. In this paper, they are both parts of the diasporic narrative, inextricable from each other because the Filipino diaspora is undergirded by the two forces, rendered meaningful by the diasporic “balikbayan”—both situational and aspirational.

2 The translation of the term *errance,* as discussed in Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation,* highlights its nuanced meaning. While *errance* is commonly translated as "wandering," the term "errantry" is deemed more fitting for Glissant's context. This translation aligns with previous interpretations of Aimé Césaire’s works. For Glissant, *errance* is neither linear like the trajectory of an arrow nor circular and repetitive like the nomad's path. Instead, it embodies a sense of purposeful, sacred movement, as opposed to aimless roaming. See Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1997, p. 211.

their lives.[1] Evidently, such errantry has, in fact, become constitutive of the identity formation of the diasporic Filipino.

Apart from women domestic helpers who dot the globe, Filipino sailors are illustrative of the diasporic Filipinos' tangled routes on and between land and water. The Philippines is the largest supplier of seafarers in the world. They serve the top fleets from Greece, China, Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong, and the Philippines, including merchant fleets, oil tankers, general cargo, container ships, passenger chips, and liquefied natural gas tankers. Name the global space, the Filipino sailors are there in place. In fact, it is said that Filipinos are preferred on cruise ships in particular because they are able to adapt to different cultures and languages, love to explore new cultures and meet diverse people, and experience the world firsthand.[2] With such a culture underpinned by what may be called a "diasporic spirit," Filipino seafarers have been praised in the media for being ideal workers in international crews. Indeed, the Filipinos' experience in centuries of seafaring has served them well.[8]

Figure 2. Philippine travelers' global flight routes.
(Philippine Airlines Flight Route Map, posted online)

1 However, a study provides a contrasting perspective on the lives of Filipino seafarers, emphasizing the harsh realities of their experiences at sea. According to Thelma B. Magcuro, "Contrary to the common belief that seafarers live a privileged life, the truth is they are one of the most vulnerable groups of workers. They are exposed to the physical dangers of life at sea, unscrupulous ship masters, and a life of boring routine and constant loneliness. It is a life of severe peril and exertion." See Magcuro, Thelma B., "Filipino Seafarers: How Are They Faring? (A Situationer)," *Philippine Journal of Social Development*, vol. 2, 2010, p. 23, www.cswcd.upd.edu.ph/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/PJSD-Vol-2-2010_Magcuro.pdf.

2 "Clues of advanced ancient technology found in the Philippines and Island Southeast Asia," *Business Mirror*. If verified, this discovery attests to the long tradition of seafaring in the islands. https://businessmirror.com.ph/2025/02/21/clues-of-advanced-ancient-technology-found-in-the-philippines-and-island-southeast-asia/

Visually heuristic of this kind of errantry is the image of plane routes over a world map, crisscrossing distances with markers from point to point glowing in sparks ("tilamsik"). As suggested by Figure 2, which traces the flights of Philippine Airlines, the country's flag carrier, if one imagines the plane routes in the image as Filipino overseas workers flying to and fro, going abroad for work, and coming back to the Philippines for family, literally, one sees dynamic, if also somewhat disorienting, movements happening simultaneously. Indeed, only a strong diasporic disposition could adapt to this kind of synchronic spacial multiplicity. Such multiple mobilities mark the shifts in space as well as transformations in identity in relation to others in mutual constitution, affecting the limits of their lives every day. In the maze of comings and goings across oceans, their diasporic imaginary has learned to envision a future of freedom.

A close look at the imagined world map shows that the "place" of home-and-not-home lies in the diasporic relation between spaces and across spaces, marking repatriative trajectories. For example, from their homeland (Place 1), the diasporic Filipinos go to Italy where they have initially found work as caregivers (Place 2) and stay there for a contract of two-three years. Then, they go home as *balikbayan* or repatriate (Place 3) until they learn of a vacancy in the UK as a nanny that pays better and so decides to live there for several years (Place 4), or depending on the employment contract, which is often short-term. Then, they return home as *balikbayan* again upon the end of that contract (Place 5). After a couple of months' vacation, they are back "in flight," having found a job as domestic helpers in the United Arab Emirates, or maybe Korea, drivers in Hong Kong (Place 6), *ad infinitum*.[1] A similar "itinerary" happens to millions of overseas contract workers, crossing over each other sometimes in really quick overlapping succession like a zigzag zipper mass.

As the image suggests, there are numerous dots indicating relational routes on the world map, wrapping all around the globe in sparks, through all their dispersions, dislocations, and displacements, the routes enmeshed in interlocking directions, rooted but not quite, akin to Deleuzian roots. Note the contingent trajectory of flows of errantry of the diasporic Filipino on the map, crisscrossing places across spaces in multiple and mixed trajectories in which the identity of one is contingent upon another across entangled departures, arrivals, transits, and transfers at layover points. On the map are indirect connections where departure

1 "Place" is generally understood to mean a located space where identity and sense of rootedness are shaped for an individual or a community, as opposed to space which is physical, yet abstract and open, implying mobility.

destination points are relative to any other intermediate points, contingent upon routes.

Associative of Edouard Glissant's errantry here is his principle of "poetics" of relation in which the rhizomatic network characterizing archipelagic thought involves a multiplicity of vantages from which, in effect, one recognizes one's own otherness.[1] Drawing from Glissant, this is what might be called the archipelagic orientation: the tangled routes enabling the recognition of one's islandness only upon one's awareness of an other—of the next island here and the next one there, and so on.

From this perspective, as in the case of Filipino seafarers, their sense of dwelling in ships is situated in principle both in place and in space—across the oceans and under the skies—at once fixed and located in place and but equally mobile, enduring, and ephemeral in space. As illustrated by the case of the Filipino domestic helpers, dwelling is that space between departure and arrival and between being rooted and uprooted—a home-not-home that offers both possibilities and limits, while nonetheless constituting the dynamic of identity formation in errantry. It is in the dialectic of this movement that produces the errantry's poetics.[2]

Diasporic Critique: Errantry in Dispersion, Dislocation, and Displacement

The complexity of Philippine diasporic culture as represented in literature and film, in particular, is marked by an attention to multiple movements and directions constituted by what I have referred to above to as "sparks" and "trajectories" in undertaking what may be called a "diasporic critique." It is a mode of analysis consisting of the examination of the social, cultural and economic forces and contradictions that are inscribed in literary and cultural texts that perpetuate

1 Glissant's Poetics of Relation is understood as the encounter of multiple vantage points in mutual recognition of each other without domination because "in Relation every subject is an object, and every object is a subject." *Poetics of Relation* by Edouard Glissant. Trans Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997. p. xx.

2 In Glissant's use, an important dimension of the term "errantry" is the opposite of rootedness. He says, for example, "The Caribbean is a land of rootedness and of errantry." *Poetics of Relation* by Edouard Glissant. Trans Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997. p. 211.

inequalities specifically in the world of Filipinos in diaspora.[1]

Following the mobile and relational language of Glissant's poetics in *Poetics of Relation*, errantry, in "diasporic critique" foregrounds the dynamics of dispersion, dislocation/displacement in all their combinations and contradictions. However, a "diasporic critique" is not just about logic, reasoning, and argumentation; it is as much philosophy as poetry, at once factual and figurative, skidding from one to the other in a poetics of mobility.

Illustrative of figurative dispersion, dislocation and displacement in literature and literary studies, is the errantry of "parody." *Dasalan at Tocsohan* (Prayers and Jokes) by Marcelo H. del Pilar, one of the leaders of the Propaganda Movement (roughly between 1880 and 1895) is a compilation of prayers in what are referred to as "parodies." It was published in 1888 when he was in Barcelona, the prayers-turned-jokes in the compilation were critical of the Spanish friars and the colonial government's abuses. Del Pilar was the founding editor of the Tagalog-Spanish newspaper *Diariong Tagalog* (1882) and co-publisher of *La Solidaridad* (1889), the newspaper of the Propaganda Movement published in Spain.

A collection of parodies which came out in loose pamphlets, *Dasalan at Tocsohan* was a series of formal dispersions, dislocations, and displacements across textual and discursive conventions, using the format of a Catholic prayer book to

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1 In diasporic dispersion, the complex movements implied are centrifugal and centripetal. One movement manifesta in, for lack of a better term, the centrifugal splash of *kislap* (sparks) as figures thrown off the "map," leaving traces between points of departure and arrival. The other movement is the centripetal *tilapon* (trajectory) in the language of tropes of home-not home, using familiar motifs in old Tagalog films and radio soap operas, structuring their narratives, where the "story" itself lies not in the two points but in-between. *Kislap* and *tilapon* heuristically function as figurations of a migratory movement, representing the bursting into the global scene of formerly colonized people from the different parts of the globe now "colonizing" the homes of their former colonizers, cooking their food, washing their clothes, cleaning their houses, and taking care of their children, some of whom now speak with Filipino accent—"marginal' peoples—that accent that speaks of a dream of a possible brilliance of their future.

parody Spanish creeds and catechetical dogmas, that ridiculed the friars.[1]

Rhetoric of repatriation

Parody or "parodia" goes back to ancient Greek literature, referring to a narrative

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1 *Dasalan at Tocsohan,* published in 1888*,* is said to be jointly authored by Marcelo H. del Pilar, Pedro Serrano Laktaw, and Rafael Enriquez. The Ten Comandments is a prayer parodied in the compilation in Tagalog. Following the Tagalog original is the English translation.
Parody of "Ang Sampung Utos ng Diyos" (The Ten Commandments**)**
1. I, the Lord, am your God. You shall not have any other gods besides me.
2. You shall not take the name of the Lord, your God, in vain.
3. Remember to keep holy the Sabbath day.
4. Honor your father and mother.
5. You shall not kill.
6. You shall not commit adultery.
7. You shall not steal.
8. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
9. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife.
10. You shall not covet your neighbor's good.
The Greatest Commandment
You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole soul, with your whole mind.
You shall love your neighbor as yourself.
Ang Manga Utos Nang Fraile
Ang manga utos nang Fraile ay sampo:
Ang nauna: Sambahin mo ang Fraile na lalo sa lahat.
Ang icalaua: Huag cang mag papahamac manuba nang ngalang deretsos.
Ang icatlo: Manalanguin ca sa Fraile Domingo man at fiesta.
Ang icapat: Isangla mo ang catauan mo sa pagpapalibing sa ama't ina,
Ang icalima: Huag cang mamamatay cung uala pang salaping pang libing.
Ang icanim: Huag cang maquiapid sa kanyang asaua.
Ang icapito: Huag cang maquinacao.
Ang icaualo: Huag mo silang pagbibintangan, cahit ca masinungalingan.
Ang icasiyam: Huag mong ipag cait ang iyong asaua.
Ang icapulo: Huag mong itangui ang iyong ari.
Itong sampong utos nang Fraile'I dalaua ang quinaoouian.
Ang isa: Sambahin mo ang Fraile lalo sa lahat.
Ang icalaua: Ihayin mo naman sa caniya ang puri mo't cayamanan. Siya naua.
The Commandments of the Friar
The friar's commandments are ten:
The first: Adore the Fraile above all.
The second: Don't insult people in the name of straightness.
The third: Pray to Fraile Domingo at the fiesta.
The fourth: Pledge your property to bury your father and mother,
The fifth: Don't die without funeral money.
The sixth: Don't cheat on your wife.
The seventh: Don't steal along with him.
The eighth: Don't accuse them, you might be lied to.
The ninth: Don't cheat on your wife.
The tenth: Don't touch your genitals.
The ten commandments of the Friar, ultimately lead to two:
One: Worship the Fraile above all.
Second: Offer him your praise and riches. Amen.

poem imitating the style and prosody of epics which Filipino intellectuals, writers, and artists like del Pilar or Graciano Lopez Jaena, who studied in Spain, knew only too well. Today, parody is also associated with forms like pastiche, skit, and burlesque, and in its subtler iteration, it is akin to "irony." These styles or techniques, as conventionally understood, are all of Western origin, the aesthetic taste for which was mainly acquired from centuries of colonial education under Spain, and then of the United States.

At times verging on the satirical, del Pilar's "prayers" in the compilation imitate familiar Catholic prayers such as the "Hail Mary" or "Our Father" in a distinctly humorous way through the deployment of rhetorical word-play, linguistic displacement, and semantic substitution. In places, the lines seem like comic spoofs. But published in the late 19th century within the most oppressive last decades of the Spanish colonial era, these imitative "prayers" move one notch funnier, even more biting than satire, as the tone turns nearly burst into sarcasm.

To illustrate: In the prayer, "Hail Mary," the first line goes, "Hail Mary, Full of Grace…" In Tagalog, that line is correctly translated as, "Aba Ginoong Maria, Napupuno ka ng grasya…" In del Pilar's parody, however, "Napupuno" (full) becomes "nakapupuno" (able to fill). Two strategic linguistic, verbal, and rhetorical shifts are employed in this word play: first, a prefix is added ("naka"), changing the adjective into a verb ("napupuno" versus "nakapupuno"), implying a subject doing the stealing, which is not in the original, implying an object only; and second, when "grasya" (grace) is changed to "alkansya" (piggy bank), what results is the line's refiguration from the invocation of spiritual "grasya" to the evocation of materialistic "alkansya," transforming the text from the prescriptive singular meaning inscribed by the frailocracy to a dispersive, interpretive plenitude. The substitution ironically links together the two words through the rhyme pattern of their last two syllables but as it does also implicitly juxtaposes them with the inscription of opposite meanings. The substitution, displacement, and re-figuration alone have changed the tone of the line from mere parodic imitation to a biting critique. What this apparently quick verbal trick is able to accomplish is to introduce an anti-colonial practice that deftly reduces the value of something supposedly holy or spiritual to one that is monetary and materialistic. This literary practice and critical strategy deployed by del Pilar would prove to be useful later in postcolonial criticism.

Overall, the stylistic and tonal shifts in Pilar's parody were meant to produce mockery or insult, assuming that the readers are aware of the object (and subject) of imitation. Del Pilar's parody crosses the comedic line when it makes a strong critical commentary that is embedded in the imitation itself. Moreover, the parody slides across conventions as it turns into a satire while still drawing from the original "prayer," in which the parody becomes the medium for a piercing criticism about larger issues which would no longer be narrowly religious and catechetical but tactically political and strategically emancipatory. Finally, what is satirical in del Pilar's parody turns sarcastic when verbal tone, generic techne, and reformist intention combine in a way that what is comedic is now meant to sting with utter and unmistakable contempt.

Del Pilar's "parody" is all of that, albeit its radical edge owes to its expansion of the foreign form through its local inflection. Its potency emerges from a textual push-and-pull or linguistic coming--and-going at that precise moment of recognition in which while the original—that pious, foreign colonial text—wrestles identity away from the colonized people, the imitative, comedic, decolonizing parodic voice of the "native" struggles to regain it.

The decolonizing textual process deploying parody is repatriative in the aesthetic movement of the parody and the anti-colonial attitude of the critique. At the repatriative moment of "striking back," the "prayers" is by turns satirical, sarcastic, and funny for which del Pilar's parodic criticism of the colonial order dominated by the friars would come down in the Philippine literary history as the most damning yet, alongside Rizal's novels.[1] This is the dynamic of contrapuntal forces in Glissant's errantry of hybridity or creolization rearing its emancipatory head of the literary kind during the Spanish colonial regime in the Philippines, as early as 1888.

In this Philippine example though, hybridity, has at least two sides: one faces the past (in the parody, this refers to the old text, the original, and the other faces the future (the imitation, in its new hybridized and refunctioned form) owing to the formal, textual encounter between the colonizer and the colonized. Imposed by one, refunctioned by the other, undermined is the authenticity of the friar's voice (standing in for "God" as well as the State) as implied by the original text through the insertion of the Other in the very act of parodying in the mode of activist

1 In Jose Rizal's novel, *Noli MeTangere* (1887), the main protagonist is named Crisostomo Ibarra, a Filipino-Spanish mestizo who returns to the country after studying in Europe for a few years in order to undertake reforms by building a school in his hometown. His second novel, El Filibusterismo (1891) is the sequel of the first whose main character, Crisostomo Ibarra, is now disguised as "Simoun." The purpose of his return is no longer to undertake reforms but to foment a revolution.

intervention.[1]

The power of the hybrid in del Pilar's "prayers" is evident in commandment number seven of the Ten Commandments, which says, "You shall not steal." In Tagalog translation, it is "Huwag kang magnakaw." But in del Pilar's parody, a simple, everyday prefix, "maki," is added so the line now goes, "Huwag kang makinakaw." The prefix "maki" means to join or take part in, as in "makisama" ((for example, to get along in order to become part of a gang) or "makihalubilo" (for example, to socialize with the members of a clique) like members of a band of thieves. The addition of the prefix "maki" to "nakaw" (steal), spins around the meaning to point to a thief who is so rapacious that he does the stealing solo so he could keep all the loot to himself.

By underscoring the dialectic tension between the original and the imitation, the parody transforms into a diasporic critique itself in which "the empire writes back," impelled by the imaginary's emancipatory desire for a better *Las Islas Filipinas*. As in the nature of parodies, *Dasalan and Tocsohan*'s power lies in the tension that develops in the movement between the reader's knowledge of the original text and its parody, the shuttling back and forth from word to word and back, line by line, producing a hybrid text – the "contact zone."[2]

What takes place is a kind of metaphorical repatriation where the text of the original looks similar yet different in places as it turns and returns, in the process,

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1 Attributed to Homi K. Bhabha, the term "hybridity" refers to the "Third Space of Enunciation" in which two or more cultures mix and interact in a mutual constitution, influencing each other to create an international culture made up of people with a shared identity in the in-between space. It is a controversial term because, among other reasons, it assumes a world of equality and is not dominated by a few powerful forces protecting their own vested interest. Hybridity's double-discourse is constituted between colonialism and the post-colonialism. As hybridity is deployed in the example of M.H. del Pilar's parody, hybridity is Janus-faced, with its colonial face representing the original and the parody representing resistance to domination, facing the post-colonial future. However, critics have warned against the use of the term hybridity in contemporary cultural discourse because of its historical association with racial categories of the past with racist implications.

2 Mary Louise Pratt considers parody as one of the arts of critique or one of "the literate arts of the contact zone. By this, parody becomes one of the social spaces where cultures meet, class and grapple with each other, of ten in contexts of asymmetrical relations of power." p. 37.

She draws from ethnographer's term, "transculturation," to refer to processes "whereby members of subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture." p. 36.

Pratt, Mary Louise. "Arts of the Contact Zone." *Profession*, (1991) pp. 33-40 Published by: Modern Language Association: http://www.jstor.org/stable/25595469.

transforming a prayer into its spectre, its parody. In the parody—the very contact zone of the foreign and the native, the colonizer and the colonized—the set of commandments self-destructs even as the parody builds a new one, emerging from a palimpsest of meanings inscribed in the linguistic and rhetorical shifts.[1]

Glissant refers to the imaginary as "all the ways a culture has of perceiving and conceiving of the world" which might be read upon the layers of figures and figurations in the parodic play which might be instructive to a diasporic critique for the present context.[2] Today, the diasporic experience is potentially poetic in the sense described above but also political, at once driven and inspired by an image of the world so unlike the one that the diasporic Filipinos have left back "home" and the world they have encountered. Still, they long for a home that makes the idea of repatriation richly meaningful. Anticipatory of the "new" world waiting for them in the host country, yet equally wary of its failed promises, constituting the tension that both connects and separates relational subjects in errantry, a process of diasporic repatriation which is a function of the experience of dispersion, dislocation, and displacement—the embodiment of the Filipino OCWs, Overseas Contract Workers (Figure 3).

Figure 3. *Hong Kong OFW packs her* balikbayan *box right beside the shop that will deliver the item to her home in the Philippines. (*Sunday Beauty Queen*, Voyage Studios, Tuko Film Productions, Buchi Boy Films, 2016, screen capture)*

1 In the case of these prayers, parody constitutes a layer of the decolonizing palimpsest whose radical edge is enabled by yet another layer in translation in which the principle of equivalence between languages underpinning conventional tradition theory is rejected. This rejection is the springboard for the subversive parodic effect.

2 Glissant, Edouard. *Poetics of Relation.* Translated by Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: The U of Michigan P, 1997, p. 18-19.

In Philippine history particularly in the case of del Pilar and his works, the Filipino's anti-racist, anti--obscurantist and reformist struggle for representation in the Spanish Cortes would meet its downfall with the execution of Jose Rizal; but shortly after, the revolutionary movement struggling for independence would rise through the sheer power of conviction of the Katipunan. Inspired by nationalism and the Enlightenment's promise, the triumphant revolution would be soon followed by a betrayal with the violent and treacherous American Occupation of the islands.[1]

Diasporic Critique: The Subject/Object in Repatriation

Figure 4. *LBC Estill Springs boxes. (Kristine's Filipino Goodies,* Facebook *page) Balikbayan*

Indeed, in the contemporary world, the most emblematic of errantry is the diasporic Filipino working class overseas, specifically, the *balikbayan* (repatriate) and their globally ubiquitous *balikbayan* boxes shown in Figure 4.

As suggested by the global map discussed above, overseas contract workers travel away from home in dynamic mobilities of centrifugal splash of sparks ("tilamsik") only to return home one day in the centripetal trajectory ("tilapon") of the *balikbayan*. The trajectory is a back-and-forth movement of the repatriate, the returning resident, or the "returnee" coming home, whether permanently or not. Diasporic repatriation of Filipinos is a narrative of errantry that unfolds as *kislap* and *tilapon* in time and space.

The main idea that "balikbayan" carries concerns Filipinos who come back

1 This refers to the Philippine Islands, as the Philippines was called "Las Islas Filipinas" in honor of King Philip II of Castile.

to visit family, celebrate holidays, or reconnect with their roots "back home." Underlying such returns is a sense of nostalgia and a desire to reconnect with one's home and heritage or, upon the end of the contract with a former employer, only to await a new one with another elsewhere in the globe. In this sense, it also means a hiatus, a temporal in-between in the dialectic of dwellings that gives diasporic space both a sense of philosophical abstraction and renders diasporic place an archipelagic concreteness.

Indeed, a prominent theme in Philippine literary tradition revolves around repatriation, *pagbabalik sa bayan* ("the return to nation") in which the main characters in literary texts are the repatriates, the *balikbayan*. The national hero, Jose Rizal, in his life and works, represented the Filipino repatriate. He lived and studied in Europe for years and so did the main characters of his famous novels, *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*, Ibarra and Simoun respectively. Both suffered out of their desire to serve the country; one to undertake reform, and the other to wage a revolution. Indeed, many Tagalog films revolve around the loves and lives of the *balikbayan*.[1]

Predictably, the narrative of today's balikbayans are told by government institutions, overseas employment agencies, and the media, wrestling away the term's real meaning today from the balikbayans themselves. Filipino students are told in the classroom that the overseas contract workers are heroes because of their

1 Among the numerous films about the lives of Filipino overseas contract works films abroad and repatriates are: *Miss X* (1980), '*Merika* (1984); *Birds of Prey* (1988); *Minsan May Pangarap* (1995); *Barcelona* (2006); with *Bukas...May Pangarap* (1984) and *Homecoming* (2003) about returnees - all by *Gil Portes. Pinay, American Style* (1979) & *Waikiki* (1980), with *Otso* (2013) about a returnee - all by Elwood Perez, *The Secrets of Sarah Jane: Sana'y Mapatawad Mo* (1994); *Minsan, May Isang Ina* (1983) by Maryo J. de los Reyes, *The Flor Contemplacion Story* (1995), *The Sarah Balabagan Story* (1997), *Migrante* (2012), with *Isa Pang Bahaghari* (2020) and *Lockdown* (2021) about returnees, by Joel Lamangan, *Ang Bagong Bayani* (1995) by Tikoy Aguiluz, *Inagaw Mo ang Lahat sa Akin* (1995) has a returnee character; by Carlos Siguion-Reyna, *May Nagmamahal sa Iyo* (1996) by Marilou Diaz-Abaya, *Milan* (2004) and *Barcelona: A Love Untold* (2016) by Olivia M. Lamasan, *Caregiver* (2008) with *Signal Rock* (2018) featuring returnees by *Chito S. Roño, Sunday Beauty Queen* (2016) by Baby Ruth Villarama, *Kita Kita* (2017) by Sigrid Andrea Bernardo.

sacrifices for the country, evoking the memory of the national hero.[1] They are called "mga bayani ng bayan" (the country's heroes) in direct allusion to the national hero, Jose Rizal, appropriating his patriotic deeds and justifying the continued exploitation of Filipino labor abroad while corrupt state functionaries and employment agencies make money out of them.

Repatriation is a process that occurs when people—balikbayans—return to their home country after living, or working abroad. For example, when the contract of the overseas contract workers is up, they may decide to return home in the interim between contracts. Interestingly, in finance, the term repatriation refers to the conversion or exchange of foreign currency into someone's home currency; in this sense, human labor converts into a kind of "currency translation."

It is common knowledge that the remittances of the balikbayans add substantially to the country's income even as they also line the pockets of corrupt government officials and greedy private agencies alike, on top of bleeding the overseas contract workers dry from the processing of applications in the country to compliance with protocols upon their arrival in the host country abroad. Such global and local injustice and inequality are inscribed in the experience of Filipino diaspora. But such injustice is simply assumed, par for the course, where repatriation is both physical and psychical, in the phantasm of home away from home. Especially in the first years of exporting Filipino workers as government policy, many poor Filipinos from the rural areas were compelled to sell their carabaos and farms to be able to

1 An example of a student's essay about "Bayani ng Bayan" is copied below: "Overseas Filipino Workers are truly considered as the Bagong Bayani ng Bayan today because of their hard work, sacrifices, and working ethics that make them strong and stand still. Working abroad is such difficult work to do; you have to be away from your family and children, you are working for a foreign people, and you have to immediately adapt to the new environment because if not, you will find it very hard and cruel. They are not only working for some money reason, but they also represent the Philippines working in foreign countries. It signifies and describes the hardworking Filipinos around the world. They are considered economic heroes of the country because of their significant contribution to the growth of the Philippine economy. Continued growth in OFW remittances would support recovery in consumer spending, which accounts for nearly 70 percent of the economy, as well as supporting recovery of the country's GDP (gross domestic product)." www.coursehero.com/file/127081207/Overseas-Filipino-Workers-are-truly-considered-as-the-Bagong-Bayani-ng-Bayan-today-because-of-their/.

work abroad and return to their hometown eventually as *balikbayan*.[1]

Repatriation is a function of the experience of dispersion, dislocation, and displacement—the cultural logic of neoliberal globalization under which international labor mobility has increased while levels of exploitation and deregulation have accelerated. For the Filipino repatriate, home is as much an imagined space as a physical place, marked by repeated ambivalent departures and ambiguous arrivals, both meaningless without each other. Before leaving the country, they ask themselves: What for do I have to leave home? And when they return, they ask: What for do I have to stay home? The stakes are not only about a question of identity in relation to others but also one that is implicated in their battle for survival—between life and death.

In a Filipino balikbayan's mind, the issue is as much about just ensuring that there is a place for everyone at the table in a globalized world as it is about fighting to be sure that there is food on the table. It is not surprising that Filipino overseas contract workers often complain about receiving a measly pay for being treated like sub-humans abroad by their employers; so what might be surprising for some people is why they keep going back there knowing they would receive the same inhuman treatment anyway.

The drama of errantry warrants time, but it also takes place in space, a material and metaphorical one. The narrative of a number of Philippine literary and cultural texts, including films about Filipinos in diaspora, begins with a wish to go abroad that is equaled only by the wish to return as *balikbayan,* only to leave and return again, and again, from somewhere else. Like many OCWs from Indonesia, Vietnam, Bangladesh and so on, the Philippines' complex post-colonial archipelagic "repeating

1 Interestingly, repatriation also refers to the return of stolen or looted cultural materials to their countries of origin. The balikbayan program's history is summarized below: "In the 1970s former President Ferdinand Marco institutionalized a policy to encourage emigration to stimulate the economy. While these policies were aimed to be of a temporary nature, labor migration has been steadily increasing since. High unemployment and poor living standards combined with a government policy of emigration encouraged thousands of Filipinos to seek employment overseas. In 1972, former President Marcos imposed Martial Law leading to the exile of political opponents. The political, social and economic uncertainty under the martial law rule of President Marcos pushed opponents and middle class Filipinos to leave the country. Economic development in Asian neighbouring countries, the emergence of the Gulf region after the oil crisis, and the change in immigration policies of destination countries further stimulated migration. Even after the ousting of President Marcos, the Philippine government remained increasingly reliant on remittances. While the current administration refutes migration as a development strategy, it cannot deny its dependency on it." https://centerformigrantadvocacy.com/philippine-migration/history-of-philippine-migration/

islands" is home-not-home as depicted by Filipino films.[1]

In literary and filmic texts, the Filipino construction worker in the Middle East or the domestic helpers in Italy or the entertainer in Japan or the English teacher in Korea, always morph from the *balikbayan* (if they return alive) and a *balikbayan* box (if they return dead), at once unremarkably nondescript yet distinctly recognizable.

Balikbayan Box

Figure 5. *Artist's rendering of a typical* balikbayan *box. (Balikbayan Box Movement,* Facebook *page)*

1 The Philippine government's Balikbayan Program covers so many countries such as: Angloa, Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, Australia, Audtria, Bahamas, Bahrain, Barbados, Belize, Brazil, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Costa Rica, Czech Republic, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Estonia, Fiji, Finland, France, Greece, Grenada, Guyana, Honduras, Hungary, Iseland, Indonesia, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea, Kuwait, Lietchtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Madagascar, Malaysia, Maldives, Mali, Malta, Marshall Islands, Muritania, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Norway, PalauPanama, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Qatar, Romania, Russia, Saudi Arabi, Senegal, Singapore, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Solomon Islands, South Africa, Spain, Suriname, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand, Tunisia, Turkey, UK, US, Vatican, Venezuela, Vietnam, among others. https://centerformigrantadvocacy.com/philippine-migration/history-of-philippine-migration/ Many studies have shown how balikbayans play a central role in the economic development of the Philippines. One that focuses on the balikbayans from the US is "Migrant Returns: The Transnational Migration of Filipinos, Ambivalence, and the Production of Balikbayan Economy" by Eric John Pido. Dissertation, Ethnic Studies, Grad School, University of Berkeley, 2011.

Indeed, a *balikbayan* is nothing without a *balikbayan* box (literally "repatriate box") because *balikbayan* and the *balikbayan* box stand for and with each other like twin stars floating in the sky. In the Filipino imaginary, the *balikbayan,* is by definition, one who brings or sends home *balikbayan* boxes full of gifts. *Balikbayan* boxes are corrugated boxes full of a variety of items sent by overseas Filipinos (known as balikbayans) which are often shipped by freight forwarders or brought by Filipinos returning to the Philippines by air, as shown in Figure 5. Said to be a billion-dollar industry that alleviates the homesickness of Filipinos overseas, in the popular imagination, it has become a symbol of Filipinos working or living abroad whose income feeds family members, buys a house, helps extended family members, and sends their children to school. Having made it back home, they are said to have "made it abroad."

The *balikbayan* box is not just an object; rather, it's an object that is a subject, like a family member who comes home to warmly and cheerfully maintain the connections between home and not home. Balikbayans bring to their family and friends assorted gifts from abroad when they return, called the *pasalubong* (presents). Gift-giving is a deep-seated trait of Filipinos,, whether they are together or apart; as such, the *balikbayan* box is the figurative tie that binds dear lives that have been factually torn apart by globalization. As an article about the *balikbayan* box on the internet says, "This is the Filipino way. You can't go home without a box."[1]

Indeed, when one thinks of the global map with balikbayans flying all over the world, one also imagines images of "moving" boxes against immobile places. Drawing from Glissant, this box constitutes the world of the transnational Filipino repatriate, the embodiment of the sense of home that they have known in diaspora,

1 *Pasalubong* is a specific type of gift or present given in the practice of gift-giving that is embedded in the culture of reciprocity of Filipinos. The *balikbayan* box which is full of *pasalubong*, is said to symbolize love and care from relatives and loved ones living abroad, temporarily or permanently. They usually contain clothes, toys, and gadgets to give away—a gift-giving practice within the culture of reciprocity. Shyong, Frank. "Must Reads: These boxes are a billion-dollar industry of homesickness for Filipinos overseas." Los Angeles Times, 28 April, https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-balikbayan-boxes-20180428-htmlstory.html

mobile outside, yet immobile inside—the errantry, that is the Filipino diaspora.[1]

It is also the world from which they envision a future diasporically, the possibilities offered by the promise in the splash of sparks on the map—that explosion onto the contemporary scene of "marginal' peoples out of their impoverished country. Today, they have imaginary images of the hoped-for brilliance of prosperity in the future as they labor.

Finally, often, boxes of this kind are called in full—"balikbayan boxes"—by the recipients back home. But sometimes, they are just called "the box" by the balikbayans themselves (or alternatively, the "balikbayan") so coined by abbreviation like a nickname of a person in an odd sense of displacement and substitution, between object and the subject, the thing and the person, as if the words are interchangeable, as the commodified body of the *balikbayan* translates into the *balikbayan box* with its content carefully measured in cash.

Figure 6. *An entertainer's remains arrive at the airport for her family to pick up. (*Maricris Sioson: Japanyuki*, Regal Films, 1993, screen capture)*

1 The award-wining Tagalog short story, "Arrividerci," by Fanny A. Garcia is one of the first fictional texts by a canonical author in the Philippines to have tackled the tension in the lives of overseas contract workers, caught between the promise to the world's working class like Filipino women domestic helpers, which is at once given and withdrawn by globalization. Promised the freedom of the stars in the dream of diaspora, they awaken to tiny cubicles in which they are made to stay in the residence of their employers. At the core of its narrative aesthetic is a repetition of space-implying movements, both space-permitting and space-constricting ones. It is the space between home-and-not home in which the diasporic Filipino tries to endure the oppressive present and persist in dreaming of an emancipated future. As a scholar has remarked, "In this space, untruth becomes complicit with truth in an interlacing of localizing practices and migratory memories in this encounter between the European setting and Filipino narrative in the diaspora." In "Migratory Aesthetics in Diasporic Claustrophobia" by Maria Luisa Torres Reyes. *Mobility Humanities*.Vol. 1, No. 1, January 2022. p. 57.

Mostly, a box contains goodies of *pasalubong*. But sometimes, in fact and in fiction, what the “box” also alludes to is the coffin of an indescribable, dead body of the overseas contract worker returning home. In Tagalog films about balikbayans, this scene or sequence is always, for the local audiences, the most touching part in the narrative as it ends or begins with it.[1] Examples are shown in Figure 6 from a film about the deadly fate a Filipino OCW.

Figure 7. *A daughter breaks down when she realizes that she will no longer be able to welcome her mother home. (*The Taste of Money*, Above the Line Productions, 2012, screen capture)*

News about incidents of death of an overseas contract worker overseas, for reasons known or unknown, appear in Philippine newspapers. Indeed, a number of fiction and film texts today attest to this fact so poignantly and so powerfully for the unjaded because such narratives are familiar if all too repetitively sensationalized by the media.[24] Figure 7 shows the young daughter of a Filipina domestic worker helplessly in tears as the body of her dead mother arrives home from overseas. On the global map referred to above, the “tilamsik” or sparks that we see might as well be the body of a *balikbayan* flying all across the skies—alive but deadened, or dead. The “tilapon” or trajectory is unmistakable: diasporic Filipino leaves for abroad alive and well but returns home either dead or dying.

1 The short story “Arrividerci” by Fanny A. Garcia ends with the main character’s dead body being sent back home by friends to the Philippines from Italy, where she worked as a domestic helper. *Dandaang Damit:16 na maiiling kuwento*. University of the Philippines Press, 2007. pp. 160-186. Similar scenes begin or end in films like *Maricris Sioson Story: Japayuki*, 1993, directed by Joey Romero, which is about a 17-year-old Filipino entertainer in Japan. The Korean film, *Taste of Money*, 2012, directed by Im Sang-soo, is about a Filipino maid of a rich family in Korea.

Conclusion

It is for this reason that non-government organizations have sprung up to protect, support, and assist Filipino contract workers. This phenomenon has been depicted in films, particularly in "The Flor Contemplacion Story" (1995), about a Filipino domestic helper in Singapore who was accused of murdering her fellow domestic helper and her employer's son. This incident exposed what the media described as the Philippines government's neglect, inaction, and inability to assist its own citizens who send remittances with their own blood to keep the economy afloat. Out of similar incidents emerged non-government organizations who work to support and assist Filipino overseas contract workers, especially Migrante International. Members and supporters of Migrante-Philippines were said to have even worked with the production of the popular film aboput an overseas contract worker, *Flor Contemplacion*, as consultants and as actors in the film.[1] Figure 8 is a rally organized by MIGRANTE.

Figure 8. August 28, 2015, observed as "Zero Remittance Day." (MIGRANTE Partylist, posted online)

1 With the inability of the government to fully protect the overseas contract workers, non-government organizations have been set up, including MIGRANTE. Migrante is a national formation of community-based organizations of returned migrants, families, and advocates worldwide.

Organizations like MIGRANTE understand that the diasporic errantry symbolized by the *balikbayan* and the *balikbayan* box is a kind of transactional exchange to keep the neoliberal globalization's wheels rolling. Its logic rides on the back of Filipino overseas contract workers' labor as payment for the country's bid for redemption and global capitalism's perpetuation. Figure 9 shows the logo of MIGRANTE-Philippines.

Figure 9. MIGRANTE, a Philippine-registered organization. (Philippine logo)

MIGRANTE works "for a harmonious working cooperation between and among migrant associations around the world as well as work in "solidarity with migrant organizations of other nationalities and peoples who are against the plunder of economies, destruction of the environment and wars of aggression that cause widespread poverty and injustice.”[1] Figure 10 shows the logo of MIGRANTE-International.

Figure 10. MIGRANTE as a founding member of the International Migrants’ Alliance. (International logo)

The repatriation of both the *balikbayan* and the box—that box flying like a bird in

1 Migrante is part of a global alliance of grassroots migrant organizations of overseas Filipinos and their families in 24 countries. They uphold and advance the rights and welfare of overseas contract workers. MIGRANTE addresses campaigns for the institution of government policies and passing laws beneficial to the overseas Filipino contract workers and other related issues affecting the plight of Filipino overseas workers and their families, including climate change, environmental issues, legal assistance, livelihood support programs, and so on. Below is an official leaflet from MIGRANTE: “It was founded in December 1996 after the death of Filipina domestic worker Flor Contemplacion who was hanged in Singapre for allegedly murdering another Filipina domestic worker in 1995. The Flor Contemplacion case aroused wide indignation over the Philippine government’s inaction and failure to save her life and brought to national and international awareness the life and death-situation of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs). Since then, Migrante International has become a defender of the rights and welfare of OFWs by raising public awareness on their plight and providing a critical analysis of the Philippine government’s labor export policy program as the main factor responsible for the countless human rights abuses suffered by OFWs. Migrante International has handled and assisted thousands of welfare and rights cases, including the landmark and record-breaking case of Angelo Dela Cruz who was kidnapped and held hostage in war-torn Iraq in 2004. Migrante International’s quick public information work was able to mobilize thousands of Filipinos into pressuring the government into action. The resounding support for Dela Cruz’s case, both locally and internationally, caused the government to pull out Filipino troops in Iraq, and Dela Cruz was eventually rescued from captivity. Many other battles followed: cases of stranded, detained, and mysterious deaths, rape, and sex trafficking, wage cuts and maltreatment, anti-migrant policies and laws, evacuation in times of war, the plunder and corruption of OFW funds, and the continuing clamor for genuine public service and good governance for OFWs. Through them all, Migrante International has remained steadfast and has earned the trust and respect of OFW families and fellow advocates worldwide. After more than a decade since its establishment, Migrante International continues its consistent and unwavering record of service to OFWs. It now has over 200 member organizations in over 23 countries, making it the biggest organization of overseas Filipinos all over the world.” https://migranteinternational.org/about/

the skies, away from home for the first time contains the *balikbayan*, alive, lively, and enlivened by the imaginary of a better life only to come flying back with wings clipped, dead, or dying. But this *pasalubong* contains either the goodies for Christmas or the dead body of the *balikbayan*. Between these is the diasporic Filipino working class whose errant, spent bodies either anticipate freedom in and through collective action or just feel consigned to lives of diasporic enslavement alongside other errant bodies, other histories, other places, and spaces. Indeed, as Glissant says, a poetics of relation is “nothing other than the search for a freedom within particular surroundings.” In an archipelagic world, if the *balikbayan* box were to be an embodiment of that internationalist imaginary “elsewhere” of which Glissant speaks, then it might just turn out to be the balikbayan’s *pasalubong* in a box. Inside is the *errantry* of the diasporic Filipino repatriate, caught between mobility and stasis under globalization.

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No Common Measure: Lacan, Fanon, and a Non-Western Critique of Neoliberal Identity

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Abstract This essay examines how neoliberal commodification of identity operates through a fantasy of equal exchange that fundamentally misrecognizes the structural dynamics of racial and sexual differences. Drawing on Fanon's analysis of colonial subjectivity and Lacan's theory of sexual difference, I argue that neoliberalism's promise of market-mediated recognition fails precisely because it presupposes a universal exchangeability that colonial and patriarchal orders render impossible. Through an analysis of how political demands for recognition are transformed into market demands for representation, I demonstrate that neoliberal frameworks intensify rather than resolve the paradoxical position of marginalized subjects. The conversion of identity into an entrepreneurial project generates what Lacan terms jouissancea cycle of enjoyment/suffering centered on the constitutive impossibility of achieving recognition through market participation. This theoretical intervention reveals how neoliberalism's presumption of homogeneous exchange conceals fundamental antagonisms that commodification cannot resolve, suggesting that effective resistance must begin by exposing these constitutive contradictions rather than seeking recognition within market logic.
Keywords neoliberalism; identity; Lacan, Fanon; psychoanalysis; resistance; subjectivity; Deleuze and Guattari
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Introduction

Neoliberalism fundamentally reshapes how we understand and experience identity by reframing systemic inequalities as matters of individual choice and responsibility. Under this framework, social problems that were once viewed through the lens of collective action and structural change become issues of personal management and market participation.

Neoliberalism's approach to rights and identity is distinctly market-oriented. Civil rights are increasingly transformed into consumer rights, with solutions to inequality often presented through market-based mechanisms like educational choice and voucher programs. This shift has profound implications for how marginalized groups pursue justice and equality as political demands become reconceptualized as market demands.

The neoliberal emphasis on self-regulation and personal responsibility has transformed identity itself into an entrepreneurial project. Individuals are expected to manage their own risks and outcomes, with success or failure attributed primarily to personal choices rather than structural conditions. This individualization process can weaken collective political mobilization around shared identities, emphasizing individual achievement over group solidarity.

This dynamics create significant tensions between individual empowerment and collective action, market solutions and structural change, and personal responsibility and systemic accountability. While neoliberalism presents itself as offering solutions to identity-based inequalities, it often obscures systemic barriers and structural inequalities, effectively depoliticizing identity-based struggles while reinforcing existing power structures.

The Lacanian framework provides a potent theoretical perspective for interrogating the psychic economy of neoliberal subjectification, particularly concerning the commodification of identity. Through this lens, we can discern how neoliberal ideology operates not merely at the level of political economy but fundamentally structures the psychic landscape of contemporary subjectivity.

The neoliberal articulation of identity can be analyzed through the three registers of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Neoliberalism constructs a scene of self-actualization within the Imaginary order through market participation and self-regulation. This misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) echoes the mirror stage, wherein the subject becomes alienated in an idealized image, perpetually pursuing an impossible wholeness through practices of consumption and self-optimization. The imaginary identification with market-mediated identity positions serves to mask the fundamental split in subjectivity that Lacan identifies as constitutive.

In masking the split in subjectivity, neoliberal discourse affects a profound restructuring of the signifying chain. The Master Signifier of "freedom" becomes evacuated of its radical political potential and is instead articulated within a chain of signification that reduces liberty to market participation. This dismantled symbolic restructuring transforms traditional social bonds into market relations, producing what Lacan might term a "university discourse" that obscures its own ideological operations through appeals to neutral technical knowledge.

However, the anxiety and dissatisfaction that haunt the subject despite perfect market performance point to the impossibility of achieving wholeness through neoliberal prescriptions. The compulsive pursuit of self-improvement and optimization can be understood as a form of jouissanceexcessive enjoyment/sufferings that circle around the constitutive lack of subjectivity without ever filling it.

This Lacanian approach reveals how neoliberal commodification of identity functions as a fantasy structure that simultaneously promises and forecloses the possibility of wholeness, masking the fundamental splits and lacks inherent in subject formation. The "responsibilization" of the individual can thus be read as a symptomatic response to the anxiety of lack, one that paradoxically intensifies rather than resolves the fundamental alienation of the subject.

To interrogate the contradictions embedded within neoliberal mechanisms of identity commodification, this analysis deploys a theoretical framework that synthesizes Fanon and Lacan. By examining the intersecting matrices of sexuality and race through Fanon's creolization of Lacanian theory, we can better understand how colonial/neoliberal power structures both produce and are destabilized by singular forms of subjectivity. Fanon's radical re-articulation of psychoanalytic conceptsparticularly his emphasis on the socio-historical constitution of the unconscious and his theorization of colonial traumaprovides crucial analytical tools for understanding how neoliberal commodification operates at the level of racialized and sexualized identity formation.

This theoretical intervention allows us to examine not only the mechanisms of subjection but also the possibilities for resistance that emerge from the very contradictions inherent in neoliberal processes of identity commodification. By bringing together Fanon's analysis of racial psychology with Lacan's theory of sexual difference, we can better understand how neoliberalism shapes identityand where it might break down. What is revealed is how people are subjected to market forces and how the contradictions in modifying identity create opportunities for resistance.

Humans and Race

I would like to start the discussion by sharing my own experience. It was an after-party event of a lecture organized by a civic organization. The lecture was about

Asian modernity, and there was a lot of discussion about the topics that came up during the lecture. At one point, a man said with a serious look on his face, “Korean women seem to like white men too much these days.” The man was a so-called “woke liberal,” the kind who usually follows political news and gets attentive to critical issues through social media. Immediately, counterarguments came out. They ranged from saying that love has no borders to pointing out that such a view could be racist and misogynistic. The man who first spoke up looked perplexed and said, “We can never be white, can we?”

Maybe this episode is just one of the blips on the radar, but to me, the man’s thoughts did not feel isolated and subjective. The man’s words were not just a reflection of his personal taste or morality. Why did the “woke” say, “We can never be white?” On the surface, this statement seems to be a rejection of “whiteness,” but it is a manifestation of a desire longing for whiteness. Of course, in this case, longing for whiteness means rejecting oneself as a subject who cannot be white.”

At this point, we need to recall Franz Fanon, who preoccupied himself with the question of whiteness comes to mind. Among other things, Fanon argued that the rejection of the white man actually meant revenge against the white female (Fanon 69). Thus, according to Fanon’s logic, a subject who cannot be white can never reject “whiteness.” Fanon’s statement that “what is often called the black soul is a white man’s artifact” proposes the unconscious of the subject, who cannot be white (Fanon 16). To interpret Fanon’s description of “whiteness,” perhaps it can be read to mean that the white man invented the unconscious of the black man. This issue can be further explored through Lacan’s analysis of anxiety (*l’angoisse*).

Fanon’s foundational question “What does the black man want?” deliberately echoes and complicates psychoanalysis’s preoccupation with feminine desire. This parallel interrogation reveals how the ostensibly universal subject of classical psychoanalysis implicitly presupposes whiteness, just as it presupposes masculinity. Yet Fanon’s intervention demonstrates that race is not merely an addition to psychoanalytic theory but rather is already operative within its fundamental logic. By excavating this racial dimension, Fanon radicalizes psychoanalysis, transforming it into a tool for analyzing colonial subjectification.

Fanon’s pioneering contribution lies in his appropriation of Lacanian theory, particularly the mirror stage, to theorize how black subjectivity is constituted through the internalization of whiteness. Fanon’s theoretical move allows us to draw productive parallels between Lacan’s analysis of feminine subjectivity and Fanon’s examination of racial subjectification. Both Lacan and Fanon deal with subjects constituted through their relationship to a dominant symbolic order that simultaneously excludes them.

The question of black desire, or the desire of non-white subjects, can be understood through two crucial observations in Fanon's work. First, the assumption of white superiority structures the entire field of racial relations. Second, the black desire produces a compulsive drive in the black subjects to demonstrate their intellectual and cultural equality to whites (Fanon 12). This dynamic reveals how the supposedly universal category of human is always already racialized because while white subjects can claim this universal position, black subjects find themselves caught in an impossible desire for whiteness itself. The human, purportedly universal, reveals itself as fundamentally particularmarked by both whiteness and masculinity.

This analysis of the relationship between the black desire and the white superiority illuminates how the very structure of desire under colonialism produces an impossible subject position for black individuals: the universal human they are called to become is precisely what excludes them. This paradox parallels Lacan's analysis of feminine desire while introducing the crucial dimension of racial difference.

For Fanon, the only thing more disgusting than a black person who wants to be white is a black person who spreads hatred of whiteness For Fanon, because the two kinds of blackness are sharing a fantasy in the sense that longing for and loathing of whiteness are two sides of the same fantasy. Fantasy is the refusal to acknowledge the fundamental fact that something is lost because we believe that we can always restore it.

Lacan's fantasy formula ($\$ \diamond a$) may be instructive. This means that the subject barred finds itself complicatedly entwined within a circular dynamic with the *objet petit a*, wherein one aspect is shaped by the process of alienation, while the other is delineated by separation, showing how a split subject desires *object a* through its relationship with the signifier. Since the $\diamond$ is a circuit that desires *object a*, it can never fill the void of its absence (*Seminar VIII* 374). Nevertheless, since the absence is something that once belonged to us and then disappeared, we think we can have it again one day. This lost thing that we believe we can restore at any time is an *object a* that does not exist and yet exists. This *object a* appears in the subject's relationship with the Other, the way the subject relates to the Other constitutes the fantasy.

The Black Soul as an Invention of a White Man

If we look at Fanon's proposition from this Lacanian perspective, "whiteness" can never disappear because it is a substitute for blackness. A black person who hates "whiteness" is not so much rejecting "whiteness" as he is enjoying the symptoms of his lack of it. The subject constantly seeks to derive pleasure from the symptom; only when the symptom fails to provide pleasure does the subject experience a fantasy crisis. The black man is not foreclosing the white man from the beginning; rather, he is a subject who has already entered the "father's name" and has been created. This subject is a narcissistic container of libido, wherein "even narcissistic structure may be glimpsed in the glass spheres in which the exhausted partners of the 'Garden of Earthly Delights' are held captive" (*Écrits* 86). This container is revealed as the image of the body (*i' (a)*) in the mirror of the Other. Here, the *object a* that causes anxiety in the subject, unlike the Freudian iceberg metaphor, intervenes and operates in a relationship with anxiety rather than being an anxiety-producing stratum at the base of consciousness. Lacan speaks of anxiety as a "signal" that emerges from the subject's relationship with *object a*. In other words, if the "signal" of anxiety is turned on, there is a problem in the subject's relationship with *object a* (*Seminar X 13*).

In a Spinozist context, Lacan defines "anxiety" as an affect rather than an emotion. For Spinoza, an affect is "an affection that increases or decreases, facilitates or hinders, the capacity of the body, and at the same time an idea of that capacity" (Spinoza 154). In this sense, the affection is both the modification itself and the idea. If we ourselves are the cause of this transformation, we are active; otherwise, we are passive. In this way, our bodies and minds are both acting and being acted upon. There is no one-sided relationship because the same goes for the body and mind that define black and white. Lacan's fantasy formula also shows the flow of desire oscillating between subject and object. This flow is represented by the vector from \$ to a ($\vee$) and from a to \$ ($\wedge$).

We can say that Lacan created this fantasy formula (\$ ◇ a) with the symbols of mathematical logic in mind. In mathematical logic, $\vee$ stands for "or": A $\vee$ B is true if either A or B is true, and false if both are false. Meanwhile, A $\wedge$ B is true only if both A and B are true. Otherwise, it is false if only one is true. This means that a vector flowing from "\$" to "a" can be true if only one of them is true, but a vector flowing from "a" to "\$" cannot be true unless one of them is true. For this reason, the structure of the cycle looks like an equality, but it is a formula that shows that the subject and object are not interchangeable. The vectors below and above imply different logics. The relationship between blacks and whites can also be seen as an example of this non-exchangeable equivalence, in the sense that each sets up the other as an object.

If affect refers to a state of mind and body that is unrestrained and unable to be contained, then we can say that the black psychology of "whiteness" that Fanon analyzes also implies an affective state of anxiety. If Fanon is right, "whiteness" is anxiety because it imposes a castration complex on black people. Castration in the complex does not mean "genital mutilation." Rather than "cutting" the "penis," castration is the utterance itself, saying, "we are going to cut it off." This statement creates anxiety, which is the effect of castration. According to Lacan, castration refers to the fact that "jouissance has to be refused in order to be attained on the inverse scale of the Law of desire" (*Écrits* 700).

Castration is a pre-emptive rejection of jouissance. Only then can it be placed under the Law of desire. But this process is always "unsettling" because it turns the Idea upside down. In this context, the Idea refers to the *idealized structure* of symbolic order: the fantasy that the Law of desire is coherent, complete, and fully stabilizing for the subject. The subversiveness of jouissance can upset the Law of desire at any moment. Castration, therefore, does not literally "cut off" the "genitals," but through the implication of that "cutting off," it points to the "residue" of jouissance that remains. It is not necessary to eliminate all possible enjoyment of every pleasure. As with circumcision, this effect can be achieved by excising a part of the 'genitals' rather than the whole.

The identity of the body originates from this loss of parts. With the partial loss, the subject can think they can lose everything. This is the structure of the subject. We can see here that the subject appears to exist through symbolic exchange, but in reality, it is not like that at all. What is lost in this process of castration can never be the object of symbolic exchange. This is why we, or black people, cannot be "white." These are things that came into being due to *object a* before the common, communicative, social object was constituted (*Seminar X* 91).

At this point, let us return to Fanon's statement that "the black soul is an invention of the white man." According to Fanon, black people have different attitudes towards whites than they do towards fellow black people because "whites" can never be black. In other words, 'whiteness' proves to be an irretrievable loss for blackness. In Lacan's words, the phallus must be concealed because it causes "anxiety" when it is revealed. The phallus is a colossal deficiency that creates anxiety rather than power. The phallus is one of the objects "from before the constitution of the status of the common, communicable, socialized object" (*Seminar X* 91). This is something to do with *object a.*

The *object a* is what Lacan calls the cause of desire, but it is also the leftover from the subject's entry into language and the symbolic order. It is not a real object but a kind of gap or void around which desire circulates. The phallus, in this sense, is structurally related to *object a*: it is an index of lack, but one that gets invested with libidinal weight. Both the phallus and *object a* induce anxiety when they come too close to being directly encounteredbecause they expose the subject to the Real: the inassimilable kernel of experience that the symbolic cannot fully account for.

In this sense, "whiteness" is a phallus that must be hidden from blackness. When this phallus becomes visible as "white," the black man is thrown into "anxiety." It is for this reason that the black people try to become like whites in an attempt to quell their wandering insecurities or reinforce their fantasies of whiteness by expressing feelings of disgust. At this point, however, the way to politicize this "anxiety" is through the variable X that cuts across the fantasy of whiteness, a "*passage á l'acte*." If this "passage to the act" signifies a decolonial trajectory that calls for rearticulation in terms of desire, what remains to be addressed is the question of how this trajectory is to be envisaged and structured. I now turn to this question.

Sexuation and Decolonizing Subjectivities

It is worth taking the infamous example of Fanon here. In discussing the love between a white man and a black woman, Fanon refers to the difference between whiteness and blackness as divided by skin color. For the black woman, the world is "white and black represent two poles of a world" (Fanon 44). The Manichean logic of black and white is something that has already been said and must be remembered, so the question of being white or black is ontological, not ethical.

> I am white: that is to say that I possess beauty and virtue, which have never been black. I am the color of the daylight…
>
> I am black: I am the incarnation of a complete fusion with the world, an intuitive understanding of the earth, an abandonment of my ego in the heart of the cosmos, and no with man, no matter how intelligent he may be, can ever understand Louis Amstrong and the music of the Congo. If I am black, it is not the result of a curse, but it is because, having offered my skin, I have been able to absorb all the cosmic effuvia. I am truly a ray of sunlight under the earth… (Fanon 45)

Here, whites and blacks form an exquisite binary opposition between culture and nature. Fanon sees this binary opposition as a product of the devaluation of indigenous cultures, as he developed his view of negritude by referencing the work of Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor (McCulloch 37). Of course, Fanon's early affirmation of blackness is indebted to Jean-Paul Sartre's *Orphée noir*. However, this initial perspective gives way to a critique of blackness itself in *Black Skin, White Masks*.

In discussing the romantic relationships between white men and black women, Fanon points to a fundamental imbalance. Analyzing Lucette Ceranus's autobiographical novel *Je suis Martiniquaise*, which was written under the pseudonym Mayotte Capécia, Fanon says:

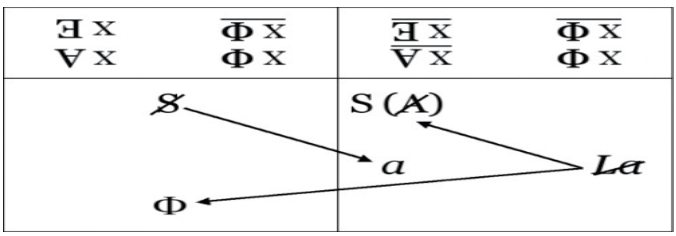
> Mayotte loves a white man to whom she submits everything. He is her lord. She asks nothing, demands nothing, except a bit of whiteness in her life. When she tries to determine in her own mind whether the man is handsome or ugly, she writes, "All I know is that he had blue eyes, blond hair, and a light skin, and that I loved him." It is not difficult to see that a rearrangement of these elements in their proper hierarchy would produce something of this order: "I love him because he had blue eyes, blond hair, and a light skin." We who come from the Antilles know one thing only too well: Blue eyes, the people say, frighten the Negro. (Fanon 42-42)

Fanon's analysis always already presupposes the inferiority of black women. However, although this issue of superiority is reproduced through skin color, but it is actually based on the dichotomy of whiteness as civilization and blackness as nature. The black woman loves the white man because he is white because what she loves, Fanon points out, is not a particular white man but whiteness itself. At this point, we can understand Fanon's assertion that the black soul is a white invention. In this sense, the black unconscious is structured like the white language. Referring to white attitudes toward French-speaking blacks, Fanon says, "A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language" (Fanon 18).

By focusing on language, Fanon's aim is not only to describe the international political system of mother country-colony relations but also to reveal how black people internalize whiteness. After discussing Sartre's anti-Semitism, Fanon applies Lacan's theory of the mirror stage in a lengthy footnote to show how the white imaginary of blackness can be established from childhood. Extrapolating from Lacan's mechanism of the mirror stage, "the real other for the white man is and will continue to be the black man" (Fanon 161).

A recurring theme in Fanon's work is the question of the appearance of blackness as a construct. Like gender, which distinguishes male desire from female desire, blackness is first distinguished from whiteness through appearance. "With the Negro," Fanon asserts, "the cycle of the *biological* begins" (Fanon 161). Race is, in his view, a visual perception. It is this appearance that race, and sex differences share with each other. In the visual image, race and gender are first ontologized, but the appearance does not indicate that there are men and women, or that there are whites and blacks; there are only men and only whites. In the sense that all humans are male and white, there are no women and no blacks.

Fanon's framing of blackness as a "biological" issue can be more deeply explored through Lacan's ontology of sexuation. His engagement with mirror stage theory, in examining the formation of black subjectivity, may thus be seen as an early gesture toward an ontological account of racialization. Let us first examine Lacan's formula of sexuation, which discusses the ontology of sexual difference, and then apply it to Fanon's ontology of race. Lacan illustrates the topology of sex difference with the following diagram (*Seminar XX* 78).



Lacan uses this diagram to reveal that the relationship of desire to the phallus determines sexual difference, but the Φ in the diagram does not signify the presence of the phallus, but rather its castration. In its absence, the phallus is transformed into Law, which is universal to all beings. This castration takes place on a symbolic level, as it is the murder of the primal father. As is well known, Lacan distinguishes between the penis and the phallus, which does not refer to the penis in the biological sense. In this context, we can say that the phallus has a similar symbolism to Fanon's concept of whiteness. When Fanon says that the biological being begins with the Negro, what he implies is that the skin color that defines the biological being of blackness is symbolic. Since it is the Symbolic that dominates the biological, what Mayotte loves is not the biological being of a white male but the blue eyes, blond hair, and white skin that make the 'human animal' white. These elements have a biological origin but have acquired a symbolic meaning that is not reducible to that origin.

The equations at the top of the diagram show a deadlocked structure in the symbolic system. The equation on the left is said to represent masculinity, and the equation on the right represents femininity, which, as mentioned earlier, are symbolic, like Fanon's whiteness, while the symbols in the lower layers of the diagram refer to the subjects in relationship to the main ideal. The 'a' at the bottom of the feminine does not mean that women are *object a* to men, but rather that men consider women to be objects; however, 'there is no such woman ($L/\ a$).' In the equation at the top left, '∃' is an existential quantifier, a predicate symbol in set theory referring to the number of beings that are equal to one, many, or some. Let us solve the equation in the top left corner, where 'Φ x' stands for negation. As mentioned earlier, this symbol does not refer to an actual penis or phallus but rather to castration, which represents submission to the Law, and, consequently, to the subject's way of pursuing the master ideal by submitting to Law and language. Thus, the equation at the top can be interpreted as "There is at least one male (M) who does not submit to the law (∃)." With this equation, Lacan expresses the logic of exceptionality, which reveals the fact that all beings are subject to the Law except for at least one man who is not subject to the Law: the primal father. In the sense that no one can be that father, the one male who is not subject to the Law is the Law.

The equations in the upper left corner represent variables. ∀ is a "universal quantifier" used in set theory which means "everything." This equation can be interpreted as "For all beings, x depends on the phallic function." In line with the logic of exceptionality mentioned above, this equation completes the proposition that everyone else is subject to the phallic function except for one exceptional man who does not obey the Law. In other words, this logic creates the fantasy that men are able to enjoy the full subject-ideal by submitting to the Law. This is the formula of masculinity. If we were to translate Fanon's proposition "all men are white" into this equation, it would be $\forall x\ Hx \rightarrow Wx$. This means 'for all beings, if x is human, then x is white.' With this appropriation of the equation, we can easily understand Fanon's statement that the black soul is a white invention because in order to invent a black soul, there must first be a white person. As such, the white man is presupposed as all beings and it is the white man who first exists as Lacan's universal man. Therefore, Fanon's whiteness is a further refinement of Lacan's critique of "man" predominant in Western philosophy. For Fanon, the universal man is always already a "white man."

Black people have no place in this equation. First of all, black people are not white; they are reproduced through white people. In this sense, it would make more sense to assume that black people are on the right side of the gender equation. The equation on the top right represents femininity. Femininity adopts the logic of the "not-all," as opposed to the logic of exceptionality represented by the top left. If the whole, the not-all, is the feminine, then blackness occupies the same place as this feminine because, as Fanon states, blackness is the otherness of whiteness. Let us analyze the meaning of blackness by examining the equation in the upper right corner.

The top equation in the upper right-hand corner means, "there is nothing that does not depend on the Phallus function" while the equation below means "not all x is subject to the Phallus function." With this, Lacan wanted to indicate that there is something that escapes the Law, castration, or the Phallus function, and he called it 'the woman.' As mentioned earlier, in this sense, all humans are male, and to paraphrase this proposition, all "[modern] men" are "white men." If masculinity is a universality achieved through exception, then femininity represents a singularity without exception that resists or deviates from this. In this sense, the "non-total" that does not belong to all is infinitely expandable. The non-all is the structure of immanence, another infinity name, which is an annihilation of the existing order and a state of infinite becoming.

Conclusion

This essay has examined how neoliberalism's commodification of identity rests on a fantasy of symmetrical exchange that fails to account for the structural asymmetries revealed in Lacan's theory of sexuation and Fanon's analysis of racialized subjectivity. By exploring how blackness and femininity mark points of rupture within the symbolic order, we have seen how these positions resist incorporation into the normative circuits of recognition and representation. Rather than being fully integrated into the market logic of visibility and equivalence, they expose the limits of that logicand in doing so, point toward a different horizon of subjectivation.

The neoliberal commodification of identity operates through a fantasy of equal exchange that fundamentally misrecognizes the psychic economy of racial and sexual difference. While neoliberalism presents the market as a neutral space where identities can be freely exchanged, traded, and validated through consumption, this presumption of equivalence conceals the fundamental asymmetries that Fanon and Lacan reveal in their respective analyses of black and feminine subjectivity.

The neoliberal promise that marginalized subjects can "purchase" legitimacy or recognition through market participation recapitulates the impossible desire Fanon identifies in colonial subjects. Just as the black subject's desire to "become white" reveals the particular masquerading as universal in colonial discourse, the neoliberal fantasy of identity as a commodity reveals how market exchange cannot resolve the fundamental non-equivalence at the heart of racial and sexual difference. The "equal exchange" promised by commodification merely displaces these asymmetries into individual responsibility and consumer choice.

This dynamic between the individual and identity becomes especially apparent in the way neoliberalism recasts political demands for recognition as market-driven demands for representation. The logic of commodity exchange suggests that adequate representation in media, workplace, or consumer markets can compensate for structural exclusion. However, this commodification of recognition fails precisely because, as Fanon demonstrates, the desire for recognition operates within a structure where whiteness (and, by extension, masculinity) occupies the universal position. The neoliberal market cannot resolve this asymmetry because it is predicated on the very logic of equivalence that the colonial/patriarchal order renders impossible.

Moreover, the neoliberal emphasis on self-regulation and personal responsibility intensifies rather than resolves the paradoxical position of marginalized subjects. When identity becomes an entrepreneurial project, the impossibility of achieving recognition through market participation generates what Lacan would term jouissance a form of excessive enjoyment/sufferings revolving around the constitutive lack of subjectivity. The compulsive pursuit of market-mediated recognition thus reproduces the very alienation it promises to overcome.

This analysis suggests that resistance to neoliberal commodification must begin by recognizing how the fantasy of equal exchange obscures the fundamental non-equivalence that structures both racial and sexual differences. Rather than seeking recognition through market participation, such resistance might instead work to expose and exploit the contradictions inherent in neoliberalism's promise of universal exchangeability.

The theoretical conjunction of Lacanian and Fanonian insights reveals how neoliberalism's presumption of homogeneous exchange fundamentally misrecognizes the structural non-equivalence inherent in both gender and racial differences. While neoliberal ideology posits a universal market where all identities can be freely exchanged, valued, and validated through commodification, this fantasy of equivalence breaks down precisely at the points where Lacan and Fanon locate the irreducible asymmetries in symbolic and colonial orders. The impossibility of establishing genuine equivalence in systems structured by sexual and racial differences exposes neoliberalism's market universalism as not merely dysfunctional but constitutively impossiblea fantasy formation that attempts to paper over fundamental antagonisms through the logic of commodity exchange. This theoretical understanding suggests that the failure of neoliberal modes of recognition is not contingent but necessary, emerging from the very structure of difference that neoliberalism simultaneously depends upon and disavows.

The conceptual distinction between masculinity and femininity in psychoanalytic theory can be productively reframed through Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical apparatus. While masculinity operates through a logic of transcendence, presupposing an outside to the symbolic order and Law, femininity functions as what Deleuze and Guattari term a "plane of immanence" a surface of pure multiplicity that does not require or generate transcendental exceptions. This feminine logic of immanence, crucially, extends beyond biological determinations to encompass forms of difference that resist universal categorization.

In this theoretical framework, blackness emerges as a particular form of specificity that problematizes universal categories. Constructed through white colonial discourse, blackness names a mode of difference that cannot be subsumed within the logic of universal representation. A theoretical conjunction develops that illuminates the profound resonances between Fanon's analysis of racial formation, Lacan's theory of sexual difference, and Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy of difference. The latter's discussion of faciality in *A Thousand Plateaus* explicitly engages with Fanon's work precisely because facial recognition systemsboth literal and metaphoricaloperate through the same logic of difference and specificity that characterizes the construction of racial categories.

The resulting theoretical assemblage allows for an understanding of how both feminine and racial modes of difference operate outside the masculine logic of transcendence and exception, instead functioning through what we might call an immanent logic of multiplicity and specificity. This conceptual framework provides crucial tools for analyzing how systems of sexual and racial difference intersect and operate within contemporary social formations. Faciality consists of a white wall and a black hole, and Deleuze and Guattari note that in equating modern whiteness with capitalism, this symbolic construction has achieved an interpenetration of signification and subjectification (Deleuze and Guattari 182). Faciality is a mixture of whiteness and blackness, no longer in conflict but mixed together like "black wine dripping into white water" (182). Following Deleuze and Guattari, whiteness and blackness are inextricably linked in the construction of the signifier. If the white wall is signification, the hole is subjectificationthe two act as limits that neither can cross.

Deleuze and Guattari could be said to extend Lacan's question of femininity by pushing it to its structural limit in their analysis of faciality. While Lacan treats femininity as a position that escapes full inscription in the symbolic orderwhat he calls the "not-all"Deleuze and Guattari approach this limit through the concept of faciality, which describes how faces function as surfaces that organise visibility and encode social meaning.

In Lacan, femininity marks a point of symbolic inconsistency, challenging the universality of the phallic function. Deleuze and Guattari similarly examine how the face does not simply represent identity but is produced by an abstract machine that combines signification (the white wall) and subjectivation (the black hole). This machine does not capture all subjects equally; instead, it stratifies them according to racial, gendered, and colonial codes. Their theory of faciality, then, can be read as an attempt to rethink the limit posed by femininity in broader political and semiotic terms—not as a fixed identity but as part of a machinic process that determines how bodies appear and relate to systems of power.

In a way, they can be said to have found in Fanon's discussion a clue to radicalize Lacan's formulation of gender difference. If Lacanian femininity is an extension of the infinity, then women are also black and all minorities who do not submit to the Law. It becomes clear at this point what the decolonization of madness means: For a white person who has otherized blackness, the very manifestation of blackness is madness. Becoming a "black woman" who does not submit to the symbolic Law of the phalluswhich functions to regulate and normalise madness—can be understood as a process of decolonial subject formation, one that resists assimilation into dominant structures of meaning and identity. One could argue that Lacan's formulation of gender difference plays a role similar to that of race, in that both serve as structural mechanisms for organising identity and social relations. This is because x, who does not follow the Law of the phallus function, is both female and black. The intersection of gender and race marks the emergence of a sense of the *demos* that disrupts or neutralizes the phallic function. This *demos* introduces an aesthetic dimension in which the boundaries between "me and us" and "me and you" become porousallowing for a form of collective subjectivity that is at once singular and shared.

This call for the impossible, which briefly surfaced in May 1968, signals a profound demand to reexamine the politics of immanence through the intersecting insights of Lacan and Fanon. Its significance lies in how it disrupts the symbolic law and colonial structures upon which neoliberalism has continued to sustain itself. By challenging these foundations, the call gestures toward a form of subjectivity and collective life that exceeds the limits of representation, resists the capture of identity by market logics, and reclaims an aesthetic and political space of becoming not yet fully imaginable.

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Regular Section

Howard Barker's *Brutopia*: History In Politics, Politics In History

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Abstract Howard Barker can be considered as one of the most prolific writers of the British stage who has written numerous plays as well as poetry and theoretical writings on drama. He is especially a significant name for political drama due to the strong political themes explored in his works. *Brutopia: Secret Life in Old Chelsea*, as its full name, is a historical play that combines political criticism together with Barker's understanding of theatre in line with his Theatre of Catastrophe. In this play, Barker invites the audience and/or the readers to the fictionalised world of the play, decorated with the historical facts of Thomas More's life and its timeline. Barker applies history to lay out the ground for social and political criticism of the contemporary society. He skilfully blends history with fiction in order to disturb the audience and/or the readers to make them think about the present. Consequently, this paper aims at analysing *Brutopia* within Barker's creation of imaginary place as thinly disguised in history and focuses on social and political criticism that exemplifies Barker's specific approach towards drama, Theatre of Catastrophe.
Keywords Howard Barker; *Brutopia*; Theatre of Catastrophe; political drama; historical metafiction
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Introduction

Howard Barker has started his career "as a stage dramatist with the production of *Cheek* in the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in September 1970" (Wilcher 176). His political orientation as a political writer was apparent starting with his first play. Moreover, he "remained essentially a fringe dramatist, and he is keenly sensitive to the fact" (Rusinko 139) although his plays were being staged in the mainstream theatre such as the Royal Court Theatre. In this respect, Megson states that "[o]ften his work has been received with marked circumspection if not outright hostility by reviewers and, with occasional exceptions, has been rejected by major theatre establishments, most notoriously the National Theatre" (489). Hence, in spite of the numerous works he has written, including stage plays and radio plays, he persistently remained a fringe dramatist. Wilcher touches upon Barker's this stand arguing that "[h]is own uncompromisingly avant garde stance has meant that some of his plays have remained unperformed for years, and although the Royal Shakespeare Company has mounted a number of productions, they have been confined to its studio spaces" (176). Such interesting position of Barker within British theatre is pointed out by Sakellaridou as such: "Barker has saved himself both from the market place and the closures of ideolog" (62). Thus, as Sakellaridou suggests, since "Barker has invented his own 'oppositional' theatre" (62), his plays paved the way to the idea of The Wrestling School. The company was established by a group of actors in 1988 particularly to perform plays by Howard Barker. While they do not define themselves as an ensemble, the company draws attention to the need of such a group to be able to develop certain techniques in order to reveal distinctive style of Barker's writing and characters. According to the company's own definition, "[t]he Wrestling School explores the dynamic between language and communication, performer and audience through the work of playwright Howard Barker, and works to develop new forms of expression for text based drama" ("The Wrestling School"). Hence, The Wrestling School creates a ground for the plays of Barker to meet with the audience while fulfilling a need for Barker to meet with more audience. Lamb also touches upon the reception of Barker and his plays by the theatres and companies in line with his position between mainstream and fringe: "There have been productions of Barker plays at the Royal Court but these have generally been promoted as collaborations by actor-led companies such as Joint Stock and, latterly, The Wrestling School" (14). It can be concluded that although being a prolific playwright, Barker's plays struggle to find their place in the mainstream reaching a wider audience. This, in fact, is an achievement for Barker as someone who criticises the mainstream theatre and who develops his sense of drama, Theatre of Catastrophe, to challenge what is considered as mainstream.

Barker's Political Views

Brought up as a socialist, Barker has reflected his political views almost in all of his plays fiercely. According to Wandor, "Barker's cynicism knows no party boundaries; The Home Secretary in the ensuing enquiry is Labour; the ordinary people are represented as no better than their oppressors. […] His is the drama of profound cynicism, conveyed through a gutsy, invigorating and shocking use of language" (46-47). Hence, it can be argued that Barker's tone of criticism differs based on his level of criticism towards ideologies and all parties. This is indicated by Wilcher as well: "From the beginning, Barker has been preoccupied with the conflict between individual impulse and society's internal and external mechanisms of control" (177). These approaches towards the tone and themes of Barker lead us to his theory of drama, Theatre of Catastrophe. He primarily sets the principles of his Theatre of Catastrophe in his book *Arguments for a Theatre* (1989) which aims, according to Megson, "to inculcate a state of anxiety in the audience, an anxiety that is a precondition for witnessing the moral dislocation that lies at the heart of his drama" (489). Houston comments on the tone of Barker in relation to his theory of theatre: "With the Theatre of Catastrophe, the tension between the audience and the play becomes the aesthetic, the nature of the experience. This involves challenges to common morality, common socialism, even what passes for common humanity" (50). In this respect, Barker prioritises individual responses to the events staged in a play. What is more significant for Barker is the personal interpretation of the events. Thus, Barker can be considered as a provocative playwright. In his interview with Mark Brown, Barker also states that "[i]t seems to me society requires pain, civility requires pain. We must suffer, we do suffer, individually, but also collectively we must suffer" (152). It can be argued that this suffering lies at the centre of his drama. He carries the suffering onto the stage for everyone to get their share in order to broaden their mind. In this regard, what dominates *Brutopia* is also sufferings of More, Henry, and Cecilia as will be discussed further from political, intellectual, and personal aspects. Moreover, the play also presents the challenges to morality and socialism as indicated through Cecilia's aim to compose a work named Brutopia.

Barker and History

Barker's background in history is also significant for analysing his works and for considering him as a political writer before a detailed analysis of the play. As

Rusinko points out, Barker holds an M.A. from Sussex University in history (138). History is a preferred subject for Barker to reflect and criticise the contemporary Britain. Barker also admits this in his interview with Malcolm Hay and Simon Trussler: "[…] [H]istory is a vastly important factor in my plays. It broods over most of my work, it lurks in the back of the characters' minds, and is a persistent justification for action. The right-wing characters invoke it continually and the left fret about its judgment" (30). In his interview with Charles Lamb, Barker touches upon the relation between politics and history in a different way explaining his choice of history to convey a political message: "My political sense derives from the past, and I view the present from the perspective of the past, at least as I have constructed it, in imagination. […] I am acutely conscious of the collapse of a political ethic in my own time, but my sense is always that we have been here before" (39). The past is critical for Barker to find answers for today's problems. In this regard, he is a historical writer as well as a political one since he tries to make connections between Britain's past and present continuously in his drama. Hence, for Barker, history is a mediator to question the problems of contemporary world. Barker reflects historical events in a provocative manner as applied in *Brutopia* as well combining history with fiction.

The combination of history and fiction in Barker's play inevitably evokes the significant term "historiographic metafiction" coined by Linda Hutcheon. She introduces this new concept as follows: "The term postmodernism, when used in fiction, should, by analogy, best be reserved to describe fiction that is at once metafictional and historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past. In order to distinguish this paradoxical beast from traditional historical fiction, I would like to label it 'historiographic metafiction'" (3). Hutcheon's term "historiographic metafiction is further explained by Macleod: "Fuelled by a powerful sense of creative and political agency, historiographic metafictions purposely undermine the truth claims and progressive master narratives imbedded in any nation's story of its own becoming" (127-128). He further adds that "In the process, these texts reveal the inevitable and inescapable 'constructedness' of any official historical record and often put forth alternative readings that suggest new ways of pulling together the story of the past and reconceptualizing the present" (128).

Applied mainly to the post-modern novels, the concept historiographic metafiction also coincides with Barker's treatment of fictional and historical facts in the play. Hutcheon points out that "[i]n the postmodern novel the conventions of both fiction and historiography are simultaneously used and abused, installed and subverted, asserted and denied" (5). As will be discussed further, Barker also follows these steps in his play. The way Barker interprets history in his plays is presented by Sakellaridou "Howard Barker is the only male playwright in contemporary British theatre to adhere consciously and systematically to postmodern concepts of history and simultaneously theorise about the new issues and aesthetics of socialist theatre" (64). Although it might not be appropriate to name his play *Brutopia* as a post-modern work, historiographic metafiction can be applied to the play for Barker's particular style in playing with historical and fictional facts. In this regard, according to Hutcheon, "[…] the 'world' in which the text situates itself is the 'world' of discourse, the 'world' of texts and intertexts" (6) as Barker also situates the literary texts with a historical context within play's fictionalised world. Hence, Barker takes advantage of concept of historiographic metafiction while folding fictionalised and historical facts and fictions together, as will be aimed to be analysed.

Following Hutcheon's footsteps, in 1987, Ric Knowles published his article "Replaying History: Canadian Historiographic Metadrama" in which he applies Hutcheon's term to drama. In these metadramatic texts as examined by Knowles, he lays out "the making and remaking of history as a contingent and ongoing process" (Stephenson 222). Hence, Knowles's theoretical contribution corresponds with Barker's approach to history in the selected play. Hutcheon's theory of postmodernism, in line with Knowles's contribution to drama, is further interpreted by Stephenson as follows: "Metafiction and metatheatre are premised on the essential gap between the actual world of the play as an event and the fictional world contained within. Any time this gap is brought to the awareness of the audience, we get metatheatre" (223). The gap referred to by Stephenson becomes the focus in Barker's play *Brutopia*. Both through the representation of fictional and historical characters and the mentioning of fictional Brutopia and literary work of *Utopia* in the play illustrates the gap Barker intentionally put at the center of the play for the audience and/or the readers to tackle with.

Reference to More

By considering it as a historical play, Barker's *Brutopia* can be read as an attack on Thomas More who was an English lawyer, philosopher, author, humanist and a councillor to Henry VIII of England, and as a criticism of More's ideas in his work *Utopia* which describes an imagined just society in a fictional island. From this perspective, the play belongs to a tradition of writing on More's life and his ideas. There have been numerous literary works that have been written on More, as Robert Bolt's *A Man For All Seasons* one of them and as one of the most significant one. Yet, Barker's play differs from the previously written plays on More with his tone and perspective in the play by incorporating fictionalisation into historical facts as suggested through the reference to Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction. Moreover, Barker does not embody the aim of reflecting More and his time, but mostly interested in criticism of the contemporary times through More, his work and his time as mentioned previously. In this sense, the play combines More's political side with his family life and intellectual ability giving a wider perspective about him. Nevertheless, as can be understood from the title, *Brutopia*, this is not a play that merely takes More and his life into the centre. The play is mainly narrated by More's daughter Cecilia from her perspective. Thus, Barker tends to fictionalize history to convey his political message. Such fictionalization is obviously present within the story line of Cecilia who is a writer of a counter book of *Utopia*, although the names and the relations related to the More family in the play are taken from historical facts (Marius 222-223). Hence, rather than a life story given in a chronological order, Barker picks images and scenes from More's life to create a new context. He comes up with a dramatic narration inspired from historical events. This deliberate act enables Barker to refer to the contemporary politics through More's life and his work *Utopia*. In this respect, Weissengruber indicates that "Barker instead presents a dramatic arena for the dissection of an important figure in British and European History, for the purposes of indicating Utopia's entanglement in the political network of its day, and utopianism's status in contemporary political reality" (264). As Weissengruber points out, Barker discusses and criticises the ideology behind the work relating it to the contemporary politics.

History in *Brutopia*

The play has thirty-seven scenes in two acts named as "The Sickness" and "The Recovery." As the play opens up in the first act, the audiences and/or the readers are introduced to Thomas More in a garden in Chelsea, where he is away from the court to complete his work *Utopia*. Meanwhile, it is also revealed that Cecilia, More's daughter, has composed a work called Brutopia as a reaction to her father's work. Barker's approach in the play includes anachronistic elements in the first act such as the dispute between King Henry VIII and More. From a historical perspective, More composes his famous work *Utopia*, completed and published in 1516 (Marius 153). However, King Henry VIII seeks out More's approval in his political decisions more than a decade later. Despite this historical reality, at the end of the first act, More refuses to help King Henry VIII to divorce his wife, which leads to his beheading in 1533 (Marius 466). The second act centres on the character of Cecilia as More is kept in the prison for his capital punishment. It also concentrates on Cecilia's political moves to finish and publish her work Brutopia as well as her problematic relation with her father and mother. At the end of the play, she is consigned to a madhouse by her mother and silenced by King Henry. As can be observed from the plot structure, Barker fictionalises history for his own purposes, significantly political criticism, by adding his unique tone and characterization into the play. In this sense, the play combines More's political side with his family life and intellectual ability presenting a wider perspective about him. Nevertheless, it is quite difficult to specify that this is a play on More; this is mostly a play on social and political criticism done over More and his work.

One of the most significant questions that the play arouses is why Barker uses an anachronistic approach to the historical facts used in the play. The anachronistic plotline of the play makes the audience and/or the readers to ask such questions: why Barker combines the writing of *Utopia* with More's relation with Henry? If the play is a criticism of More's work *Utopia* and the utopian ideas reflected in the work from a socialist perspective, what is the function of Henry's plotline? Wouldn't Barker give the same messages on criticism of the so called just, idealized and socialist world of *Utopia*? These questions are partly answered by Barker himself who adamantly declares that,

> I gnawed at English socialism for ten years coming at last to History, which is where I had begun, neither official history, nor documentary history, whose truth I deny, but the history of emotion, looking for a politics of the emotions. I discovered that the only things worth describing now are things that do not happen, just as the only history plays worth writing concern themselves with what did not occur. (19)

At this point, it can be argued that all the historical facts included in the play carry a political aim related to each other beyond the resistance and autonomy from history and the representation of reality Barker seeks (Hoffmann 68). Using Cecilia as his spokesperson, Barker questions the system More proposes in his work and tends to analyse the shortcomings of this idealized society from a leftist point of view. As a playwright who is ideologically rooted in socialist ideas and politics, Barker questions More's system in *Utopia*. The most significant scene related to his questioning is when the doctor from *Utopia* comes into the world of More in the first act. As opposed to the perfection aimed by More, what the doctor tells draw a picture of a police-state failed in prosperity and equality. He admits in scene XIII that "[u]topia is all consequence" (42) drawing attention to the good will of More, but to the harsh reality he created within utopia. Hence, he is the embodiment of the idea that a utopia can turn out to be a dystopia.

Moreover, Barker, through More, criticises the political system as well as the social issues. Since he does not reflect solely a social point of view, the corruption within the politics is reflected to underline the utopic side of More's optimism in his proposed ideas in *Utopia*. Thus, he includes Henry as a significant figure in the play. Barker takes advantage of the figure of Henry as a representation of how power corrupts individuals. Henry is depicted in relation to the power he holds in the play. First, Henry is depicted as he tries to get the approval of More to achieve his personal ambition in politics. In the second act, his power turns into a tool for Cecilia to publish her work. At this point, the play presents the clash of ideas on More's and Henry's sides. As opposed to idealization on More's terms, the play puts forward the political ambitions of Henry relating this to some extent why utopian society fails and is doomed to fail.

Henry, in the play, also stands for realism as opposed to the fictionalized world of Cecilia and to More's *Utopia* as a fiction. Both *Utopia* and Brutopia construct ideas as opposed to realities of the age. Henry is not depicted as pursuing the good will or the socialist order which eliminates interests of individuals in *Utopia*. Throughout the play, he is solely led by his political power. This reality is reminded to More as well as the audience as he throws More's work *Utopia* to the ground at the end of act one diminishing the fictionalization as opposed to reality. Weissengruber also comments on this idea that "Henry's pronouncement of More's death sentence at the end of this act, in the name of practical political solidarity, and his dismissal of More's utopianism as an elitist snob's fantasy, provide ironic justification for the attempts of both More and Cecilia to construct imaginative counter-statements to an intolerable reality" (275). Hence, Henry can be taken as a counterpart of More and Cecilia for his representation of reality, significantly of politics.

With the second act, Henry also exemplifies the coercion which is a threat in communist societies. This is one of the most significant consequences of socialist societies as Barker tries to draw attention. In the play, Henry represents such force by letting everyone to suffer and by enjoying his ultimate freedom. As the formation of utopic ideology is given in the first act as More composes *Utopia* and as Cecilia challenges his ideas, they struggle to free themselves from the imposed ideas. While More is suffering in the prison as he waits for his death, Cecilia, assaulted by her fiancé, Bertrand, involves herself in politics to publish her book. As the sole power holder, Henry is the only person who has a saying on this issue. Thus, she becomes Henry's lover for the sake of power. She tries to control Henry through manipulating his desires. Nevertheless, Henry admits that he is aware of the plan Cecilia has made and the deal with Boleyn justifying his power as the sole authority, almost a god-like figure who knows everything under his rule. For his authority, Henry says that "I know everything. I have to." (195). He might be interpreted as "the big brother" who watches them all the time. This is clear starting with the first act when he shouts to More showing his power: "Too late! […] The bigger the head, the poorer the stalk, I am the wind and you damned well asked for it, you snob!" (161). In this regard, he is depicted as the most authoritative figure who has the potential to become a dangerous dictator.

Conversely, inclusion of Henry as a character in the play, through its political content, helps persuading the audience and/or the readers on the fact that the world Cecilia creates in Brutopia as a counterpart of the world of *Utopia*, is the real life, life on the streets when it is perceived from a different perspective. In her opening aside, Cecilia explains that "[i]n Brutopia love was impossible, and anger took its place. This anger was in certain ways, indistinguishable from love" (131). In fact, in the play, anger shapes the events starting from Cecilia and her actions against her family. More significantly, anger dominates the political acts as in the case of Henry. Later, she continues to describe the world of Brutopia as "they know no pity. So, when hurt, they seek no comfort, but find another to inflict their hurt upon" (135). Such an effect can be also observed in the politics of the play which dominates many scenes in the second act. The most specific reference to the contemporary society comes in Cecilia's aside in scene IX: "Brutopia is a republic, but with a monarch" (145). The power Henry holds is the most significant example to this statement as discussed briefly. Nevertheless, the key line on this issue is given in the caption: "Thomas More published Utopia in 1516. It describes the perfect society. His daughter Cecilia composed Brutopia in secret. Only now has the text been discovered" (132). By emphasizing the fact that it has been discovered while this play is being written it has been suggested that the world of the play is Brutopia itself. This suggestion also introduces the claim that Cecilia acts as the playwright. Thus, Barker makes his political and social criticism of contemporary society by projecting them as a fiction within a historical background. In other words, he fictionalizes the realities he criticises through Cecilia's world of Brutopia. While doing this, he also points out Cecilia as the owner of the criticism the play aims by not undertaking any responsibility.

Representation of Cecilia

It has been argued that Cecilia is a significant character in the play acting as if a narrator and posing as the protagonist in the play. In a general approach, Hammond comments on Barker's protagonists: "[Barker] comes across as a charismatic despot, and his protagonists are frequently also charismatic despots, capable of seeing what is right for others and having the necessary iron in the soul to force others to make the difficult choices and live up to their potential" (21). As discussed briefly, Barker presents a certain amount of despotism not only in Cecilia, but also in Henry and More. Nevertheless, especially Henry and Cecilia have the power and courage to force the limits in the play. Rather than the characters in the play, he forces the audience and/or the readers to make difficult choices on understanding history and applying the values and the problems such as corruptible despotic power and the shortcomings of so called idealized socialist societies to the contemporary realities. Thus, the play disturbs the audience and/or the readers as Barker aims.

As pointed out previously, Barker has developed his own theory for drama, Theatre of Catastrophe, which he discusses in depth in his work *Arguments for Theatre* refraining himself and his technique of writing from Brectian technique. In this regard, Cecilia's asides can be mistaken as a Brechtian technique. However, rather than voicing a message, her asides reflect her brainstorming on the world of Brutopia. Thus, her composing process of her book is given to the audience and/or the readers in the form of asides since the concept of Brutopia is significant for the audience and/or the readers rather than for the characters in the play complementing the political content and theme of the play. In this regard, it can also be argued that the play turns into Cecilia's writing process. In addition, the audience and/or the readers are also involved in the writing process through Cecilia's asides. The play reflects the life and society Cecilia depicted in her imaginative world Brutopia. On the other hand, from time to time Cecilia poses as the voice of Barker. But the theatre of Barker does not intend to give a direct message. In this regard, Cecilia is more of a guide not only for the world of More, but also for her own mind and Brutopia. Eventually, these elements can be discussed as Brechtian not because exclusively Barker includes these elements in his play, but rather for their resemblances to Brechtian techniques. Whereas Barker deliberately applies these elements for the sake of the theme.

The asides applied by Barker, at the same time, indicate the importance of Cecilia as a character who is quite an unusual female figure. By intending to write a work challenging her father, she is portrayed as an intellectual figure. She is sexually abused by her fiancé, and she decides to give birth to this child. She is also politically involved as she makes plans both to publish her book and to have Henry as her lover. To begin with, she is depicted as a problematic child. While Meg is the favourite child of More in the play, Cecilia does not have a healthy relation neither with her father nor her mother. In act one scene III, More clearly indicates that he does not love Cecilia like he does Meg: “How hard you are to love” (137). Moreover, he looks down on her intelligence: “It is a pity we can’t talk. It is an indictment of us both, for I can talk to anyone” (137). Thus, Cecilia’s decision to compose Brutopia, as a counterpart of *Utopia*, can be also read as a power struggle between these two characters as well as an intellectual rivalry. As she rebels against her father intellectually, she is mainly driven by her desires. From this perspective, she is not a submissive woman. Politically, intellectually, and morally her desires govern her rather than the society and its values. Her relationship with More and Henry are justifications of this side of Cecilia in which she presents the immoral and corrupted aspects of the society. According to Rabey “Barker’s characters move in a world of warfare, cultural or personal. They attempt to negotiate a terrain where man-made laws have broken down, and may attempt to reassert divine or moral law in the aftermath of catastrophe” (5). Cecilia exemplifies such comment. As one of Barker’s characters, she creates her own warfare with her father. Moreover, she attempts to rewrite the laws as she tries to seduce Henry. At the end, she submits herself to her desires, of political and intellectual. She is proud of her subversion, yet she is doomed to share the same fate as her father as she is taken to a madhouse. She is gradually defeated by the system, which is the power system she is criticising in her work Brutopia.

Politics as Reflected in the Title

The title of the play is quite functional for delivering hints on the play such as its themes, messages, and characters. First of all, the title, *Brutopia: Secret Life in Old Chelsea*, leads to the important function of Cecilia in the play. Although historical facts are about More, the play is more about Cecilia. This is not only due to the action of the play, but also on the role of Cecilia for, to some extent, representing Barker himself as well as exemplifying the specific qualifications of Barker’s typical characters. The subtitle is also related to Cecilia and her secret aim of writing a book. Moreover, as opposed to the word ‘utopia’ which has the meaning of no place, “brutopia” is not a real world that has a dictionary meaning. It is a made-up word. Thus, it can be interpreted as indicating the fictionality in the play, since besides having historical elements, the play is not a historical play. This side of the play can be taken as being indicated by the coined phrase brutopia. The function of the title, “Brutopia,” can also be interpreted in relation to the message of the play by evaluating it as the work Cecilia composes. If the word is taken as a reference to the world Cecilia creates, Barker's criticism of utopian world and thought comes to the foreground. Hence, the title is a direct reference, with a criticism at the same time, to the utopian expectations of a perfect society. In this regard, even the title embodies a cynical tone which is established by Barker in the play.

While brutopia is a coined phrase, it has been, quite interestingly, used before Barker in the cartoon series Donald Duck by Walt Disney. According to the website that is devoted to introducing the world of Donald Duck and Duckburg, the word first appears in the cartoon in 1957. It is referred to be a caricature of former U.S.S.R. The writer of the comic Don Rosa comments on the meaning of brutopia within the universe of Donald Duck that "Barks made it quite obvious that he was implying that Brutopia was the equivalent of Russia or the USSR. I don't say it's exactly Russia, otherwise I would not call it Brutopia, I'd call it Russia. I place it as occupying the eastern third of Russia (Siberia), as I place Calisota as the northern third of California" (qtd. in Sigvald). Such usage definitely carries the effects of the cold war between USA and USSR which was then a communist country. Beyond the discussion of whether Barker is aware of the meaning and the usage of the word brutopia, which would be a futile concern and question, such usage of the word has some connotations within the play, although it is a requirement to know this in order to interpret the play and the meaning of the word. Considering the word as a reference to USSR, it can be argued that the play makes a satirical criticism of utopian ideal by juxtaposing them with a communist counterpart, which is a system that carries some of the characteristics of the imagined country of *Utopia*. Moreover, if Brutopia that Cecilia describes in the play is interpreted as a reflection of contemporary society and politics, Brutopia as a caricature of a communist country stands even more cynical and harsh. This can be read as Barker's reflection of his pessimistic ideas on contemporary society. It can be also perceived as Barker's another play with fiction and reality. Just like the play is a fictionalised history with real historical facts, his ideas and criticism on utopia and utopic ideas are also made up off fictionalisation and reality. On the one hand, he uses *Utopia*, as a real work depicting the concept of utopia; on the other hand, he creates Brutopia as a fictionalized work of Cecilia which can be read as the symbol of communist Russia, a historical fact. Consequently, Barker plays with the notions of fact and fiction to lead the audience and/or the readers to question the problem and to seek for a message hidden in the play.

Conclusion

Although it has been neglected by the critics as a television play, *Brutopia* is a significant play of Barker for representing the characteristics of Theatre of Catastrophe as well as for its historical and political contents. Hoffmann argues that

> [...] Catastrophe is a theory of the theatre articulated within and against the overwhelming prevalence of Brecht-inflected British social realism in new writing for the theatre [...]. Indeed, Howard Barker's tragedies were self-consciously developed to challenge a certain kind of 'theatre of conditions' – that is Barker was writing against empiricist humanism, to re-conceptualize capital-H-history, and to problematize vulgar social utilitarianism in the arts and facile ontologies of reality in theatrical representation associated with the kitchen sink drama. (65)

Indeed, the play, Barker's theatricality and technicality in general, differs from his contemporaries, especially in terms of Barker's use of history. As discussed briefly, his characters and tone also have a specific aim of disturbing the audience and/or the readers. He skilfully blends history with fiction in order to disturb the audience and/or the readers to make them think about the present. In conclusion, Barker's television play *Brutopia* reflects a criticism of socialist ideas and politics using historical figures and facts involving the characteristics of Barker's specific approach towards drama, Theatre of Catastrophe.

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The Business of Art: The Construction of a Writer's Professional Identity in *Cakes and Ale*

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Abstract W.Somerset Maugham's novel *Cakes and Ale* portrays the interwar London literary society and examines four British writers and their struggles to define their professional identities in the early twentieth century. The novel interrogates the ethics of biographical writing, questioning whether moral flaws should be revealed in a biography. By juxtaposing writers who champion unvarnished truth against those who favor protective silence, Maugham reveals the complex negotiations required for artistic survival amid the commercialization of literature. Through the lens of early twentieth-century literary marketization, this paper analyzes how institutional forces of modern literary patronage and the demands of mass readership shape a writer's professional identity. It also examines how professional writers negotiate the tensions between intellectualism and commercialism as competing forces in constructing an ideal professional identity. Given Maugham's success in balancing quality and popularity, his insights could provide crucial guidance for contemporary writers negotiating market demands, artistic autonomy, and ethical duty.
Keywords *Cakes and Ale*; literary market; professional identity; art; commerce
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Introduction

Over a literary career spanning six decades, W. Somerset Maugham crafted the persona and lifestyle of a celebrity author. While his works remain widely read, they have received relatively little scholarly attention. Edmund Wilson critiqued Maugham's stories, stating: "They are readable—quite entertaining [...] These stories are magazine commodities—all but two of them came out in the *Cosmopolitan*—on about the same level as Sherlock Holmes" (326). David Daiches, a contemporary of Wilson, contended that Maugham wrote primarily for money: "Maugham's works are treated as entertainment rather than profound or original interpretations of the human condition" (256). In 1986, Joseph Epstein posed the question "Is it all right to read Somerset Maugham?" to explore the gap between Maugham's enduring popularity and his marginalization within academic circles. Given that the prevailing academic view of Maugham's works remains largely dismissive, one might ask: Is it all right to study Somerset Maugham? Regarding the divide between the public favour and the neglect of the intelligentsia, Maugham acknowledged his stylistic limitations but added: "The critic I am waiting for is the one who will explain why, with all my faults, I have been read for so many years by so many people" (qtd. in Epstein 1). Does a writer's ability to entertain readers, achieve public popularity, and attain commercial success necessarily come at the expense of artistic quality? Or can art survive only at the expense of commerce?

In his 1930 novel *Cakes and Ale*, subtitled *The Skeleton in the Cupboard*, Maugham explores the construction of a writer's professional identity against the backdrop of early twentieth-century literary marketization. The novel centers on a key question: Should "the skeleton in the cupboard" be exposed in a biography? Alroy Kear, a bestselling writer, is commissioned by the second wife of the late writer Edward Driffield to undertake the task of composing the biography. Kear opposes revealing the true or immoral aspects of the great writer's life, arguing that readers care little for truth and insisting on marketable and economically viable narratives. In contrast, William Ashenden—a young writer and longtime friend of Driffield and his first wife, Rosie—refuses to participate in the project, believing the biography should expose "the skeleton in the cupboard" for art's sake. The question of whether to reveal this hidden truth becomes a lens through which Maugham examines the negotiation between art and commerce in a professional writer's career. How do intellectualism and commercialism influence the construction of a writer's professional identity? By analyzing the four writers' ethical choices in *Cakes and Ale*, this paper explores Maugham's critical insights into the construction of a writer's professional identity amid the shifting literary and social landscapes in twentieth-century Britain. As one of the century's best-selling British writers, Maugham shows an acute awareness of market dynamics ahead of its time. His reflections on a writer's professional identity hence deserve critical analysis.

From "Cultural Legislators" to "Cultural Producers": Identity Transformation of the Professional Writer in the Early Twentieth Century

Adam Smith introduced the concept of "the invisible hand" in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*[1] and later in *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*[2] to highlight the power of the market. This concept marks a shift away from the stigmatization of market activities. Literature, "historically bound to the extension of market rationality," had been deeply shaped by the processes of commodification that emerged in the eighteenth century (Breitenwischer et al. 3). Griffin noticed that the symbolic center of literary culture shifted from the court to the burgeoning literary marketplace of the book trade.[3] Stover hence pointed out, "With the decline of patronage, writing to earn a living was no longer a gaucherie but a necessity. New markets and an expanding public meant greater rewards. The literary profession had been born" (75). As the eighteenth century progressed, it witnessed "the emergence of modern authorship," where writers transitioned from being "a financially independent gentleman amateur" or "a dependant of the patronage system" to "a proud and respected professional man or woman" who directly deals with booksellers and aspires to earn a living through their writing (Griffin 132). According to Ian Watt, the emergence of the literary market was closely tied to the rise of the novel, exemplified by authors like Daniel Defoe and Samuel Richardson.[4] Reinfandt argued that Defoe and Richardson were acutely aware of the rise of the literary market and recognized the necessity to make their works salable. Defoe, for instance, "clearly panders to the marketplace by first insisting on the tale's spectacular and entertaining qualities" (3), while Richardson attracted readers to Pamela more with "the promise of an interior view of a young woman's mind and boudoir than by the morals of Virtue Rewarded" (4). With the advent of new printing technology, the rise of magazines, and the labor division among publishers, retailers and printers, novels were further marketed as literary commodities by writers like Charles Dickens and George Eliot during the Victorian era. Historically, the market had been seen as the opposite of literature, and

1 See Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, London: HG Bohn, 1853, p. 264.

2 See Adam Smith, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations, BOOK IV*, London: T. Nelson and Son, 1873, p. 184.

3 See Dustin Griffin, "The rise of the professional author?" *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, edited by Michael F. Suarez, SJ and Michael L. Turner, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 132.

4 See Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964.

businessmen as the antithesis of artists. As Halsey observed, "The artist, literary or otherwise, places a high value on the aesthetic, symbolic, emotional and personal experiences of life. His outlook is quite a different from that of the businessman who is concerned with the more practical, material aspects. This difference puts the artist in fundamental opposition to the business ideology" (397). However, with the rise of the literary market, professional writers increasingly began to engage with writing as a business.

In the early twentieth century, the British literary market matured and expanded significantly. The implementation of the Net Book Agreement (NBA) on January 1, 1900, along with improvements in copyright law, led to increased profits for everyone involved in the publishing industry.[1] Economic democracy paved the way for the rise of mass culture, as the classes "make cultural demands which their formerly marginal position did not permit" (Feldman 339). The primary supporters of writers evolved from the aristocratic, upper, and middle classes in the eighteenth century to a rising middle class in the nineteenth century, and finally to the common reader amid the emergence of mass culture in the twentieth century. As a result, the early twentieth century witnessed the rise of a new generation of professional writers who transitioned from crafting works for a narrow circle of readers to producing literature for a broader, more diverse readership. Among them was Somerset Maugham, who, along with his contemporaries, took up literature as a viable profession. These writers capitalized on the opportunities presented by the growing commercialization of literature, leveraging expanded readerships and improved legal protections to establish successful literary careers. In the meantime, they were confronted with the challenge of balancing artistic value with the demands of a market-driven industry. Professional writers, therefore, often found themselves in a state of conflict—they had to weigh commercial considerations against artistic pursuits, maintain independence while collaborating with various stakeholders, and cater to as well as enlighten the reading public. Writers, once revered as "the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (Shelley 70), were increasingly expected to become "simultaneously an artist and an impresario, an aesthete and an entertainer, a thinker and a businessman" (Brier). The expanding literary market and reading public provided writers with an economic foundation, while simultaneously triggering an identity crisis as they struggled to reconcile their artistic autonomy with commercial pressures. This challenge was not unique to Maugham and his contemporaries; it remains a pressing issue for writers today.

1 See Christoph Reinfandt, "The Present in Perspective: Mapping the Literary Market Today," *The Literary Market in the UK,* 2017, pp. 1-18.

In *Cakes and Ale*, Maugham examines how different writers navigate the ethical dilemma through four characters. Jasper Gibbons and Edward Driffield illustrate the influence of modern literary patronage, particularly through the figure of a literary hostess, Mrs. Barton Trafford. Alroy Kear, by contrast, embodies the influence of a reader-driven market, where his success depends on catering to public tastes and market trends. William Ashenden, Maugham's fictional persona, offers a more reflective perspective on negotiating the tension between art and commerce as a professional writer. By comparing and contrasting the artistic and commercial approaches of these writers, Maugham explores the ethical principles professional writers should uphold in creating, sustaining, and expanding the literary marketplace.

Constructing a Writer's Professional Identity Under Modern Literary Patronage

Literary patronage has long been a significant force in shaping the production and reception of literature. In the traditional patronage system, a "gift economy" facilitated reciprocal exchange between patrons and clients: writers received financial support and social recognition, while patrons enhanced their reputations for liberality, enlightenment, or magnificence, thereby gaining cultural capital in the exchange.[1] Historically, literary patrons symbolized aristocratic culture and stood in opposition to the market. According to Van den Braber, the primary distinction between traditional and modern patronage lies in the increasing dominance of the market.[2] Before 1850, "patronage operated as a system for funding in a literary field that was not yet (fully) market-centred" in Britain (46). As the literary market became more commercialized, patrons began to assist authors in managing relations with the public, critics, and various social circles, with an aim to "construct a commercially viable career in a relatively safe, semi-private environment" (53). In the modern patronage system, "its nature and function changed: it became a safety net for those authors who could not or would not rely on the market because, for example, they were not interested in capturing a large audience or because they looked down on established tastes" (46). Van den Braber analyzed three patronage models in the nineteenth century: one led by a writer-patron, another by a writer-beneficiary, and a third by a salon hostess offering a platform to authors. In *Cakes and Ale*, Mrs. Barton exemplifies the third model. As a literary hostess in early

1 See Helleke Van den Braber, "Reciprocal Interactions and Complex Negotiations: Three Nineteenth-century Models of Patronage," *European Journal of English Studies,* vol. 21, no. 1, 2017, pp. 43-60.

2 Ibid. P. 46.

twentieth-century London, she extends patronage to two writers—Jasper Gibbons and Edward Driffield. The ups and downs of their literary careers under her patronage reflect the role of modern patronage in shaping a writer's professional identity. For Gibbons, patronage leads to both celebrity and obscurity, with his professional and personal life manipulated by the patron. "She nobbled Jasper Gibbons" (*Cakes and Ale* 141). As Ashenden the narrator observes:

> She had him to lunch to meet the right people; she gave At Homes where he recited his poems before the most distinguished persons in England; she introduced him to eminent actors who gave him commissions to write plays; she saw that his poems should only appear in the proper places; she dealt with the publishers and made contracts for him that would have staggered even a cabinet minister; she took care that he should accept only the invitations of which she approved; she even went so far as to separate him from the wife with whom he had lived happily for ten years, since she felt that a poet to be true to himself and his art must not be encumbered with domestic ties. (141)

Gibbons' failure to construct a writer's professional identity can be attributed to two main reasons. First is his inability to adapt to the public side of a literary career. "He had never been accustomed to having money to spend, he was quite unused to the lavish entertainments that were offered him, perhaps he missed his homely, common little wife" (141). His discomfort in social settings highlights a deeper struggle: the tension between the private space of writing where a poet finds material and creativity, and the public space of being a public figure. Second, Gibbons' inability to respond to criticism constructively further contributes to his downfall. When his third book fails, critics land harsh criticism on him: "The critics tore him limb from limb, they knocked him down and stamped on him, and [...] then they lugged him round the room and then they jumped upon his face" (142). Instead of handling the criticism with resilience—or even indifference—Gibbons turns to alcohol for comfort and descends into self-destructive behavior that eventually leads to his arrest. In his literary memoir *The Summing Up*, Maugham suggested that "authors are unwise who do not read criticisms. It is salutary to train oneself to be no more affected by censure than by praise; for of course it is easy to shrug one's shoulders when one finds oneself described as a genius, but not so easy to be unconcerned when one is treated as a nincompoop" (158). Treated as a nincompoop and abandoned by Mrs. Barton, Gibbons fails to construct a writer's professional identity under patronage. His failure to cope with the pressures of public exposure and criticism leads to his descent into obscurity.

In the case of Driffield, when Mrs.Barton employs the same strategy on him, he handles it more adeptly than Gibbons. Driffield's success and failure as a man of letters is deeply intertwined with patronage. His literary career can be divided into two phases: the first, when he works without a patron in Blackstable, and the second, when he collaborates with Mrs. Barton in the London literary circle. Ashenden attributes Driffield's artistic success to his early environment in Blackstable, where he remained close to life and wrote without restraints. There, he was exuberant, fun-loving, and enthusiastic. He chose writing as a profession and married his first wife, Rosie, a barmaid, at a time when Victorian morality deemed both decisions indecent. With Rosie, he had contact with a lifestyle untrammelled by conformity, codes, and inhibitions, which infused energy into his writing. Ashenden believes that this unconventionality produced works of the highest quality and value. Driffield's professional identity during this phase is shaped primarily by literary factors. A case in point is the controversy surrounding his novel *The Cup of Life*. A particular scene in the book—"The scene of the child's death [...] and the curious incident that follows it" (170)—sparks a sudden storm of criticism. This scene challenges Victorian readers' expectations, defies the sensibilities of conservative critics, and conflicts with prevailing social norms. Unlike Gibbons, who crumbles under critical scrutiny, Edward remains indifferent to criticism and simply responds, "They say it isn't true [...] They can go to hell. It is true" (171). His unwavering conviction in his artistic judgment highlights his resilience and his ability to stand by his work despite external pressures. Ashenden considers *The Cup of Life*, "though certainly not the most celebrated of his books, nor the most popular, is to my mind the most interesting" (170).

In the second phase of his career, Driffield's artistic decline—and his rise to great literary fame—coincides with the support of Mrs. Barton and the system of literary patronage she represents. Under her patronage, his artistic value diminishes from excellence to mediocrity, while his literary fame is inflated by non-literary factors, and he becomes a "Grand Old Man of English letters" (109). Leaving Blackstable and losing Rosie result in the loss of a vital source of inspiration and the authentic touch of life essential to his artistic creation. Ashenden notes that Driffield's engagement with the London literary circle leads to a decline in his creative spirit: he loses more of his animal spirits and gradually takes on an artificial role. At this stage, Driffield's professional identity is shaped primarily by non-literary factors. While his closeness to literary and social elites brings him fame and recognition, it also distances him from the raw, unfiltered experiences of life that once fueled his creativity. The very patronage that elevates his public standing simultaneously undermines the depth and originality of his work.

Through Gibbons and Driffield, Maugham illustrates how professional writers may become trapped by worldly success, "for it may very well cut the author off from the material that was its occasion. He enters a new world. He is made much of. He must be almost super-human if he is not captivated by the notice taken of him by the great and remains insensible to the attentions of beautiful women" (*The Summing Up* 129). Maugham is not opposed to writers achieving success, but he emphasizes that they should remain cautious of its potential consequences. Compared to Gibbons, Driffield does succeed in constructing a professional identity; however, this identity is largely shaped by non-literary factors. Under the protection of patronage, his professional identity is formed more through external promotion and manipulation than through artistic authenticity and literary autonomy.

The modern literary patronage system fosters literary coteries which, in Maugham's view, constrain the development of a writer's professional identity. While this system may serve as a form of resistance to the market in the name of artistic integrity, it does not always facilitate the creation of genuine art. In fact, it might isolate writers from a conducive writing environment, from real life, and from an understanding of the reading public. In the era of commercialization, literary patronage itself is increasingly shaped by market forces. As moderators of literary coteries, patrons like Mrs. Barton function more as speculators—those who "buy in the open market" (*Cakes and Ale* 141) and seek to "back a winner" (143)—than as genuine mentors committed to nurturing struggling writers. Under such a patronage system, the relationship between patron and writer becomes central to the construction of the writer's professional identity. However, this relationship is not always equitable or harmonious. McCabe argued that literary patronage often reflects a broader social and political structure driven by systemic inequality.[1] This dynamic places writers in a precarious position, dependent on the shifting interests and preferences of their patrons. Samuel Johnson famously criticized this imbalance, describing a patron as "one who looks with unconcern on a man struggling for life in the water, and, when he has reached the ground, encumbers him with help." Johnson's metaphor underscores the inherent power disparity in patronage, where support often comes too late or with strings attached, leaving writers vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation. As André Lefevere noted, patrons are "powers (including people and institutions) that can promote or hinder the reading, writing,

1 See Richard Anthony McCabe, *"Ungainefull Arte": Poetry, Patronage, and Print in the Early Modern Era*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

or rewriting of literature" (15). In *Cakes and Ale*, Maugham exposes how the patron-writer relationship can instrumentalize writers and stifle their creative autonomy. Gibbons represents a parasitic dependency on literary patronage: as a hanger-on in literary circles, he is crushed by public pressure and ultimately loses his voice. Driffield, by contrast, becomes ensnared in the literary fame that patronage affords him. Once a bold, unconventional realist, he is rebranded by the literary establishment into a respectable monument—stripped of the vitality and flaws that once defined his work. He becomes a symbol constructed by literary circles: discussed by intellectuals as a marker of taste, yet largely irrelevant to the reading public. As Maugham observed, "The writers who delight a clique and never reach the great public will never delight posterity, for posterity will never hear about them" (*The Summing Up* 132). Through Gibbons and Driffield, Maugham critiques patrons who act as market-driven speculators and writers who retreat into literary coteries under patronage. He condemns such coteries for fostering literary pretension rather than cultivating authentic creativity.

Constructing a Writer's Professional Identity in a Reader-driven Market

In the early twentieth century, the commercial expansion of the book trade created an alternative economy centered on the relationships between authors, publishers, and readers. As the power of the aristocracy declined and the influence of capitalism grew, literary patronage shifted from social elites and professional critics to the common reader. The purchasing power and cultural participation of a broader reading public enabled writers to survive independently, no longer reliant on the support of a narrow circle. This shift granted writers greater autonomy, as they were no longer bound to cater solely to the interests of a select few who supported their literary ambitions. At the same time, however, a wider readership brought new challenges. Writers had to navigate both literary and non-literary considerations on their own, long before the advent of modern literary agents. In an increasingly competitive marketplace, professional authors were expected to become "jack of all trades," mastering not only the craft of writing but also the complexities of publishing, marketing, and cultivating public relations.

At the very beginning of the novel, Ashenden introduces how Kear climbs up the literary ladder as a professional writer. Kear's success rests on four key factors: political background, the themes of his writing, public relations, and literary positioning. First, Kear's background plays a crucial role. Having studied at Oxford and served as a private secretary to a politician, he gains early access to the "great world" (14) of high society, which provides him with rich material for his writing.

Second, the themes of his works reflect his keen sensitivity to contemporary trends. In his early novels, he draws extensively from his experiences in upper-class circles, skillfully portraying "viceroys, ambassadors, prime ministers, royalties, and great ladies" in a tone that is "friendly without being patronizing and familiar without being impertinent" (*Cakes and Ale* 14). As public interests shift, Kear adapts by focusing on the "spiritual conflicts of solicitors, chartered accountants, and produce brokers" (ibid.), ensuring his work remains relevant. Third, Kear maintains close relationships with fellow writers, critics, and readers. With fellow writers, he sends copies of his first novel to the leading writers of the day, presenting his work as a tribute to those he admires. This gesture, combined with his generous praise of their work, earns him goodwill and support within literary circles. He also actively participates in literary organizations and delivers lectures on the merits of younger writers, further solidifying his reputation as a generous and engaged member of the literary community. With critics, when confronted by negative reviews, he invites reviewers to lunch, where his charm and hospitality often persuade them to soften their views or reconsider their opinions. By the time his next novel appears, critics are inclined to see it as a significant improvement. With common readers, Kear undertakes successful lecture tours across the United States and Great Britain, later revising his talks into published volumes. His willingness to speak publicly on diverse topics—from politics to the role of women in the home—helps make him a familiar and trusted public figure. Finally, Kear's literary positioning is central to his professional success. Aware of his limitations, he readily acknowledges that he is not a great novelist: "All I want people to say is that I do my best. I do work. I never let anything slipshod get past me. I think I can tell a good story and I can create characters that ring true" (C*akes and Ale* 17). These strategies make Kear "an example of what an author can do, and to what heights he can rise, by industry, commonsense, honesty, and the efficient combination of means and ends" (24). Kear's identity as a professional writer aligns with that of a businessman; he writes for the market and treats his novels as commodities crafted to meet consumer demand.

As a businessman, Kear approaches Driffield's biography as an opportunity to craft a narrative that aligns with public expectations and maximizes commercial profit. Specifically, in handling "the skeleton in the cupboard," he refuses to include any controversial elements in the biography, fearing how the public might react to the truth:

> It would be rather amusing to show the man with his passion for beauty and his

> careless treatment of his obligations, his fine style and his personal hatred for soap and water, his idealism and his tippling in disreputable pubs; but honestly, would it pay? (*Cakes and Ale* 117)

Driven by the pursuit of profit and public recognition, Kear epitomizes the commercialization of literature, constructing his professional identity through astute navigation of the literary market. This approach reveals an ethical dilemma central to literary commercialization: the tension between the autonomous and heteronomous sectors, as conceptualized by Pierre Bourdieu. In other words, it is a negotiation between art and commerce. Cox pointed out that the market has assumed the role of an unchallenged god in modern society, shaping politics, ethics, and personal values.[1] Cultural production both thrives and suffers under market forces. On the one hand, the rise of the literary market enables economic sustainability for professional writers. As Stover stated, "There are no authors without readers, and no professional authors without paying readers" (75). The market also facilitates the democratization of culture. Benjamin, argued that mass reproduction technologies emancipated art from elite control by making cultural works more accessible, though he cautioned that this progress came with certain aesthetic compromises.[2] Both Kear and Maugham benefit from the rise of the literary market. As Leavis observed, the emergence of "worthless fiction" resulted from a division in the previously unified literary marketplace: common readers read common novels, while more sophisticated turned to works labeled as literary or classic.[3] "The insatiable demand for fiction—now the publisher's mainstay—had to be satisfied by the second rate" (Leavis 132). By supplying what the market demands, these so-called "second-rate" writers achieve commercial success rarely attained by their "first-rate" counterparts. Thus, so-called "worthless fiction" gains cultural worth by satisfying the desires of common readers and the needs of the market.

On the other hand, the excessive reliance on market mechanisms raises significant concerns for cultural production. It can lead to the erosion of artistic autonomy, as writers prioritize market trends and profit over creative freedom. It may also result in cultural homogenization, as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer argued through their concept of the "culture industry"—the systematic

1 See Harvey Cox, *The Market as God*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016.

2 See Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, London: Penguin, 2008.

3 See Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, London: Chatto And Windus, 1939, p. 133.

transformation of art into standardized, predictable commodities designed for mass consumption.[1] Kear's approach to the literary market emphasizes commerce over art. His writing reflects a deliberate effort to align with prevailing public sentiments, as Ashenden teasingly observes:

> his sincerity is stamped on every one of their multitudinous pages. This is clearly the chief ground of his stable popularity. Roy has always sincerely believed what everyone else believed at the moment. When he wrote novels about the aristocracy he sincerely believed that its members were dissipated and immoral, and yet had a certain nobility and an innateaptitude for governing the British Empire; when later he wrote of the middle classes he sincerely believed that they were the backbone of the country. His villains have always been villainous, his heroes heroic, and his maidens chaste. (*Cakes and Ale* 21)

The problem with Kear's art is that it "is calculated to give the public what it wants—not the real novelist, whose creative power will always be masked by the puzzling incongruities of his actual existence, but the figure that literary society demands, free from complexity, contradiction, and indecorousness" (Palmer 58). Featuring flat characters and safe ideas, Kear's works reinforce existing beliefs, offer comfort through predictability, and sacrifice the potential to challenge or expand the intellectual horizon. While the market exerts considerable influence on writers, writers' artistic choices and ethical stances, in turn, shape the literary market and the intellectual climate of society. Kear's market-driven approach—treating literature as a standardized product at the expense of artistic individuality—leads to artistic mediocrity. When the popularity of such works overshadows quality works in the market, it creates the phenomenon of "bad money driving out good," resulting in a cultural environment dominated by widespread artistic mediocrity. Consequently, literature risks losing its vital role as a powerhouse for societal change.

Kear's professional identity reflects the erosion of professional ethics in the face of commercial pursuits. As many opportunities as the literary market offers, it also imposes significant challenges. The task, then, is neither a naïve rejection nor an uncritical embrace of the market, but rather a form of "resistant negotiation"—leveraging market forces while subverting their exploitative tendencies. This balancing act continues to challenge cultural producers. Like Kear, Maugham is acutely aware of his public image and actively works to expand his reputation and

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1 See Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, and Gunzelin Noeri, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Redwood: Stanford University Press, 2002.

book sales. He is not blind to the harsh realities of the literary market: "Every year, hundreds of books, many of considerable merit, pass unnoticed. Each one has taken the author months to write; he may have had it in his mind for years" (*The Summing Up* 123). Therefore, "It is not unnatural that he should use whatever means he can to attract the attention of the public," and due to "the stress of circumstances," a writer might "yield to the demand of the public" (ibid.). Maugham does not oppose writing for money, asserting that a writer's motive is irrelevant to the reader: "[...] for the reader has nothing to do with the motive for which the author writes. He is only concerned with the result" (ibid.). Instead, he maintains that financial success can provide writers with two key benefits: "One, the more important by far, is the freedom to follow his own bent, and the other is confidence in himself" (*The Summing Up* 130). Yet Maugham also cautions against the dangers of success, warning: "The writer is wise then who is wary of success. He must look with dread on the claims that others make on him because of it, the responsibilities it forces on him, and the hindering activities that it brings in its wake" (ibid.). While a professional writer should respect market rules and adopt a pragmatic outlook, this does not mean that they should uncritically follow market trends or exploit them for purely material gain. Kear fails to balance market demands with artistic integrity and achieves popularity at the expense of artistic quality; in Maugham's view, this does not constitute the ideal professional identity of a writer.

Reconstructing a Writer's Professional Identity in the Modern Literary Market

Driffield's retreat from the literary market and Kear's active engagement with it highlight an ethical dilemma for professional writers: Can one construct an ideal professional identity at the intersection of commercial pragmatism and artistic authenticity? Ashenden, a persona of Maugham, "struggles to escape fake intellectualism, pseudo-art, and social narrow-mindedness" (Palmer 55). As Palmer argued, this is "a struggle to free himself from a drive for success that would deny happiness and true creativity" (57). In this sense, a writer's professional identity is shaped not only by how they choose to write, but by how they choose to live. Therefore, when faced with the question of whether to expose "the skeleton in the cupboard" in Driffield's biography, Ashenden refuses to take part in a project that serves not the interests of art, but rather Kear's desire to profit through falsification. He believes the biography would be better if it depicted Driffield "warts and all" (*Cakes and Ale* 117), and explored the artistic value of an imagined reality firmly rooted in the richness of lived experience. Kear's omission of "the skeleton in the cupboard" reveals his shortsightedness and social narrowness, as "her [Rosie's] flagrant though harmless promiscuity hardly fits the narrow conventions of the biography Kear intends to write" (Palmer 59). Ashenden—or Maugham himself—adopts a long-term perspective instead, recognizing that readers and values evolve over time. As Ashenden sees it, "It may be that another generation, accommodating itself more adequately to the stress of life, will look for inspiration not in a flight from reality, but in an eager acceptance of it" (*Cakes and Ale* 105). History has shown this to be true: "It is strange (and instructive) to read now the book that created such a sensation; there is not a word that could bring a blush to the cheek of the most guileless, not an episode that could cause the novel reader of the present day to turn a hair" (171). Kear's approach of tailoring art to suit the sensibilities of the present is therefore problematic. As public tastes evolve, his works risk being discarded by future generations. In contrast, literature that endures often speaks to universal human experiences through the specific lens of its historical moment.

Given the shifting interests and sensibilities of readers, writers should prioritize cultivating individuality over chasing fleeting trends. Maugham warns against writers financing their careers through journalism, as journalism and reviewing "kill the individuality" (*The Summing Up* 125) by promoting impersonal, generalized perspectives and mechanical reading habits that erode a writer's unique voice and vision. Individualistic works require time to produce, may not immediately resonate with the public, and may not always endure. Yet these are often the works that leave a lasting impact. As Maugham pointed out:

> originality should not at first be welcomed. In this perpetually changing world people are suspicious of novelty and it takes them some time before they can accustom themselves to it. A writer with an idiosyncrasy has to find little by little the people to whom it appeals. Not only does it take him time to be himself, for the young are themselves only with timidity, but it takes him time to convince that body of persons, whom he will eventually rather pompously call his public, that he has something to give them that they want. (*The Summing Up* 124)

In *Cakes and Ale*, the depiction of Rosie underscores Ashenden's pursuit of individuality in art. Kear refuses to reveal the truth about Rosie, fearing it might upset readers and be rejected by the market. In contrast, Ashenden chooses to present the authentic Rosie—her genuine character and the significant role she plays in inspiring Driffield. Her candid sexual openness and zest for life, qualities rarely found in literary circles, become vital to writers like Driffield, Ashenden, and

Maugham himself.

In reconstructing a professional writer's identity, Ashenden strives to navigate a delicate balance: engaging with market forces while safeguarding artistic individuality. This effort reflects Maugham's philosophy that art should entertain readers and inspire the right action. The concept of entertainment, often misconstrued as pandering to popular taste, in fact represents a deep understanding of market demands, the needs of the reading public, and the ethical duty of the writer. From the early days of his career in theater, Maugham recognized the value of entertainment, asserting, "It is the public that pays, and if it is not pleased with the entertainment that is offered it, stays away. A play does not exist without an audience [...] A play that does not appeal to an audience may have merits, but it is no more a play than a mule is a horse" (*The Summing Up* 90). In his view, entertaining the public is not an artistic compromise but a skilled craft requiring both technique and talent. As Maugham defended, "The critics accused me of writing down to the public; I did not exactly do that; I had then very high spirits, a facility for amusing dialogue, an eye for a comic situation and a flippant gaiety [...] They were designed to please and they achieved their aim" (*The Summing Up* 84). If the philosophy of art for entertainment emphasizes a reader-centered approach, the concept of art for right action underscores the ethical duty of the writer. Maugham stated that, "The value of art is not beauty but right action", emphasizing that "art, if it is to be reckoned as one of the great values of life, must teach man humility, tolerance, wisdom, and magnanimity" (214.). The value of art should thus be measured not only by its market appeal, but also by its ethical impact on individuals and society. In reconstructing his professional identity, Ashenden rejects Driffield's isolation from the literary market and distances himself from Kear's excessive commercialization, which reduces literature to a mere pursuit of fame and profit. Instead, he strives to negotiate a balance between art and commerce through individualistic works that not only entertain but also inspire the right action.

Conclusion

A writer's professional identity is inherently shaped by his attitude toward the literary market; their choices to accept, reject, or negotiate with market forces are integral components of that identity. In *Cakes and Ale*, Maugham explores how a writer engages with the literary market to construct his professional identity in the early twentieth century. Gibbons and Driffield exemplify how modern literary patronage fosters coteries that promote elitism and literary pretensions by alienating writers from the broader market and general readership. Kear epitomizes the excessively commercialized professional writer—one who exploits the market for financial gain at the expense of artistic value. Ashenden, Maugham's persona, underscores the necessity of navigating a delicate balance between art and commerce

In Maugham's narratives, balancing popularity and quality is not a zero-sum game but a crucial endeavor in constructing a writer's professional identity. Without popularity, sustaining a livelihood as a professional writer becomes unfeasible; without quality, achieving long-term professional growth is unattainable. This dual focus aligns with Maugham's artistic philosophy of "art for entertainment" and "art for the right action." Entertainment reflects a respect for the literary market, advocating for cultural products that fulfill the needs of the common reader. The right action emphasizes the ethical dimension of the literary profession, highlighting that art should contribute to societal development. Constructing a writer's professional identity, therefore, requires a careful balance among economic viability, literary merit, and ethical responsibility, addressing a writer's obligations to the common reader, literary critics, and society at large. Through his portrayal of the four writers in *Cakes and Ale*, Maugham conveys his ethical stance: that the business of art and the art of business should be carefully balanced in the construction of a writer's professional identity..

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A Caged Entity: A Study of Trans Body Narratives in India

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Abstract This paper explores the lived experiences of hijras in India, specifically focusing on individuals assigned male at birth who later identified as female. Drawing on the autobiographies *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* by A. Revathi, *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* by Laxminarayan Tripathi, and *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey* by Living Smile Vidya, the study examines the socio-political marginalization and systemic exclusion faced by the hijra community. Despite being recognized as the "third gender," hijras remain subject to profound discrimination, relegated to the lowest echelons of society, and often denied basic human dignity. Through an intersectional and gender-fluid lens, this research highlights how societal perceptions rooted in rigid binary constructs perpetuate their exclusion. It underscores the need to push theoretical and societal boundaries of gender beyond traditional binaries to foster greater acceptance of diversity in gender identity. By examining the personal narratives of these authors, this paper aims to shed light on the transformative yet challenging journeys of hijras as they navigate societal rejection and struggle to assert a positive self-identity. The study ultimately calls for a reimagining of social attitudes to promote a nuanced understanding of gender fluidity. Recognizing and respecting hijras' identities is imperative not only to mitigate the adverse impacts of marginalization but also to cultivate an inclusive society where all individuals can thrive with dignity and equality.

Keywords Autobiobraphy; Hijras; India; Identity; Society

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Introduction

> "Becoming human is becoming individual, and we become individual under the guidance of cultural patterns … which give form, order, point, and direction to our lives … . We must … descend into detail, past the misleading tags, past the metaphysical types, past the empty similarities to grasp firmly the essential character of not only the various cultures but the various sorts of individuals within each culture, if we wish to encounter humanity face to face." (Geertz 13)

Georges Gusdorf defined autobiography as an "art" and "representative" of the leading thinkers of its era because it "recomposes and interprets a life in its totality" (Gusdorf 38). Trans-autobiographical writing is basically anti-normative and sporadically given any importance as a focus of study as they are not seen to be enigmatic enough to do justice to the academic standards and literary canons. Not only in life but also as a form of literature, marginalization prevails. If life of the trans-people need to be revolutionized then it is mandatory to scrutinize their autobiographies from where we can revise our concept and understanding of their lives, voice, sexuality, struggle and in some cases victory. It becomes a mode for self-articulation. Autobiography, therefore, can be the only platform by which they can leave an everlasting presence in history. Autobiographies seem to be the only instrument for these derided invisible subjects to become visible. This literary form has endless possibilities and therefore the narratives of self-actualization seem to be a reflection of all the other people who have not been able to voice their yearnings. This in turn will help the readers to a better understanding of different cultural practices and learn to look beyond the cultural stereotypes of society. One needs to outmaneuver gender essentialism and combat against all kinds of misappropriation by the presiding conventional autobiographical theory albeit with the realization that one autobiography of a trans-individual is not the prototype of others who are not just socially oppressed but also financially marginalized. By writing about the life of the trans persons, we are righting the injustices that have been hurled upon them. Hence, we can safely say that "from autobiography becoming a "metaphor of the self" (Olney 1980), it has come to explore the "changing self" (Spengemann 1980)" (Vakoch 19).

Around 1990s, academia encouraged the idea that being a trans does not mean that a person is necessarily suffering from some kind of mental disorder. This made trans individuals more open to the truth about themselves and hence venture further into acceptance and exploration. Trans activist and writer A. Revathi views writing as a powerful space for a transgender individual like herself to assert her identity, allowing her to embody both the narrator and the subject. "Writing my own story has also helped me examine my life afresh and that has been both challenging and enjoyable" (Revathi "Voice for Visibility"). The postmodern concept of deconstruction has brought forth a mammoth transformation to the concept of sex and gender. It now seems to be intrinsically ingrained in the individuals who experience them. Mostly people have an unreal concept of gender and on the basis of that they tend to stigmatize and oppress trans people. As has been rightly stated by Stephen Whittle, "Homophobia and sexism are not based on your genitals or with whom you sleep, but on how you perform the self in ways that are contraindicative to the heteronormative framework" (Stryker and Whittle XII).

Joseph Pulitzer mentions, "Put it before them briefly so they will read it, clearly so they will appreciate it, picturesquely so they will remember it and, above all, accurately so they will be guided by its light" (Ireland 68). A trans person is commonly known as a "hijra" in the Indian community. They are considered to be the 'third sex' and have the lowest social standing. In this paper, I am exclusively looking into the condition of those hijras who were born male but desired to be females. For this I will be delving deep into three autobiographies—*The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* by A. Revathi, *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* by Laxminarayan Tripathi and *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey* by Living Smile Vidya. Hijras are mostly considered as a group that experiences all forms of socio-political marginalization and exclusion. Their only wish is to get basic dignity as a human being. The entire deprivation is based on the absence of an understanding related to a separate gendered entity beyond the male-female ambiguity. This has led to a social exclusion which has furthered their chances of being abused in all possible ways and forms. Nobody can deny that the position of the trans is not only difficult but also problematic. The heteronormative framework has taught us that the concept of gender is very conveniently segregated as a man or a woman. But this fails to fathom the experience of trans people as their perspective and history is very different. Often what remains etched in our minds is the bewitching and exotic elements but the real lives of the transgender remain in oblivion. Therefore, it is extremely crucial to push our theoretical boundaries on gender beyond the rigidity provided by the concept of binaries and to understand and accept gender fluidity. This will help the society to see how marginalization directly has an impact on their identity and learn how to give recognition to a positive trans identity. B. Manjamma Jogathi, in her autobiography, mentions—"Our only effort is to enable inclusive acceptance of those like me by sharing our struggles, our pain, our joys, our fears, and making you, the reader, a part of who I am" (Jogathi and Bhat X).

Transgender Archetypes in Mythology and History

Gender fluidity has long been embedded in the mythology of the Indian subcontinent. Hinduism embraces this concept through figures like Ardhanarishwar, a form of Lord Shiva that symbolizes the union of masculine and feminine energies. In the Mahabharata, Arjuna assumes the form of Shikandi, playing a pivotal role in the Pandavas' victory over the Kauravas. Similarly, in the Ramayana, the monkey king Riskha transforms into a woman and marries the Sun God and the Rain God, giving birth to Sugriva and Vali (Pattanaik). These narratives underscore the cultural acceptance of gender fluidity within Hinduism.

Hijras were once a respected and integral part of Indian culture. References to eunuchs and individuals embodying both masculine and feminine traits can be found in the Vedas, ancient Hindu scriptures. They were considered bearers of good fortune and believed to possess unique powers associated with fertility (DelliSwararao 515). Hijras are perceived as channels of the Mother Goddess's divine energy, turning their barrenness into a force of creation and vitality. They are considered to be the dual entity of both Shiva and Shakti (Nanda 5). Ancient Indian writings provide evidence of the acknowledgment of a "third sex" or individuals who did not align with conventional male or female gender identities. Concepts such as *tritiyaprakriti* and *napumsaka* were deeply woven into Hindu mythology, folklore, epics, and early Vedic and Puranic texts. During the Mughal period, transgenders held significant status in royal courts. They were esteemed for their sharp intellect, reliability, and unwavering loyalty, granting them access to all social strata and enabling them to play a crucial role in Mughal political affairs.

Transgender individuals were treated with respect and held significant positions in the courts of the Mughals. "Hijras were considered clever, trustworthy and fiercely loyal and had free access to all spaces and sections of the population, there by playing a crucial role in the politics of empire building in the Mughal era" (Michelraj 18).

The arrival of the British significantly altered the lives of transgenders in India, making them victims of colonization. The privileges and recognition they once enjoyed under Indian rulers were stripped away. The British, unable to accept the respect and prominence accorded to hijras by Indian kings, actively criminalized the hijra community and deprived them of their civil rights. Colonization introduced a shift in societal attitudes, leading to widespread discrimination against transgenders. They faced ridicule for their appearance and behaviors, resulting in severe psychological trauma. Today, transgender individuals in India continue to face societal abuse, familial rejection, and marginalization, leaving their current status deeply challenging (Subapriya 62). In their narratives, hijras recount enduring persistent harassment, disapproving gazes, and an overwhelming fear of navigating public spaces. These fears extend to the risk of not making it home alive, using communal washrooms, attending school, or facing arrest.

Repudiation and Identity

Most literary works depict a coalition between transgenders and middle-class life. Laxminarayan Tripathi "lived in a shanty on the banks of the Siddheswar Lake in Thane, Mumbai" (Tripathi 1). Similarly, A. Revathi states in her autobiography, "I am from a small village in Namakkal taluk, Salem district" (Revathi 1). Living Smile Vidya also mentions that her "family wasn't exactly well off" and her father was "a municipal worker of the lowest rung: a sweeper" (Vidya 10). As has been highlighted by Estivill "Social exclusion is an accumulation of confluent processes with successive ruptures arising from the heart of economy, politics and society; gradually distances and places persons, groups, communities and territories in positions of inferiority in relation to centre powers, resources and prevailing values" (Estivill 19). Beall and Piron suggests, "a process and a state that prevents individuals or groups from full participation in social, economic and political life and from asserting their rights. It derives from exclusionary relationships based on power" (Beall and Piron 9).

The very basic dichotomy that is experienced by the individuals themselves is an inability to relate to their physical and emotional states. It is nearly impossible to recognize and put a name to a transgender identity in oneself at a tender age. So what undergoes is basically a sense of confusion and anxiety in their gender identity. Laxminarayan Tripathi mentions in her autobiography:

> Yes, it is true that I was like a woman. My mannerisms, my walking and talking style were all feminine. But why was it so? I did not know. I wasn't of the age to answer this question. Loner that I already was, I drifted even further into my cocoon. (Tripathi 4)

Vidya mentions: "I thought he was the one relative to see through me and recognize my abnormality, when all the others saw me as eccentric" (Vidya 31). Self-assertion is achieved by adhering to terms like "abnormal" or "eccentric." Thus, leading to a heightened sense of agitation at being unable to relate to the self. Michael Foucault has highlighted that heterosexuality has become such a norm that any deviation from the same is considered to be sick or abnormal. It is also seen to be a means of exerting power and retaining one's authority (Foucault).

Marginalized by society, they have no recourse to understand this gendered split. Hence, they feel entrapped in their own being. A. Revathi also goes through the same: "I could not talk to anyone about my confusions. Not to my brothers, or my parents. Nor could I stop my heart from wandering and so I went about as if crazed" (Revathi 9). This process reminds us what Simone de Beauvoir had mentioned "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (de Beauvoir 295). Butler argues that "there is no recourse to a body that has not always already been interpreted by cultural meanings; hence, sex could not qualify as a pre discursive anatomical facticity. Indeed, sex, by definition, will be shown to have been gender all along" (Butler 12).

Aaron H. Devor has referred to Anne Bolin and Frank Lewins who have devised models to highlight how individuals come to recognise themselves as transsexual women. Bolin has proposed a four stage model whereas Lewins has mentioned a six stage model. The first stage usually begins with a state of confusion and agony at not being able to understand oneself and then it gradually moves towards a transsexual identity. This is followed by a recognition of the self as a woman and ultimately that leads to the refusal of a transsexual identity in the quest to be recognized as a true woman. Bornstein, Feinberg and Green have advocated that "many transsexual women and men openly acknowledge their transgender histories today and take pride in this identity, rather than considering it shameful or stigmatizing and seeking to become invisible" (Devor 52). Devor highlights a fourteen stage model that reiterates the last stage as a sense of self-exaltation which "implies both a personal sense of pride in oneself and a political stance" (Devor 57). Although we cannot use a single model to fathom the varied experiences of trans people, nevertheless, these models act as tools to help us get an enlightened perspective about the identities of trans people.

Social ostracization furthers the angst of the trans people. Humiliation and rejection is abundantly provided to them. This is primarily because of the panic that people experience when they see trans individuals going beyond and against the meticulously established normative norms regarding not just their behavior but also mannerisms. A. Revathi mentions: "I was teased often at school, for behaving like a girl, for doing women's work, and on the streets too, was bullied often. I had a stammer and would also get teased for that. I was thus a regular source of amusement and curiosity" (Revathi 6). Hatred breeds hatred and even children imbibe the behaviour of the adults and consider it to be normative to indulge in ridiculing trans individuals and practicing gender tyranny. Vidya highlights her angst –

> Even kids didn't spare me. Once they followed me when I was on field duty and sang raucous film songs at me. Who taught them to do this? Where did they learn such domineering behaviour? If you see a tirunangai, attack her, insult her, make her cry, chase her away whimpering, screaming – that seemed to be the rule, regardless of race, religion or creed. (Vidya 135)

Aaron Devor mentions "Each of us has a deep need to be witnessed by others for whom we are. Each of us wants to see ourselves mirrored in others' eyes as we see ourselves" (Devor 46). This is very important when they are undergoing a process of identity formation. When this interaction turns into rejection and apathy, it leads to great psychological trauma. In the context of trans people, it "is also about seeing oneself in the eyes of others like oneself" (Devor 46). In certain scenarios, even after realising one's gendered identity, the next struggle is to hide that identity from the world to save themselves from further humiliation. Thus, the struggle to lead the pretentious life of a cisgender ensues. Vidya states: "I was a girl. Unfortunately, the world saw me as a boy. Inwardly I wanted to be a girl, but I made every effort possible to hide my femininity from the outside world" (Vidya 33). Succumbing to the desire of professing their true identity, even if for a short time span, would require utmost carefulness. For Vidya, dance liberated her from the shackles of societal gendered normativity. But it had to be done in a fastidious way – "I took great care to shut all the windows properly, checking and rechecking that I had done so, and then filled the keyhole with paper" (Vidya 32). She had to meticulously select even the sari that she would wear:

> …I always wore a sari from Akka's pile of clothes meant for the laundry: I couldn't fling it away in that manner if I wore a fresh sari, could I? I would have to fold it neatly and put it away, and the delay in opening the door would give the game away! (Vidya 33)

Joel Anderson summarises Axel Honneth's opinion on identity formation is influenced by "the development of self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem. These three modes of relating practically to oneself can only be acquired and maintained intersubjectively, through being granted recognition by others whom one also recognizes. As a result, the conditions for self-realization turn out to be dependent on the establishment of relationships of mutual recognition. These relationships go beyond (a) close relations of love and friendship to include (b) legally institutionalized relations of universal respect for the autonomy and dignity of persons, and (c) networks of solidarity and shared values within which the particular worth of individual members of a community can be acknowledged" (Honneth XI). It is usually seen that the first experience of rejection is encountered in the family itself and if ever acceptance takes place, it might be because of financial dependency. According to Suzy Woltmann, "The displacement, alienation, and homelessness that many hijra youth experience leads to what I call ideological diaspora—a form of internal diaspora predicated on intersectional oppression and exile" (Woltmann 3). In this regard, transgender autobiography acts as a platform to humanize the experience and trauma of the trans people. Other trans individuals see a reflection of their lives in the narrator's and experience a feeling of solidarity and communal harmony. Hence, these writings empower and motivate them to fight against all kinds of stigma. Laxmi's acceptance by her family challenges prevailing norms and serves as a model for other families with children who defy traditional gender expectations. In Laxmi's autobiography, this shift in familial attitude is evident when she reflects on her participation in the television show *Sach ka Samna*, with her family. Their acknowledgement of her queerness was evident. Shielding Laxmi's identity, her father asserts:

> Why should I expel Laxmi from the family? I am his father, he is my responsibility. A Hijra can be born to any family. If we spurn them and show them the door, we leave them with no alternative but to become beggars. Driving Laxmi out of the house was out of question. (Tripathi 123)

While analysing the autobiographies, one early indication of trans identity is seen in an individual's love for cross dressing. This acts as a medium of expressing one's gender identity. Cavallaro and Warwick in their work, *Fashioning the Frame: Boundaries, Dress and Body* discuss clothing "as a figurative supplement of identity" (Elahi 195). A. Revathi states: "I would wear my sister's long skirt and blouse, twist a long towel around my head and let it trail down my back like a braid. I would then walk as if I was a shy bride, my eyes to the ground, and everyone would laugh" (Revathi 4). Even Vidya mentions the same:

> …I was aided and abetted by my sister Manju's skirts and midis, her eyeshadow, bangles, bindis and costume jewels. Lipstick was easily replicated by applying coconut oil to my lips and rubbing it in repeatedly. Long, plaited hair was an altogether different issue, but I knew how to overcome that problem too: just spread a thin cotton towel – a large kerchief…. (Vidya 19)

Thorner and Krishnaraj state that "subaltern history employs the principle of self-representation as a means of recovering suppressed identities. It seeks to retrieve the subject-hood of oppressed groups by highlighting their everyday activities" (Thorner and Krishnaraj 18). Mostly transgenders are seen to adorn themselves in flamboyant makeup. Vidya describes another trans woman, "Sugandhi had a massive physique. She wore her salt and pepper hair in a tight bun and the two-rupee-coin sized kumkum bindi on her broad forehead instilled awe in onlookers; her mouth constantly chewed paan, while her bell-like voice matched her impressive physical appearance—Sugandhi Ayah looked formidable" (Vidya 2). It seems like the impressive and loud exterior is purposely maintained so that the marginalised and voiceless get a voice and visibility. However much one may try, it will be impossible not to take a note of them. This is their way of attaining their identity, an identity that even the government did not want to give them. Ignominious comments, to some extent, seemed pleasurable as that gave them their desired identity, that of a woman's. A. Revathi mentions how her classmates would call her "'Girl-boy!' 'Ali!' 'Number 9!' My heart would sink at these words, but I also felt faintly gratified and even happy that these boys actually conceded that I was somehow a woman" (Revathi 6). Even Vidya highlighted the same:

> When I walked down the street, youngsters started teasing me: 'Look at the nattamai's son. He walks like a female!' The teasing did not hurt me. On the

> contrary, it pleased me. It made me happy to know that at least some onlookers understood what I was feeling. (Vidya 23)

As Reddy suggests, “Viewing hijras solely within the framework of sex/gender difference—as the quintessential ‘third sex’ or ‘neither men nor women’—ultimately might be a disservice to the complexity of their lives and their embeddedness within the social fabric of India” (Reddy 4). Their writings “call attention to the fact that ‘gender,’ as it is lived, embodied, experienced, performed, and encountered, is more complex and varied than can be accounted for by the currently dominant binary sex/gender ideology of Eurocentric modernity” (Stryker 3). Many people fail to realise that there are numerous other trans people in the world who were way different from what the binaries provided. A recognition of the same automatically enlivens their spirit. Confidence heightens with the feeling of sisterhood. Laxminarayan Tripathi describes her elation thus, “When I got home that day, I floated on air. I was not alone. I had met people who were my kind. They shared my sexual attraction for members of my own sex. My confidence rose” (Tripathi 12).

The hijra, India’s oldest ethnic-transgender community, is organized within the *jamaat*, a social structure where alternative relationships are forged based on shared marginalization, offering support and belonging in the absence of traditional kinship ties. A. Revathi describes the community as similar to an extended family and, like a household, is headed by an elder known as the guru who in turn adopts a set of chelas or disciples who are like daughters to her, the jamaat becomes their life and security (Revathi 22-23). With its own culture, rituals, and secret language, the community is matrilineal, structured around the guru-chela system, which fosters socio-economic interdependence. Acting as both a refuge for trans women excluded from the "cistem" and a challenge to heteronormative gender norms, the hijra community must be understood in the plural — “communities” — reflecting regional, linguistic, cultural, and caste diversity.

Anatomy and Identity

Trans-autobiographies can also be read as body narratives. A critical examination of the same highlights their tendency to center on the body, as somatic transitions play a pivotal role in shaping their lived experiences. Consequently, these autobiographies navigate the interplay between corporeal transformation and the liberation of the self, reflecting a dialogue between the somatic and the cognitive. Most people have the idea that hijras are traditionally believed to be born intersex and are taken in by the hijra community at birth. Many undergo an operation where they get rid of their male genitalia but vaginal reconstruction is not done. This is often known as the emasculation operation or 'nirvana'. Thus, making them a group that is completely different from the heteronormative. But many do acknowledge themselves to be women.

For many, this inability to conform to any particular gender, is in itself quite liberating. They feel emancipated because they are not bound by the norms of hetero-gendered performativity. They can unshackle themselves from the pre-assigned gender roles and keep pushing their boundaries. Manjamma highlights that a trans person can even transcend the limitations imposed on heteronormative beings by dint of their anatomical framework— "Had I been born a man I couldn't have fathered that many, nor could I have given birth to so many had I been a woman. But my art has ensured I have the privilege and comfort of being 'Amma' to countless children across the globe" (Jogathi and Bhat X). Their non-conformity to dominant social practices enables them to explore and express their true selves, which is inherently "antinormative."

Laxmi's autobiography challenges the traditional definition of "hijra" and alters our perception of them. Laxmi states: "The word 'hij' refers to the soul, a holy soul. The body in which the holy soul resides is called 'hijra'. The individual is not important here. What is important is the soul and the hijra community that possesses it. God loves the hijra community and has created a special place for it outside the man—woman frame. A Hijra is neither a man nor a woman. She is feminine, but not a woman. He is masculine, a male by birth, but not a man either. A hijra's male body is a trap- not just to the hijra itself who suffocates within it, but to the world in general that wrongly assumes a hijra to be a man" (Tripath 39). This "suffocation" is largely caused by society's persistence on cisgender majority and prioritising it over everything else. As Judith Butler has claimed that there are only certain bodies that are important and are worthy of being safeguarded and lamented. Other bodies are rendered abject, violating socially constructed boundaries and norms that lack inherent significance. In contrast, bodies deemed "culturally intelligible and socially valuable" retain privileges and recognition (Butler 16). The hijras are considered to be abject bodies and so it is of hardly any significance whether they exist or not. No one pities their humiliation, derision or pain. Nor does anyone lament their loss. The abject body of the hijra disrupts established borders and boundaries, serving as a site of oppression within the patriarchal structure. Concurrently, the memories of "becoming," while elusive and immaterial, are intricately linked to the "materiality of their bodies" (Smith and Watson 27).

The major problem that is highlighted in these autobiographies is in the dichotomous nature of their physical entity. They are constantly at war with their anatomical and psychological entities that are starkly contradictory in nature and formation. This makes their body a site for brutality. Patriarchy has always celebrated masculinity to such an extent that they never took into consideration the toxicity that was bred in its garb. Effeminate men, therefore, are considered to be less masculine and become victims of subjugation by the mainstream masculinity. Many, therefore, resort to unlicensed and illegal ways of removing this unwarranted entity that hinders them from having their desired identity.

Robert Phillips draws on Julia Kristeva and Catherine Roudiez's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* to describe this marginalization process, which excludes those deemed "other" by dominant societal norms. Phillips extends the concept of "abjection" to explore the "instability of the gendered and/or sexed bodies—especially those occupied by transgender individuals" (Phillips 19). He explains that, as Kristeva and Roudiez suggest, abjection "disturbs identity, system, order and encompasses a kind of borderline uncertainty—ambiguous, horrifying, and polluting" (Phillips 20). Transgender bodies, especially those undergoing transition, subvert the boundaries of systemic order by resisting rigid categorizations of sex and gender. As Phillips argues, "The abject can thus service the cleaving point of abstruseness and unease—separating, pathologizing, and psychologizing trans subjectivity" (Phillips 20).

In Vidya's autobiography, the contested self and body serve as central themes throughout the narrative. Vidya's emotional and sexual conflicts, alongside challenges related to the negotiation of her multiple identities, emerge prominently from the outset. Through the act of writing, Vidya engages in a process of self-construction, crafting a coherent sense of self from the multiplicity of experiences and identities. The very first chapter of Vidya's autobiography is titled as 'nirvana'. It seems, as if, she begins her autobiography with a narration of her birth, a phoenix like resurrection, into her new and long desired entity as a woman.

Societal encumbrance in its lack of regard towards one's gendered identity beyond the established norms of heteronormative constantly debases the reality of the trans lives. Vidya claims, "I had no problem with people recognizing my femininity, but hated it when they made fun of me on that account. Worse was when they imagined I was a man sexually or romantically interested in a girl…To you, I may seem to be a man, but I am a woman at heart" (Vidya 50). Therefore, even after going through a painful operation, in an extremely unhygienic situation, she felt nothing but gratitude—"I thanked them silently. 'Thank you for removing my maleness from my body, thank you for making my body a female body. My life is fulfilled. If I die, I'll lose nothing'" (Vidya 8).

Conventional Roles Aiding in Compartmentalization

The hijra identity, marked by marginalization and the decline of its traditional roles, experiences dual victimization—by mainstream society and within its own community. While the guru-chela system offers support to those lacking agency due to poverty and gender identity, its limitations highlight the urgent need for affirmative action. Gender dysphoria transcends socioeconomic boundaries, yet access to education and resources determines outcomes. For transgender individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, state initiatives are vital. Sensitizing society, especially educational and employment sectors, is essential to promote the inclusion and self-actualization of the hijra community. Hijras, as part of a group, use their training to earn a living. In *Not This, Not That: The Hijras of India and the Cultural Politics of Sexuality*, Vinay Lal highlights their cultural role:

> At what are traditionally held to be the two most auspicious moments in an adult person's life in India, namely, marriage and the birth of a male child, hijras come into their own as persons possessed of the power of conferring blessings and, complementarily, inflicting curses. (Lal 123)

Hijras primarily sustain themselves through three means: *badhaai* (blessing during auspicious events), *mangti* (begging and threatening with curses if refused), and *dhandha* (sex work). Limited by lack of education—often disrupted by gender-based violence—and denied mainstream job opportunities, many hijras are compelled, as Laxmi states, "to find refuge in the hijra world" (Tripathi 8).

Azar and Vaudrey highlight the ways in which financial and social stigma compel many hijra individuals to lead "double lives." In these circumstances, they may be constrained to live "as a cisgender man with wife and children" while simultaneously, and often discreetly, embodying the life of a hijra woman. This dual existence can result in significant psychosocial distress. Such individuals are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation by cisgender men and police.

Vidya lays bare the lived realities of tirunangais, revealing how systemic neglect compounds individual struggles. These reflections highlight not only personal struggles but also the structural inequalities that perpetuate their exclusion from mainstream society. "Most tirunangais are unlettered. Thus, they cannot find avenues of expression as I have done. Even if they are prepared for hard work, they have few skills. Who will help them if they want to study?" (Vidya 131).

Through her poignant narrative, Vidya underscores the multifaceted barriers that transgender individuals encounter in accessing education, employment, and basic civil rights. These reflections highlight not only personal struggles but also the structural inequalities that perpetuate their exclusion from mainstream society.

> True, I was a graduate—an MA in linguistics, in fact—but did that mean there were government jobs waiting for me, a transgender person? And while there might be sympathizers in the private sector, how many would actively support tirunangais? If I wanted to strike the path of a self-employed entrepreneur, how many people would be ready to give me business, or even finance my venture? There is absolutely no social security for transgenders in this country. Who will step forward to help us, when the government itself is unprepared to extend any kind of basic recognition—it does not issue us a voter ID or even a ration card! (Vidya 92)

Even Nani succumbs to this societal disparity and suggests Vidya, "No jobs are waiting out there—your degrees will get you nowhere. You'd better do the sensible thing and concentrate on begging" (Vidya 106). For Vidya, begging serves as both an act of resistance and a means of reparation, symbolizing the compensation she claims from a society that marginalized and mistreated her. Even Revathi mentions,

> We want to live as women, and if we are granted the facilities that will enable us do so, we'll live as other women do. We were not born to beg or do sex work. Circumstances, faulty laws and social hatred have left us with no course but to beg and do sex work. Our parents begot us like they did other children. We are also human. (Revathi 262)

Her statement highlights the systemic marginalization of transgender women, emphasizing how discriminatory laws, societal prejudice, and limited opportunities compel many to turn to begging or sex work as survival mechanisms. Her appeal calls for systemic reforms, advocating for legal protections, equal opportunities, and societal inclusion to ensure a more just and equitable environment for transgender individuals.

The Sole Prerogative

Revathi poignantly illustrates the intersection of gender identity, objectification, and social exclusion. The intrusive comments and physical violations she describes reveal the pervasive dehumanization transgender individuals face. Her reflection on the societal rejection and lack of support from both family and society underscores the profound isolation transgender people experience. Revathi's struggle to maintain dignity in the face of constant humiliation highlights the stark contrast between her desire for a life of dignity and the oppressive conditions that deny her basic recognition and humanity. She mentions,

> Some men made bold to touch us, on our waists or our shoulders. Some others pointed to our breasts and asked, 'Original or duplicate?' At such moments, I felt despair, and wondered that people could be this way. How we could ever hope to make a living? God has made us this way, I thought, and we have no work of our own, our parents do not understand us and this world looks upon us with distaste. Yet we too go hungry. Above all, we wanted to live as human beings do, with dignity. I tried hard to ignore all that was happening around me. (Revathi 30)

The pursuit of dignity among transgender individuals is a fundamental aspect of their human rights, encompassing the validation of their gender identity and the provision of equitable opportunities in all spheres of life. However, this pursuit is often obstructed by systemic discrimination, societal marginalization, and legal exclusion. For transgender people, dignity is not only about personal validation but also about accessing basic rights such as education, healthcare, employment, and protection from violence. As such, the desire for dignity is intrinsically tied to broader calls for social justice and equality, requiring transformative changes in both social attitudes and institutional structures.

> My expectations were simple: I wanted to live a normal life like all men and women. My being a tirunangai was natural, just as men are men, women are women, and cats are cats. Trouble arises when people do not understand this simple truth. We cannot even describe our problems as those of the minorities. All we need is equal opportunity to work and earn a livelihood. Only when people approach us with evil intent and harass us do we have to take specific steps with negative outcomes. Please believe me when I say that most of the violent behaviour of tirunangais in public places—their loud talk and aggressive soliciting, for instance—is out of self-defence. We live in a world which offers us no security. Only by doing something disgusting can we keep at bay men who are much stronger than we are. We can't even go to the police

when we are assaulted, sexually or otherwise. They don't take our complaints seriously. (Vidya 130)

Conclusion

Teaching transgender theory combines exploration with activism, engaging with evolving cultural landscapes to amplify trans voices and foster justice. This approach involves recognizing the limitations of traditional sex and gender categories, inviting us to reimagine identity as a fluid construct. By embracing the freedom to envision, express, and define identities, we aid in fostering to a more inclusive, human-centered perception of gender and selfhood. Revathi, in her autobiography, poses a few questions that we all must cogitate on for enabling a more inclusive society:

How many of us are even conscious that there is a social group called hijra? Since people are not even aware of our existence, they think ill of us. It is our duty to dispel such ignorance. Just as how dalits have come to oppose the violence inflicted on them, why cannot we hijras get together and fight for our rights? Do we not have the right to change our sex? Aren't we human too, born of mothers, as others are? We have not descended from the sky, have we? We have rights, just like the others. We are citizens of this nation. Don't we want all those rights that are granted to other citizens: the right to have a ration card, to hold property, to have a passport, the right to work, to marry, adopt or raise a child? (Revathi 24)

Even Vidya highlights the same need, "We need to belong, just as the rest of humanity needs to belong. What can we do when we don't have a wall to lean on, when we can't find a place to stay?" (Vidya 131)

Empowering the transgender community and countering social stigma are crucial to fostering authenticity and well-being. Disclosure is a significant, often daunting step in the identity journey of many trans individuals, with the timing and method of revealing their true gender identity weighed carefully amid fears of rejection or discrimination. Transphobia and societal stigmatization frequently push trans people to conceal their identities, underscoring the need for a more inclusive and supportive environment that respects their journey and allows them to live openly. Engaging with the personal narratives of trans individuals facilitates a deeper understanding of their experiences and provides critical visibility to their struggles.

I speak because we need to be heard, I write because we need to be understood, I dare because we need to survive. (Subramaniam 30)

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Fatness, Gender, and Race: Obesity Narrative in Margaret Atwood's *The Man from Mars*

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Abstract This paper examines the intersection of impurity metaphor and identity politics in Margaret Atwood's short story *The Man from Mars* through the lens of obesity narrative. By analyzing the protagonist Christine's embodiment of obesity and her encounter with a Vietnamese students studying in Canada, the paper explores how Atwood critiques societal stigmatization of female bodies and social exclusion of the alien by interrogating the complexities of "impurity" discourse. The narrative reveals the public rhetoric on fat women and the "Third World" men ,who are labeled as "dirty other", threatening clear-cut boundaries and categories with the parallels of fat and alien as pollutant so that they are treated as the "unwanted other", worthy of discrimination and exclusion. This phenomenon not only points to the heterogeneity of groups within spaces and places, but also reveals the hegemonic normative assessment that confines women's autonomy and reinforces the alien's otherness. The findings suggest that Atwood's obesity narrative challenges hegemonic aesthetics and purity norms while exploring the intersection of gender, ethnicity and health discourses. The study contributes to expand discussions on identity politics in Atwood's work and offers an interdisciplinary perspective on logics that determine individuals' positionings and their resistance with the monolithic "same system" and the symbolic hegemony.
Keywords Margaret Atwood; obesity narrative; fat stigma; polluting body; identity politics
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Introduction

In 2000, the World Health Organization released a report titled *Obesity: Preventing* *and Managing Global Epidemics*, which declared that "Today ... as standards of living continue to rise, weight gain and obesity are posing a growing threat to health in countries all over the world. Obesity is a chronic disease, prevalent in both developed and developing countries, and affecting children as well as adults. Indeed, it is now so common that it is replacing the more traditional public health concerns, including under-nutrition and infectious disease, as one of the most significant contributors to ill health" (WHO Report 13-14). In this widely understood as a medical authority, it defines "obesity" as a true "disease" with a tone that includes risks, warnings, and impending disasters. The World Health Organization's report does not make a personal judgment on "obesity", nor does it explicitly mention any specific moral defects of the "obese" body. However, the authoritative medical narrative used by the World Health Organization provides the foundation for the moral panic currently experienced in Western societies. With the development of science and medicine to make moral evaluations of the body, many concepts related to beauty, health, and purity are also influencing different groups in different ways. Obesity and the shame it brings are also distributed in many aspects of society, placing marginalized groups in a more disadvantaged position in terms of region, race, and class. The negative cognition of "impure" bodies under the stigma of fat dominates the lives of groups such as women, immigrants or people of color as the victims. This "victim" image is a key element in Atwood's creations. In the short story *The Man from Mars*, she highlights Christine's embodiment of obesity and her encounter with a Vietnamese student, revealing the potential "terrorism" caused by the "purifying" power.

Offense: The Fat Female Body as Aesthetic and Spatial Disruption

Given the pervasiveness of people's fear of fat and the common panic caused by "obesity epidemic," "obesity" are not primarily medical issues at all. Many people have come to see it as primarily a cultural and political issue, as Samantha Murray states, "In Western society, 'fatness' is not understood as a singular category, but rather is continually constituted and (re)constituted along a continuum of relativity that is governed by a series of gendered, classed, and raced imperatives for normative bodily being"(3). Socially, the obese body is perceived as aesthetically disordered and incongruous—its mass and dimensions disrupt environments designed for normative bodies. In *The Man from Mars*, Christine is acutely aware that upon being seen, she is expelled beyond the boundaries of acceptable corporeality. Christine's overweight physique has always subjected her to an "abnormal" being: To her parents, she was a sturdy, chubby girl, diligent but lacking special talents. Christine's two sisters, considering her plain-looking, showered her with affection never given to each other, because she posed no competitive threat. Male friends just saw her as an ideal tennis partner for the sporty ones. "She was an exception, she fitted none of the categories they commonly used when talking about girls" (Atwood 22). Because of her fatness, Christine is an outsider of "women". According to Murray interpretation ,the "fat" woman"(is presumed to be) lazy, she is out of control, she is a moral failure, she is unhealthy, she is an affront to normative feminine bodily aesthetics, she is a food addict, she cannot manage her desires, her level of intelligence is below average"(13-14).

As early as 1924, Dr. James S. McLester in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA) summarized his generation's view of obesity, "Overweight is a mar to beauty [...] An excess of fat destroys grace and delicacy. A fat face has a monstrous uniformity. No theatrical producer would hire a plump actress to mirror the real depths of the human soul" (Kersh and Morone 166). This article on "obesity" was published in the top medical journal in the United States, but it was not related to treating diseases or finding the causes of so-called "obesity" diseases. The most intriguing aspect of McLester's article is his implicit assumption that "fatness" is essentially gendered. When an obese body belongs to a female, such a body is the most offensive and dangerous. McLester takes the example that "fat" actresses cannot convey the true depth of the human soul to the readers, believing that "the 'fat' woman as less-than-woman, less-than-human; unable to truly access her 'inner self', or perhaps she does not even have a core, but is merely an assemblage of the worst indiscretions and shortcomings of woman"(Murray 2). There is no mention in McLester's comment on "fatness" in men, or indeed of the disease of obesity in men. Similarly, Lee F. Monaghan also observes that fat today is "routinely discredited as female or feminizing filth" (68). The corporeality of fatty substances and their inherent gender differences link obesity to both physical and cognitive traits, playing a significant role in shaping negative perceptions and stereotypes about the personalities of obese individuals.

Obviously, obese women's bodies are not diseased, but they are pathological. McLester's medical view of "obese" women is not that it is a body that suffers from "pain", but rather that it is a source of pain for others. This means that the threat to the body of "obese" women lies in their aesthetic offense to society, which indicates that the women are "harming beauty" and their "fat" flesh, destroys elegance and delicacy. In *The Man from Mars*, when Christine walks across the campus square after tennis, her imposing figure draws gazes from the crowd, their eyes followed her bodily movements, then indifferently shifted away. And when she is closely chased by the Vietnamese international student, she "was aware of the ridiculous spectacle they must make, galloping across campus, something out of a cartoon short, a lumbering elephant stampeded by a smiling, emaciated mouse, both of them locked in the classic pattern of comic pursuit and flight" (Atwood 17). Her body is interpreted as deviant, aberrant or perverse. The moment Christine's body enters others' visual field; it is instantly transformed and marked as problematic. Graham has coined the term "lipoliterates", "In fat-obsessed cultures we are all 'lipoliterates' who 'read' fat for what we believe it tells us about a person. This includes not only their moral character but also their health" (Graham 178-179). When it comes to reading bodies, many people have a readily deployed literacy to "read" bodies and to construct or (re)produce knowledge about certain bodies. Within the cultural narratives, the "appropriate" and "harmonious" female identity is confined to narrowly defined parameters. However, the criteria for what constitutes a normative body are never merely material. Like gender, fatness (obesity) can be both a state of existence and an assertion of identity—the fat female body becomes a lived identity arbitrarily narrated across cultural texts.

The essence of obesity stigma is fat stigma. The dominant power/knowledge system generally holds a negative attitude towards fat: it is seen as excess and wasteful. Kent remarks that fat is often associated with specific manifestations of unpleasant, bad, or lifeless traits, "makes fat women's bodies synonymous with the offensive, horrible, or deadly aspects of embodiment" (130) and is therefore despised and considered something that must be discarded. In *The Man from Mars*, people's attitude towards Christine implies the preservation of fixed gender identities and normative female sexuality. Just like what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has called a "fat abhorring world of images," a world in which fat women are charged with "concentrating and representing 'a general sense of the body's offensiveness" (Sedgwick 1993). Besides, Christopher E. Forth states, "people's prejudices against fat are often accompanied by a powerful emotion that is anything but detached or disinterested" (Forth 12). In *Fat: Culture and Materiality*, Forth and social humanist Alison Lich analyze the three characteristics of fat, namely, moist, pasty and soft. According to their analysis, after undergoing several centuries of semiotic construction and stabilization in western culture, fat or obesity is often linked with clumsiness and stupidity, as if their mental activities have become dull due to their physical insensitivity. The corporeality of fatty substances and the accompanying gender differences link obesity to physical and cognitive characteristics, exerting a significant influence on the formation of negative views and stereotypes towards obese individuals. These influences continue to be widely spread in society in subtle ways even today.

Fat people themselves are not the threat; rather, they are the metaphoric representation of problem of excess and corruption. This metaphor of fat continued to be used throughout the 20th century and now. When fat stigma permeates daily life, it infiltrates the individual's psyche, shaping her beliefs, altering her interpersonal dynamics, and redefining her mode of existence. Internalized fat oppression may lead women to readily negate their self-worth, conflating identity with bodily appearance. Low self-esteem, body shame, and chronic stress are among the psychological and physical harms inflicted by such oppression. Especially for white women in the West, becoming fat means a person's decline and degradation in the scale of civilization. In the western world, "civilization project" meant not just racialization and gender and sexual hierarchies, but also the construction of certain types of body types as superior and others as inferior. In *The Man from Mars*, Christine's "chunky reddish face, exposed with no softening fringe, looked like a Russian peasant's (Atwood 14). When Christine engaged in a brief, heated altercation with the Indian maid at the home, her mother perceived this as evidence of her having descended to the level of a "servant" viewing both figures with equal dissatisfaction, albeit as unavoidable compromises. This perception stemmed from the white middle-class ideology embodied by the mother, wherein corpulent physicality functioned as a semiotic marker of civilizational decline—a signifier inextricably linked to racialized hierarchies of inferior bodies or associations with primal, uncivilized corporeality.

Thus, obese women face substantial challenges in constructing their social identities. If her fatness precedes her personality in the eyes of others, the obesity—along with all its associated prejudices and revulsion—becomes her public persona. That means people are highly inclined and eager to observe others' bodies and rapidly draw conclusions. When the observed subject is a fat woman, particularly a white one, observers swiftly extrapolate her character from her appearance, deeming her lazy, lacking self-control, or morally deficient. In contemporary western culture, the current rejection of "obesity" is still based on the moral anxiety of retaining a fixed gender identity and ideal avatar. This stigma distinguishes one woman from another or one type of woman from another in a hegemonic way. In the 20th century, the issue of obesity escalated to a moral and ethical level, with body shape becoming a significant criterion for social assessment. An advertisement even declared, "Don't let weight crush your body and social relationships," implying that without a good figure, one would lack credibility and connection.

Contemporary dominant discourses surrounding the aversion to obese bodies reveal that societal antipathy toward fatness stems primarily from its association with stigmatized groups—low-income populations, women, and people of color. In *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture*, Amy Erdman Farrell maintains "the cultural hatred of fat emerged simultaneously with the construction of hierarchies of race, sexuality, gender, and class. Fat denigration was linked to overall processes of mapping political and social hierarchies onto bodies" (19). He argues that the current stigmatization of fat has exploded in a world in which the stereotyping of traditional minority groups has become generally unacceptable. This aligns with Mary Douglas's analysis of concepts such as separation, purification and the punishment of deviance, whose primary function is to impose systemic order upon experiences of disorder. "Order implies restriction; from all possible materials, a limited selection has been made and from all possible relations a limited set has been used. So disorder by implication is unlimited [...] It symbolizes both danger and power" (Douglas 95). Within this framework, fat becomes semiotically constructed as pollutant, the obese body a "defiled entity" violating social order.

Fat, as a substance imbued with unsettling cultural connotations—impurity, disease, moral degeneracy—is perceived as possessing contaminating power. In this sense, the concept of contamination is linked to social life. Some contamination is used as a metaphor to express an overall view of social order. And the fat issue "sounds exactly like the sort of exaggeration that can produce a cultural epidemic of fear, bearing no relation to any rational assessment of risk" (Campos xv). Christine' experiences of being ignored and belittled due to obesity indicate the stigma on fat is an outrage to values of equality, of tolerance, of fairness, and indeed of fundamental decency toward those who are "different."

Anxiety: The Alien's Body as Contamination and Transgression

The cultural aversion to fat stems from its materiality evoking dual negative perceptions, fat body means filthy, shame or abjection. In Kristeva's words, abjection "is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). Objectively, fat operates as a transferable substance traversing bodily interiors and exteriors. Yet its internal accumulation manifests as a transgression of somatic boundaries, producing the swollen morphology of obesity. The body, as a paradigmatic bounded system, becomes destabilized, which further reinforces perceptions of obese bodies as ungovernable—both individually and socially, which corresponds with Kristeva's viewpoint: abjection is merely the inability to assume with sufficient strength the imperative act of excluding abject things. Such perceived inability or loss of control over bodily boundaries constitutes a social threat. Because all social systems are vulnerable and fragile at their margins, margins are deemed perilous. This is oriented toward those uncertain spaces of unstable identity, toward the fragility-both threatening and fusion. Similarly, Judith Butler interrogates: If gender is constructed through relations of power and, specifically, normative constraints that not only produce but also regulate various bodily beings (Butler xi).Given the understanding of construction as constitutive constraint, it is possible to raise the critical question of how such constraints not only produce the domain of intelligible bodies, but produce as well a domain of abject bodies. This latter domain evokes the further thinking, such as what is excluded in constituting bodily boundaries? How does this exclusion haunt those boundaries as their constitutive outside? Therefore, the alien body bodies could be also interpreted within the productive constraints of certain highly regulatory schemas.

In *The Man from Mars*, Christine initially intends to evade and reject the Vietnamese student, but gradually transforms into understanding and sympathy to the foreigner. Christine sees the shadow of her own discrimination in this Eastern man. The Vietnamese student's subjectivity is overlooked due to his marginalized ethnic identity, while Christine is rendered "invisible" because of her obese body. Like the obese individual is seen as both internally polluted and capable of transmitting this defilement to others, the Vietnamese student is also labeled as "the polluting other." His experiences of isolation and exclusion in Canada exemplify how the local residents to "purify" the neighborhood to keep clean, modern and bourgeois inner-city spaces and hegemonic aesthetics. "Purity" cultural communities construct boundaries and taxonomies to control disorder and expel the "impure." Categories are shared; they cannot emerge independently. Elements that defy shared classificatory schemas—aberrant individuals or objects—are invariably labeled "dangerous," thereby erecting walls between "us/inside" and "them/outside." In this sense, Christine and the student are the "spectacle" in the hegemonic normative assessment, considering the dominant values and orders.

In Canada, "Asians" or those from "oriental countries" are locally classified, are still seen as "others" with poverty, disorder, and backwardness, who disrupt the local pure, stable and safe pattern, like "rendering 'Asia' (and on occasion 'Africa') transparent (unless the subject is ostensibly the 'Third World'); reestablishing the legal subject of socialized capital-these are problems as common to much poststructuralist as to 'regular' theory" (Spivak 24). Accordingly, the "Vietnamese body" could serve as a master trope for delineating insider/outsider, self/other boundaries. Eveline Diirr and Gordon Winder use "dirty other" to indicate the dominant trope that draws boundaries between outsider and insider."These boundaries are spatial, social and racial at once and involve an inherent social ranking of who is more 'foreign' and therefore more polluting than others" (Diirr and Winder 64). In other words, immigrants, refugees and strangers are polluting because they are not seen as the "natural" and "original" inhabitants. This reflects the argument of Duschinsky and Brown (2014), who points out that it is an imputed difference from the "natural" or "essence" attached to a place that underlies classifications of impure or polluting. Pollution, then, is tied into the perception of otherness and difference; it is a means by which individuals negotiate and relate to difference of an assumed "natural" (Duschinsky, *The Politics of Purity* 65).

In the perspective, the negative discourse regarding outsiders reflects resentment at the presence of outsiders. As Douglas (2001) would have it, identities are related to place in this discourse. The student's following with Christine is construed as the result of unwelcome alien behavior so that it is in fact not the "following" person but "he" is not seen as belonging "naturally" to Canada. Negative discourses about immigrants and pollution both reflect and legitimize xenophobic exclusion. When first confronted with the diminutive, disheveled Vietnamese international student in *The Man from Mars*, "Christine looked at him more closely… he was not young, just short. …He was also what was referred to in their family as 'a person from another culture': Oriental without a doubt" (14). Her initial reaction is one of visceral disgust—she found him somewhat repulsive. Motivated by a perfunctory sense of "gave him her official welcoming smile", she directs him to his destination, only to be met with the man's effusive gratitude: he eagerly writes down his name for her. Yet Christine resists further engagement, her internalized revulsion persisting as she "turning away from his puzzled face and setting off at what she hoped was a discouraging jog-trot. It was like walking away from a growling dog" (15). Finally, her guardedness softens when he meekly expresses a desire for friendship. After all, he isn't harassing her—"he was a stranger, he just wanted to meet some of the local people; in his place she would have wanted the same thing" (16). After obtaining intimate photos with Christine, the Vietnamese student happily said that he could send the photos home so that his family wouldn't have to worry about his life in Canada, as he could acquaint himself with the local people because he finally made his first "friend" there.

In *The Man from Mars*, when the Vietnamese student phoned Christine in French, her mother mistakenly thought it was a French man pursuing her chubby daughter, and she was extremely excited. She warmly invites him over, urging Christine to be friendly or "more cooperative." "He" is a foreign monarch in her mother's mind, while a Vietnamese person is dangerous guy. Here, the colonial logic of racial valuation is laid bare: the hypothetical French student is romanticized as royalty, while the Vietnamese counterpart is degraded to a "threat." Within Western societies, the Enlightenment narrative posits rationality as humanity's liberator from misfortune, with scientific knowledge enshrined as the engine of progress. In the sense, the history of Europe as Subject is narrativized by the law, politics, economy, and the West's ideology. Consequently, regions outside Europe's sphere of instrumental rationality development are systematically interpreted as realms of inherent deficiency. When viewed through the West rational subject's gaze, the cultural achievements of societies deemed "underdeveloped" in this paradigm inevitably receive pejorative valuations. Financial capitalism's globalization has further institutionalized the center/periphery dichotomy, reified through discursive oppositions between a dynamic, progressive West and a static, inert East. Such binary imaginaries bifurcate the world into enlightened civilization versus benighted backwardness, or stabilization versus drift. Ultimately, any divergence from western modernity's developmental trajectory becomes marked as otherness.

Obviously, the "outsider" is deemed problematic or even dangerous, unable to achieve moral subjectivity. In this view, the Vietnamese student is conceived of as not conforming to the models of rational or logic behavior. When faced with the chase of the Vietnamese student towards Christine, Christine's family reported the matter to the police. During the police's arrest of the student, Christine insists that "he was not dangerous, he had never hurt her." However, her mother claims that the thing about people from another culture is that you could never tell "whether they were insane or not because their ways were so different". The policeman definitely agrees with her mother, warning Christine "That kind don't hurt you…They just kill you. You're lucky you aren't dead" (Atwood 34). These individuals, without having engaged in in-depth exchanges with the man, labeled him as a danger. In addition, Elvira, the maid from the West Indies working for Christine's family is regarded as less educated urban dwellers in general or community members in particular. The "girls" like her seem to be destined because most people like Christine's mother viewed "they'd either have to go into a Home or stay in their own countries" (Atwood 17).

These reactions represent typical responses to the rejection and aversion towards "uncivilized foreign bodies". Those who do not belong to the "native" or "original" residents—this identity legitimizes the "fact" that "outsiders bring contamination"—demonstrates that identity is tied to place, and anything beyond the boundaries is perceived as impure, dangerous, and taboo. Negative emotions cluster around it. Thus, the obese body and the stranger's body establish a reciprocal correspondence: a deviation from an ideal. The social manifestation of the obese body represents an aesthetically disordered and discordant physical form, while the weight and dimensions of an overweight individual disrupt environments designed for normative bodily standards. In *The Man from Mars*, Christine's obese body becomes relegated beyond the homogeneous "pure" space due to its marginality and deviation from "normative" or "normal" physical parameters. Similarly, the Vietnamese international student provokes local anxieties and disgust through the "alien body" perceived as transgressions against the same notions.

Zygmunt Bauman noted in his book *Strangers at Our Door* that since the dawn of modernity, migrants or refugees fleeing primitive hunger, barbaric wars, and destitute living conditions have been knocking at the doors of other nations. Those behind these doors have consistently perceived these refugees as strangers. As Bauman notes: "Strangers tend to cause anxiety precisely because of being 'strange'—and so, fearsomely unpredictable, unlike the people with whom we interact daily and from whom we believe we know what to expect; for all we know, the massive influx of strangers might have destroyed the things we cherished – and intend to maim or wipe out our consolingly familiar way of life" (8). While "the presence of strangers among us" is a universal phenomenon, a closer examination of specific, nuanced, and "present-day" existential realities under postmodern and postcolonial frameworks reveals that displaced people have become the most emblematic group among these "strangers at our door." Living in foreign lands under impoverished conditions, stripped of dignity and respect, they endure condemnation and discrimination from their host societies, leaving them feeling perpetually affronted and oppressed. In his analysis of "strangeness as anxiety," which integrates the concept of liquid modernity in postmodern society and postcolonial power structures, Bauman argues that refugees and migrants, as "strangers at our door" challenge the stability of nation-state boundaries and collective identity.

In fact, a striking problem with globalization is that the number of homeless people such as immigrants, refugees, refugees and asylum seekers has been rising. The influx of these outsiders will inevitably lead to cultural blending, as the fusion of cultural inspirations serves as both a wellspring of cultural enrichment and an engine of creativity—a truth equally valid for European civilization and all others. Nevertheless, a subtle distinction must be drawn between cultural enrichment and the erosion of cultural identity. To prevent coexistence between natives and newcomers from harming cultural heritage, such coexistence must be grounded in respect for the fundamental principles of the host nation's "social contract." Crucially, both parties must strictly adhere to this principle. The Vietnamese student in *The Man from Mars* expresses his eagerness to develop a good rapport with the local residents. Unfortunately, they did not give him an amicable feedback. Yet genuine respect cannot be achieved if the recognition of these outsiders' social and civil rights remains so grudging and hesitant, and if progress continues at such a sluggish pace.

In the Flow: The Paradox of Prison and Liberation

Christine and the Vietnamese shared experiences reflect how the "pure" and "natural" mainstreams persistently construct boundaries and classifications through standardized value systems to impose control over disorder or evade contamination. The category of "purity" operates as a shared, holistic construct that cannot emerge independently. Components irreducible to these collective classificatory schemas—heterogeneous individuals or elements—are systematically labeled as "dangerous", thereby establishing the dichotomy of "inside"/"us" versus "outside"/"them." This mechanism mirrors the realities of Christine and the man, whose narratives exemplify victimization through being categorized as "exceptional" or "abnormal". Such labeling inherently embodies acts of epistemic violence and hegemonic enforcement, reinforcing exclusionary socio-cultural hierarchies through institutionalized otherness.

It is precisely because the two characters encounter similar experiences of discrimination and exclusion, which leads the westerner and the oriental to seek mutual comfort. Christine found herself perplexed in the wake of being persistently pursued by the Vietnamese international student. Standing before her mirror, she contemplates what makes her so charming that elicited his attention. The young man's relentless pursuit paradoxically allowed her to experience what she perceived as a "normal girl's" life. Her perceived "weight loss" appeared to rupture a false exterior, unveiling a seemingly coherent body imbued with individuality and agency—a form now deemed socially legible, unthreatening, and non-transgressive due to its liberation from the "burden" of fat. Yet this corporeal transformation constrained the body's capacity for outward expansion, redirecting its energies inward toward a ceaseless struggle against an "internal enemy." So long as fat remains discursively constructed as an urgent risk, its designation as a "danger" can never be fully eradicated. Like "embodied knowledge" or "psychological archives," it becomes inscribed into bodily memory. The experiences, sensations, visual perceptions, and actions of individuals invariably imprint themselves upon bodily imagery, while shame and disgust deposit residual traces upon the corporeal form. Fat, demarcated as shameful or repugnant bodily zones, operates as an intrinsic specter that shapes the boundaries of all somatic representations. In the novel's denouement, Christine's aura of mystery soon fades because no one like the Vietnamese student follows her, "she herself no longer believed in it. Life became again what she had always expected" (Atwood 26).

Upon graduating, Christine goes into the Department of Health and Welfare; she does a good job, and is seldom discriminated against for being a woman because nobody thinks of her as feminine. Obesity in men can symbolize wealth and power, but for Christine, it serves as the best evidence of her "degendering" as she possesses a "less feminine" body. Thus, Christine embodies various "differences" and her difference is even "pathologized": represented as a pathological form of "otherness." Christine plays less and less tennis; what had been muscle with a light coating of fat turned gradually into fat with a thin substratum of muscle. She begins to get headaches. Ironically, Christine' position—a governmental apparatus imbued with medical authority—heightened her awareness of her precarious existence as an "abnormal subject". The obese body, precisely because it constitutes an object of bio-political technologies and epistemic regimes, becomes fragmented, medicalized, and pathologized under the ideology of weight. This process transmutes the flesh into a locus of fearful imaginaries, rendering it incapable of resisting the hegemony of the "fat-free" ideal. Her "headaches" symptomatize the ontological confusion and powerlessness of a victim subjected to fat-phobic oppression. The spectral presence of fat—so potently stripping individuals of their right to "normative existence"—haunts all corporeality, amplifying somatic anxieties, demonizing fat subjects, and mobilizing affective economies of revulsion.

Meanwhile, the Vietnamese international student's pursuit can be understood as an attempt to forge "connection" with others or to seek mutual, reciprocal "recognition"—or, more precisely, to navigate toward "equilibrium of recognition" amid its systemic "imbalance." As Liu Yu observes in her essay *One and All "Us*,*"* struggles for "recognition" in the 21st century have centered on identity politics, where the adversary is "no longer monarchy or capital, but the 'other' or the 'imagined other' "(Liu Yu iv). Actually, the ongoing deepening of identity-driven political struggles catalyzed the proliferation of civil rights movements—feminism, anti-racism, and migrant/refugee rights activism—demonstrating that identity politics remains compatible with main values like equality and fraternity. Though identity derives its potency through the marking of difference, its analytical focus on multiplicity and diversity (rather than singularity or homogeneity) reveals it as a dynamic framework for social organization.

In the eyes of the Vietnamese student, Christine is the first person to respond to his request for help after coming to Canada. Later, he visits her home and takes photos with her, including using an urgent action to "grab" this friend. He feels he is no longer treated as a "stranger" but a subject. This identity does not demand assimilation into mainstream societal treatment of its members but rather insists on respect for their existence as a differentiated one. The quest for recognition here shifts from universalist individual liberties toward collective liberties grounded in ethno-cultural particularities. Johann Gottfried Herder, foundational thinker of modern European ethno-nationalism, posited that every human community manifests uniqueness, with each "Volk" expressing its distinctive cultural character through adaptation to local environments. Echoing this, Francis Fukuyama (2021) contends that the demand for recognition tends to take a particular form, focused on the dignity of a specific marginalized group that feels disrespected. For many people, the inner self that needs to be seen is not a generic human inner self but that of a particular kind of person from a particular place with particular customs.

But the student enthusiastic following still caused unease among Christine and her family, and finally he was sent back to Vietnam. Deported--- "had him out of here" and "he'll be better off in his own place" means denying the right to nationality for other social classes or ethnic groups. From restrictions to expulsion, the process encompasses the unknown terror, time-limited ultimatums, the feeling of being unwanted, and the psychological pressure solely due to ethnic identity, just like Atwood writes in the novel, "Was it that something had happened to him, some intolerable strain just from being in this country" (Atwood 26). Gayatri C.Spivak in her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* interrogates the epistemic violence inherent in hegemonic political representation systems, arguing that while subaltern or marginalized subjects may physically articulate speech, their voices remain systematically suppressed and rendered inaudible within dominant discursive frameworks. She prefers to consider the "margins (one can just as well say the silent, silenced center) of the circuit marked out by this epistemic violence, men and women among the illiterate peasantry, Aboriginals, and the lowest strata of the urban subproletariat" (37). This totalizing application of identity neutralizes the radical multiplicity and "heterogeneity" of the Other through assimilation into the Self's universality. The pursuit of "self-identical being" thus enacts a violent epistemic process whereby heterogeneous Others become subjected to homogenizing reduction—even ontological erasure—ultimately reduced to mere "energetic substrata" that sustain the Self's illusion of existential continuity. In Atwood's word, "something nondescript, something in the background" (Atwood 26).

In Atwood's depiction, Christine and the Vietnamese student are perceived as the Other because of the traits of "liquid". The obese body always appears unstable and trembling, which implies that the boundaries on obese women's bodies (those that have been transgressed) are filled with uncertainty and ambiguity. Consequently, there is a perception that the obese body is difficult for both individuals and society to control. The alien body, being "outside the place," is also easily seen as an "impure" body, a symbolic representation of a body that has violated social order and been contaminated. Therefore, fluid bodies are framed as a threat to safety and stability. In fact, it is not fluid or impurity that is the real issue here, but rather danger. Impurity discourses are the trappings of danger to an imputed state of purity, identity and stability. However danger only exists where there is power--the power to destroy, transform and create from a cellular to a social level. In this regard, "pollution has the potential to challenge normalized behavior. This feature of pollution can be strategically employed and is used to deliberately differ from mainstream society, thus raising critical questions and pointing to inequality, uneven urban power dynamics and negligence" (Diirr and Winder 62-63).

Conclusion

In *The Man from Mars*, Atwood depicts two characters' encounters with their bodies, becoming an "outsider" and by the end, realizing that certain aloneness with her and his body is all that is possible in the patriarchal structure of the gender and race that she and he "inhabits." Fat, as an unsettling substance imbued with multivalent cultural connotations, exists as a dense semiotic matrix rather than a neutral biological entity. The construct of "fatness" operates not as a singular category but as a fluid relational framework perpetually constituted and reconstituted through socio-cultural praxis, which is governed by the imperatives of gendered, classed, and racilized normative corporeality that dictate the hierarchical valuation of bodily existences. Fat possesses the ability to cause pollution, and obesity not only pollutes from within but also risks spreading this contamination to everyone around them. Undoubtedly, gaining entry into the sanitized world of "pure bodies", alongside advocating "positive" representations of fat, constitutes a central struggle for women like Christine. Yet the majority of such "positive" bodily archetypes remain problematically conflated with hetero-normative beauty standards that equate female worth with sexual desirability. Whether these ostensibly "positive" images—codified as normal, beautiful—genuinely expand the representational possibilities for women's bodies remains, in Atwood's critical lens, a question answered with profound skepticism.

Meanwhile, Atwood associates the alien body with the fat body to examine the issue of ethnicity. During her academic tenure at Harvard University, Atwood grappled with the complexities of cultural identity formation—a struggle emblematic of mid-20th century American cultural hegemony. As the United States positioned itself at the epistemic center of globalization processes, it actively constructed its cultural identity as inherently dominant while relegating all others to peripheral, subordinate statuses. This ideological framework finds vivid articulation in Atwood's "*Survival woman*" cartoon series (circa 1960s), where she satirically reimagines national archetypes: the Canadian "heroine" as "Survival woman" juxtaposed against an American "Superham" (a deliberate lexical subversion of

"Superman"). The stark physical disproportion between these characters visually encodes the asymmetrical power dynamics between the two nations, serving as Atwood's trenchant critique of the neocolonial ambitions. The dominant cultural identity operates as a centralized, exclusionary construct—one that recognizes itself as the norm against which all "'others" (whether colonized subjects or marginalized groups) must be measured and invariably found wanting. In *The Man from Mars*, the Vietnamese boy's experience of discrimination and exclusion as an "outsider" manifests as a profound social exclusion, the "otherness" of the man completely replicate this logic.

The fat body and the alien body are two of the main sources for images of pollution and stigma in the public rhetoric; they are viewed as impure and dangerous. Whenever a strictly pure pattern is imposed upon people's lives, it either becomes extremely uncomfortable or leads to conflicts, even harm, physically and psychologically. Definitely, Atwood does not merely discuss the "body issue," but expands her perspective to a broader range of marginalized or stigmatized groups. Rosemary Sullivan(1998), author of the biography *The Red Shoes: Margaret Atwood Starting Out* once wrote that during her interview with Atwood, the latter admitted she was interested in the periphery, the marginal, and the permutations of displacement. The body in Atwood's story conveys not only individual voices but also societal ones. Those striving to articulate these voices are not merely postmodern but, more specifically, postcolonial in their self-construction. Listening to marginalized groups that are silenced in particular ways is part of a broader narrative. Within it, recognition based on universal and equal principles transforms into a special recognition of specific groups. From this perspective, Atwood's obesity narrative in *The Man from Mars* embodies the justice of fighting to be seen, heard, and respected.

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